

# **The Apostles' Creed**

## **The Conception and Birth of Christ**

*Selected Texts*

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# The Conception and Birth of Christ

## Introduction

As we continue our series in *The Apostles' Creed* I would like to examine today what it means to believe in the conception and birth of Christ. Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
**who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
and born of the Virgin Mary.**  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended into hell.  
The third day he rose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand  
of God the Father Almighty.  
From there he will come to judge  
the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

Does truth matter? In the day in which we live most people would probably answer that question affirmatively. Perhaps the debate is really over the issue of whether or not truth is relative or absolute. It is critically important for us as Christians who believe in the inerrancy of God's Word to know that truth is not relative but absolute.

Our society, and particularly our intellectual culture, is aggressively opposed to *biblical* truth. Our society is opposed to the notion that God has acted personally in history.

One of the ways in which this is seen is in the denial of the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus Christ. In the late nineteenth century this denial was widely taught by liberal theologians, first in Europe and then later in this country. By the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mainline churches all over America did not believe in the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus Christ. Our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, was born out of the mainline Southern Presbyterian church that denied, among other truths, the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus Christ.

Friends, we believe that Jesus *was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary*. And the reason we believe this is because this is what we are taught in God's Word. Aside from our human depravity, one reason why our society denies this truth is because of an erosion of confidence in the inerrancy and authority of God's Word.

## Lesson

And so today, I want to study what God has to say in his Word about the conception and birth of Jesus Christ, or, what I will call the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In our lesson today I want to look at:

1. The Promise of the Incarnation,
2. The Subject of the Incarnation,
3. The Manner of the Incarnation,
4. The Cause of the Incarnation, and,
5. The Benefit of the Incarnation.

### I. The Promise of the Incarnation

First, then, let's look at the promise of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

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One of the blessings Adam enjoyed in the Garden of Eden before the Fall—that is, Adam's Fall into sin—was the personal presence of God. It seems that God would personally visit Adam in the garden from time to time (cf. Genesis 3:8).

However, after Adam's Fall into sin, Adam no longer enjoyed that same kind of personal interaction with God. But, in his grace, one of the most precious of the covenant promises that God made to his people was that he “would walk among them and be their God” (cf. Leviticus 26:12).

The Lord fulfilled his promise in various ways. First, God gave symbols to Israel of his special presence in the tabernacle. When God gave instructions to the Israelites about how to build the tabernacle, he said, “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, *and I will dwell among them*” (Exodus 25:8). Throughout the time of the tabernacle, it was the symbol of God's presence with his people.

Second, God demonstrated his presence by his willingness to help his people in time of need. For example, the Psalmist said: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. *God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day*” (Psalm 46:4-5).

Third, God's promise of his presence reached its fulfillment in the incarnation of his Son. Matthew tells us that the birth of Jesus took place to fulfill what the Lord had promised in the Old Testament: “‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘*God with us*’” (Matthew 1:23).

We also read in John 1:14a: “The Word became flesh and *made his dwelling among us.*” Interestingly, the English phrase “made his dwelling” comes from the Greek word that means *tabernacle*. John purposely uses the very same word picture that God gave the Israelites to indicate that he was now dwelling among his people.

And so we have a precious promise from God that he would dwell among his people. In the Old Testament he dwelt among his

people, and this was indicated by symbols and the special help he gave to his covenant people. Now we get to the New Testament, and we see that God himself has come to dwell among his people.

## II. The Subject of the Incarnation

Second, notice now the subject of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The One who became man is not the Father, nor the Holy Spirit, but the Son alone. “The Word (i.e. Jesus Christ) became flesh” (John 1:14a; cf. also Galatians 4:4; 1 John 4:2). The Second Person of the Trinity became man.

We might ask the question, “Why did the Son of God become man, and not the Father or the Holy Spirit?”

Within the perfect counsel of the Trinity it was deemed best that the Son should be incarnated. Herman Witsius, author of *The Apostles’ Creed*, suggests that we should be recreated by the One who created us in the first place, and that he who is the Son of God by nature should make us sons of God by grace.<sup>1</sup>

The point I simply want to make is that we should be quite clear that it is none other than the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, who became man almost 2,000 years ago.

## III. The Manner of the Incarnation

Third, let’s observe the manner of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

With respect to the manner of the incarnation, we should note that Jesus Christ did not become a man merely in appearance, but in reality.

Right from the beginning the Early Church battled against the heresy of *docetism*, i.e. the view that the body of Christ was not real but only *seemed* to be real.

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed*, Volume II (Glasgow: Khull, Blackie & Co., 1823), 5.

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The apostle John argues against docetism in 1 John 4:2: “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (cf. also 1 John 5:6). Jesus had all the essential properties of a real man.

