

THE LORD'S CONCEPTION:
DIVINE TRUTH IN OPERATION

Reuben P. Bell, 1996

The mechanism of the Lord's conception is not an easy subject for investigation. It is a topic which in essence treats of the Divine truth and Divine good in operation, a subject not frequently discussed in detail in New Church literature of the last 75 years. Equally important to our understanding of the Lord's conception, a good working definition of the Holy Spirit is an essential element of our core theology as well. It is the Lord with us.

In *The True Christian Religion* n. 137:9 we learn that the Holy Spirit is "the proceeding and operating Divine, and thus Jehovah." This definition at once denotes action as well as being, and in explanation, we read this in *Doctrine of the Lord* n. 46:

That there is a trine in the Lord may be illustrated by comparison with an angel, who has a soul and a body, also a proceeding. That which proceeds from him is himself outside of himself [*ipse extra illum*].

From this we have a clear sense that what proceeds from the Lord is not some mere representation or effect, but is truly *Ipse extra Illum*.

Elsewhere in the Writings, we find that the Holy Spirit is Divine truth which proceeds from "the power of the highest," which is in itself Divine good (Can. 17). This is an essential point to make when considered in the context of Luke 1:35:

And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is born will be called the Son of God."

Here we begin to see a context in which to place the conception

event itself, and the Holy Spirit as well, with respect to Its origin in the Divine. The "power of the Highest" is Divine Good, and clearly, this in operation is the Divine Truth, or Holy Spirit. Since all things are from the Lord, nothing exists that does not reflect the marriage of love and wisdom which is the Lord Himself. This reciprocal dualism was represented at the Lord's conception by the presence of the "power of the Highest" and the "Holy Spirit," which "overshadowed" and "came upon" the mother of Jesus, "that Holy One." From this union of good and truth came the Lord's body and soul, respectively (Can. 17). This, John reminds us, was the Word, which was "made flesh and dwelt among us." (Can.16)

At this point we must deal with the problem of the emergence in time of the Holy Spirit. We know that the Holy Spirit did not exist prior to the Lord's Advent, because we know from the Writings and from Scripture that 1) the Holy Spirit is Divine Truth, 2) the Lord is the Word, or Divine Truth itself, and 3) the Word was "made flesh," in time and space, as Jesus, son of Mary. The spirit of Jehovah, then, became the Holy Spirit, in the Lord's human, but only after the conception. A problem with this reasoning arises for some in an apparent contradiction with John's statement that "the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified." (John 7:39) What was operating at the conception, if there would be no Holy Spirit until the Lord's glorification? "The Holy Spirit [which was conceived in Mary] stands for the Divine Truth proceeding from Jehovah the Father;

it was this that came forth as 'the power of the Most High' which overshadowed His mother." (TCR 140)

There is really no contradiction here: the Holy Spirit and its source in Jehovah were one, just as the Lord incarnate and Jehovah were one, from conception forward (AC 6982, 9229; TCR 158). Any confusion which might arise likely does so from a confusion of persons. The Holy Spirit "originated" with the Lord at His conception, because at this instant Jehovah's natural presence originated as well. After the Lord's glorification, He chose to *give* the Holy Spirit to His disciples, as the implied verb in the written Word suggests. But it had existed from His conception, as the Divine presence which had "come over" Mary and caused her pregnancy to commence. Thus was the creative power of Jehovah translated directly into the stuff of the natural world.

The final consideration in this discussion is of the Lord's soul - its composition and source. Previous statements have established that the Lord's conception was by means of Divine Truth operating from Divine Good to generate the beginnings of a natural body. But we must also account for the soul. The Writings offer us many clear statements of the soul's origin in the father, and the body's accretion from the substance of the mother.¹ These references leave little room for doubt on this subject, although taken without thoughtful consideration, one

¹See Alfred Acton notes on the *Incarnation* used by the Academy of the New church Theological School for Theology 122, page 14, section 164a: "Digest of passages on the soul being from the father and the body from the mother." This is a section of 26 entries, with 51 individual references.

might erroneously ascribe all importance to the father's contribution, and virtually none to the mother's role. We must never lose sight of the principle, mentioned above, of the reciprocal pairing of attributes in all things originating in the Lord, corresponding to His essentials of Divine Love and Wisdom. How can one member of a *reciprocal* pair be of more importance than the other? Carefully considered, these references are testimony to this essential balance of both operative and responsive contributions to the form and life of the child from a union of a man and a woman.

