

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Pastor/Teacher

Number:

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The Significance of Christ's Birth

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.¹ 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."² 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."³ Christianity as set forth in the pages of the New Testament has *three* distinctive emphases and these three all touch on the virgin birth of Christ.

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. "His supernatural birth is given already, in a word, in his supernatural life and his supernatural work, and forms an indispensable element in the supernatural religion which he founded."⁴ 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. How does this affect Christianity?

A. Autosotericism.

In the final analysis, there are really only two doctrines of salvation: God saves us or we save ourselves. The one underscores the absolute necessity for grace, the other denies any such need. Then, of course, there are those who seek a middle ground. God's grace helps us to save ourselves.⁵ Either way, unless God saves us by His grace completely, we end up not really needing a Savior with a supernatural birth.⁶

II. THE INCARNATION

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."⁷ 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."⁸ In Philippians 2:5 – 11 we are told that Christ *emptied* himself. The ESV reads *made himself nothing*. How? By taking. But what did He take?

A. He took the form of a servant.

In identity He was the Lord, the Master and Sovereign of the Universe. But He became a servant, 'made under the law' (Galatians 4:4). Men saw Him as a slave. Nor was this a mere seeming or a pretence. It was the truth. He was the servant of God. He was the One who washed the disciples' feet.

B. He took the likeness of men.

The interest here is in what Christ looked like, what people saw. If you had seen him, Paul says, He would not have turned any heads. There was no halo. There was no shining face. I don't suppose he was conspicuously elegant or handsome or that He had those attributes the glossy magazines commend to us today as archetypal masculinity. He was just a man. There was nothing to betray who He was.

C. He took the cursed death of the cross.

Part of the glory of this is the reminder that the humiliation of Christ was not a point, but a line. 'He made himself nothing' (NIV), He 'made himself of no reputation' (AV), both versions struggling to express the meaning of 'he emptied himself'. But even after He took the form of a servant and became man He went lower still, as if the Manger weren't low enough. Donald MacLeod ponders "What did the angels think of it all? One day they blinked in astonishment as they saw their great Creator in a manger in Bethlehem. They must have found the spectacle incomprehensible. Then as the days and years moved on they saw a drama unfold which must have over-loaded every circuit in their computers. One day word came that their Lord was in Gethsemane, and one of them had been sent to strengthen Him. Hours afterwards there came even more astonishing news: He was bleeding on the cross of Calvary. That, surely, was the bottom: the very worst! But no! The next thing was, The Father had forsaken Him. The God whose whole impulse it was to wash away the tears from the eyes of His people not washing away the tears of His own Son! That's how it was from the beginning to end of the earthly life: down! The tremendous step from throne to stable, and then the incredible journey from the stable to the cross and beyond it to the journey on the cross itself from the immolation to the dereliction. The angels must have been saying, 'Will this never, never end? How low is He going to go? How low does He have to go?'"⁹

III. THE REDEEMPTIVE

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: 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 (I Timothy 2:5)."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ The 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 super-natural 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.

² N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (Harper, 1999), p. 171.

³ J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (rpt. Baker Book House, 1975), p. 382.

⁴ *The Works of B.B. Warfield III* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 451.

⁵ “There are, in fact, as we might have anticipated, but *two* complete self-consistent systems of Christian theology possible.” “1st. On the right hand, Augustinianism completed in Calvinism. 2nd. On the left hand, Pelagianism completed in Socinianism. and 3rd. Arminianism comes between these as the system of compromises, and is developed Semipelagianism.” A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 96.

⁶ Islam teaches that the Trinity is composed of God the Father, the Virgin Mary and Jesus who was the offspring of the first two. Cf. Robert Morey, *The Islamic Invasion: Confronting the World’s Fastest Growing Religion* (Harvest House, 1992).

Likewise, Mormonism teaches the patently unbiblical idea that “Adam-God”, known as *Elohim*, had sexual relations with the Virgin Mary and produced Jesus. Cf. J. & S. Tanner, *The Case Against Mormonism* (Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1968). This kind of nonsense is totally pagan. Pagan mythology, as Alan Richardson has noted, “is full of legends of a supernatural hero born of intercourse between a god and a human woman. But this is scarcely a *virgin* birth, and there is no real parallel to the story of the birth of Christ in pagan literature. The Jewish mind (and Matthew 1 and Luke 1 are intensely Jewish) would have been revolted by the idea of physical intercourse between a divine being and a woman.” *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. A. Richardson (SCM, 1969), p. 357.

⁷ Warfield, *Works*, p. 453.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 454.

⁹ D. MacLeod, *A Faith To Live By: Christian Teaching That Makes a Difference* (Mentor, 1998), This section is adapted from the chapter on the Incarnation.

¹⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah* (P&R, 1990), p. 26.