

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory (Matthew 1:21)		Pastor/Teacher
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THE BIRTH OF JESUS: HIS NAME

Christmas is the traditional day that we celebrate the birth of Jesus. It is, in the words of the noted British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, “on any showing, the most momentous event in the history of our Western civilization.”¹ We could say even more – it is the greatest event in the history of humanity. The gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus underscore its importance and its *uniqueness*. In Matthew’s narrative, it is stated twice that Mary’s conception was “of the Holy Spirit” (1:18, 20). Luke, likewise, notes, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you, and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God” (1:35). While Mark does not begin his gospel with the birth of Jesus, he is in harmony with Matthew and Luke. He opens his gospel by declaring Jesus is “the son of God” (1:1). John’s gospel agrees as well. He affirms at the opening of his gospel, “The Word was with God and the Word was God” (1:1). Elsewhere we read in John, “You are from beneath; I am from above” (8:23). All of these united in affirming the uniqueness of Jesus. He was not an ordinary man. He is the Son of God. Note the language of Luke 1:32, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.” Mary’s child would be *called* (not that He would *become*) the Son of God. “Christ was not holy simply because He was virgin-born; rather, He was virgin-born because He was holy in His eternal Person and because He had been set apart for this messianic task.”² The early church regarded the virgin birth as important. It is found in the Apostles’ Creed and, in view of the brevity of this ancient creed, the inclusion of the doctrine of the virgin birth demonstrates how important this doctrine was to the early church. Why is this important? Although Jesus is fully human, He had no common human parentage. His human nature came from Mary by the conception of the Holy Spirit. This human nature is united to the divine nature in a personal union, so that He had and has no sin. The importance of all this is best described by B. B. Warfield:

“The cardinal point upon which the whole of this supernaturalistic Christianity, commended to us by the New Testament, turns, is formed by its doctrine of incarnation. The supernatural Savior, who has come into the world to work a supernatural salvation, could not possibly be conceived by it as of this world. If it would be to ‘annul Jesus,’ to imagine that he had not come in the flesh, or that he who had come in the flesh was not the Word of God who in the beginning was with God and was God – God only-begotten who was in the bosom of the Father – it would no less be to ‘annul him’ to imagine that he could owe his coming to earthly causes or collocations. Born into our race he might be and was; but born of our race, never – whether really or only apparently.”³

The true significance of this child is found in His name.

- I. **HIS NAME DIVINELY GIVEN AND EXPLAINED.** Paul tells us in Philippians 2:9-10 that God gave His Son the name Jesus, and it is a superbly appropriate name for the Father to give Him. It tells us about His Person. He is *Immanuel*, which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). It is true of His office or work – “He shall save His people from their sins.” His name means *Yahweh Is Salvation*.⁴
- II. **HIS NAME WAS WORN BY OLD TESTAMENT FIGURES.** *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Joshua*. Two important individuals in the Old Testament are called by this name. Joshua, the son of Nun, led the children of Israel in the conquest of Canaan. Moses changed his name from *Hoshea* to *Joshua*, because he would be the one that led the people to the Promised Land and demonstrated that *salvation is of the Lord* (cf. Numbers 13:16; 1 Chronicles 7:27). In the book of Zechariah we read of the High Priest Joshua, symbolically crowned to represent the one King-Priest. Now the name is His alone.
- III. **THE NAME IDENTIFIES HIM WITH HIS PEOPLE.** He comes to *save* His people from their sins. What links Him with His people is not their goodness or merit or righteousness, but their sin, misery, and guilt. They need a Savior, a Redeemer, and Jesus’ concern is with sinners. It is important to note *who* Christ came to save. Robert Letham correctly highlights this by pointing out that *only* a definite or effective atonement is most compatible with the doctrine of the covenant and of Christ as the last Adam: “When Adam sinned the entire race sinned in him (Rom. 5:12ff.). He was head of the race in a twofold sense. On the one hand, all are related to him organically. As an acorn has in itself the potential of an oak tree, so that the oak which eventually develops can be said to exist in the original acorn, so the whole race was existent in the person of the first Adam. Again, as the head of the race, Adam was its representative. Consequently, his actions were simultaneously those of the people he represented, like a Member of Parliament who acts in his official capacity on behalf of his constituents. In this sense, the relation is legal and representative rather than organic. Similarly, Christ is the head of the new humanity as the second Adam, and he imparts a real personal union to his people. His life is communicated to them by the Holy Spirit. Additionally, he is also their representative as Adam was of those who were related to him. His actions were done on their behalf and in their place. Thus, his death on the cross was a representative death undergone on behalf of those united to him. In view of this, a provisional and universal atonement would undermine the vital union with Christ that lies at the heart of biblical soteriology. If we are united to Christ then we surely are united in his death and resurrection. Indeed, a case can be made for this being the heart of the Pauline theology. If, however, his death was faced with the intention of atoning for everybody in a provisional sense, contingent on their own believing response, then Christ’s union with his own people is somehow suspended. He is no longer anybody’s representative. He is not acting vicariously. In practice, if he is in the place of everyone provisionally, he is in the place of no-one specifically. At the heart of these questions is the influence of nominalism. If reality consists exclusively in the particular, then one will think inevitably in categories concerned with the individual and salvation will be seen as a purely individual matter. Scripture holds before us, however, the corporate nature of humanity and of its salvation. We belong in Adam by nature and, as Christians, in Christ by grace. Therefore, it is not first and foremost a question of Christ dying for certain individuals. He died for *his people* (Mt. 1:21). That heads us in the direction of effective atonement where Christ dies for his people.”⁵

