

NOTE: This is the unpublished draft of a paper that I submitted for a TEDS ethics class in 2013. It was completed rather last-minute, and as such probably contains a few errors and over-relied on online sources. However, it does outline the gist of my position. I may someday elaborate on and publish on the concept, especially if I could team with someone with more scientific training than I have. Feedback is welcome.

LIFE BEGINS AT BLOOD:
A PRAGMATIC, BIBLICAL PRO-LIFE POSITION

by

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A PAPER

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Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood

be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. ~ Gen. 9:16¹

For the life of the flesh is in the blood. ~ Lev. 17:11a

Introduction

“Life begins at conception” serves as the clarion call of the modern-day pro-life movement, the credo finding frequent expression in pro-life position papers,² political proposals,³ church statements,⁴ and ethics textbooks.⁵ It is a position with the *gravitas* of ancient precedent, having been espoused by a number of early Christians when faced with the practice of abortion in the Greco-Roman world.⁶ The logic is straightforward: from the moment of conception, a human embryo is a human person made in the image of God and espousing the same right to life as any other human person, born or otherwise. All efforts should be made to preserve and protect the lives of these embryonic human persons,

1 *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. All Scriptural citations derive from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

2 *Focus on the Family's* position statement on abortion provides an example of this: “At Focus on the Family, we are dedicated to defending the sanctity of human life, and by human life we mean God's creation from fertilization to natural death.” <<http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/social-issues/abortion.aspx>>. Retrieved 5-23-2013.

3 For example, see H. R. 23 “Sanctity of Life Act” currently being proposed in the House of Representatives by Rep. Paul Broun, Jr. (R-GA10), which advocates that “human life shall be deemed to begin with fertilization.” <<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hr23>>. Retrieved 5-23-2013.

4 See the Roman Catholic church's position statement by Pope Paul VI for an example of this: “[F]rom the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes,” <<http://bit.ly/oDYaC>>, 7 December 1965. Retrieved 5-23-2013.

5 For one such textbook, see John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 87ff.

6 Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 47-62.

including (but not limited to) a curtailing of elective abortions.

While “life begins at conception” may be the most prevalent pro-life position in the modern world, debates about the point at which a human embryo or fetus becomes a human life—or takes on a human soul⁷—and how people should respond to such questions of humanity from legal, ethical, and spiritual perspectives are quite ancient. At the founding of Christianity, the Greco-Roman world was immersed in competing beliefs about the nature of human life and ensoulment, from the Aristotelian belief that a male human embryo gains its soul at 40 days past conception while a female human embryo gains its soul at 90 days past conception,⁸ to the Jewish belief that a human baby does not gain a soul until it is born and takes its first breath.⁹ The Scriptural passages debated by early Christians and Jews were, by and large, the same passages cited by pro-life and pro-choice Christians today: Gen. 1:27-28, 9:6; Ex. 21:22-25; Jer. 1:5; Lk. 1:39-44, etc. The lack of an unambiguous biblical testament to a starting point for human life has left many Christians with little choice but to reason out their positions with citations from human development science, allowing for the possibility of pro-life alternatives to the conception position.

The purpose of this paper is to advocate for one such alternative pro-life

7 Sometimes this process is known as “quickenning.” Addressing competing theories on human constitution is beyond the scope of this paper. The major Christian theories of human constitution are discussed by Millard J. Erickson in *Christian Theology*, 538-57 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: BakerAcademic, 2009). When I speak of a human *embryo* or human *being* becoming a human *person*, I mean that point at which the entity in question takes on the quality of being made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27-28; 9:6) and becomes an eternal being which, after separation from its body via death, will have a place in the resurrection of the righteous or the damned (John 5:28-29).

