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THE VIRGIN BIRTH--WHY BELIEVE IT?

Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38

By

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Special Christmas Message

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We live in a day of "cafeteria Christianity," where folks go down the line and say, "I'll have some of this, but I don't want any of that. I don't like it." They pick and choose what suits their fancy, as if they are free to take whatever they like from the faith and disregard the rest. Coupled with this is the prevailing dogma that doctrine is at best not important, and at worst intolerant and divisive. According to this view, it really doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're loving and accepting toward others, no matter what they believe.

All Christians enjoy the story of the birth of Jesus. The familiar narrative of Joseph and Mary, their trek to Bethlehem, no room at the inn, the humble birth of Jesus in the stable, and the adoration of the shepherds and the magi, makes for a story we never grow tired of repeating. But there is one part of the story that many professing Christians would just as soon leave out: the virgin birth of our Savior. In 1970 (Sept. 11 issue), *Christianity Today* published a survey that revealed that the virgin birth is denied by 60 percent of Methodists, 49 percent of Presbyterians, 44 percent of Episcopalians, 34 percent of American Baptists, and 19 percent of American Lutherans. I assume those numbers have not improved with age! Perhaps that part of the story sounds just too incredible for the modern mind.

And besides, what difference does it make? Isn't the important thing that we believe that in Christ God was present among men? *Why is it necessary to believe in the virgin birth?* I want to answer that question in this message. I want you to see that ...

Belief in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is essential.

A few doctrines are "fundamentals" of the Christian faith. Sincere Christians may differ on their understanding of the non-fundamentals--such areas as prophecy, spiritual gifts, and views of baptism. But to deny the fundamentals of the faith is to depart from the core of what it means to be a Christian in the historic sense of the word. The virgin birth is a fundamental doctrine of the

Christian faith. To deny it requires that we deny the authority and truth of the Bible, the deity and sinless humanity of Jesus Christ, and that He is the Savior as taught in Scripture. Or, stated positively, to affirm these essential doctrines, we must affirm the virgin birth.

1. Belief in the virgin birth is essential to affirm the truthfulness of the Bible.

Since the Bible clearly teaches the virgin birth of Jesus, you can't consistently claim to believe anything else the Bible says and at the same time deny the virgin birth. The main reason skeptics reject the virgin birth (or, more accurately, the virgin conception of Jesus) is that they assume naturalism and thus reject miracles as being mere fables passed down from a time when people were not as scientifically knowledgeable as we are today.

But the Bible begins by assuming the fact of God: "In the beginning God created the heavens and earth" (Gen. 1:1). It teaches that the reason men reject God is not intellectual, but moral: they suppress the truth because they do not want to turn from their sin and submit to the Lordship of the Creator (Rom. 1:18-21). The fact of an intelligent Creator is evident in His creation. To think that anything as complex as life on this earth could have evolved by sheer chance plus time is a leap of faith that runs counter to the principles of the scientific method. When we examine any complex mechanism, whether a watch or a computer, we do not assume that given enough time, such a thing could happen by chance. We know that an intelligent designer put these things together for a purpose.

Which is more logical: to conclude that something as complex as plant and animal life on this earth, and the conditions necessary to sustain it, interdependent as it all is, happened by sheer chance over billions of years, with the parts that needed the other parts hanging on for a few billion years until the other necessary parts evolved; or, to conclude that an omniscient, omnipotent Creator designed it?

If a supernatural God is the source of creation, then miracles are not a problem. He can interrupt the normal laws of His creation and perform supernatural deeds if He chooses. The angel states this to Mary when he announced that she would bear the

Savior. She was puzzled as to how she could have a child, since she had not had relations with a man. He explained, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; ..." He concludes, "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:35, 37). It was a miracle.

Critics say that the virgin birth is just a myth similar to other ancient myths, where influential men were said to have been conceived by the gods having relations with human women. It's not surprising that Satan would invent many such counterfeit stories to confuse and cloud the facts surrounding the birth of the Savior. But invariably such mythical stories sound like fables, whereas the biblical accounts read like factual history.

Matthew was one of the twelve, and we can assume that his source was either Jesus or Mary. Luke states that he made a careful investigation of the facts and talked with eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4). It is probable that he talked directly with Mary. Matthew's and Luke's accounts are independent of each other, yet both men report the same miraculous event. Thus to reject the virgin birth a person must reject the word of two independent historians who lived at that time and whose writings have been accepted as factual history by thousands of scholars.

