

December 13, 2015

Advent Born of a Virgin

Isaiah 7:14

Luke 1:26 – 38

Richard Dawkins, one of the world's most famous angry atheists, wrote in his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, these words: "The nineteenth century is the last time when it was possible for an educated person to admit to believing in miracles like the virgin birth without embarrassment. When pressed, many educated Christians today are too loyal to deny the virgin birth and the resurrection. But it embarrasses them because their rational minds know it is absurd, so they would much rather not be asked".¹ In light of that, I'm sure he's dumbfounded by the latest Pew Research Center poll² that found that almost 75% of Americans today believe in the Virgin birth of Jesus. And among evangelical Christians, the figure is closer to 96%. Richard Dawkins is no doubt, right now, writing off 75% of Americans and almost all evangelical Christians as ignorant and uneducated, or maybe just permanently embarrassed.

But Isaiah 7:14, "...the virgin shall conceive and bear a son..." lies at the very heart of Christmas, and to deny this crucial doctrine would not only reduce Christmas to a meaningless holiday, but it would "...dismantle the very center of Christian thought and take away the keystone of the arch of Christian theology" says Gary Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College.³ Donald Macleod, who wrote, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology*, said in that book, "The virgin birth is posted on guard at the door of the mystery of Christmas; and none of us must think of hurrying past it. It stands on the threshold of the New Testament, blatantly supernatural, defying our rationalism, informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself and that if we find it offensive there is no point in proceeding further."⁴

John MacArthur says, "The virgin birth is an underlying assumption in everything the Bible says about Jesus. To throw out the virgin birth is to reject Christ's deity, the accuracy and authority of Scripture, and a host of other related doctrines central to the Christian faith. No issue is more important than the virgin birth to our understanding of who Jesus is."⁵ In other words, if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then He was not the Son of God; if He was not the Son of God, then He was just another man with delusions of grandeur, whose death on a cross was meaningless and tragic, and we are still in our sins. If this story of His birth is merely legend or a fabricated tale, then everything else recorded of Him in Scripture is suspect. This doctrine was considered so important, that every Christian creed, from the 3rd century Apostles Creed to the 16th century Augsburg Confession makes mention of the Virgin birth. Everything the Bible teaches us about this Christ depends on the truth we celebrate at Christmas.

The virgin birth of Jesus has long been a subject of skepticism, cynicism and outright denial by detractors of Christianity, and even by those who consider themselves to be Christians, especially those in the liberal theological ranks. But even when Jesus was alive, the question of His parentage was an issue. In John chapter eight, Jesus is engaged with the religious leaders of His day, and at one point they tell Him, "*We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father--even God.*" (John 8:41) That was a not-so-subtle poke at the supposed status of Jesus' own birth. They were, in effect, saying that "We're not the ones who are illegitimate". No doubt stories of the circumstances of His birth had made the rounds and these Pharisees reacted no differently than skeptics would today if confronted with a story of an unplanned teen pregnancy and a Holy Ghost.

1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2006) 157.

2 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/12/25/most-americans-believe-in-jesus-virgin-birth/>

3 <http://www.religionnews.com/2014/12/23/can-question-virgin-birth-still-christian/>

4 Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, Downers Grove, Ill. 1998)37

5 <http://www.gty.org/blog/B141208/whats-so-important-about-christs-virgin-birth>

It was an important question also for His disciples. In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks His disciples "Who do men say that I am?" One says, "John the Baptist". Another says "Elijah". Still another says, "Jeremiah or one of the prophets". At the heart of this question was the truth of His birth. Was He just another human, as these answers indicated? Or was He something else? Suddenly Peter gets a supernatural revelation. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" In other words, Peter recognizes that Jesus is not just a great teacher, or a good moral example, or even a great prophet of God – He is God. And that speaks directly to the circumstances of His birth.

Furthermore, in that last week before His crucifixion, Jesus underwent several examinations by the religious and secular authorities, and one of those examinations had to do with His birth. *Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, 42 saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." 43 He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 44 "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"? 45 If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?"* (Matthew 22:41-45) The fact of the Virgin birth of Christ was incredibly important. If His birth were not a supernatural intervention by God, then King David was sadly mistaken in his theology.

