

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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AND WAS INCARNATE BY THE HOLY SPIRIT OF THE VIRGIN MARY

A few years back CNN aired *After Jesus – The First Century Christians*. As to be expected, the program suggests everything we know about Christianity might be wrong. Christ as divine Messiah? Irrelevant. The Gospels? Politicized and dubious. Blah blah blasphemy. Or not. Who knows? It's all a matter of faith anyway. But if that's the small point of this competently packaged rehash of familiar scholarship and smarty-pants skepticism, why bother? The usual class of liberal scholars are trotted out and portrayed as infallible experts: Bart Ehrman, Blaire Pfann, Amy-Fill Levine, Robin Griffith-Jones, Lawrence Schiffmann, Richard Freund, Marvin Meyer and Gerald O'Collins. Ehrman appears the most. Ehrman, you will remember from an earlier reference, is a graduate of Moody Bible Institute who lost his faith in graduate school and is now a dogmatic skeptic. His NY Times bestseller *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (Harper Collins, 2005), is a tour de force example of his hostility to his former faith. Reoccurring throughout the program are these old liberal canards: The NT Gospels are flawed and inaccurate; the Apostle Paul invented Christianity; and The Early Church Fathers suppressed the *real* gospel, i.e., The Gnostics' story. Not to be outdone, The National Geographic Channel aired *The Secret Lives of Jesus*. The cover story for *U.S. News & World Report* was "The Gospel Truth: Why some old books are stirring up a new debate about the meaning of Jesus." The storyline was the same. The Gnostics were the "good guys" and the early church fathers (Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine) were the black-hatted "bad guys." Naturally one of the orthodox doctrines that comes in for heavy criticism is the Virgin birth (which Gnosticism has no place for). The early Church, however, cherished this doctrine. You can see that it is an integral part of the Apostles' Creed, which states that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary." This doctrine has historically been viewed as one of the touchstones of orthodoxy. It was identified as such in the great controversy between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists during the first part of the 20th century. The reason the Fundamentalists were labeled as such is due to the two-volume set called *The Fundamentals* which was published in 1909.¹ Why is this doctrine so important and what is at stake? This doctrine, wrote James Orr, "affects the whole supernatural estimate of Christ – his life, his claims, his sinlessness, his miracles, his resurrection from the dead. But the virgin birth is assailed with special vehemence because it is supposed that the evidence for this miracle is more easily gotten rid of than the evidence for public facts such as the resurrection. The result is that in very many quarters the virgin birth of Christ is openly treated as a fable, and belief in it is scouted as unworthy of the twentieth century intelligence."²

The virgin birth of Christ was a supernatural birth. Of course, many people will claim that the word *supernatural* can be applied to anything that is out of the ordinary. In that sense we could say that the births of Isaac and John the Baptist were also *supernatural*. I am, however, restricting the word *supernatural* to its usage of referring to that which does not and cannot take place on a natural level. A supernatural event is a divine intervention into the natural order. In other words, it is a miracle.³ Is the virgin birth of Christ *essential* to Christianity? If by the term *Christianity* we mean biblical Christianity as expressed historically in terms of orthodox Christian belief -- yes, the doctrine of the virgin birth is absolutely essential to Christianity.

