

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Birth of Christ		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	4		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 1:18-25; Isaiah 9:6		
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THE VIRGIN BIRTH

William Barclay, the acclaimed author of the multi-volume *The Daily Study Bible*, once described himself as “an evangelical liberal.” Perhaps nowhere in his many writings is this label more evident than in his assessment of the Virgin Birth. Regarding the passage in Matthew 1:18-25, he writes: “This passage tells us how Jesus was born by the action of the Holy Spirit. It tells us of what we call the Virgin Birth. This is a doctrine which presents us with many difficulties; and our Church does not compel us to accept it in the literal and the physical sense. This is one of the doctrines on which the Church says that we have full liberty to come to our own conclusion. At the moment we are concerned only to find out what this means for us. If we come to this passage with fresh eyes, and read it as if we were reading it for the first time, we will find that what it stresses is not so much that Jesus was born of a woman who was a virgin, as that the birth of Jesus is the work of the Holy Spirit. *Mary was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.* It is as if these sentences were underlined, and printed large. That is what Matthew wishes to say to us in this passage. What then does it mean to say that in the birth of Jesus the Holy Spirit of God was specially operative? Let us leave aside all the doubtful and debatable things, and concentrate on that great truth, as Matthew would wish us to do.”¹ “Doubtful and debatable” is how Barclay describes the Virgin Birth. But this doctrine is not a mere insulated point in theology; it is an *essential* aspect of the Bible’s teaching on the Person of Christ. Robert Letham underscores this by declaring: “The virginal conception stands at the start of the Gospels with the resurrection at the climax, like bookends framing the whole, pointing to the mighty acts of God, effected by the Spirit, constituting and establishing the entire drama of salvation. Moreover, this is a striking example of the inseparable works of the Trinity, for the Spirit is acting in harmony with the Father and the Son in indivisible union. Elsewhere and later, Jesus consistently refers to himself as the Son sent by the Father. Thus, the conception of Jesus results from the Father’s sending and is accomplished by the Spirit’s sovereign creativity.”²

Back in the mid-90’s, I preached a series of sermons on *The Apostles’ Creed*. Just before I finished the series I met with an individual who informed me that he had decided to leave Redeemer and find another church because the preaching here did not make him feel good. He went on to explain that he thought this was what preaching should really aim to do, and if I were to change my style and emphasis in the pulpit, the church would attract more people and have a better ministry. When I asked him to explain what “feel good” preaching meant, he quickly responded by saying it must be *Biblical* in nature (but of course), but not distinctively *doctrinal* (as if the two were somehow in conflict). He ended up giving me some specific sermon topics like “Improving Your Marriage” and “Coping with Stress.” He concluded by advising me to lighten up in the pulpit by telling more jokes and humorous anecdotes. Earlier in this century, J. Gresham Machen took note of this same kind of mindset and called this syndrome the “tyranny of the practical.”³ In Machen’s day, this was what characterized the growing liberalism in the mainline denominations. Today it is a crisis that is welling up within the ranks of professing Evangelicals. Increasingly, Evangelicals choose the churches they attend not because of any specific doctrinal concerns, but because of the smorgasbord of programs offered to meet “felt needs.” What really matters is how I feel and what I experience. Since

theology or doctrine does not make me feel good, then I will find a church that caters to my need to feel good. This is, I submit, symptomatic of a very large number of people who flock to the various mega-churches today. But it is also dangerous. It is dangerous because it is impossible to live the Christian life in the absence of Christian truth.⁴ One of the foundational articles of Christianity is the virgin birth. “When we hear of some great undertaking to be performed, we inquire, of course, about the person who is chiefly concerned in it; so, when we are told of the mighty works Jesus Christ engaged to perform, to redeem a lost world, to satisfy Divine justice, to make an end of sin, to abolish death, and to bring life and immortality to light; the first question that occurs is, “Who is he?” so inquired good old John Newton, the 18th century hymn-writer who gave us “Amazing Grace.”⁵ Newton directs us to Isaiah 9:6-7 and says: This text, if it stood alone in the Bible (supposing the Scriptures to be a revelation from God), would be a full warrant and firm foundation, for that great point of Christian faith and doctrine, that Jesus Christ is very God and very man.”⁶ The context of the passage from Isaiah must not be ignored. Beginning in 9:1, the prophet’s words describe darkness and gloom all about! It is a time of great distress. All around the prophet were clouds of darkness. “He heard,” says Spurgeon, “prophetic thunders roaring, and he saw flashes of the lightnings of divine vengeance; clouds and darkness, for many a league, were scattered through history; but he saw far away a bright spot -- one place where the clear shining came down from heaven.”⁷ Isaiah calls this “a great light.” The darkness of sin can only be dispelled by light, and light is the gift of God (Genesis 1:3). “It cannot be produced from a human heart which itself is in darkness. The whole work of Christ and all the blessings which He brings may be characterized by the one word *light*.⁸ In Isaiah 7:14 (cited in Matthew 1:23), the virgin born son called “Immanuel” is announced. Now the child who brings light and rejoicing (9:3) is introduced in greater detail.

