

Faith Pulpit

When Does (the Sanctity of) Life Begin?

When life begins is a question of current interest in theology, science and the media. The issue is clouded by emotion and personal beliefs. Some contend that life begins at conception. Some believe life begins at birth. Others say the beginning of life occurs in various stages of individual development. The “beginning of life” is germane to stem cell research, cloning, abortion rights, and euthanasia.

As with many controversial issues, a clear understanding is seldom achieved. Definitions are, many times, drafted to suit a particular personal belief or political position. Nevertheless, a clear understanding of the meaning of life and of life processes is necessary to answer the question, “When does life begin?”

It should be first understood that life does not begin at conception, birth or some intermediate stage of an organism’s development. Life began many years ago. It was a “one-time” event. It is perpetuated by birth and reproduction. Creationists believe life began in the recent past as recorded in the first chapter of Genesis. Evolutionists believe life started in the ancient past. Both the biblical and evolutionary views agree that life began sometime in the past.

Life’s beginning was a one-time event. It does not “begin” at fertilization or birth. Life has been continuous since it began. George Johnson, in his book *The Living World*, lists two of the major tenets of biology: “All (living) organisms are composed of one or more cells within which the processes of life occur,” and “Cells arise only by division of previously existing cells.”¹

No “new” beginnings of life have occurred. Many scientists have tried to “create” life, but none has been successful. The best known “Origin of Life” experiment was done by Drs. Stanley Miller and Harold Urey, who used an electric discharge to react a mixture of water, hydrogen, ammonia and methane in order to produce organic molecules that were characteristic of living systems. The experiment produced some organic molecules and other products but nothing which could be said to be

even precursors of life.

Life is a unique property of living systems, distinctly different from non-life. George Johnson explains that living things demonstrate the properties of “cellular organization, metabolism, homeostasis, reproduction, and heredity.”² Non-living things quite obviously do not exhibit these properties. The bridge between life and non-life is enormous, and no scientist has been able to cross it.

Cells are extremely small—some only 10-8 cm in diameter. In spite of their size, cells are extremely complex. They are, in fact, extraordinary chemical factories. They take in raw materials (food) and process the food chemically to sugars which are then oxidized to obtain energy. Cells recycle and remove waste material. They package amino acids to form proteins which make up the structure of the body and provide catalysts for innumerable functions.

Cells are the building blocks of all living organisms. Except for the one-celled bacteria, living systems are made up of an enormous number of cells. Humans have about five trillion (5,000,000,000,000) cells, each contributing uniquely to the living organism. Although the cells are identical, their specific function is controlled by the body’s internal system of control. The organism itself has a “life cycle.” It has a beginning, a time of existence, a reproduction cycle, and a final demise.

New individuals come into being when the male sperm cell and the female egg cell are joined through the process known as fertilization, in which the hereditary information in the sperm cell and the hereditary information in the egg cell become one. In this process the DNA of each parent is preserved, and the diploid cell thus formed contains the complete blueprint and program for the formation of an adult individual. No additional information is added in the subsequent developmental stages. The Psalmist described this amazing process: “Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect, and in thy book all my members were written which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there were none of them” (Psalm 139:16).

The fertilized egg cell undergoes a number of processes in which the physical, psychological, neurological, and growth of the individual occurs. These stages, as generally recognized in the scientific community, are listed below.

1. In three to four days the fertilized egg cells undergo mitosis to a few thousand cells. At this stage the cell mass has taken on a spherical shape. In the interior of this sphere of cells, the blastocyst, are the so-called “stem cells” or the cells that develop into an individual. It is obvious that if the stem cells are removed, further development of the individual is terminated. The developing organism is called a zygote.

2. In a few weeks the zygote develops into an embryo.

3. After about nine weeks the developing cell mass is called a fetus , and the bodily features begin to be seen.

4. About nine months later, birth occurs. At birth the development is called a child.

Through all these stages, the development is dictated by the information in the fertilized egg. At no stage is the development random. After birth, the child develops further into a mature individual, possessing all the hereditary information contributed by the parents and contained in the zygote.

Since the sperm and egg were “living” cells, the whole process of individual development is a living process. At no stage can the process be called “non-living.” To destroy the fertilized egg or any subsequent development obviously obliterates the mature individual. The mature individual, a human being, is held in high esteem, and the sanctity of life is everywhere held to be inviolable.

It is the human organism or individual who has a unique place in the world. All civilized societies consider the human individual as having value beyond the value of other organisms for food or function. Humans are everywhere held in sanctity. That is, they are set aside from other living organisms as unique, are counted to have worth, and are to be protected. This sanctity of human life is the center of the debate about the beginning of life. At what stage in the development of an individual does society consider it to be of worth? Clearly, the original question, “When does life begin?” should instead be “When does the sanctity of life begin?”

Life began long ago and is perpetuated through living cells which, in the process of fertilization, give rise to new organisms. Birth produces new individuals. Humans are considered worthy of special status, and it is they themselves who champion the “sanctity of life.” In the debate about “When does life begin?” or cloning, or stem cell research, or euthanasia, it is the sanctity of life that is at stake, not the beginning of life. The Bible clearly indicates the uniqueness of man, in that only to the creation of man (not animals) is it recorded: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7).

The Bible clearly reveals the origin and development of human life as the plan of God from ages past, and Christ Himself loved us (the individuals) so much that He died to give us “new” life as children of God.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

Works Cited

1. Johnson, George B., The Living World, 2d ed., McGraw Hill, 2000, 75.
2. Ibid., 5.

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Dr. David Boylan was a distinguished educator, pastor, and leader with a lifelong commitment to advancing biblical education and ministry. He served faithfully as the president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary from 1974 to 1980, where he focused on spiritual growth, academic excellence, and the training of servant-hearted leaders.

Known for his dedication to sound doctrine and a deep love for the Word of God, Dr. Boylan influenced countless students and colleagues through his teaching and administrative leadership. In January 2025, Dr. Boylan was promoted to Heaven. His legacy was marked by a steadfast commitment to equipping others to serve Christ effectively.