So whether you've given the Virgin birth of Jesus much thought or none at all, or you're somewhere in between, it is a crucial doctrine of faith that everyone who is a Christian must embrace. On the other hand if you ask "Does a person need to believe in the Virgin birth in order to become a Christian?" the answer would have to be "No". It is entirely possible to come to faith in Christ without knowing that Jesus was born of a virgin. But it is on the other hand impossible, once understanding the Scriptural truth of the Virgin birth, to be a Christian and reject the truth. It's found in many places in Scripture, but even if it were in only one place in the whole Bible, we would be obligated to believe. For example, in the passage we read this morning, Matthew tells us that before Joseph and Mary had come together as man and wife, Mary "*was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit*"; and then he ties it back to the Old Testament: "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel"(which means, God with us)."*

In his article entitled, ***Must We Believe in the Virgin Birth?***, Al Mohler quotes Millard Erickson, Distinguished Professor of Theology at Western Seminary, who says: "*If we do not hold to the virgin birth despite the fact that the Bible asserts it, then we have compromised the authority of the Bible and there is in principle no reason why we should hold to its other teachings. Thus, rejecting the virgin birth has implications reaching far beyond the doctrine itself.*"⁶ So this morning, we are going to look at four reasons why this doctrine is so important to our faith. It is important because it speaks to the authority of Scripture, the deity and humanity of Jesus, the sinlessness of Christ, and the meaning and nature of grace. The authority of Scripture, the deity and humanity of Jesus, the sinlessness of Christ, and the meaning and nature of grace.

First of all, it speaks to the **authority of Scripture**. If the Bible is in error here, why should we believe it in any other point? Several years ago, an evangelical pastor named Rob Bell wrote a book called 'Velvet Elvis' in which he tried to articulate his attempt to 'rethink' the Christian faith in a way he felt made it more contemporarily accessible. He likened the fabric of faith to a trampoline that was held in place by many springs around the circumference, and reasoned that the Christian faith does not fall apart if we simply remove one spring among many. In the book he argued, "*What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus has a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of Mithra and Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births?*"⁷

The problem with that 'one spring' theory however, is that once you lose one spring, it increases the pressure on all the others which begin to fail under the strain. And if you follow Rob's story, you see him dropping spring after spring of crucial Christian doctrine until now he is questioning all the non-negotiable truths of the Christian faith, and last year got his own show on the Oprah network to share his doubts.

6 <http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/12/14/must-we-believe-in-the-virgin-birth/>

7 Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis, (Zondervan, 2005) 26

If rethinking the Virgin birth is not off limits, why should we believe what the Bible says about anything else? Where is solid ground for faith? Just because the Virgin birth is out of the realm of the ordinary and obviously miraculous and supernatural, why should we feel the need to explain it away? Yet this is what the skeptics do over and over, never minding the fact that some of their own bedrock faith elements are based on what can only be described themselves as miraculous. Stephen Hawking, the brilliant Cambridge physicist, in proposing an explanation for the existence of our universe apart from God said, *'...the universe itself can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist.'*⁸ I don't know – that sounds an awful lot like a miracle to me. The Virgin birth seems almost ordinary by comparison.

People like Hawking say that miracles like the Virgin birth cannot occur because they violate the laws of nature. But I like John Lennox's response to that. *"What, after all, are those laws? They are our descriptions of what normally happens and they enable us to predict what will happen if no-one intervenes. However, God is not a prisoner of the laws that describe the regularities that He has built in to the cosmos. It is therefore no act of violation, if he intervenes in his own creation. For such intervention breaks no laws. Suppose I put £100 in my hotel drawer last night and I put in another £100 tonight. The laws of arithmetic say that I have £200 pounds in the drawer. If I find only £50 there tomorrow what do I conclude? That the laws of arithmetic have been broken or the laws of England? Clearly the laws of England. How do I know that? Because I know the laws of arithmetic. They have not been broken and that is what tells me that a thief has come in from outside. Similarly, when a genuine miracle takes place, it is the laws of nature that alert us to the fact that it is a miracle. If we did not know the laws, we should never recognise a miracle if we saw one. Science therefore cannot rule out miracle. The universe is not a closed system. This world is not the only world there is."*⁹ John Lennox