8 Gorman, 22.

9 *Ibid.*, 39.

position, a position best summarized as “life begins at blood,” and to argue for its Scriptural, eschatological, scientific, and pragmatic superiority to “life begins at conception.” The paper will begin by defining this position and examining its Scriptural basis, then contrast this to the proffered Scriptural basis for the conception position. It will then turn to some of the eschatological, scientific, and pragmatic problems with believing that life begins at conception. Throughout, it will demonstrate that the blood position is entirely free of the conundrums that plague the conception position and allows for pro-life Christians to conscientiously make lifestyle choices that most of them are already making—even the ones who profess to believe in conception as the start of human life.

The Definition of and Scriptural Basis for “Life Begins at Blood”

To believe that “life begins at blood” is to believe that a human embryo becomes a human person made in the image of God at the point when blood develops in the embryonic system and the heart begins to beat. This occurs approximately three weeks after fertilization¹⁰ and well after implantation, the latter of which occurs somewhere between 5 and 14 days after conception. Up until that point, the embryo should not be considered a human person with a right to life, and any action taken that would destroy it (whether intentionally or unintentionally) or hinder it from developing further should not be regarded

10 See the time line at “Human Development,” *Real Alternatives*, <<http://bit.ly/121B9QW>>. Retrieved 5-23-2013. In a normal pregnancy where gestation is counted from the date of last menstrual period, an obstetrician would say that the heart begins beating at 5 weeks gestation. Other sources say that the human heart begins forming at 18 days, which means the earliest blood could be present in the embryo at about 17-18 days. See *The Embryo Project*, <http://www.med.upenn.edu/embryo_project/heart/heart.html>. Retrieved 11-10-1996.

as causing the loss of or devaluing human life.

The Scriptural basis for this position is found in a passage in the book of Leviticus, which reads (emphases mine):

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel: No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall any alien who resides among you eat blood. And anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. **For the life of every creature—its blood is its life;** therefore I have said to the people of Israel: You shall not eat the blood of any creature, **for the life of every creature is its blood;** whoever eats it shall be cut off.¹¹

The book of Genesis also ties murder to the shedding of innocent blood, and implies that there is a connection between possessing blood and being made in the image of God:

“Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.”¹² Thus Scripture declares a fairly direct link between human life and the presence of blood.

There is wisdom in what the authors of the Pentateuch observed, for the notion of human life being inextricably dependent on the presence of blood embodies other symmetry. There are numerous ways for a person to die, and a person can certainly die in ways that do not involve loss of blood, but if a person loses enough of her blood, death is a certainty. This is in contrast to some of the other markers that are present at conception and

11 Lev. 17:11-14.

12 Gen. 9:6.

used to argue for conception as the beginning of life, such as DNA. It is true, as Feinberg and Feinberg note, that the DNA of even a single-celled organism can tell us whether that organism is human as opposed to a “fish, bird, tree, or any other creature.”¹³ However, that DNA has no power to dictate life versus death. “Loss of DNA” has never been written down as the cause of death on a death certificate.

The Scriptural Basis for “Life Begins at Conception”

A number of biblical passages are commonly cited by advocates of the conception position. Unfortunately, while these passages do tend to indicate that the unborn possess life and personhood, arguably none of these passages indicates conception as the beginning of human life as opposed to another early stage of development. Most passages that could be cited by a conception advocate could be agreed on by a blood advocate. For example, in the book of Jeremiah, God declared to the prophet Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”¹⁴ A blood advocate would agree with a conception advocate on God's involvement in forming Jeremiah in his mother's womb, and that similar involvement takes place in the formation of all human lives. He would simply disagree on the exact point in human development at which God became involved in the creative process.¹⁵

Similarly, the passage in Luke where the unborn John the Baptist leaps for joy

13 Feinberg and Feinberg, 89.

14 Jer. 1:5.

15 The same argument applies to Ps. 139:13-16.

in Elizabeth's womb at the arrival of the pregnant Mary is also used to argue for the personhood of the unborn.¹⁶ However, the text only specifies that Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy at the time that Mary conceived; we do not know how far along Mary was when she visited Elizabeth. Furthermore, since Mary was a virgin and presumably did not have a typical conception involving a sperm and an egg, we do not know the mechanics of her conception or the true gestational age of the unborn Christ at Mary's visit. This passage cannot be used to specify conception as the starting point of life.

