

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 9

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Volume 9 • Number 1 • January 1985

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from  
publications worldwide for an international  
readership, interpreting the Christian faith for  
contemporary living.*

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Published by  
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

I confess that I have neither the intention nor the expertise to tell you **P. 58** how to contextualize your theological educational curriculum. All I can do, having described my understanding of it, is to urge you to make a serious attempt to do it. To this end, I would like to suggest some guidelines which, I believe, are essential points for consideration in any meaningful effort at contextualization that is both Christian and Biblical. These are:

1. An existential conviction that the Gospel of the Incarnate Son of God has eternal saving efficacy for man everywhere and in all generations who, in repentant faith, is committed to Him.
2. A conviction that man's spiritual needs which are essentially universal are perceived through the spectacles of cultural colouring.
3. A recognition of the fact that every man's apprehension of Christ as God's answer to human needs is crucially influenced by his culture. This creates the need to overhaul the current theological curriculum which was devised in a different culture to meet specific needs as perceived there. This is necessary if theological education is to equip the minister for meeting the total needs of his people in their cultural setting. Overhauling does not necessarily mean that the existing curriculum will be discarded. Some elements are basic and must be retained, but this will be done because they are found to be universally relevant following an objective evaluation.
4. A realization that a theological curriculum that is relevant must include an in-depth study of the African world view, his self-understanding and the resultant traditional religions. Such an exercise will afford the minister an opportunity to sit where his people sit in order to see life through their eyes and thus be able to identify their deep spiritual needs which only Christ can satisfy.

With the foregoing, the Christian theologian is ready to begin a meaningful contextualization of the theological curriculum that will become relevant because it has grown out of the world view, culture and thought-pattern of the African as viewed from the perspective of Biblical Christianity. The theological educator must never lose sight of the fact that his main function is to 'equip the saints for the work of the ministry'. This the saints do by mediating the saving knowledge of Christ to men in their particular total environment. Unless the Gospel is so contextualized the people may not give an existential response to the Christ who came that men may have life and to have it more abundantly.

If this is our task, then we must resist the temptation to defend the status quo. We must be open and re-examine our present curriculum, **p. 59** delete, add and modify as needed in the light of the result of the findings from our objective studies.

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## **The Conception and Unborn Life of Christ as a theme for Christian Worship**

# Murray Darroch

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*This edited version of a paper on the conception and unborn life of Christ seeks to explore the place of unborn children in society and in Scripture. The author suggests why this theme is generally ignored by Christians and why it is relevant for Christian worship.*

(Editor)

Our own society sees life very much in terms of a process that starts with birth and ends with death. Anyone who has been closely involved in the experience of pregnancy will know that, in our day a person is seen as being a parent only when a birth occurs. Prior to the birth a woman is merely a person who 'is going to be a mother' and is 'going to have a baby', rather than being a woman who is 'with child'.

Similarly the human life of Christ tends very much to be seen as beginning at Bethlehem—hence the Incarnation of Christ is seen as being an appropriate theme for Christmas. Thus we have a pattern of thought which in effect says 'the birth of Christ = Bethlehem = Christmas = Incarnation of Christ'. It is almost as if Christ came straight to Bethlehem from heaven, without being incarnated as an unborn child and living for nine months in the womb of a human woman, and some of our statements almost go as far as saying exactly that.

The thought pattern 'the birth of Christ = Bethlehem = Christmas = Incarnation of Christ' is strongly reinforced by a number of our hymns and sermons. Such hymns and sermons, whether they are of a general nature or prepared specifically for Christmas, frequently make one of two assumptions. Either they speak of the Incarnation of Christ and the birth of Christ in the same breath, or they list our Saviour's birth as the first of the salvation events in his life here on earth. Hymns and sermons which fall into this latter category always start with the birth of Christ and use this as a sort of 'jumping off place' for all subsequent events in Christ's earthly life such as his childhood, his three years of public ministry, his death, his resurrection and his ascension. This same thought pattern is also clearly evident in the multitude of magazine articles and church sermons on the Incarnation during the month of December. [p. 61](#)

In practical terms birth is seen as the beginning of life because it is a process that can be pinned down to a place and a time. All of us know the date on which we were born, and most would know the time of day and the day of the week when our mothers' contractions pushed us out of their bodies into the world. Conception, on the other hand, is much less identifiable in terms of date or time. Except for those who were knowingly conceived through natural family planning, few of us could readily identify our respective conception dates, And none of us could identify a specific time at which we were conceived. Job in the Old Testament is aware that God knows when he (Job) was conceived (see [Job 3:3](#) and [6-7](#)) although such knowledge is of course hidden from Job.

