

A Brief Exegesis of Hebrews 2:17

...For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people... (NIV)

If you ask a person of faith to provide a biblical basis for their belief that human life begins at conception, the response you typically receive is that, for them, it is simply a matter of faith. In fact, there is no specific declaration in The Bible that identifies the time during human development when life begins. There is, however, some compelling evidence in The Bible instructing us when human life does not begin. That evidence can be found in the passage quoted above.

In this passage, the author of Hebrews is instructing his readers in the details of The Incarnation, pointing out that Jesus “had to be made like his brothers (humanity) in every way” for his act of atonement in their behalf to have significance. If he had not been like us “in every way,” his sacrifice would have been meaningless. So let’s take a look at when he first started to be “like his brothers.”

Normal human development begins with the union of a sperm and an egg, a process called conception. However, Jesus’ conception was anything but normal. It was a supernatural process involving the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if his life as a human began at his conception, then he could not possibly have been “like his brothers in every way”.....yet, as the author of Hebrews points out, “he had to be.” So his human life had to begin after his conception. And if he became a human life sometime after conception, then—to be made like him in every way—so did we.

.....

It is, of course, very unsatisfactory to be left with only an exegesis of when life does not begin, so we need to pursue some reasoning to determine the most logical point in time when it does begin. For decades, the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) has held that pregnancy begins when the embryo implants in the uterus of the mother—about six to ten days after fertilization. Certainly, this makes the most sense from the perspective of the embryology. Implantation of the embryo is a very chancy event. It fails almost half the time and the unsuccessful embryos are discarded. This means that, if life begins at fertilization, multitudes of living humans are destined to early deaths—the victims of simple probability. The process of human development is consistently predictable only after implantation.

Yet, as logically compelling as the ACOG position may be, it remains unconvincing to those who, on faith alone, continue to contend that human life begins at conception. In fact, there is a compelling theological basis for a belief that implantation is the beginning of human life. To establish that basis, we need to begin with a biblical passage from the creation story:

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27, NIV)

So, to become human, the individual must become the image of God. When might that happen? What better time than when the individual—an embryo as it implants—becomes first associated in intimate relationship with a current bearer of God’s image—the mother whom God has invested with the responsibility of tending to his/her introduction to life among us.

Richard E. Ecker, Ph.D.
July 2014