

The Marvel of Christmas

Born of the Virgin Mary

Matthew 1:18-25

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Born of the Virgin Mary

Scripture

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. This is the third in a series of Advent messages on “The Marvel of Christmas.” My sermon is titled “Born of the Virgin Mary.”

Let us read Matthew 1:18-25:

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

Introduction

During my third year at the University of Cape Town I bought my first *decent* car—a 1976 Ford Escort. The car was only about three-years old, and it was in great shape. I was very glad to have that car.

Shortly after I bought the car I went home for the Christmas vacation. I had saved up enough money to buy and install a nice car radio and tape deck. I had all I needed!

One evening, just as it was getting dark, my brother shouted to me that someone was outside at the car. We rushed out but we were too late. Whoever was at the car ran off down the street as soon as he saw us.

A closer inspection revealed that this fellow had just stolen my new car radio. I did not lock the car and so it was very easy for him to get into the car and take off with my radio and tape deck.

We called the Police and they came and searched the area, but we all knew that I would never see that radio again.

I learned a valuable lesson that day. I learned that it is important to guard carefully what I consider precious.

This lesson is true in the spiritual realm as well. If we do not guard what is precious, Satan will try to steal it from us.

Satan has many different strategies. One is to take some small but foundational element of truth appear insignificant and then ridicule or call that element into question. This is Satan's *strategy of doubt*.

If Satan can get people to doubt the smallest foundational truth, he can eventually destroy the entire superstructure. That is why issues like the infallibility of Scripture are so important.

If Scripture is the Word of God—and it is—then it has to be truth unmixed with error. Every detail in the Bible—including the historic, geographic, and scientific ones—must be completely accurate or it is not the Word of God.

If we fall prey to Satan's strategy of doubt at even one point of biblical truth, we open the door to denial and unbelief. History bears testimony to the inevitability of this pattern.

The Virgin Birth is such an issue. Some see it as a non-essential issue or, worse, treat it as a myth or fable. It is neither.

Although the Church has not always been careful to guard the truth of the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, it is foundational to the birth of Jesus and to Christianity.

Lesson

Today I would like to take another look at the Virgin Birth of Jesus. I would like to do so by examining:

1. The Biblical Statements of the Virgin Birth,
2. The Confessional Statement on the Virgin Birth,
3. The Attacks on the Virgin Birth, and
4. The Importance of the Virgin Birth.

I. The Biblical Statements of the Virgin Birth

First, let's examine the biblical statements of the Virgin Birth.

A. *The Prediction of the Virgin Birth*

The Virgin Birth of Jesus was not an afterthought in God's plans. The Old Testament has many prophecies pointing to the birth of Jesus by a virgin.

As far back as Genesis, we find hints that God was going to send a redeemer. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit, God pronounced this curse on the serpent: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Genesis 3:15, *NASB*).

"Her seed" is an unusual expression. It is used here in Genesis 3:15 and also in Revelation 12:17. Whenever the Bible speaks of "seed" or "offspring," it is always referring to the male seed or sperm. But here in Genesis (and also in Revelation) Scripture is referring to the seed of a *woman*, indicating something special.

The prophet Isaiah prophesied the birth of the Messiah. Moreover he said that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. He said in Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a

sign: The *virgin* will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

There are some who reject the prophetic intent of this verse by pointing out that the Hebrew word translated as *virgin* (*almah*) can mean “young girl.” They are right. One can interpret *virgin* as “young girl.”

But if this means just any young girl having a baby, then the force of Isaiah’s prophecy is lost. In the Hebrew culture lots of young girls had babies. So, how would a young girl having a baby be a sign?

A sign is meant to get your attention. If, for example, you were driving and you saw a sign that said, “City Limit,” it would not help you much if you did not know what city you were entering. When God gave this sign, he was pointing to something extraordinary, to something special.

A virgin—and not merely a young girl—bearing a child and giving birth to a son would indeed be a sign.

B. *The Commentary on the Virgin Birth*

Matthew 1:22-23 gives the divine interpretation of Isaiah 7:14. Notice the word that Matthew uses: **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The *virgin* will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us.’”**

The Greek word for *virgin* is *parthenos*, and it cannot mean anything but a *virgin*—that is, someone who has never had sexual intercourse.

