

THE NECESSITY OF BELIEF IN THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF JESUS

When any person accepts the Word of the Scriptures that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin, he or she has taken a momentous step. He or she may not yet have accepted everything that the Bible teaches. However, that person has affirmed that God has intervened supernaturally in the course of this world.

People who reject the virgin birth of Jesus hardly ever retain a really Christian view of Jesus Christ. Most people who reject the virgin birth also reject the whole supernatural view of Christ. They often profess that they believe in the “incarnation”, but usually the word means the opposite from what the Scriptures mean when they say, “The Word became flesh.” To them it means that God and human beings have somehow become one. To the New Testament, however, it means that God and man are not one. It means that the eternal Son of God has become a human being. He has assumed our nature, by a tremendous miracle, to redeem us from sin and death, and bring us righteousness, life, and everlasting peace and joy. Belief in the incarnation goes hand in hand with belief in Jesus’ virgin birth.

Even if, by the grace of God, some people may be saved without their holding the virgin birth, the doctrine of the virgin birth is necessary to Christianity. The doctrine of the virgin birth is a fundamental article of our faith. If a person is deliberate and consistent in his denial of it, that makes saving faith impossible. A true child of God finds it no harder to believe this miracle than any other miracle. If, when God created this world, He instituted natural conception through the union of husband and wife, He can use that same almighty power to create a human being, specifically, His own Son, in a different way. *“With God nothing will be impossible”* (L 1:37).

If people don’t believe this, but regard Jesus as the true, natural son of Joseph and Mary, then they are compelled by Holy Scripture to regard Jesus as having been born in sin, and with the germ of death in Him. Jesus told Nicodemus, *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh”* (J 3:6). When “flesh” is contrasted with “Spirit”, “flesh” regularly means “sinful human nature.” Whoever is born of sinful human parents is sinful. Paul said, about Jews who later became Christians, *“We were by nature the children of wrath, even as others”* (E 2:3).

The virgin birth was God’s way of producing a holy, sinless, child, who had also been the Son of God from eternity. For that reason, He was able to fulfil the Law perfectly as a human being also. For that reason, He was able to be our human substitute, taking on Himself our guilt, and suffering our punishment. In this way God acted decisively in Christ. Through Him He reconciled the world to Himself, and, by paying the enormous cost Himself, did not impute people’s sin against them, but reckoned them as righteous. They receive His verdict in faith. Because our Saviour is God and man in one person, our redemption is certain.

The virgin birth of Jesus is also necessary for the corporate witness of the church. People have every right to hear the Gospel preached on this solid basis. They should know that the Gospel is for them, as they hear that Jesus Christ is a true human being, like us in every way, except for sin, and except for the fact that He had no human father. He is on our wavelength. He fully understands everything about us. Yet they should also know that He is of one substance with the Father. Everything the Father is, He is, too. The angel who broke the news of His birth to the shepherds said that the baby who had been born for them in Bethlehem was the Messiah (Christ), and the LORD. He is Lord, just as the Father is Lord. Yet, because the name “Lord” regularly referred to God with respect to His gracious covenant relationship to His people, the New Testament very often means Jesus Christ when it uses the name “Lord.” Jesus, whose name means “the Lord saves”, is God in His capacity as the One who in steadfast love and mercy has redeemed His people, so that He may be their God, and that we may be His people.

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin’s womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as Man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.

This year we shall be hearing the Gospel readings taken mostly from Matthew. It is instructive to see this theme of “Immanuel (God with us)” running through the Gospel. For example, in chapter 18 Jesus made the statement, *“For where two or three have come together in My Name, there am I among them.”* We all know the

last verse in the Gospel according to Matthew, but there again we see the continuing connection with “Immanuel.” *“And lo, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”*

We should also remember that the Lord’s Supper is not a fairly insignificant ceremony out on the fringe of the Christian faith. In the Gospel according to Matthew Jesus’ words of institution of the Lord’s Supper give more clearly the meaning of Jesus’ death than any other verse in that Gospel, with the possible exception of 20:28, *“to serve, and give His life as a ransom for many.”* In the Lord’s Supper, the full meaning of Jesus’ incarnation ought to come home to us. For it is an extension of the incarnation. Here we receive, for our forgiveness and life, that very body which was born of the Virgin Mary for our redemption.

In the Middle Ages, writers like Ratramnus and Berengar tried to distinguish the body of Christ in three senses: 1) the body born of the Virgin, 2) the mystical body, the one holy church, the total of all those belonging to Christ in all ages, and 3) the body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Their opponents, such as Radbertus and Lanfranc, asserted the identity of 1, the body born of the Virgin, and 3, the body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. In the fifteenth century a one-verse hymn was often sung after the communion. Martin Luther made it available for Johann Walther’s book of hymns, published in 1524, adding two more verses to it. We have it in our hymnbook as # 295. Unfortunately, people today find the melody rather unusual, if not difficult. The first verse clearly states the connection between the Lord’s Supper and the incarnation:

O Lord, we praise Thee, bless Thee, and adore Thee,

In thanksgiving bow before Thee.

Thou with Thy body and Thy blood didst nourish

Our weak souls that they may flourish.

O Lord, have mercy.

By Thy body. Pure as none other.

Born of Mary. Thy virgin mother,

By Thy blood

For us shed

Help us in the hour of need.

O Lord, have mercy.