

Lord, I Am Vile, Conceiv'd in Sin*Isaac Watts (1674–1748)*

Lord, I am vile, conceiv'd in sin,
 And born unholy and unclean;
 Sprung from the man whose guilty fall
 Corrupts the race, and taints us all.

Soon as we draw our infant breath,
 The seeds of sin grow up for death:
 Thy law demands a perfect heart;
 But we're defil'd in ev'ry part.

Behold, I fall before thy face,
 My only refuge is thy grace:
 No outward forms can make me clean,
 The leprosy lies deep within.

No bleeding bird, nor bleeding beast,
 Nor hyssop branch, nor sprinkling priest,
 Nor running brook, nor flood, nor sea,
 Can wash the dismal stain away.

Jesus, my God! thy blood alone
 Hath pow'r sufficient to atone:
 Thy blood can make me white as snow;
 No Jewish types could cleanse me so.

While guilt disturbs and breaks my peace,
 Nor flesh nor soul hath rest or ease;
 Lord, let me hear thy pard'ning voice,
 And make my broken bones rejoice.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***My First Theological Conclusion***Kevin T. Bauder*

In August of 1973 I drew my first independent theological and ethical conclusion. At least, it's the first one that I can remember drawing on my own. By that time I knew plenty of theology, and I had a strong ethic in most ways, but it was all second-hand. I held my beliefs because I had been taught them, not because I had thought through them.

By the way, that's not a bad thing. We all start out there, and we never progress any further on some of our beliefs. We don't have time in a single lifetime to rethink everything. As we grow in maturity, however, we begin to examine our beliefs and to seek out the reasons. We reject some of those beliefs, but we find ourselves strengthened in others. This episode was part of my strengthening process.

On that afternoon I sat with a Bible open in front of me, considering the words of Psalm 51, David's great prayer of confession. I was paying particular attention to verse 5: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." As I pondered the verse, my first question was whether David was referring to his mother's sinfulness or his own. The answer seemed clear: the psalm was David's confession of personal fault, and to introduce the faults of anyone else would have disturbed the flow of thought. David was saying that he, personally, was a sinner from the moment of conception.

At that point I considered what it might mean that David was a sinner from his conception. Then I realized that if the verse was true, then David must have been a sinner before his birth. He was a sinner while still in his mother's womb.

If David was a sinner, I reasoned, then he must have been a moral agent. We do not hold inanimate objects accountable for sin. We do not hold cows, dogs, or other brutes accountable for sin. Only moral agents can be sinners, so David must have been a moral agent.

At that point, I did not understand all the places that this conclusion would take me. For example, I later encountered the teaching that humans are born morally neutral. For people who held this view, "original neutrality"



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 900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

was a lynchpin of anti-Calvinism. I could never accept the notion of original neutrality because I already understood that humans are sinners from the womb onwards. They are already morally culpable.

I also did not yet realize that this verse underlined a distinction between imputed guilt and guilt as personally acquired. An infant in the womb is not capable of doing anything either virtuous or vicious. Therefore, the sin of which David was (and we are) guilty must have been imputed rather than individually merited. When I encountered the notion of original sin as imputed guilt, I was prepared to receive it because of what I already understood from Psalm 51:5.

What I did infer that afternoon was that if David was a sinner and consequently a moral agent, then he must already have been a person. Only persons are moral agents. Consequently, David's personal moral agency must have begun at the moment of his conception. David was not merely a blob of tissue in his mother's womb. That blob of tissue was a person.

Furthermore, I realized that if David was a person, then he was a human person. Both words are important. The tips of my fingers are human, but they are not human persons. When I lost the tips of a couple of fingers through the careless use of a power saw, the loss of those parts was not equivalent to the death of a human being. At his conception, David was smaller than my fingertips, but he was already a human person, a human being.

It was at that point in my reasoning that I recognized the relevance of my cogitations for the ethical issue of abortion. On the testimony of David, an embryo is a moral agent, a person, a human being. To kill that embryo is to take the life of a human being. To kill it deliberately is to commit murder.

That is the point at which my theological conclusion also became an ethical conclusion. Just that January (1973) the United States Supreme Court had ruled that women possessed a right to abort their unborn babies. If my conclusion was correct, then every abortion ended the life of a human being. Except for abortions performed to save the life or perhaps health of the mother, every abortion had to be considered murder.

That was not the moment that I became pro-life, but it was the point at which I understood how serious the issue was. I understood that *Roe v Wade* was a hellish decision, the reversal of which had to become the top concern in my political activity. I understood that the lives of embryos and fetuses had the value of human beings, and that any investment in saving those lives by helping mothers bring their children to birth was an investment well spent.

In 1973, the reversal of *Roe v Wade* seemed impossible. The process of accomplishing that task took 49 years. Now, as lower courts are overturning

some states' anti-abortion legislation, and as other states are actively legislating abortion as a woman's right, and as pro-abortion activists are violently targeting pro-life pregnancy centers, the struggle to protect the unborn continues. That struggle is just as relevant and just as important today as it was fifty years ago.

Each January we devote special attention to the sanctity of life. We have already seen the dreadful consequences of a culture of death. We who are Bible believers need to continue to recommit ourselves to using every legal means to push back against those who wish to legalize murder, whether through abortion, assisted suicide, or euthanasia.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