If, on the other hand, *Christianity* is primarily defined in some subjective (as opposed to objective and concrete beliefs) sense where vague and fragmented references to Jesus are allowed to define Christianity, then the doctrine of the virgin birth is hardly considered important at all. As can be seen, it is very critical that we determine at the beginning what *kind* of Christianity we have in mind in discussing the importance of the virgin birth. Some professing Evangelical scholars do not think the virgin birth is all that important. N. T. Wright, famed for his advocacy of the so-called “New Perspective on Paul,” is one of them. In the book he authored with Marcus Borg (a member of the infamous *Jesus Seminar*) we read “Jesus’ birth usually gets far more attention than its role in the New Testament warrants. Christmas looms large in our culture, outshining even Easter in the popular mind. Yet without Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 we would know nothing about it. Paul’s gospel includes Jesus’ Davidic descent, but apart from that could exist without mention of his birth. One can be justified by faith with no knowledge of it. Likewise, John’s wonderful theological edifice has no need of it: God’s glory is revealed, not in the manger, but on the cross.”⁴ A more reliable guide on the subject is J. Gresham Machen, who wrote the definitive work on the virgin birth. “To our mind, the story of the virgin birth, far from being an obstacle to faith, is an aid to faith; it is an organic part of that majestic picture of Jesus which can be accepted most easily when it is taken as a whole. The story of the virgin birth will hardly, indeed, be accepted when it is taken apart from the rest; but when taken in connection with the rest it adds to, as well as receives from, the convincing quality of the other things about Jesus which the New Testament tells. At this point we are brought to the last question with which it is necessary for us to deal -- the question, namely, as to the importance of belief in the virgin birth to the Christian man. That question is being argued eagerly at the present day; there are many who tell us that, though they believe in the virgin birth themselves, they do not think that that belief is important for all men or essential even to the corporate witness of the Church. This attitude, we are convinced, is radically wrong, and with a brief grounding of this conviction regarding it our discussion may properly be brought to a close. What is the importance of the question of the virgin birth? In the first place, the question is obviously important for the general question of the authority of the Bible. It is perfectly clear that the New Testament teaches the virgin birth of Christ; about that there can be no manner of doubt. There is no serious question as to the *interpretation* of the Bible at this point. Everyone admits that the Bible represents Jesus as having been conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary. The only question is whether in making that representation the Bible is true or false.”⁵

I. **THE SUPERNATURAL.** Anyone who accepts at face value the teaching of the New Testament acknowledges that the kind of Christianity found there is supernaturalistic from beginning to end. Everything about the Christ of Scripture is supernatural. A denial of this has serious consequences, as Thomas C. Oden points out: “So crucial is this testimony that it is often thought that those who reject the special conception are likely to fail to grasp the broader significance of the incarnation and thus of the resurrection. The Reformed theologian E. W. Sartorius wrote: *Those who deny the birth of the God-man of the Virgin Mary will always question also the pre-existence and deity of Christ in general.*”⁶ Sadly, much of Christianity today, even in professing evangelical circles, is so preoccupied with mining the self and therapeutic ways of addressing our ills and the like that in a very real sense the doctrine of the virgin birth (or any other theological doctrine) is dismissed on the *essential* level (it may be professed on the so-called *head-knowledge* level) as lacking practicality and relevance. Doctrine is simply ignored.

II. **THE SON OF THE VIRGIN.** “It is perfectly clear,” to quote Machen again, “that the New Testament teaches the virgin birth of Christ; about that there can be no manner of doubt. There is no serious question as to the *interpretation* of the Bible at this point. Everyone admits that the Bible represents Jesus as having been conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary. The only question is whether in making that representation the Bible is true or false.”⁷ Isaiah 7:14 announces the virginal conception and Matthew 1:16-24 and Luke 1:27-35 affirm the fulfillment. The Apostle Paul likewise presupposes this in his teaching on Christ’s pre-existence and eternal Sonship (Romans 1:3; 8:3; Galatians 4:4). The New Testament also speaks of Christ as sinless, holy, sanctified by God

(John 10:36), knowing no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), a lamb without spot and blemish (1 Peter 1:19), the righteous one (1 John 2:1; Acts 3:14; Acts 22:14). On account of His sinlessness and miraculous birth, Christ is constantly represented as the head of a new race (Colossians 1:18), the first born among many brethren (Romans 8:29), the second Adam (Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:45), the new man (Ephesians 2:15). The Son assumes full humanity to identify sinlessly with our helpless condition, but the Word becomes flesh in a creative act. As a sign, the virginal conception bears eloquent witness to this divine act, with the *origin* of Jesus's humanity inevitably remaining distinct from ours; many modern Christologies assume what "full humanity" must mean without providing adequate argument. They leave behind companion truths – the Son's full divinity and personal unity – without which "incarnation" is meaningless. True, virginal conception is not required for the Son's sinlessness; no account of sin's transmission attained creedal consensus. Instead, the virginal conception announces God's fresh visitation of his people, via the Father's initiative and the Spirit's overshadowing (Isa. 59:21; 61:1-3).⁸