A second reason why birth is commonly seen as being the beginning of life relates to the question of identity and the process of being named. When we were in the womb of our mothers, our sexual identities were unknown. And because they were unknown, we were unnamed. And because we were unnamed it was possible for us to be thought of as being other than real people. In her book *Male and Female* Margaret Mead refers to the commonplace relationship between the sexual identity of a child, and the naming of the child when she states:—

'The sex of the child, marked by a name, is the way in which the fact of birth is fixed in the minds of friends and relatives who have not seen the child. Before birth, hopeful mothers

may use the planned name for the baby, but only after birth does the child move, and at once, from it to a named, fully sexed individual.’<sup>1</sup>

There are perhaps other reasons why we have tended to emphasize birth as the beginning of life. The experience of this author is that amongst older people, there is a reticence to use such terms as ‘unborn children’, ‘conception’ and ‘conceived’ and ‘the womb’. Such reticence would appear to be related to a particular view of human pregnancy and human sexuality that sees these issues as being unmentionable in public conversation. Such reticence is commonly associated with the moral viewpoints of the 19th century. Certainly the citizens of the Duchy of Hanover had no inhibitions in 1660 about making plans to celebrate the stirrings of the unborn child, later to be named George Louis (later still to be George I of England) when he was in the womb of his mother the Electress Sophie of Hanover. This was possibly an unusual occasion in that the unborn child concerned was p. 62 known to be the prospective heir to the duchy.<sup>2</sup> The replacement of the term ‘with child’ (which was current in literature and everyday conversation up until the 19th century) with terminology such as ‘being pregnant’, has, in its own way, helped to reinforce the concept of life beginning at birth.

Perception of whether what is in the womb is a person or a thing is of course cultural. I am told that in traditional Chinese society, a child was regarded as being one year old when born. I have heard, too, that in Northern Nigeria there were difficulties in the past in gathering comparable population census data since rural dwellers count their own unborn children in the census count. Margaret Mead refers to Manus Islanders ‘handling miscarriages and abortions, all of which are named, and treated as if they had been full individuals years afterwards’. Mead says, ‘a (Manus Islander) mother will not distinguish in retrospect between a miscarriage at three months, a stillborn infant and a child who died after birth’.<sup>3</sup>

## THE UNBORN CHILD IN BIBLICAL HISTORY

For its part the Old Testament shows a perspective about the beginnings of human life that does not fit easily with current western thinking. As already mentioned, Job, in his sufferings, looked back to both his conception and his birth as his beginning—

‘Let the day perish wherein I was born,  
and the night which said “A man-child is conceived”.’

The above passage links conception and birth together in the poetic device of parallelism commonly used in Old Testament poetry. This device is also used by the prophet Isaiah in telling forth to the people that the fact that God will save and uphold them from the beginning to the end of their lives p. 63

Hearken to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne by me from your birth  
carried from the womb;  
even to your old age I am He,

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<sup>1</sup> *Male and Female* by Margaret Mead, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1950, p.267.

<sup>2</sup> *Sophie Electress of Hanover*, Maris Kroll, chapter 3. First published in Great Britain by Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1973 (First Nel Mento Edition, p.99).

<sup>3</sup> *Male and Female* by Margaret Mead, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1950, p.155.

and to your grey hairs I will carry you  
I have made, and I will bear;  
I will carry and will save

[Isaiah 46:3-4](#)

Because of this idea of the dual importance of birth and conception, those in the womb were seen by the Jewish people in the Old Testament as being very much part of the community. On three occasions in the Psalms ([22:31](#); [78:6](#) and [102:18](#)) the Psalmist refers to the coming generation who are 'a people yet unborn'. We are accustomed to think of such phrases as referring to people who are yet to be conceived. However, in view of Jewish thinking about life in the womb, what is being referred to are unborn children, and that those who are unborn children at this moment in time are the coming generation who are to yet receive God's testimony and to know for themselves the Lord and experience his deliverance from sin.