The passage that most directly seems to tie conception to personhood is David's lament in Psalm 51: "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." As one pro-life Web article notes:

The most often heard interpretation of this passage is that the author, David, sees that he was sinful even at the time he was conceived. If he was not a person, then it follows that he could not have a sinful human nature at that time. A prehuman mass of cells could not have any basis for morality. Only the "humanness" occurring at the time of conception would allow David to possess a sinful nature at that time.¹⁷

However, the text is more literally translated, "Indeed, I was born *in inequity*, and *in sin* did my mother conceive me," which renders the owner of the inequity and sin ambiguous. The inequity or guilt of the first part of the verse is not necessarily David's, but that of the environment he was born into. Likewise, the sin of the second part of the verse is probably not David's but that of his mother. David is lamenting that he could not escape engaging in

¹⁶ Lk. 1:39-44.

¹⁷ Tommy Mitchell, "When Does Life Begin?," *Answers in Genesis*, <<http://bit.ly/zXxj6h>>, 26 August 2010. Retrieved 5-23-2013.

sin and inequity with Bathsheba because it was present around him even at his conception and birth.

For these reasons, the Scriptural basis for the blood position is actually stronger than the Scriptural basis for the conception position. The Bible indicates that blood is connected to personhood and life. It never specifies this for conception.

An Eschatological Consideration

In their discussion of spontaneous abortion, Feinberg and Feinberg indicate that anywhere from 30% to 50% of fertilized eggs perish due to failure to implant in their mother's womb.¹⁸ Mitchell cites a slightly more conservative 20% to 50%.¹⁹ Regardless of the correct number, if the conception position holds true, this means that as much as 50% of the human race could be meeting its end without ever having experienced implantation, much less life outside the womb, and as many as half of the persons in heaven or hell (depending on one's soteriology) will be persons who never experienced more than a few days of *in utero* life.

Mitchell is correct that this realization does not render the conception position false. These embryos that are perishing without achieving implantation certainly could still be full-fledged human persons created in the image of God. The concept is simply something of an enormity, and the Bible's complete silence on the loss of these masses of humanity must be regarded as odd.

18 Feinberg and Feinberg, 72.

19 Mitchell, <<http://bit.ly/zXxj6h>>.

In contrast, the blood position does not fall prey to this enormity. While a significant number of human beings are still lost *in utero* via other forms of spontaneous abortion, 20% to 50% of the human race is not constantly perishing after only a few days of prenatal life. The Bible is silent on the matter because it is not happening. We will not be greeted in the resurrection by waves upon waves of human persons who never made it to implantation.

Scientific Considerations

There are reasons rooted in our scientific knowledge of embryonic development which disfavor conception as the starting point for human personhood. Among these are the phenomena of monozygotic multiples and human chimeras.

Monozygotic multiples is a phenomenon that is most commonly observed in monozygotic twins, often incorrectly labeled “identical” twins. Monozygotic multiples occur when a zygote or blastocyst spontaneously splits into two or more zygotes or blastocysts. This split can take place as late as 15 days after conception, although multiples that split more than 12 days after conception will almost certainly be conjoined. While two is the most common number for monozygotic multiples, monozygotic quintuplets have been born alive and survived.²⁰

The phenomenon of monozygotic multiples creates difficulties for the conception position for a number of reasons. For starters, the phrase “life begins at

20 “How Multiples are Formed,” *Facts About Multiples*, <<http://bit.ly/14h2Fcv>>. Retrieved 5-23-2013.

conception” simply does not apply to the 1-4 multiples that did not exist until after the split. For these persons, life did not begin at conception; at best it began 2-15 days *after* conception.