- III. **THE SON OF DAVID.** Christ is over and over again called the Son of David, the One in whom so many Old Testament promises are fulfilled (cf. Matthew 22:42-45). Jesus was of the house of David and as such was the legal heir to the throne of David. This is implied in Acts 2:30; 2 Samuel 7:12 and Acts 13:23. It is distinctly stated in Romans 1:3 where we read, "regarding His Son, who as to his human nature was a descendent of David" (cf. also Hebrews 7:14; Revelation 22:16). In 2 Timothy 2:8, there is a distinct creedal flavor in the words: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David." In Revelation 3:7, Jesus is introduced as "the true one, who has the key of David," prompting Donald Guthrie to write that "this must be understood as expressing his royal authority."⁹
- IV. **THE SON OF GOD.** The heart and center of the gospel message is that the Son of God has become incarnate to redeem sinners. In 1 John we are repeatedly told that confession of Jesus as the Son of God is the cardinal point of Christianity (cf. 1 John 4:15; 5:5, 10, 12). In Acts 9:20, the Apostolic message was "to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God." In Galatians 2:20, Paul declares that saving faith is a living faith in "the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me." Christianity today, even in professing evangelical circles, is so preoccupied with mining the self and therapeutic ways of addressing our ills and the like that in a very real sense the doctrine of the virgin birth (or any other theological doctrine) is dismissed on the *essential* level (it may be professed on the so-called *head-knowledge* level) as lacking practicality and relevance. The one who comes into this world by supernatural birth did so because of who He is. He comes to accomplish a supernatural salvation. The only begotten of the Father, the eternal Word was He. "Born into our race He might be and was; but born of our race, never -- whether really or only apparently."¹⁰ We cannot escape either historically or logically the fact that the deity of Christ and the Incarnation are inseparably bound together with the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. "In point of fact," argued Warfield, "accordingly, it is just in proportion as men lose their sense of the Divine personality of the messianic king who is Immanuel, God with us, that they are found to doubt the necessity of the virgin birth; while in proportion as the realization of this fundamental fact of the Christianity of the New Testament remains vivid and vital with them, do they instinctively feel that it is alone consonant with it that this Being should acknowledge none other father than that Father which is in heaven, from whom alone he came forth to save the world."¹¹
- V. **THE REDEMPTIVE.** The virgin birth and the incarnation do not appear in the pages of the New Testament simply for their own sake. The Apostolic message does not terminate on them as such. Rather, they serve to accomplish God's great purpose in sending His Son -- redemption. The central message of the Gospel is distinctively redemption from sin. Since Christ came to redeem sinners, it was imperative that the Redeemer himself should not be in any way tainted with sin. The supernatural birth of the Redeemer safeguarded the incarnation which in turn guarantees that

redemption would be accomplished. Therefore, when speaking of the essential content of Christianity, we must not think that the doctrine of the virgin birth as somehow not important -- or if we grant that it has some doctrinal significance, it really does not have any real practical value.