- I. ***THE NAMES OF THE IMMANUEL CHILD.*** The word “child” appears first in the Hebrew text, for all the weight and emphasis fall upon it – and it is *for us* that He is to be born.⁹ The Child is worthy to bear these names. They are accurate descriptions and designations of His being and character. In the Bible, the name indicates the character, essence or nature of a person or object. As Young correctly points out, “When, therefore, it is stated that He shall be called we are to understand that the following names are descriptive of the Child and deserve to be borne by Him.”¹⁰ The translation of the KJV gives the impression that there are five names, but actually there are four (as rendered in the NIV). These are double-membered names.
 - A. ***Wonderful Counsellor*** (Hebrew *pele yoetz*). The word “wonderful” is not an adjective but a noun, so literally this expression is “Wonder-Counsellor.” As a *Counsellor*, He is a *Wonder*. There is none like Him. The word *pele* is used in Exodus 15:11 and Psalm 77:15 to describe the acts of God. In Judges 13:18 the Angel reveals the fact that He is deity by stating: “Why do you ask my name? It is Wonderful.” This, as Hengstenberg observes, “means my whole nature is wonderful, of unfathomable depth, and cannot therefore be expressed by any human name.”¹¹ Such counselling is only given by God (cf. Psalm 16:7; 32:8 and especially Isaiah 28:29). To designate this child with such a title is to make the clearest affirmation that e is deity.¹²
 - B. ***Mighty God*** (Hebrew *‘el gibbor*). In prose the word *‘el* usually appears with other words such as *‘el Shaddai*, *‘el ‘elyon*. Liberal scholars have argued that *‘el gibbor* does not refer to deity since *‘el* in the plural (*Elohim*) may have reference to men (as in Psalm 82:1, 6). But *‘el*, especially in Isaiah, is always used in reference to God alone (cf. 10:21). Furthermore, it is used as a personal name (Isaiah 31:3 cf. also Jeremiah 32:18 and Deuteronomy 10:17). The Gospels repeatedly stress the power of Christ (Matthew 28:18). Jesus declares that He has overcome the world (John 16:33); we may be of good cheer because our Savior is the “mighty God.”
 - C. ***The Everlasting Father*** (Hebrew *abshi ‘ad*). “The word *‘ad*,” says Young, “signifies perpetuity or duration. It may have the sense of eternity, as when Isaiah speaks of the *high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity . . .* (57:15).”¹³ This again signifies that character of the Child. Elsewhere we

read of God described as Father (Isaiah 63:16; Psalm 103:13). Why is the Son called the Father? It is in relation to His people. He is a King who cares for His subjects the way a father cares for his children (cf. Isaiah 22:21; 2 Kings 13:14; Psalm 68:5). The quality of this fatherhood is defined by the word eternity. Again, this can only have reference to deity.¹⁴ “The name means that the Messiah is eternal and paternal in relation to His people.”¹⁵

- D. *The Prince of Peace* (Hebrew *sar shalom*). This stands purposely at the end and is very emphatic. He establishes Peace. In as much as the peace to be made is eternal, it becomes obvious that more than a temporary cessation of earthly hostilities is in view here. The *cause* of all strife and misery must be addressed, namely, human sin. Peace can only be established when sin is addressed – this first and foremost – has reference to the enmity which existed between God and humanity. The Prince of Peace must make peace by dealing with sin – and this is exactly what the Lord Jesus did do (cf. Romans 5:1).