Further evidence of unborn children being regarded as the coming generation is found in the rather gruesome military strategies of the nations who surrounded Israel. In [2 Kings 8:12](#), [Amos 1:13](#), and [Hosea 13:16](#) we find reference to the ripping open of women who are with child. Conventional military strategies of the time dictated that if you were able to invade enemy territory but not able to occupy it permanently, you would kill all who were able to use weapons i.e. all men, and all who one day would be capable of using weapons i.e. all male children. If, as an invader, you wanted to be particularly thorough, your soldiers would also kill all unborn children by ripping open all women with child.

In discussing such passages it is important to see that the Old Testament not only reflects the views of the Jewish people concerning their unborn children. The Scriptures also reflect God's own perception of the place of unborn children. In [Romans 9:10](#) we read '... but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purposes of election might continue, not because of his works but because of his call, she was told "The elder will serve the younger". As it is written "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated".' God's purposes for Jacob and Esau were determined and foretold while they were in the womb. p. 64

Then there is Samson. Samson was a Nazarite from conception—see [Judges 16:17](#). The angel of the Lord told Manoah's wife that the child she was to conceive and give birth to would be a Nazarite from birth. The dietary instructions she was given for the nine months of the pregnancy clearly bear out Samson's own assessment that he had been a Nazarite from his mother's womb.

Other examples of people whom God chose or consecrated while in the womb are Jeremiah, Paul and John the Baptist. In [Jeremiah 1:6](#) we have those well known words—

Before I formed you in the womb knew you  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

The Apostle Paul, for his part, looks back beyond the Damascus road experience to the time when God has 'set me (Paul) apart before I (Paul) was born'—[Galatians 1:15](#). There is no indication that Jeremiah's parents or Paul's parents had any prior knowledge of the respective tasks God had entrusted to their sons, nor indeed would they have known the sexual identity while they were in their mothers' wombs. Yet, in hindsight, both Jeremiah and Paul knew that God had chosen them while they were in the womb.

John the Baptist represents a particular case of God's involvement with an unborn child. In John the Baptist's case, not only was the circumstance of his conception very

special, but John the Baptist was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb’—[Luke 1:15](#). This is evidenced by the fact that as a six month old unborn child, he responded with joy to the presence of Christ (who was at that time newly conceived in the virgin womb of Mary)—[Luke 1:41–44](#). The prospect of an unborn child filled with the Holy Spirit responding to the presence of Christ is not something within our normal framework of thinking. Yet, as Alfred Edersheim points out, the response of John the Baptist as an unborn child was not at variance with Jewish expectations. Edersheim says in a footnote ‘According to Jewish tradition, the yet unborn infants in their mothers’ wombs responded by an Amen to the hymn of praise at the Red Sea. This is supposed to be indicated by the words (Psalm LXVIII. [27](#), see also the Targum on that verse).<sup>4</sup> p. 65

The most important unborn child mentioned in the Scriptures is of course Christ himself. As the Apostles Creed states, Christ was ‘conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary’. Luke’s and Matthew’s Gospels both give prominence to the virginal conception of Christ and to those nine months Christ spent in the womb. The importance of God the Son taking on human form and of the nine months he spent as an unborn child is also dealt with in [Isaiah 44:2](#) where it says

Thus says the LORD who made you  
who formed you from the womb and will help you  
Fear not, O Jacob my servant,  
Jeshu’run whom I have chosen

and in [Isaiah 49:1–3](#) where it says

The LORD called me from the womb  
from the body of my mother he named my name  
He made my mouth like a sharp sword  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me  
He made me a polished arrow  
in his quiver he hid me away  
And he said to me ‘You are my servant  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified’

The fact that Christ was once an unborn child is more than just a piece of academic information. To realize that God became a human being in the form of an unborn child conceived in the womb of a virgin is ultimately to realize more of God’s salvation. To see him as a scarcely visible embryo is to see the exact nature of his emptying of himself to take on the form of a servant—[Phil. 2:6–7](#). By visualizing God as the unborn child we can gaze on afresh in wonder at the love and the obedience of God the Son—love which drove him to the cross. The writer to the Hebrews again makes this clear when he quotes our Lord in obedience to his Father saying ‘Sacrifices and offerings thou has not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me. Then I said “Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God”.’ [Hebrews 10:5](#) and [7](#).