In throwing away the reliance upon the authority of Scripture, you also are throwing away Jesus' claims to deity. If Larry were the father of Jesus, how could He be God? You must have the Divine involved otherwise it is a purely human exercise. The words of Isaiah make it clear *"And they shall call His name Immanuel (which means 'God with us')*. The point of the incarnation is God with us. No longer separate from us. John's gospel declares that *"In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God...And the word became flesh and tabernacled among us and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."* That can't be if you hold that Jesus had only an earthly Father. If you say that, then everything changes. In that case we have a sexually promiscuous young woman lying about God's miraculous hand in the birth of her son, shaming a decent man to whom she is betrothed, seeing her son proclaimed Messiah, and then watching him die for no good reason.

But the Virgin birth announces with choirs of angels singing, the incarnation. It proclaims with Christmas joy that God Himself became a man. He is God, He always was God, and He is now man – the God man. Fully God and fully man. The Bible teaches us that Jesus had two natures – one divine and one human. He was not 50% God and 50% man. Titus 2:13 tells us that we are *"looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."* When Thomas sees the resurrected Christ in that upper room he exclaims, *"My Lord and my God!"* The writer of Hebrews reveals the Father's own testimony about Jesus: *"But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever'".* And if you study through the New Testament, you see that Jesus exhibited all the attributes of divinity. He knows everything, He has all power, He rules over everything, He depends on nothing outside Himself for anything, He is everywhere, He always existed and will never cease to exist, and He created all things. Everything God is, Jesus is. He is all God.

And He is all man. He was always God, but He was not always man. That's the wonderful truth of the incarnation. 2000 years ago, God broke in on His creation and was born into humanity. The truth of Jesus's humanity is just as important to hold to as the truth of his deity. The apostle John tells us that to deny that Jesus is a man means that you are in league with the spirit of the antichrist¹⁰. His humanity is displayed in the fact that he was born as a baby from a human mother, that He became weary, He thirsted, He got hungry, and that He experienced the full range of human emotions such as joy and wonder and sorrow. He lived on earth and He had a family just like the rest of us. He was fully human.

8 Stephen Hawking, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam, 2010), 180.

9 <http://www.johnlennox.org/jresources/a-christmas-message-from-john-lennox/>

10 1 John 4:2 ESV

It was absolutely crucial that God would break in on His creation to become one of them. The sin that separated God and man could only be dealt with by this unique God man. You see the penalty for sin is death. Someone had to die. For obvious reasons, God was not the ideal candidate. You can't put God to death. Therefore you had to have a man. But not just any man would do. Every person ever born could only die for their own sins. No one besides Jesus has ever been born that could die for the whole human race – past, present and future. That's because the sacrifice for sin had to be sinless. And this is the third thing the Virgin birth speaks to – the sinlessness of Christ.

If Jesus had been born through the usual means to Joseph and Mary, He would have inherited the very same sin nature that infects all of humanity, and He would not have been a candidate for the perfect Lamb of God. But the Bible makes it clear that Jesus was without sin. In his first letter, Peter tells us that Jesus never committed any sin¹¹; and John tells us that He came to take away sins, '*...and in Him there is no sin.*'¹² The Bible is very clear that Jesus, although fully human, was sinless. And I know that some of you are thinking, "How is that possible? Yes, God, through the Holy Spirit was the father, but Mary was still the mother, and wasn't she human? Doesn't that mean that Jesus had to have a sin nature just like us?" To answer that, we need to understand something about how sin entered into the world. In Romans Paul tells us that "*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.*"¹³ Yes, it's true that Eve was the one who sinned first. However, sin did not enter the world through her. The Bible says that it entered through Adam.

