

THE VIRGIN BIRTH: A MYSTERY TO BE CRIED ALOUD

by John Hartog III, TH.D.

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The virgin birth refers to Mary's miraculous conception of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, without any male participation, so that, though the birth process was not unlike that of other humans, Mary was still a virgin when Jesus was born. This Biblical doctrine should be distinguished from the Roman Catholic tenets of Mary's immaculate conception and her perpetual virginity (Erickson, 179).

The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception

According to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Mary was "preserved free from all stain of original sin" (Ott, 199). Since she was subject to the necessity of original sin, she stood in need of redemption; but since she was redeemed from the moment of conception, she was thereby preserved from original sin. Her redemption, therefore, according to this dogma, was more perfect than that experienced by any other human. The dogma was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854, and a Biblical basis for the belief is argued from texts such as Genesis 3:15 and Luke 1:28, 41. Reading these passages, one is left at a loss as to how such a doctrine could find Biblical support were it not for underlying Marian presuppositions.

The Dogma of the Perpetual Virginity

The Catholic tenet of the perpetual virginity of Mary holds that she was "a Virgin before, during and after the Birth of Jesus Christ" (Ott, 203). Accordingly, Mary was not only a virgin at the conception and birth of Jesus but remained so throughout her life. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church "the deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ's birth "did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it." And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as Aeiparthenos, the "Ever-virgin" (CCC, 499). Catholics officially promulgate the idea that "Mary bore her Son without any violation of her virginal integrity" (Ott, 205). A few, the Schoolmen in particular, theorized that Jesus' birth did not pain Mary, nor did it

nullify her "physical virginity." For the Schoolmen, then, Jesus was born miraculously in a way analogous to His emergence from the sealed tomb or to His going through the shut doors (i.e., Jesus was born directly through Mary's abdominal wall). The Scriptures, on the other hand, describe Mary as the one who "brought forth" her Son; they say nothing about a miraculous birthing of Jesus.

Magisterial Catholic theologians propound the concept that Mary remained a virgin after Jesus' birth. For Augustine and others, Biblical support for this comes from an inference based on Luke 1:34, where Mary's question is taken as "a resolve of constant virginity on the ground of special Divine enlightenment" (Ott, 207). Others look to John 19:26 and infer that Mary had no other children but Jesus. However, the aggregate voice of Scripture contradicts the dogma of perpetual virginity with the repeated mention of Jesus' siblings: Matthew 12:46, 13:55; Mark 6:3; John 2:12, 7:3-5; Acts 1:14; and Galatians 1:19. In addition, Matthew 1:25 could hardly be clearer on this point: Joseph "knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son." The words till (see also 1:18) and firstborn (see also Luke 2:7) provide a double proof against the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. It is of little wonder that one Catholic catechism reads, "The perpetual virginity of Mary is not revealed truth which can be clearly demonstrated from the New Testament without the light of tradition" (Lawler, 107).

The Biblical Doctrine of the Virgin Birth

Therefore, we reaffirm the Biblical doctrine that Mary conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit apart from the cooperation of man and that Mary was most certainly a virgin when He was born, although Jesus' birth was not unlike that of other humans. Two primary Christmas passages further explain this Biblical doctrine.

The first passage, Matthew 1:18-25 indicates that Mary's pregnancy was due to the activity of the Holy Spirit (1:20). It also indicates that Mary remained a virgin until she gave birth to Jesus (1:25). The other passage, Luke 1:26-38, teaches that Mary was a descendant of King David and that she was a virgin (1:27). After the angel told Mary that she would bear the Son of the Most High, Mary asked a perfectly logical question, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (1:34). The angel answered, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee;" for this reason, Mary's holy Offspring would be called the Son of God (1:35).

The Modernist Denial of the Virgin Birth

Modernist theologians feel that the doctrine of the virgin birth is not

important; they conclude that the doctrine of the virgin birth is a theologoumenon, i.e., a story reflecting the faith of the early church in its attempt to reinforce its Christological myths. Most treacherous are those Modernists who claim to hold the doctrine of the virgin birth, though they actually deny it by redefining the term as a reference to the incarnation, with no affirmation of the biological virginity of Mary. Contrary to the liberals' condescending dismissal of the doctrine, we reaffirm the importance of the doctrine and its integral position in a Biblically-based systematic theology (see EDT, 1143-45).

The Virgin Birth and Scripture

The doctrine of the virgin birth is closely tied to the truthfulness and authority of Scripture. If one denies the virgin birth, then one is denying the straightforward teaching of the Bible. If one denies the virgin birth, then he must conclude that the Bible is not telling the truth and that it lacks authority in this area of doctrine. Machen wisely observed that "if the Bible is regarded as being wrong in what it says about the birth of Christ, then obviously the authority of the Bible, in any high sense, is gone" (Machen, 383).

