

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE VIRGIN BIRTH: DOCTRINE OF DEITY

The supermarket tabloids and the sensational news programs on TV, as well as the syndicated talk shows that specialize in the bizarre, have from time to time featured some unusual births. We recently learned of a British woman who with the aid of fertility drugs became pregnant with *eight* babies (she miscarried all the babies). In 1934, the Dionne quintuplets were born; years later the Fisher quintuplets were born and the amazing birth of the Stanek sextuplets occurred in 1973. All received international notoriety. However, the only really unique (one of a kind) birth in the history of mankind is the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. How important is the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ? 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.¹ It was identified as such in the great controversy between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists during the first part of this century. The reason the Fundamentalists were labeled as such is due to the two-volume set called The Fundamentals, which was published in 1909.² 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 got 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."³ 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.⁴ 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. Christianity as set forth in the pages of the New Testament has *six* distinctive emphases and these *six* all touch on the virgin birth of Christ.

I. THE SON OF THE VIRGIN

"It is perfectly clear," says the noted New Testament scholar J. Gresham Machen, "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 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; Gal. 4:4). The New Testament also speaks of Christ as sinless, holy, sanctified by God (John 10:36), knowing no sin (II Cor. 5:21) a lamb without spot and blemish (I Peter 1:19), the righteous one (I 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 (Col. 1:18), the firstborn among many brethren (Romans 8:29), the second Adam (Romans 5:14; I Cor. 15:45), the new man (Eph. 2:15).

II. 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; II 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 II 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."⁶

III. 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 I John we are repeatedly told that confession of Jesus, as the Son of God, is the cardinal point of Christianity (cf. I 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."

IV. 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."⁷ 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. Autosoterism.

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.⁸ Either way, unless God saves us by His grace completely, we end up not really needing a Savior with a supernatural birth.⁹

V. 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."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

VI. 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: “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.”¹² The promised child of Isaiah 7:14 is not to have a human father by ordinary generation, but as the creed rehearses it, He “was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” This miracle, wrote Machen, “is one of the things that will show the child to be rightly called *holy* and *Son of God* . . . the term *Son of God* is here used in some very lofty sense. It does not designate the promised child merely as the Messiah, though sometimes the Messiah was called *Son of God*. Evidently the term is used here in some unique and stupendous sense.”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 (I Tim. 2:5).”¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Mormonism does *not* subscribe to this essential doctrine of Biblical Christianity. Based on the teachings of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young taught that Adam, the first man, was actually *our* God, the father of our spirits, the father of Jesus in the flesh, he impregnated the *Virgin* Mary (in which case there is no “Virgin” birth), came here from another planet with a resurrected body, and Mormons, when they become gods will actually do so by becoming *Adams*. Mormon apologist Robert Millet in his recent book *A Different Jesus? The Christ of The Latter-Day Saints* (Eerdmans, 2005) openly admits that, “While the Latter-day Saints clearly believe that Jesus is the Son of God the Father, there is no *authoritative* doctrinal statement within Mormonism that explains how the conception of Jesus was accomplished.” (p. 74) Given Mormonism’s anti-Trinitarian theology (cf. Millet, pp. 17, 141) the virgin birth of Christ is incoherent. Why so? Noted theologian Samuel Mikolaski argues, “Hence Christians test the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity by the truth of the doctrine of the Incarnation, and not vice versa. If Jesus Christ is really God, then the virgin birth occurred; then the incarnation was real; then the nature of God must be trinitarian. This is a logical sequence.” As cited by Robert Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth: Doctrine of Deity* (Nelson, 1974), p. 26.

² The 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. In the last subsection of his *Dogmatics* (vol. 1), Barth looks at the mystery of revelation in the form of the Christmas miracle. The texts in Matthew and Luke provide the biblical basis and starting point. Barth concedes that in view of textual problems the evidence has a certain thinness (174-176). All the same, one cannot dismiss the dogma of the miraculous conception and virgin birth on exegetical grounds (176). As a sign, the miracle of Christmas denotes the mystery of revelation, the fact that God himself does this real act of incarnation, which means the coming of revelation and the effecting of reconciliation (177). Like the empty tomb at the end of the earthly life of Jesus, the virgin birth at the beginning is distinguishable but not separable from that which it denotes (178f.). The virgin birth cannot properly be

understood in the context of natural theology (180f.), and it is not to be rejected (cf. Brunner) as a poor attempt at explaining the incarnation biologically (183f.). If the dogma cannot be proved, it demands acceptance because it answers to the biblical attestation and is analogously related to the mystery. After these preliminary remarks Barth devotes a special passage to the “born of the virgin Mary.” The virgin birth, he thinks, signifies five things. First, that Jesus was born as no one else was (185). Second, however, that he was born as real man (186). Third, it implies a judgment and limitation of human nature, or, more strictly, of sinful human nature (187). Fourth, and more positively, it marks a new beginning of human life (189). Fifth, it shows that this new beginning is not due to human will and achievement, but to the free grace and act of God (190ff.). Cf. G. W. Bromiley, *Introduction to The Theology of Karl Barth* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 26.

3 James Orr, “The Virgin Birth of Christ” in *The Fundamentals For Today* I, ed. C. L. Feinberg (rpt. Kregel, 1958), p. 241.

4 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.

5 J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (rpt. Guardian Press, 1975), p. 382.

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

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

8 “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 Semi-pelagianism.” A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 96.

9 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, as already noted, Mormonism teaches the patently unbiblical idea that “Adam-God” 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 Matt. 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.

10 Warfield, *Works*, p. 453.

11 Ibid. p. 454.

12 Gromacki, op. cit. p. 167.

13 J. G. Machen, *The Christian Faith In the Modern World* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1947), p. 152.

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