Without getting into a deep theological discussion on Federal Headship and original sin, suffice it to say that what this means is that the Bible teaches that our sin nature is passed down through the father. The writer of Hebrews puts this concept into words when he writes: "*And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.*"¹⁴ Since Jesus had no literal, biological father, the sin nature was not passed down to Him. However, since He had a human mother, He was fully human but without original sin. And that makes Jesus the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. Which is why the angel could tell Joseph here in Matthew: "*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*"

The fact that Jesus was not a direct descendent of Joseph also meant that the prophecies concerning His inheritance of the throne of David were not threatened either. In Jeremiah, we read of a curse placed by the Lord on one of the last bad kings of Judah, a man named Jeconiah, that said: "*Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule any more in Judah.*"¹⁵ And this becomes a problem because Matthew records the genealogy of Joseph and this guy Jeconiah is right there in the middle of it, which seems to eliminate Jesus from consideration as someone to inherit David's throne. However, since Joseph was only Jesus' **legal** father, Jesus did not inherit the curse on Jeconiah's **actual** descendants. And since Jesus was the **actual** son of David through Mary according to Luke's genealogy in Luke chapter 3, He fulfilled the conditions of coming "from the loins of David"¹⁶ without losing legal rights to the throne of David by falling under the curse on Jeconiah. The more you study the Bible, the more you realize how precisely God has put everything together.

But of all the things the Virgin birth speaks to, it speaks most powerfully to grace. We read last week that passage in Luke where the angel comes to Mary and says: "*And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus.*"¹⁷ And the first thing you notice is that no one asked Mary how she felt about this or if she wanted this to happen or even if she would be willing to be pregnant out of wedlock in the first place. The angel simply comes and announces that, ready or not, willing or unwilling, she's going to bear a son, and Joseph is not going to be the father. This is a powerful declaration of grace.

11 1st Peter 2:22 ESV

12 1 John 4:2 ESV

13 Romans 5:12 ESV

14 Hebrews 7:9-10 ESV

15 Jeremiah 22:30 ESV

16 2 Samuel 7:12 ESV

17 Luke 1:31 ESV

You see, God took the initiative. He didn't ask for Mary's willingness. He didn't ask for her permission. He acted, as He always acts, decisively, gently here, but decisively, to save His people from their sins. In Luke, the angel comes to Mary and says, "Hail favored one! The Lord is with you."¹⁸ This word favored is the same one used in Ephesians 1:6 where Paul tells us that God freely bestowed His grace on us. So the first thing the angel tells Mary is that this is God's grace coming to her. She didn't earn it. She didn't work for it. She didn't deserve it. God simply bestowed grace on her. What the Virgin birth says to us is that all the initiative and all the power to save is God's. Salvation is fundamentally an act of God, not an act of men.

You see, humanity needs a redemption that it can't bring about on its own. The fact that the human race couldn't produce its own redeemer implies that its sin and guilt are profound and that a savior must come from outside. And to add to that, the Bible reveals our real condition in Romans 3: *as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."*¹⁹ Only when we understand this can we begin to appreciate the wonderful grace of God in this Christmas story. The God who created the universe and everything in it, who stands outside of time and history and the world, broke in on Christmas day to become part of His creation in order to save it.

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel"(which means, God with us)." He came to dwell with the sick, to heal them. He came to dwell with the demon possessed, to liberate them, He came to dwell with the poor to bless them, He came to dwell with those bowed low under heavy loads to free them, He came to dwell with the lepers to cleanse them, with the diseased, to cure them, with the hungry, to feed them, with the handicapped, to restore them, and He came to dwell with the lost that He might save them.

Our gracious God and Savior,

We thank You for breaking in on this sin-sick world to rescue and redeem and save Your people. Emmanuel, God with us. Christ the word, the very God became flesh and tabernacled among us and we have seen His glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. Let the grace of Christmas break in today and deliver those here who are still living in darkness and death. We thank You that we have a God who did not remain remote and unreachable but came to us as a vulnerable, weak and dependent babe; a God who hungered and thirsted, and longed for human touch and affection; a God who chose to be born in obscurity and shame, to a virgin, an unwed maiden, with a dirty stable as a home and a borrowed manger as a bed, in a tiny, insignificant town called Bethlehem, a God who came to us that we might be brought to Him. Come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

18 Luke 1:28 ESV

19 Romans 3:10-12 ESV