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Series: **Special Message** **Pastor/Teacher**
Text: **Matthew 1:18 – 25; Luke 1:35** **Gary L. W. Johnson**
Date: **December 23, 2012 (am)**

THE VIRGIN BIRTH: CRITICAL DOGMA OR NEGOTIABLE DOCTRINE?

It's been a tough year for Jesus," writes Jeff Jensen in the pages of the Dec. 22 issue of *Entertainment Weekly*. "First, *The Da Vinci Code* spreads rumors about his sex life. Then his pal, Mel Gibson, makes a spectacle of himself. And now, just in time for his birthday, this documentary (CNN Presents*: After Jesus – The First Christians* aired Dec. 20 from 7-9 pm) 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 best-seller *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, last Sunday night (Dec. 17) The National Geographic Channel aired "The Secret Lives of Jesus." The cover story for the Dec. 18, 2006 issue of *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 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."[2]

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."[3] 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).

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; 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."[4]

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 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."

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. 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.[5] 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 three distinctive emphases and these three all touch on the virgin birth of Christ. "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."[6] 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? 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.[7] Either way, unless God saves us by His grace completely, we end up not really needing a Savior with a supernatural birth.[8]

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."[9] 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."[10]

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: *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."[11] 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."[12] 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]

ENDNOTES

[1] 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.

[2] James Orr, "The Virgin Birth of Christ" in *The Fundamentals For Today I*, ed. C. L. Feinberg (rpt. Kregel, 1958), p. 241.

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

[4] D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), p. 258.

[5] 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.

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

[7] "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.

[8] Although the expression is used by groups like Islam and Mormonism, the orthodox understanding of the doctrine is in fact denied. 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). James White also points out, "Even if your only acquaintance with the Biblical account of Christ's birth is Linus' speech in "A Charlie Brown Christmas," you should notice some very stark differences between what the Qur'an says, and what the Bible says. First, the Qur'an neglects to mention that Zacharias was struck dumb as a punishment for his faithlessness, and only had his speech restored when he wrote the name of his son calling him 'John' as the angel instructed. About the only point of contact the Qur'anic account of Christ birth has with the Biblical narrative is where Mary points out to the angel that 'no man has touched me' and the angel assures her that her pregnancy will come about by divine agency. Significantly, the Qur'an skips over Zacharias' prophecy, as recorded in Luke 1:67-79 where he speaks of how God has 'visited us and accomplished redemption for His people.' As for the description of Christ's birth itself, the Qur'an says nothing of the angelic proclamation to the shepherds, the message given to Joseph (indeed, Joseph is not mentioned at all), there is no manger, there is no star, there are no magi; indeed, there is no sense of the humility of Christ's birth so vividly portrayed in the Gospel narratives. In the Qur'an, the birth of Jesus is the birth of another prophet. In the Bible, the birth of Jesus is the birth of the Christ, the Son of God: Immanuel, God with us. Sure, the Qur'an surrounds the birth of Jesus with the supernatural as befitting a prophet, but there is certainly no sense of the singularly significant event that was Christ's birth, no sense of this being a pivotal point in human history." *www.gomin.org* (Dec. 21, 2006) Likewise, 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 Richrdson 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.

[9] Warfield*, Works,* p. 453.

[10] Ibid. p. 454.

[11] www.ethoschurch.com/index.

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

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