The Early Church believed that Jesus was fully God and also fully man. But a precise understanding of how full deity and full humanity could be combined together in one person was formulated only gradually in the Church and did not reach its final form until the Chalcedonian Council in 451 AD. Before that point, several inadequate views were proposed and rejected.

Let me read to you the Chalcedonian Definition, which definitively answered the inadequate views concerning the person of Christ:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; *consubstantial [coessential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial [coessential] with us according to the Manhood*; in all things like unto us, with sin [i.e., who have sin]; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in *two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather *the property of each nature being preserved*, and concurring in *one Person* and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten God, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has been handed down to us.

Basically, Jesus Christ has two distinct natures, one human and one divine, in one person. How this is so is mystery.

#### **IV. The Cause of the Incarnation**

This brings us to our fourth point, which is the cause of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The Bible says quite simply that Jesus was conceived in the womb of his mother Mary by a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit and without a human father. While it is difficult for us to understand how this is so, we recognize that this is the teaching of God's Word.

Matthew tells us: "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*" (1:18).

Shortly after that an angel of the Lord said to Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, "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*" (1:21).

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

The same fact is affirmed in Luke's gospel, where we read about the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary. After the angel had told her that she would bear a son, Mary said, "How will this be since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34).

The angel answered, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God*" (Luke 1:35).

The conception of Jesus Christ is quite simply a miracle. The Holy Spirit is the cause of the miraculous conception of Christ. And since the miraculous is beyond human comprehension, we accept the truth of such an event on the basis of God's Word.

## V. The Benefit of the Incarnation

Finally, let's take note of the benefit of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Why did Jesus Christ become a man? Christ became a man so that he might become our Mediator. The apostle Paul expressly mentions that the Mediator was a man in 1 Timothy 2:5: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, *the man* Christ Jesus."

In answer to the question, "Why was it requisite that the Mediator should be man?" the Westminster Larger Catechism (#39) answers:

"It was requisite that the Mediator should be man, that he might advance our nature, perform obedience to the law, suffer and make intercession for us in our nature, have a fellow-feeling of our infirmities; that we might receive the adoption of sons, and have comfort and access with boldness unto the throne of grace."

It was requisite that Jesus become a man so that he could be our redeemer. The word "redeemer" in Hebrew is *goel*. This word is rich in meaning. Let me note a few details concerning a *goel*, or Redeemer, which we learn from the Mosaic Law.

First, a *goel* referred to one's nearest relative.

Second, a *goel* was required to perform one or more of the following duties:

1. to buy back (or redeem) possessions (such as land or a house) which had been sold or alienated of his nearest relative,
2. to obtain the freedom of the relative if he were a captive or a servant,
3. to avenge the relative, if he had been murdered, and
4. to marry the wife of his nearest relative in order to ensure that his relative would have descendants.

And third, a *goel* performed these duties in one of the following ways:

1. by paying the price that was to be paid, as in the redemption of property that had been sold,
2. by using power or force to obtain the freedom of the relative or to avenge his blood, and
3. by marrying the widow of the nearest relative.

The Old Testament *goel* is a picture of Christ. First, Christ became our *goel* when he assumed our nature. He became our Brother and our Kinsman so that he might redeem us.

Second, Christ performed all the duties required of a *goel*:

1. by his meritorious righteousness he has recovered our lost possessions and the heavenly inheritance which we forfeited by our demerit,
2. he has obtained our freedom from captivity, since we were in bondage to Satan,
3. he has taken vengeance on our enemy Satan, and
4. he has dissolved our relationship to our former husband, the law of God and the covenant of works, and joined us to himself in an everlasting and indissoluble marriage, according to the covenant of grace.

And third, with respect to the manner in which Christ performs these duties:

1. he has purchased us with a most ample price,
2. he has rescued us from the slavery of Satan by the most signal exertions of might and power, and
3. he has displayed incredible love in betrothing the church to himself.

Our Lord Jesus Christ became a man to dwell among his people so that he could redeem and rescue his people.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we should note that truth matters. It matters that we get the facts concerning God's dealings with men right.

In a marvelous act of condescension on God's part, he sent the Second Person of the Trinity into this sin-ridden world to save us. You know, there are two kinds of beings in the world. There are human beings and there are angelic beings. Human beings sinned and fell in Adam. Angelic beings sinned and fell with Satan. Yet God, while he leaves angels to suffer the punishment due to their sin, and consigns them to eternal misery in hell, has compassion on men, and that he may show them his compassion, becomes a partaker of the same nature with them. God did not take on the nature of angels, but he did take on the nature of humanity. God took on human nature so that we might become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Oh, what gratitude that should stir up in us! How great is God's love for his own. How we should thank and praise God for sending the Lord Jesus Christ into this world so that we might become the sons of God! We who are united to Jesus Christ by faith will spend all eternity thanking and praising God for the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us praise him even now! Amen.

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