To know Christ the unborn child as the one who was to become our Saviour is to be able to glorify God in the same way as did Elizabeth, her unborn child John the Baptist and her husband Zechariah, all of whom did so under the power and the authority of the Holy Spirit. Zechariah was enabled to see God’s salvation in the form of a three month unborn child carried by his wife’s cousin. For him the unborn Christ child was indeed ‘a horn of

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<sup>4</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* by Alfred Edersheim, Longmans, Green and Co., London, first published in 1883, Vol. 1 (12th Impression 1907, pp.152f.).

salvation for us in the house of her servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old’—[Luke 1:69–70](#). p. 66

In looking at the conception of Christ, we are looking at the wonder of the Incarnation of God the Son. In the nine months that followed, his presence made itself known in the lives of Mary, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, Zechariah, and Joseph—all of whom are representative of the faithful remnant of Israel who were waiting for the Messiah. Later at his birth, he was openly manifested to the Jewish people, represented by the shepherds. Then he was manifested to Simeon and Anna at the temple, who, like Mary and Elizabeth and their immediate families, also represent the faithful remnant. Then Christ was manifested to the Gentiles represented by the coming of the wise men. All these events are noteworthy, but should not be allowed to overshadow the importance of the Incarnation.

If we can appreciate fully the significance of the conception of Christ, we are then able to look at the birth of Christ in its proper context. (The importance of Christ’s birth is that he was born where the prophets foretold he would be born, that through his birth he was clearly shown to be of the house of David and of the Jewish race, and that he was born as Messiah and king—see [Micah 5:2](#), [Isaiah 9:6](#), [Matthew 2](#), [Luke 2](#) and [John 18:37](#).)

Similarly, if we appreciate fully the significance of the conception of Christ we are then able to look at Christmas in its proper context. Christmas as it is meant to be is no more than the Feast of the Nativity of

<i>Event</i>	<i>Theological Significance</i>	<i>Name of Appointed Feast which is meant to celebrate the Event</i>	<i>Date</i>
The Annunciation (or the Announcing of the Coming of Christ) followed by Christ’s conception	Incarnation of Christ	Feast of the Annunciation of our Lord formerly known as the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary or ‘Lady Day’	25 March
Birth of Christ	Manifestation of Christ to Jewish People	Feast of the Nativity of our Lord or ‘Christmas’	25 Dec.
Coming of the Wise Men	Manifestation of Christ to the Gentile People	Feast of Epiphany	6 Jan.

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our Lord. At present Christmas as it is currently celebrated in Protestant churches is a conflation of three separate events and their themes—the Incarnation of Christ, the Birth of Christ, and the coming of the Wise Men. In the table set out below, this conflation of merging together of the three things can be seen more clearly.

Some Protestant denominations take the view that Christians ought not to have special feast days. Most would, however, see some merit in celebrating the occasional feast day, but only where it can be seen as having importance in relation to the life and work of Christ. Protestant denominations celebrate Christmas, as ‘Feast of the



Incarnation' rather than as a feast which concentrates on the *birth* of Christ. The reasons why we have been celebrating Christmas in this way, are as follows:

Firstly, our society has a preoccupation with birth, to the exclusion of conception.

Secondly, Matthew's and Luke's Gospels record the place of Christ's birth (Bethlehem). While still there he was visited by the wise men. The Gospels do not however, record the time or the place where Christ was conceived.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, Protestant Churches are culturally and theologically heirs of the Western Catholic tradition. We have accepted some parts of the tradition without question, and discarded other parts perhaps without sufficient good reason. The observance of Christmas has been accepted with question, and the other feasts (the Feast of the Annunciation of 25 March, and the Feast of the Epiphany) have been discarded, the result being that their themes have been conflated into Christmas.