Second, the monozygotic multiples phenomenon demonstrates that the DNA present in the embryo at conception is not necessarily the DNA that will be inherited by the human person. Monozygotic multiples have identical nuclear DNA, but they do not have identical mitochondrial DNA. As one Web site explains:

Identical twins share the same DNA—but do not have identical DNA. When the egg splits into two halves to form identical twins, the DNA may not divide equally between the two cells. The basic concept is similar to when you cut an apple in half, the two halves may not look the same.

I don't want to get too complicated with the explanation, but DNA differences of identical twins revolve around the mitochondrial DNA (DNA that is not located in the nucleus of a cell).

Mitochondrial DNA is passed on to the child by Mom. A fertilized egg will have Mom's mitochondrial DNA, half of Mom's nuclear DNA, and half of Dad's nuclear DNA. When the fertilized egg splits into two, the twins will each have identical nuclear DNA, but not EXACTLY identical mitochondrial DNA. Physical differences in identical twins are contributed, in part, to how much and how similar the mitochondrial DNA each twin inherited from Mom expresses itself.²¹

Thus the DNA of the persons who will be born is not determined at conception.

Finally, the monozygotic multiples phenomenon demonstrates that even a person's sex is not determined at conception, for it is now known that monozygotic twins can

21 “Facts About Identical Twins,” *Multiple Treasures*, <<http://bit.ly/cVEOv6>>. Retrieved 5-23-2013.

be different sexes. This occurs when an XY (male) embryo divides and one of the multiples loses its Y chromosome in division, rendering it an X0. The X0 twin will be born as a woman with Turner syndrome.²² This has been observed 3-5 times, its rarity probably being exacerbated by the fact that approximately 99% of babies with Turner syndrome are miscarried or stillborn—though the ones that survive can have an excellent prognosis and quality of life.²³

Human chimerism occurs when the zygote or blastocyst of a fraternal twin absorbs and assimilates the cells of its sibling. The surviving twin will live the rest of his or her life in a body containing two entirely different sets of DNA. The phenomenon has been rarely observed because most human chimeras appear perfectly healthy, giving health professionals no reason to test different parts of their bodies for different sets of DNA. Human chimerism was discovered in several cases involving women for whom DNA tests had concluded that they were not the mothers of the children they remembered giving birth to, only to have testing of other parts of their bodies reveal a match. In the cases where the assimilated twin is of the opposite sex, a chimera may have reproductive organs from both sexes.²⁴

The mechanics of monozygotic multiples and human chimerism demonstrate

22 *Ibid.*

23 Krissi Danielsson, "Turner Syndrome (Monosomy X) and Pregnancy Loss," *About: Miscarriage/Pregnancy Loss Guide*, <<http://bit.ly/16Rdxzh>>. Retrieved 5-23-2013.

24 Maggie Koerth Baker, "The Mind-Blowing World of Human Chimeras," *Boing Boing*, <<http://bit.ly/bRwcs8>>, 1 May 2009.

that conception is not as neat and tidy a starting point for human personhood as some would like to think. The number of humans that will result is still subject to change, as is the DNA and the sex of the persons involved. No one denies that a fertilized embryo is biologically human, just as the egg and spermatozoa that created the embryo were biologically human. However, the blueprint of who and what this person will be is still very much subject to change. Locating the beginning of human life and personhood at blastulation, 17-21 days post-conception, eliminates the problems posed by chimerism and monozygotic multiples.

Pragmatic Considerations

The most common concerns articulated by advocates of the conception position involve opposition to elective abortion, embryonic stem cell research, *in vitro* fertilization, morning-after pills, and intrauterine devices or systems (IUDs/IUSs). Elective abortion, whether chemical or surgical, makes no secret of the fact that it attempts to terminate an embryo or fetus long after conception and implantation. Morning-after pills and IUDs/IUSs both have well-known primary birth control mechanisms that interfere with the implantation of a fertilized embryo. Embryonic stem cell research and *in vitro* fertilization involve the utilization of fertilized embryos in clinics and laboratories, most of which will wind up discarded with no chance at implantation in a healthy womb. It is easy to understand why these methods are opposed by advocates of this position.