CONCLUSION: Taken together, the four names given to this child are an extension of the name *Immanuel*. He does only what God can do because of who He is, “God-with-us.” At this time of the year when our minds are so easily distracted by the season (!), let us heed the words of the Puritan Thomas Manton on this passage: “To increase our reverence, and that the ignominy of his cross may not obscure his glory, nor lessen his respect in our hearts, but that we may have high and honourable thoughts of our humbled Lord in his lowest estate. Let us give much thought to Isaiah 9:6, 7, and why so? . . . When we are meditating only upon his humiliation, the natural atheism which is in our hearts is apt to turn those thoughts into a snare, and our respects to the majesty of Christ are abated. Therefore we ought again and again to consider his divine nature, and that glorious estate wherein he was from the beginning, so to balance our thoughts of his humiliation.”¹⁶ Old John Trapp summed the matter this way, “*And his name shall be called.* Heb., He shall call his name; (1) God his father shall; or, (2) Every true believer shall call him and count him all this. And sure it is, had we but skill to spell all the letters in this name of Christ, it would be *a strong tower* (Prov. 18:10) unto us, better than that of David builded for an armoury, and completely furnished (cant. 4:4). Compare this text with 1 Cor. 1:30, and see all our doubts answered. Are we perplexed? He is our *Wonderful, Counsellor*, and *made unto us of God wisdom*. Are we in depths of distress? He is *the mighty God*, our *redemption*. Want we grace and his image? He is the *everlasting Father*, our *sanctification*. Doth the guilt of sin sting us? He is the *Prince of peace*, our *righteousness*.”¹⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Wm. Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew* Vol. 1 (Saint Andros Press, 1975), p. 20.

² R. Letham, *The Holy Spirit* (P&R, 2023), p. 124.

³ J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans, 1946), p. 56.

⁴ This theme is handsomely developed by R. Scott Clark in his article, “The Importance of Being More than Earnest” in *Modern Reformation* (Sept./Oct. 1996), pp. 10-12.

⁵ *The Works of John Newton* II (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 340.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, *A Treasury of Spurgeon on the Life and Work of Our Lord: The Messiah* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 107.

⁸ E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-18* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 325.

⁹ Young writes: “Isaiah had already pointed out (7:14) that the Messiah would be with us (*Immanuel*) to bring us blessing; here He is to be for us (*Lanu*). At the same time this *lanu* is to be contrasted with the *lakem* (to you) of Isaiah 7:14.” *Ibid.*, p. 330.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹¹ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament* I (rpt. MacDonald Publishing Co., N.D.), p. 449. “Revelation 19:12 is to be compared, where Christ has a name written that no man knows but He himself to intimate the immeasurable glory of His nature. That which is here, in the first instance, said to all others, holds true of His whole nature; the King is a Wonder as a Counsellor, because His whole person is Wonderful,” *Ibid.*

¹² This is an example of what is known as “prophetic paradoxes.” A prophetic paradox is made up of two or more prophecies to its fulfillment, seems impossible to solve. Consider some of these impossible contrasts: God will come to earth to be born as a child. The Messiah will be begotten by God, yet He will be God. He will be providentially, even miraculously, fulfilled in the life of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament. Cf. F. John Meldau, *The Prophets Still Speak: Messiah in Both Testaments* (rpt. Christian Victory Publishing, 1988), p. 37.

¹³ Young, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

¹⁴ Note the remarks of the Puritan giant, John Owen: “And this may be added to the other names of God that are attributed to Christ: as *Adonai*, Psalm 110:1; *Elohim*, Psalm 45:6; Hebrews 1:8; *Jehovah*, Jeremiah 23:6, 33:16; Malachi 3:1; Psalm 83:18; *God*, John 1:1; *The true God*, 1 John 5:20; *the great God*, Titus 2:1.” *The Works of John Owen*, XII (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976,) p. 315.

¹⁵ Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A New Translation and Commentary* (The Spearhead Press, 1971), p. 165.

¹⁶ *The Works of Thomas Manton* XX (Maranatha, N.D.), p. 403.

¹⁷ John Trapp, *A Commentary on The Old and New Testaments* III (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria Publication, 1997), p. 320.