What happened at the moment of the Lord's conception? Preoccupation with this problem could lead us astray, if we were to attempt to rigidly apply our science to this problem of spiritual, and not natural reality. It was just such a preoccupation with the soul/body nexus that led Swedenborg the scientist into spiritual crisis. He found that his science could never lead him to "the finest things of nature," or the soul, on the other side of time and space. But we are led, nevertheless to see what the Writings for the New Church have to say about this mystical event, because they do offer some insight here, and because we do know a lot about what happens when two humans converge into one. With some caution, there may be much to gain from the effort.

In TCR 103 we find that

In the seed from which each individual is conceived there is a shoot or cutting of the father's soul in all its completeness, wrapped in a covering of natural elements. These control the formation of the body in the mother's

womb.

This "shoot" from the father's soul is implanted into the fertile substance of the mother's uterus, and so directs the development of the embryo as to form.² This is reminiscent of Aristotle's formative *vital heat* of the male as organizer of the material *menstruum* of the female uterus in the development of the embryo.³

But Swedenborg goes farther, telling us that in the male seed, the soul is wrapped in a covering of "natural elements." (ibid.) And further, he tells us that having entered the ovule, this seed begins to "clothe itself in a little bodily form," after which all other elements are of the mother, be it in the ovule or the womb (AC 1815). Following its sojourn in the ovule, the developing embryo is perfected in the womb, into an "image of heaven." (AC 6468)

These teachings compare nicely with what is now known of early human development: The male seed, or sperm cell (having one-half the essential human chromosomal complement), is indeed "clothed" with a thin envelope of natural elements. The cell itself is virtually lacking in cytoplasm. It is a cell membrane surrounding a nucleus, a centriole (to help with the first cell division to come), some mitochondria for energy production, and

²Substance and form: Once again we have here the reciprocal dualism of Love and Wisdom, this time in operation in the developing embryo. One can be no more important than the other, as each is essential to the existence of the other.

³Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, Book II, Chapter 3, in Smith, J.A., and Ross, W.D., *The Works of Aristotle*, Volume V, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1912.

one long flagellum for locomotion. Having penetrated the ovum, its membrane and cytoplasm discarded upon entry, its mitochondria and flagellum disintegrate; only the nucleus and centriole remain inside. Then the nuclear membrane and nuclear proteins in close association with the chromosomes are gradually replaced by elements of the ovum. The sperm cell is thus "unclothed." Having fused with the female pronucleus (containing the other half of the chromosomal complement), all that remains of the sperm cell in the ovum is its centriole, which will subsequently divide and determine the plane of the first cell division. After cell division in the fertilized ovum is under way, this new entity enters the uterus, for implantation in the lining, and the formation of a placenta. The substance of the embryo from fertilization is thus virtually all derived from the mother, yet the sperm's genetic material and centriole play essential roles in its ultimatum. Not surprisingly, our science can tell us no more about the soul in this process than it could in Swedenborg's day.

Spiritual analogies to the physical processes of early human development are easily visualized from their descriptions in the Writings. The male seed contributes almost nothing in the way of material substance, but does supply the formative "blueprint" for development in its chromosomes. And it contributes a curiously important formative element in its tiny centriole, which determines the polarity of the first cleavage division plane - the front-back, left-right, and head-tail orientation the

organism will carry throughout its life. The general process is just as described in the Writings.

The problems of the Lord's conception and the nature of His soul are not surprisingly difficult. While still far from a complete understanding of these, we do have the satisfaction of knowing two important principles concerning them: The Lord's conception, as mystical as the Holy Spirit "coming over" and the "power of the Most High" "overshadowing" Mary may be, corresponds directly to the mechanism of conception we do understand from our scientific studies. This is of great help in tying a spiritual concept to natural experience (*nunc licit!*). And secondly, in a similar line of reasoning, what the New Philosophy can tell us about the nature of our own souls we can apply to the Lord's. Once again, a mystical subject is rendered less mysterious by the application of experience and rationality. That is what New Church doctrine is all about.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Smith, J.A., and Ross, W.D., Ed., *The Works of Aristotle*, Volume V, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1912.

For an expanded treatment of the soul-body problem in early development, see Bell, Reuben P., *Soul-Body Interaction in Human Conception and Development*, in *New Church Life*, June, 1996.

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Books of the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, as abbreviated in the text:

AC	<i>Arcana Coelestia</i>
Canons	<i>The Canons of the New Church</i>
Lord	<i>Doctrine of the Lord</i>
TCR	<i>The True Christian Religion</i>