- IV. THE NAME INDICATES HIS CHIEF WORK.** Jesus is a great teacher, but to see Him *only* as a religious teacher is like someone knowing about Michael Jordan as only a baseball player! To know Christ as Savior is to know Him in His greatest work.
- V. IT IS HIS NAME FOREVER.** In Revelation 22:16, we read of Jesus who says, “I am the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.” These are the words of the glorified Jesus, who beckons all who are thirsty to come to Him for the water of eternal life. He will forever be **JESUS**.

CONCLUSION: “The incarnational Christology of the New Testament,” writes New Testament scholar R. T. France, “had its roots not in philosophical speculation, and still less in the gratuitous imitation of supposedly similar ideas in other religions and cultures, but in Christian experience of Jesus, both in his earthly ministry and in his risen power, and that it was the natural translation of this experience into an attitude of worship which provided the seedbed for New Testament Christology. To fail to explore and account for this attitude of worship, as has much modern discussion of the origins of Christology, is to discard the real life-situation of a warm and experience-centered devotion to Jesus in favour of a process of philosophical speculation which lacks an adequate starting point in the life of the Christian church.”⁶ The incarnation brought God and humanity into the most intimate type of fellowship. Because of the Person of Jesus Christ, God now sustains a relationship to man that is unique. The Son of God now refers to believers as His brethren (Hebrews 2:17). He can sympathize with us (Hebrews 4:15). What is done to believers is done to Him (Acts 9:1-4). He even lifts our nature above that of the angels (1 Corinthians 6:3; Hebrews 2:17). Listen to the words of the 17th century Dutch preacher, Wilhelmus à Brakel: “How intimately the elect are united to God, when even their nature has been assumed within the Person of the Son of God! In this they are even exalted above the angels of God, whose nature is not personally united to God. Is it a small matter to be so near to God? If only we would attempt to reflect more upon this wonder of wonders! The angels are desirous to look into this. It is an activity with which they continually occupy themselves since they are not able to satisfy their desire. If we were to be continually exercised with this, we would lose ourselves in holy adoration, joyously approve of this, and before realizing it we would find ourselves wonderfully near to God, being united in communion with Him. We would understand what it means when the Lord Jesus says, ‘That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us’ (John 17:21). This exceeds all comprehension and adoration.”⁷ Before we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, let us worship our Lord Jesus in the singing of “Man of Sorrows! What a Name” (Trinity Hymnal, p. 246).

ENDNOTES

¹ M. Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1969), p. 1.

² R. G. Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth: Doctrine of Deity* (Thomas Nelson, 1974), p. 73.

³ B. B. Warfield, “The Supernatural Birth of Jesus,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. S. G. Craig (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), p. 163.

⁴ The name signifies that Jesus is the revelation of the God of our salvation. “Jesus is the revelation of our salvation, who calls light out of darkness, righteousness out of sin, life out of death, heavenly glory out of the desolation of corruption and hell.” Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Reformed Free Publ. Assoc., 1973), p. 339.

⁵ R. Letham, *The Work of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1993), p. 235.

⁶ R. T. France, “The Worship of Jesus,” in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology presented to Donald Guthrie* (IVP, 1982), p. 33.

⁷ W. à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* I (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), p. 511.