

### **Is Human Life Sanctified by the life-giving Spirit or the life-giving Womb?**

When I heard about the Sanctity of Human Life Sunday (January 21, 2007), I was reminded of the Report received by the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). There was one sentence in particular from the trinitarian paper that I distinctly recalled. It reads: “The overflowing love of God finds expression in the biblical depiction of God as compassionate mother (Isa. 49:15; 66:13), beloved child (Mt. 3:17), and life-giving womb (Isa. 46:3)” (The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing, 385-87). This is the Trinity, portrayed in a new and novel way, seemingly well-suited to the American culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is no secret that we are living in an age of feminism and religious pluralism. And it is understandable that the General Assembly would instruct the Department of Theology and Worship to produce materials to introduce female imagery of the Holy Trinity into the worship of the triune God. In fact, it was reported that the attending commissioners and others offered their prayers in the name of the triad “Mother, Child, and womb.”

However, to symbolize the third Person of the Trinity as a womb is Binitarism, not the Trinity. The three *hypostaseis*, or “Persons,” of the Trinity ought to be represented equally and distinctively. The key here is three “ways of being.” In other words, the trinitarian formula requires the triad equal in every aspect of existence and yet distinct, not only in the divine inner life but also in our experience of God. Any symbols of the Trinity must contain this concept. Otherwise symbolism loses any real meaning.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not a convoluted mess of changing rules, as some would have you believe. Rather, it is based on simple, coherent logic that was settled during the early trinitarian controversies. In fact, it is precisely because of these logical rules that the doctrine of the Trinity remains the most conservative of all Christian dogmas. The basic elements of the doctrine have existed mostly unchanged since its inception.

Accordingly, I do not see any possible way to parallel the triad “Mother, Child, and

womb” with one another. While “Mother and Child” are personal, interpersonal, and personalizing, the term “womb” not only lacks a sense of divine personality, it lacks any personality. Therefore, “womb” can only be considered an ill-fitting metaphor in the doctrine of the Trinity. And without the third, the Report’s Mother and Child is only a binary couple. (Cf. the logic of J. Moltmann, *Trinitat und Reich Gottes*, p. 185.)

Other arguments strive to support the theistic concept of the womb as the third Person of the Trinity, using ancient Asian teachings and Greek ideas of reproduction. However, here the theories are not centered on monotheism, but rather the sense that the nurturing womb-deity is one of many gods. Thus, again, the term is not quite accurate for our talks of the triune God.

Subjectively, I understand the awe and respect that we, as living creatures, feel for the womb. It is, after all, the cradle where life is formed and where one touches his or her mother before ever touching anyone else, including the father. It is our home in every sense of the term; it is where we for the first time experience love, before all the precious things we ever encounter at home, home-town, and home-country. However, who among us thanks the womb rather than our mothers? Again, the “womb” carries far less symbolic power than the “mother” does. There is no way to balance our experience of the two. Certainly I, for one, would refuse to parallel the love of my mother with that of her womb. The vital distinction here is that to the Christian, the womb is merely an instrument of life; it is not the creator of life.

The important question then is: Who is the originator and source of life? I confess, as a follower of the Nicene Creed, that the Holy Spirit is “the Lord, the giver of life,” both physically and spiritually. Christians have worshiped the life-giving Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed itself was practiced but not formulated until the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Church historians do not know the exact date when the Creed was officially accepted by Christians. For ages, the Nicene Creed has been affirmed almost universally by the Christian Church, including the Presbyterian Church (USA). It is unclear, however, how contemporary Christians all over the world will react to the revamped, binitarian idea of the womb symbolizing the life giver, as presented by the Presbyterian Church (USA). And I am not quite sure if the elevation of an organ to a role currently occupied by the life-giving Spirit will help Presbyterians enhance the sanctity of life in the womb.

Here I recall an interesting discussion among New Testament scholars long ago. The apostle Paul, unlike the Twelve, had found himself in a dilemma, required to present

his apostolic credentials. He was called, conversed, and commissioned by the glorified Lord. The story of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is enough for average Christians to uphold his apostleship but usually scholars dig into a deeper level.

Paul is thought to be defending his apostleship by making reference to his life implanted in the womb of his mother. In support of this idea, New Testament scholars quote Galatians 1:15-16 where Paul writes, "But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man . . . ."

How have scholars related the passage above to Paul's divinely commissioned appointment to be a missionary? (New English Bible, a British scholarly work, correctly translates the term *apostolos* of Romans 11:13 as "missionary.") Scholars have determined that Paul equates his apostleship with the divine call of two great prophets of the old covenant. Isaiah (49:1) declared to the nations: "Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name." Jeremiah also recorded (1:5) what he had heard from the Lord: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart."