Luke is quite clear in his account of the birth of Jesus that Mary had no contact with a man either before or during her pregnancy. In Luke 1:35 the angel explains to Mary that her pregnancy is due to the power of the Most High overshadowing her. This means that in spite of Mary being a sinful human being, the Holy Spirit would see to it that her child was not sinful.

Clearly the conception of Jesus was supernatural. His mother, Scripture tells, us, was a virgin at the time of his birth.

In July 1978, a little girl name Louise Brown was born in England. At 5 pounds 12 ounces, Louise was a tiny baby, but what made her birth truly remarkable was that she was the first child ever born who was conceived outside the human body. Little Louise Brown was the first so-called “test-tube baby.”

Since then, many other children have been conceived by what is called in-vitro fertilization. It is truly amazing and, until some years ago, unthinkable. But, it is *not* miraculous.

Conception occurs when a male seed fertilizes a female egg. In in-vitro fertilization conception takes place *outside* the body instead of *inside* the body.

Scientists are experimenting with other amazing techniques to enable conception and birth by other than natural means. But, despite all the developments of modern science, Christ’s conception remains truly unique.

Science will never be able to explain how a virgin like Mary, a woman who had never had sexual intercourse with another man, could conceive a male child. The only explanation is that it was a miracle of God, the greatest miracle of conception the world has ever known.

II. The Confessional Statement on the Virgin Birth

Second, let’s examine the confessional statement on the Virgin Birth.

I want to draw your attention to what the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states about the birth of Jesus:

The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon Him man’s nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost,

in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.¹

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* upholds and summarizes the biblical teaching about the Virgin Birth of Jesus.

III. The Attacks on the Virgin Birth

Third, let's examine the attacks on the Virgin Birth.

Throughout history there have been attacks on the Virgin Birth of Jesus.

A. *Jesus' Enemies*

Jesus' enemies questioned his parentage. At one time a crowd of Jews were upset that Jesus claimed to have come from heaven. They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?" (John 6:42).

This crowd thought that Joseph really was the father of Jesus. Of course, they were wrong.

B. *Eighth Century*

As early as the eighth century, an extremist anti-Christian cult popularized the teaching that after Mary married Joseph, she unwittingly conceived a child by a neighbor who came in the dark of night and had intercourse with her. She assumed that the man

¹Smith, M. H. (1996, c1990). *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation.; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. (electronic ed.). Greenville SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press.

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was Joseph and because she never saw his face in the dark, she never knew the difference. According to the legend Joseph knew he was not Jesus' father, so he left Mary after she gave birth to Jesus.

Of course, none of that has any basis in historical fact. Its sole purpose was to make Jesus illegitimate and remove his divine nature. The antagonists who concocted that story wanted only to invalidate Jesus' claim to be divine.

C. *Hugh J. Schonfield's The Passover Plot*

Similar attacks have been made in our own generation on the Virgin Birth of Jesus.

I have a book by Hugh J. Schonfield titled *The Passover Plot*. This book was very popular in the late nineteen sixties.

Schonfield postulates that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. He views Jesus as nothing but a master conspirator who thought that he could be the Messiah, and purposely tried to fulfill Messianic prophecies. Schonfield writes:

There was nothing peculiar about the birth of Jesus. He was not God incarnate and no virgin mother bore him. The Church in its ancient zeal fathered a myth and became bound to it as dogma.²

We should not be surprised by attacks on the Virgin Birth by those who do not profess to be Christians. But it is a sad truth that attacks on the Virgin Birth have come even from within the Church.

D. *The Presbyterian Church in the USA*

In 1922 Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a notorious sermon in the First Presbyterian Church in New York City titled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" In this sermon Dr. Fosdick contrasted the

² Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*, 42.

conservative and the radical views of the Virgin Birth, the inspiration of the Scriptures, the atonement, and the Second Advent of Christ. He pleaded for a tolerance of both conservative and liberal views within the Church.

There was an immediate outcry against Dr. Fosdick's sermon. His sermon was in reality the signal for a new and public outbreak of the conflict between the forces that represented historic Christianity and modern liberalism within the Presbyterian Church in the USA.

