



We love reading the Gospel of Luke's birth narratives at this time of the year. I read these accounts for many years before I realized how profoundly pro-life were their implications. Though this pro-life meaning is not the main point of these texts surely we are right in drawing attention to them in our post-Christian age. For example, we remember Mary's hurried visit to her cousin Elizabeth within days after Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

Here is Luke's text:

"In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:39-40, ESV).

The young Mary wasted no time in visiting her aged, yet six-month pregnant relative Elizabeth. And why not? Mary had just received the most life-changing news ever given.

Who better to share her news with than her cousin Elizabeth of whom Mary had been just told was also remarkably pregnant? The journey from Nazareth to Zechariah and Elizabeth's home near Jerusalem would have taken Mary three or four days by foot. In those BC (before cellphone) days Elizabeth would have had no notice of Mary's impending visit. Thus, without prior announcement there Mary was, framed in Elizabeth's gateway, calling for her relative. I like to think of Elizabeth coming to the door, perhaps wiping her hands on her apron, when suddenly her unborn baby leaped in her womb—not a slight shifting in the womb, not a little kick, but a joyful jump! Why? Because unborn John knew he was in the presence of another unborn child the little Christ-child, as yet no more than a zygote (to use a medical definition).

How do we know it was to Jesus that John was responding rather than Mary's voice? Because of what Luke tells us. Elizabeth's excited cry at Mary's greeting was,

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (vss. 42-44).

Mary had not given a word of explanation of all that had happened in her life. Without knowing a thing about Gabriel's announcement to Mary, Elizabeth gave excited expression to her voiceless son's first prophecy. John's joyful leap anticipated the words he would utter thirty years later:

"Here is Light of the world, here is the Lamb of God, here is he who ranks before me because he was before me!" (John 1:8,15,36).

The profound pro-life implication of this text is clear. In reporting how the six month old in-utero John responded to the two week old in-utero Jesus can we agree that Luke was assuming the personhood of the unborn? Hasn't this assumption also been shared by the church throughout the centuries, namely the personhood of the developing baby from the earliest beginning of pregnancy. Theologian Thomas F. Torrance has written,

"It was because in Jesus the Creator Word of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, that Christians came to regard the unborn fetus in a new light, sanctified by the Lord Jesus as an embryonic person....So, from the moment of conception every human being is infinitely precious to the Lord Jesus, and is the concern of his redeeming love."

Therefore, Professor Torrance concludes,

"Our regard for the unborn and born alike must surely be governed by our commitment to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Creator and Lord of every human being, who was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary and born to be the brother and Redeemer of humankind." [\[Theology](#)

The tacit acceptance to the practice of abortion in both church and society today must never become acceptable for the people of God. Surely the embryonic personhood of Jesus implicit in this Gospel account should give us great pause before our culture's widespread resignation to abortion, much less acceptance of infanticide and the problematic termination of embryos left over from in-vitro fertilization cycles. How can we speak the truth in love to those who need to hear? How will ears and hearts be opened to the Spirit of truth? We should pray and fast in this Advent season for the presence of Jesus to come in power to those who need to repent and receive his grace. I am thankful for the thirty years of Presbyterians Pro-Life's witness to the sacred value of human life from fertilization to natural death.

Let us never forget the overarching purpose of Luke's birth narratives: To proclaim the miraculous and grace filled incarnation of the Son of God to save his people from their sins. New Testament scholar N.T Wright comments on John's prophetic leap in his mother's womb as *"the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph...thirty years before Calvary and Easter."* [[Luke for Everyone](#) , Tom Wright, SPCK, 2001, p. 14]

May this great gospel of God's redeeming love and merciful forgiveness for sinners through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ give hope to all of us sinners. May we turn away from our false beliefs and turn to God. By faith in Jesus who incarnated himself to us first as an embryo developing in his mother's womb, may we find reconciliation and peace with God.

[John Sheldon](#) is the pastor of [First Presbyterian Church](#) of Ocean City, NJ and the President of PPL's Board of Directors.