More puzzling is the number of conception advocates who are indifferent to hormonal contraceptives. It has been known for some time now that birth control pills and

their hormonal contraceptive cousins (patches, rings, shots, and implants) do not just work by suppressing ovulation or thickening the cervical mucus so that sperm are less likely to get through. In the event of breakthrough ovulation, they also interfere with the implantation of fertilized embryos by thinning the lining of the uterus. In *Birth Control for Christians*, Jenell Williams Paris explains:

A third argument, one that is most persuasive to Christians who are otherwise inclined to use hormonal methods, is that these methods may cause abortion. Natural family planning authors John and Sheila Kippley claim that nearly two million conceived human lives are aborted each year by the pill. Medical doctor Chris Kahlenborn testified to the FDA that “a woman who takes the oral contraceptive pill will have a least one abortion for every year that she is on it.” The same argument is made about Norplant, Depo-Provera, and other brands of hormonal contraceptive. Millions of pro-life Christians use the pill, however, and most doctors tell patients that hormonal methods are a safe, effective birth control option.²⁵

In spite of this, many Christian books and articles which take the “life begins at conception” position and discourage methods such as IUDs continue to recommend hormonal contraceptives, or at least fail to come out against them. For example, Tim and Beverly LaHaye's *The Act of Marriage*, a popular Christian sex manual in the 70s and 80s that continues to find use among Christians today, discourages IUDs and abortion, but recommends the pill as “the preferred method for a new bride in the early stages of marriage.”²⁶ For Feinberg and Feinberg, IUDs are discouraged as causing abortions²⁷ while

25 Jenell Williams Paris, *Birth Control for Christians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2003), 143.

26 Tim LaHaye and Beverly LaHaye, *The Act of Marriage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1976), 187. Note that the original edition of the book, published in 1976, recommended both the pill and the IUD to newlywed couples. The 1998 edition of the book was updated with a denunciation of the IUD due to its

the “controversy” surrounding hormonal contraceptives is only briefly noted and no side is taken.²⁸ Other Christian authors are more consistent in upholding the “life begins at conception” philosophy and its ramifications for hormonal contraceptives. In their book against birth control, Sam and Bethany Torode lay out a chapter opposing hormonal contraceptives and noting that pro-choice advocates have known for years that if pro-life advocates are ever successful in outlawing abortion on the grounds that life begins at conception, hormonal contraceptives will soon follow.²⁹ The Torodes correctly observe that every time a politician proposes that life should be protected from conception onward, the pro-choice lobby responds by pointing out that his or her proposal would mean the end of hormonal contraception, because “if you oppose abortion on the grounds that life begins at conception, you must also oppose the Pill, which can prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg...”³⁰

The one issue that seems to interest hardly any conception advocates concerns the “abortifacient” properties of the lactational amenorrhea method, i. e. breastfeeding. As with hormonal contraceptives, routine breastfeeding has the function of suppressing a woman's ovulatory cycle. When ovulation does break through, it also carries the function of causing a luteal phase defect wherein not enough progesterone is produced to prepare the

“abortifacient” properties, but the pill was still recommended.

27 Feinberg and Feinberg, 304.

28 *Ibid.*, 294.

29 Sam Torode and Bethany Torode, *Open Embrace: A Protestant Couple Rethinks Contraception* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 73-83.

30 *Ibid.*, 74-75.

uterine lining for implantation. If the egg is fertilized in this time period, it will likely fail to implant and perish, just as it would if the woman was taking a hormonal contraceptive.³¹ A truly consistent advocate of the conception position would have to insist that breastfeeding women use an alternative form of contraception, such as a barrier method, to try and prevent these failure-to-implant “abortions.”³²

If advocates of conception as the starting point for life wished to be consistent, they would have to oppose hormonal contraceptives and the lactational amenorrhea method with the same fervency with which they oppose abortion, IUDs, embryonic stem cell research, *in vitro* fertilization, and morning-after pills, for all carry the same potential to cause the demise of a fertilized embryo. Virtually none of them demonstrate such consistency. While ignorance probably accounts for some of this inconsistency, conception advocates may also recognize, whether consciously or subconsciously, that “life begins at