Some scholars are ready to suggest that Paul was commissioned more highly than Jeremiah and Isaiah. Others, of course, question Paul's higher standing. And scholarly discussion goes on. However, what is unchallenged is the place of the divine calls. The calling took place within the wombs of their mothers, where God had formed his servants. The English use of and NIV translation of "from birth" sets the stage for misunderstanding. Paul does not mean that God sets him apart from the point of his birth. What Paul and the others are saying culturally is "when I was in the womb of my mother" and thus a better translation in this context is "even before birth."

So, what is so important about these debates among New Testament scholars? What does this mean for a Christian living in America, especially during a time when life within the womb is cherished so much less than life outside of it? The lesson is this; the triune God acts upon life in the womb. If the scholars are right, and we are "set apart" for this time and this place, then any life within a woman's womb is very dear to God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Giver of life has plans for life in the womb even before its birth. (Cf. Genesis 25:23 where the twins in Rebekah's womb were referred to as two nations; Luke 1:41-44 where the baby in Elizabeth's womb reacts joyfully to the visit of the baby in Mary's womb) The triune God loves with an

overflowing love those lives inside of the womb and cares for them providentially.

Further, God's overflowing love is not limited to the life in the womb. Life does not have to be formed in the womb to receive God's love. He sanctifies the life formed even in a plastic tube. God loves equally all human lives outside of the womb on earth. This is supremely demonstrated in the life of the Son, the second Person of the Trinity. He died on the cross and was raised from the dead to save those inside and outside of the womb. Praise God, for Americans, perhaps more than anyone else in the world, have practiced their love for those outside of the womb. But I have to say that their love for those inside of the womb is limited. The actions of some Americans are inconsistent. It is contradictory to say "I honor life outside of the womb but have less regard for life inside of the womb." The Giver of life loves equally all human lives.

God's overflowing love is directed to life rather than to the womb. God loves man and woman not because they are born of the womb but because He Himself placed and formed them in their mother's womb. The womb is a divine instrument for us to be nourished and loved for a while before we move on to the earth. Sensing certain similarities, some ancient writers poetically thought of the earth (land and sea) as a womb. This does not mean in any sense, however, that the womb is the giver of life. The womb is only an instrument of the life-giving Holy Spirit, and never a giver of life.

If the source of life is the triune God and the womb is nothing but a necessary cradle where God shapes and forms life to receive His love, then it is not the womb that sanctifies the life, but God who sanctifies life in the womb. In turn, it is the God-given life that sanctifies the womb, and not vice versa. The sanctity of life flows from God to human life and from human life to the womb.

Or at least the womb receives its sanctity from God. Human life is sacred not because it is implanted in the womb but because it is given by God who alone is holy. And if there cannot be two "Holinesses," then the real source of sanctity is the triune God alone. Otherwise, the sacredness of the womb loses any real ground.

This reminds me of a story from Matthew 23:16-22. Here, Jesus is alarmed by the lifestyle of the Pharisees. In their religious practices, they regard gold more highly than the temple and the gift than the altar. Jesus corrects the Pharisees. It is the temple that makes gold sacred and the altar that makes the gift sacred, not vice versa. Thus gold and gift are less important than the temple and the altar. In fact, the religious value of the former is totally dependent on the latter. The same logic applies to the

relationship between the Life-giver and the womb. Misguided logic often leads us to lose sight of the more important elements in the religious practices, including in the act of worshipping God.

Finally, I must add one more issue here. There is one, basic hermeneutical problem with symbolizing the womb as life-giver. Of some sixty occasions where the term “womb” is mentioned in Scripture, not a single occasion refers to it as a deity, let alone the Lord God—this differs from some Asian classics as alluded to above. Isaiah 46:3, which is quoted as a supporting passage for the symbolism of “life-giving womb,” in fact speaks of God who has loved and still loves the people of Israel with an overflowing love. Here the term “womb” is used figuratively to emphasize God’s unceasing love for the nation of Israel “even before its birth.” (Cf. above for my preferred translation.) It is possible to interpret this passage to mean that God loved and cared for Israel even before it was born as a nation, just as He loves and cares for the life in a mother’s womb before it is born. Thus, again the womb is not the source of the life and love, but rather God.

If the triune God alone is the source of the life that is being loved in the womb and if the third Person of the Trinity is the life-giving Spirit in appropriation as taught in the Nicene Creed and affirmed universally by the Christian Church, including those churches in the tradition of *ecclesia reformata*, the life at any stage of his or her existence in those two “wombs,” is equally precious to the triune God. As children of God we have to follow His footsteps by loving consistently all lives both inside and outside of the mother’s womb without discrimination.

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**3942 Middle Rd.**  
**Allison Park, PA 15101**  
**[www.ppl.org](http://www.ppl.org)**