Christmas in medieval Christendom had a dual significance—as the Feast of the Birth of Christ, and as the Feast celebrating the passing of mid winter. During the Middle Ages the Feast of the Annunciation on 25 March marked the beginning of the civic and religious new year. It also had a very strong Marian emphasis which is indicated by the feast's older title, the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Feast of the Annunciation specifically recalls to mind the incident of the Angel Gabriel's visit to the Virgin Mary, and the Annunciation or Announcing of the Lord, as recorded in [Luke 1:26–38](#).

What Protestant Churches have done has been to retain Christmas with its traditional Christological emphasis, and to discard the Feast of the Annunciation because of this traditional Marian emphasis. All this [p. 68](#) presents a particular handicap to the Christian individual or Christian congregation that may wish to emphasize the Conception and the Unborn Life of Christ, as a theme for Christian worship. As individuals and as congregations when we worship the Lord, we do so as members of the wider Christian Church. Individual saints, mystics, theologians and prophets may have particular insights regarding Christian worship, but it is only as these insights are fleshed out in hymns, choruses and carols, that the Christian Church is able to take up any insight it sees as being relevant. In this regard the Christian Church appears to be singularly lacking in hymns, choruses and carols which deal explicitly with the conception of Christ. Because the Feast of the Annunciation of our Lord (on 25 March) has been overshadowed by Christmas, the conception of Christ has been overshadowed by the birth of Christ as a prime subject for hymns, choruses and carols. This means that when a congregation attempts to focus attention on the Incarnation of Christ, it is inevitably drawn in worship to the theme of the birth of Christ rather than the conception of Christ.

A further complication for any congregation or any individual in attempting to focus attention on the Incarnation of Christ is the overwhelming lack of emphasis in other written material within the wider Christian Church specifically dealing with the Incarnation of Christ in the context of his conception as a theme for worship. There are many scholarly works on belief in the doctrine of the virginal conception of our Lord (the doctrine commonly referred to by Protestants as 'the Virgin Birth'). But this is not the same as looking at the virginal conception of Christ in terms of worship.

The significance of the virginal conception of Christ as a theme of Christian worship is not only that the conception represents the means by which Christ became Incarnate. It also points to the cross and beyond that to the Resurrection. Jesus Christ was conceived that he might die. By taking on human form as an unborn child, Christ was preparing

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<sup>5</sup> The recently built Church of the Annunciation at Nazareth assumes Nazareth was the place that Christ was conceived.



himself for the garden of Gethsemane where his willingness to be obedient to death was to be tested. In his sonnet 'Annunciation', the 17th century Anglican poet John Donne emphasizes the reality of this in the context of [Philippians 2:8](#). The path from the womb of the Virgin Mary is one that leads to the cross, and, as John Donne shows, it is a path taken by 'one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist'—[1 Corinthians 8:6](#). John Donne writes:

Salvation to all that will is nigh  
That All, which always is All everywhere  
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,  
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die p. 69  
Lo, faithful Virgin, yields himself to lie  
In prison, in thy womb; and though he there  
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet he will wear  
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.  
Ere by the spheres times was created, thou  
Was in his mind, who is thy Son and Brother;  
Whom thou conceivest, conceived; yea thou art now  
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother  
Thou hast light in dark; and shutst in little room  
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

Recently after reading this poem Peter Dennison and I were moved to write a hymn that could be used in the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper in our Christian Brethren Assemblies. Further we would like to encourage Protestants to recover the celebration of the Feast of the Annunciation in its true Christological meaning.

### **Lord of Glory**

You are the Lord of glory,  
Conceived in Mary's womb.  
Eternal Word Incarnate,  
You share our toil and gloom.  
You are the One anointed,  
The Saviour undefiled.  
You entered your creation,  
A helpless unborn child.

For us you came to suffer  
In love upon the cross  
A sacrifice for sinners  
To bear our utter loss.  
O Lord accept our worship,  
We give ourselves to you.  
Come Jesus our Redeemer,  
Be formed in us anew.

(Sung to the tune of 'Passion Chorale'. It may be used without permission provided authorship is acknowledged and it is used without alteration).

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