31 James Trussell, “Mechanism of Action of Emergency Contraception Pills,” <<http://bit.ly/11v6NoM>>, 18 May 2010. Retrieved 5-23-2013. Says Trussell: “To make an informed choice, women must know that [emergency contraceptive pills]—like all regular hormonal contraceptives such as the birth control pill, the implant Implanon, the vaginal ring NuvaRing, the Evra patch, and the injectable Depo-Provera, and even breastfeeding— prevent pregnancy primarily by delaying or inhibiting ovulation and inhibiting fertilization, but may at times inhibit implantation of a fertilized egg in the endometrium.”

32 I can find no pro-life “life begins at conception” sources which address the “abortifacient” properties of the lactational amenorrhea method. The Feinbergs, LaHayes, and Torodes are all completely silent on the matter. Paris mentions LAM (99-102), but says nothing about its potential to cause “abortions” as she does with hormonal contraceptives and IUDs. One self-styled Christian apologist who ran a message board attempted to debate me on the subject once. Her response was that conception advocates do not need to oppose LAM because any abortions that result from LAM are natural occurrences. This struck me as a questionable ethical system. That something is “natural” hardly makes it ethical to allow it to happen. For example, it is “natural” for a conception to turn into a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy, but it is wildly unethical to withhold treatment from that pregnant woman because her plight is “natural.” If we know that something has the potential to cause the demise of human life, we (arguably) have an ethical obligation to try and prevent it.

conception” is simply not a very pragmatic position. Hormonal contraceptives are deeply entrenched in our society—even among Christians—and used to treat many conditions in women which have nothing to do with pregnancy. Breastfeeding carries a number of benefits for both mother and child, and most would be reluctant to advocate for anything that might place an additional burden on a breastfeeding mother. Some probably avoid lobbying against these forms of birth control for these reasons.

The beauty of the “life begins at blood” position is that it allows for Christians to ethically promote all of these options. A Christian who believes life begins at blood can still oppose elective abortions, whether surgical or chemical, as virtually all such abortions are performed after 5 weeks gestation. Simultaneously, advocates of this position can support hormonal contraceptives, LAM, embryonic stem cell research, *in vitro* fertilization, and morning-after pills, as all of these methods can only cause the demise of embryos that are 14 days old or less. IUDs/IUSs could also be supported with caution.³³

Conclusion

An acquaintance who believes that life begins at conception once suggested to me that it was the best position because, even though we cannot know for certain when life begins, Christians ought to err on the side of caution. He asked me: “If you saw a pile of rags

33 The reason for caution where IUDs/IUSs are concerned is that, when these methods fail and pregnancy results, the presence of the device in the uterus can threaten the embryo or fetus for most of the pregnancy, well past the point of blood. Nevertheless, this is a failure of the device, not a normative function of it, and the chances of this happening are very small, especially with the hormonal IUS. Some Christians would still find IUDs and IUSs impermissible because of this.

in the middle of the road that looked like it could have a child under it, would you drive over it or go around it?”

My difficulty is that I am not sure there is such a thing as erring on the side of caution where this issue is concerned. Yes, early human embryos could be human persons fully created in the image of God, but many scientists believe embryonic stem cell research has the potential to cure a host of diseases and disabilities that are currently plaguing human persons created in the image of God. If we oppose embryonic stem cell research because life *could* begin at conception, we are not necessarily erring on the side of caution. We are potentially choosing non-persons over definite persons.

Or in other words, if I saw a child dangling from a window several stories up, would I drive over a pile of rags in the road in my rush to rescue her? Yes, I would. No doubt about it.

I favor “life begins at blood” because I believe the position is biblically sound, supported by science, and pragmatic. I wish more pro-life Christians would consider it.

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