CONCLUSION: *Dogma* is considered a dirty word in our postmodern society. It reeks of absolute non-negotiable truth—something that postmoderns consider offensive and arrogant. This mindset, as we have documented from time to time, typifies that group of professing evangelicals (actually they call themselves “post-evangelical”) identified by the label *Emergent*. One very high-profile Emergent Church declares on its website that when it comes to core beliefs, the Virgin birth of Christ is declared to be *negotiable* saying, “These are theological elements of which we do not have definitive clarity on the roles they play in our existence with God.”¹² This kind of statement betrays a mind that is theologically challenged. “All wrong concepts of the person of Jesus Christ stem from a denial of His eternal deity and of His virgin birth entrance into our time-space universe.”¹³ If Jesus Christ is in fact God incarnate (and the church *must* be governed by this truth), then we must likewise insist that Jesus is more than a great religious teacher on par with (or even a little higher than) the great religious leaders like Buddha or Muhammad. “Historically, this uniqueness resides in His birth; His obedient life and sacrificial death; His resurrection, ascension, and present session at the Father’s right hand; and His eschatological return as the Judge and Savior of men. Theologically, it resides in the incarnation, the Atonement, and the several (including the cosmically final) aspects of His exaltation. *If* Jesus Christ is in fact God incarnate, Jesus must continue to be proclaimed as the *only saving way* to the Father, as He said (John 14:6), His the only saving name among men, as Peter said (Acts 4:12), and His the *only saving mediation* between God and man, as Paul said (1 Tim. 2:5).”¹⁴ The doctrine of the virgin birth is an essential doctrine, but as H. P. Liddon, a great English preacher of the 19th century long ago observed, “Now, natural ability has nothing necessarily to do with the real apprehension of religious truth. It can master the surroundings of religion; the evidences on which the Creed depends; the historical circumstances which accompanied the appearance of our Lord among men; the outline of Church history; the controversies which have arisen on religious matters from century to century. But the essential point, the appeal which our Lord makes to the moral and spiritual faculty in a man, has no more to do with his intellectual capacity than it has with his accomplishments as an athlete or as an artist. And unless the spiritual faculty be on the alert, hungering to be satisfied with the good things of God, religious truth falls dead upon the soul, whatever a man’s natural ability may be. It is one thing to read about religion, and to use religious language; and a very good thing too, as far as it goes. But it is another to perceive the reality of religion from its perfect adaptation to the wants and aspirations of a man’s own soul. And this perception is impossible if we allow ourselves to think that, as we already know all about religion, there is no need for further trouble. However much he may have learnt about God, a true Christian is always learning; and he ever bears in mind, that, since he, a finite being, is face to face with the Infinite, there must always be something, or rather much, to learn. He is always forgetting those things that are behind and pressing forward to those things that are before.”¹⁵

ENDNOTES

¹The original contributors were among the best-known scholars of the day, including B. B. Warfield of Princeton, the Scot, James Orr of Glasgow, Sir Robert Anderson, Bishop H. C. G. Moule, Bishop J. C. Ryle, and G. Campbell Morgan. It is interesting to note that Karl Barth, certainly no Fundamentalist, strongly contended with Emil Brunner over the validity of this doctrine. cf. D. Macleod, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1998), pp. 27-36.

²James Orr, “The Virgin Birth of Christ” in *The Fundamentals For Today I*, ed. C. L. Feinberg (rpt. Kregel, 1958), p. 241. This is a condensed version of Orr’s larger work, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907).

³The word *miracle* is almost worthless today. It is tossed around, especially in charismatic circles, in a very careless and haphazard fashion. Almost any unusual or unexpected thing is declared to be “a miracle!” Warfield provides the following definition: “A miracle then is specifically an effect in the external world, produced by the immediate efficiency of God. Its *differentiae* are: (1) that it occurs in the external world, and thus is objectively real and not a merely mental phenomenon; and (2) that its cause is a new supernatural force, intruded into the complex of nature, and not a natural force under whatever wise and powerful manipulation.” B. B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings II* (P&R, 1973), p. 170.

⁴N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (Harper, 1999), p. 171.

⁵J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (rpt. Baker Book House, 1975), p. 382.

⁶T. C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology II* (Harper Collins, 1989), p. 134.

⁷Machen, *Ibid.*

⁸D. J. Treier in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology For the Catholic Church*, eds. M. Allen & S. R. Swain (Baker Academic, 2016), p. 219.

⁹D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), p. 258.

¹⁰*The Works of B. B. Warfield III* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 453.

¹¹*Ibid.* p. 454

¹²www.ethoschurch.com/index.

¹³Robert Gromachi, *The Virgin Birth: Doctrine of Deity* (Thomas Nelson, 1977), p. 167.

¹⁴Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah* (P&R, 1990), p. 26.

¹⁵H. P. Liddon, *The Magnificat: Sermon In St. Paul's August 1889* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1980), p. 80.