The Virgin Birth and the Deity of Christ

The doctrine of the virgin birth is also linked with belief in the deity of Christ. Frame writes, "While we cannot say dogmatically that God could enter the world only through the virgin birth, surely the incarnation is a supernatural event if it is anything. To eliminate the supernatural from this event is inevitably to compromise the divine dimension of it" (EDT, 1145; see also Machen, 387-92).

The Virgin Birth and the Humanity of Christ

Similarly, the truth of the virgin birth is connected to the doctrine of the humanity of Christ. The Apostle Paul alluded to this truth when he wrote that Jesus was "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). Ignatius, a second-century martyr, argued forcefully against the Docetists, whom he called "certain unbelievers," by stressing that Jesus truly was of the Davidic line, that He was truly nailed to the cross, that He truly suffered, and that He truly rose from the dead. Ignatius was also "fully persuaded" that Jesus Christ was "truly born of a virgin" (AF, 156-157).

The Virgin Birth and the Sinlessness of Christ

Having been born of the virgin Mary, Jesus was human Offspring. Having been conceived of the Holy Spirit and overshadowed by the power of the Most

High, Jesus was holy Offspring—the sinless Son of God. Therefore, the doctrine of the virgin birth impacts one's view of the sinlessness of Christ. When Mary "conceived, she passed on her human nature to the theanthropic person, but she was prevented by the Holy Spirit from transmitting a sin nature" (Gromacki, 125).

The Virgin Birth and the Promised Messiah

The doctrine of Jesus as the Christ, or Messiah, also depends upon the virgin birth. The Messiah was promised to come as a descendant of King David (2 Samuel 7:16; 1 Chronicles 17:14; Psalm 89:3-4, 26-37; Isaiah 9:7; Matthew 9:27, 12:23, 20:30, 21:9, 22:41-45; Luke 1:32-33; see also Ezekiel 34:23-24). In fulfillment of these promises, Jesus was born "the son of David" (Matthew 1:1,6). The Old Testament, however, not only portrays the Messiah as a descendant of David, but also mentions a curse against all of David's royal seed descending through the line of one of Judah's final kings. This king was Jehoiachin (also known as Coniah), and his wicked reign is described in 2 Kings 24:8-17 and

2 Chronicles 36:9-10. He was so wicked that God pronounced a curse against him: "No man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah" (Jeremiah 22:30). This presents a problem because, though Jesus' lineage traces back to David and Solomon (Matthew 1:6-7), according to Matthew, Jesus' lineage comes through the cursed "Jechonias" (Matthew 1:11). The virgin birth provides the wonderful solution to this dilemma. Matthew records Jesus' legal genealogy through Joseph, His adopted father (Matthew 1:16), and so Matthew establishes Jesus' legal right to the throne of David. Luke, on the other hand, records Jesus' biological genealogy through Mary. Mary too was a descendant of David, but not through Solomon and Jehoiachin. Instead, her line traces back to a son of David through a different son, Nathan (Luke 3:31). In the sovereign plan of God, the Messiah has the legal right to David's throne without its accompanying curse.

The Virgin Birth and Salvation

The doctrine of the virgin birth is also closely tied with our own salvation. If Jesus had been tainted with sin, then He could not have been our sufficient Sacrifice. On the other hand, if Jesus had not been born of Mary, and so had not been the Man, Christ Jesus, then He could not have died, nor could He have been a suitable sacrificial substitute as a Man for men. Christ became human in a miraculous way. The provision of salvation, therefore, is all of God and none of man.

It is clear, then, not only that the Bible does teach the doctrine of the virgin birth and that this doctrine differs from Catholic teachings, but it is also clear that

the doctrine of the virgin birth is an integral element of orthodox theology. The virgin birth touches upon the doctrines of Scripture, Christ, and salvation. For this reason, we reaffirm our belief in this doctrine, we teach it, and we call on others to do the same. It is a doctrine that should be proclaimed—especially during the Christmas season. Ignatius wrote of "the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing and likewise also the death of the Lord" as "three mysteries to be cried aloud" (AF110,141-142). We firmly believe that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. Throughout the year, but especially during this Christmas season, let us cry it aloud!

NOTES:

AF= The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Greek Texts with Introductions and English Translations. Edited by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984 reprint.

CCC = Catechism of the Catholic Church. United States Catholic Conference, Inc. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

EDT = Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. Edited by Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984. S.v. "Virgin Birth of Jesus," by J. M. Frame, pp. 1143-46.

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