The following year, in 1923, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA ordered the Presbytery of New York "to take such action. . . as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York to conform to the system of doctrine taught in the *Confession of Faith*."

In addition to this order, the General Assembly also reaffirmed a statement it had made in 1910 regarding essential doctrines. The statement (known as the Five Point Deliverance) set forth five doctrines as necessary articles of the faith. These articles were:

1. The Inerrancy of the Scriptures,
2. The Virgin Birth of Christ,
3. The Substitutionary Atonement of Christ,
4. The Resurrection of Christ, and
5. The Reality of Christ's miracles.

By the way, it should be noted that these points are not peculiar to Presbyterians or Reformed churches. These five points are cardinal doctrines of all true Churches.

A few months after the General Assembly met, 150 Presbyterian ministers met in Auburn, NY. They issued a document in response to the action of the General Assembly. This document, known as the Auburn Affirmation, attacked each one of the points in the Five Point Deliverance.

Our concern this morning is just with the attack on the Virgin Birth of Christ. The second point in the 1910 Five Point Deliver-

ance says: “It is an essential doctrine of the Word of God and our Standards that our Lord Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.”

Concerning this statement the Auburn Affirmation responds by noting: “We all believe from our hearts. . . that Jesus Christ was God manifest in the flesh. . . . But we are united in believing that these [five doctrines] are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our Standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion; whatever theories they may employ to explain them are worthy of all confidence and fellowship.”

It is plain from this statement that the Auburn Affirmation regards the Virgin Birth of Christ as a *theory* of the incarnation.

The narratives in the Bible, however, are very explicit in their description of the conception and birth of Christ. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:34-35).

That statement of an historical event in the two Gospels is either true or it is false. It is not a theory, and to claim that it is a theory is to reduce the sacred gospel narrative to an absurdity and to make nonsense of the language. Neither Matthew nor Luke proposes the Virgin Birth as a theory. They state it as a fact of history.

As you may know, the Presbyterian Church in the USA eventually did become liberal—and still is largely so today. Churches like the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church have sought to maintain a continued witness to the historic Christian doctrines (such as the Virgin Birth of Christ) and have severed their connections with denominations like the Presbyterian Church in the USA.

IV. The Importance of the Virgin Birth

Finally, let’s examine the importance of the Virgin Birth.

You may be wondering why I am making such a fuss about the Virgin Birth of Christ.

“Why is it so important,” someone may ask, “After all, Scripture devotes relatively little space to the Virgin Birth. Can it really be that important?”

Yes! The Virgin Birth is an underlying assumption in *everything* that the Bible says about Jesus.

To throw out the Virgin Birth is to reject Christ's deity, the infallibility and authority of the Scriptures, and a host of other related doctrines that are the heart of our Christian faith. No issue is more important than the Virgin Birth to understand who Jesus is.

If we deny that Jesus is God, we have denied the very essence of Christianity. Everything else the Bible teaches about Christ hinges on the truth we celebrate at Christmas—that Jesus is God in human flesh.

If the story of Jesus' birth is merely a fabricated or trumped-up legend, then so is the rest of what Scripture tells us about him. The Virgin Birth is as crucial as the resurrection in substantiating his deity. And anyone who rejects Christ's deity rejects Christ completely.

So, the Virgin Birth of Christ is crucially important to our understanding of who he is.

Conclusion

It is important to guard what we consider precious.

We consider the Virgin Birth of Christ to be a precious truth. We must guard this truth and not allow Satan to steal it from us.

We will not for one moment give in to doubts about the truth of the Virgin Birth of Christ. If we begin to doubt this small but foundational truth, we will eventually begin to see the superstructure of our faith crumble, collapse and eventually crush us.

Pay attention this Christmas to what people say about the birth of Christ. Listen to the radio or TV or friends or colleagues or even family. Don't let them tell you that there was "nothing peculiar about the birth of Jesus."

Jesus was, as the Apostles' Creed says, "born of the Virgin Mary." Let us this Christmas affirm that truth from the very depths of our being. Let us embrace Jesus who was born of the Virgin Mary and who came to save his people from their sins. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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