If a person rejects the historicity of the virgin birth and claims that it is only the "spiritual lesson" of the story that matters, then he has effectively cut himself off from the necessity of believing any of the history of the gospels. The "Jesus Seminar" is doing this very thing. A group of supposed scholars vote on their opinion of how likely each sentence and story of the gospels reflects what Jesus really said or did. The basis for their voting is pure subjectivism. Using the same method, we could establish that Plato or Shakespeare or any other author was not authentic, because it doesn't "sound" like that author! We would have to reject the accuracy of all written history. But such fools are arbitrarily rejecting, on the assumption of naturalism, the historical research of credible sources.

In addition to the historical factor, Matthew (1:23) asserts for his Jewish readers that the virgin birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14: "'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel,' which translated

means, 'God with us.'" There is much debate among Bible scholars as to the exact interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, which I can't go into here for lack of time. But however you interpret Isaiah 7:14, Matthew is stating that its ultimate fulfillment meant that a woman who had not had relations with a man would bear a son and that this child was none other than God with us, God in human flesh. Mary was that woman and Jesus was her child, the promised Messiah of Israel.

I might add that there is no biblical basis for the view that Mary remained a virgin all her life. That teaching is based on the unbiblical view that sexual relations in marriage are impure. Other Scriptures (Matt. 13:55, 56; Mark 6:3) show that Mary had other children. If they were Joseph's children by an earlier marriage, one of them, not Jesus, would have been heir to the throne of David. Matthew 1:25 implies that Mary and Joseph had normal relations as husband and wife after Jesus' birth.

The virgin birth of Christ was only one of numerous prophecies written hundreds of years previous to His birth which He fulfilled. Together with the historical accuracy of Matthew and Luke, these prophecies affirm the truthfulness of the Bible. You cannot claim to believe the Bible if you deny the virgin birth.

2. Belief in the virgin birth is essential to affirm the deity of Jesus Christ.

If Jesus Christ is the son of a human father and a human mother through natural biological processes, then He is not God in human flesh. It's that simple. He might, under those circumstances, be a man indwelt by God, a man upon whom God's Spirit rested. But He would only have been a man. His existence would have begun at conception. He would not and could not be the eternal God in human flesh.

The Scriptures repeatedly affirm the full deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1,14). "But of the Son, He says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom'"

(Heb. 1:8). Jesus Himself told the Jews, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham came into being, I AM" (John 8:58). When Thomas saw the risen Lord Jesus and cried out, "My Lord and my God," Jesus didn't correct him for blasphemy, but rather He accepted and commended such worship (John 20:28, 29).

Alexander Maclaren observed, "No one ever proffered to Jesus Christ honors that He put by. No one ever brought to Him a trust which He said was either excessive or misdirected.... Christ takes as His due all the honor, love, and trust, which any man can give Him--either an exorbitant appetite for adulation, or the manifestation of conscious divinity" (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], sermon on Matt. 8:8-9, pp. 382-383). The same author, after pointing out that Jesus called men to believe on Him, concludes, "Either He was wrong, and then He was a crazy enthusiast, only acquitted of blasphemy because convicted of insanity; or else--or else--He was 'God, manifest in the flesh'" (*ibid.*, sermon on John 14:1, p. 257).

No natural union of a human husband and wife could ever bring God into this world. That is the core truth of the Christmas story, that the baby of Bethlehem is uniquely, "God with us." The means God used to take on human flesh was the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary. To affirm the full deity of Jesus Christ you must affirm His supernatural virgin birth.

3. Belief in the virgin birth is essential to affirm the sinless humanity of Jesus Christ.

If Jesus was born of natural parents, then He was born a sinner like all other human beings, and He would have needed a Savior for Himself. If He had sin of His own, He could not have died as the substitute for others. The Scriptures clearly teach that the whole human race, from Adam onward, is born under the curse of sin (see Romans 5:12; Eph. 2:1-3). To redeem that race from sin, Christ had to be identified with us in our humanity, but to be sinless Himself. Just as the Scriptures teach the full deity of Jesus Christ, so they clearly teach His full humanity. He was not a hybrid God-man, half of each. He is undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one person forever.

Jesus had to have at least one human parent or He would not have shared our humanity. But through the superintendence of the Holy Spirit in the virgin birth, Jesus was able to be born as fully human and yet as sinless. The angel tells Mary that because the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her, “for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Mary herself was not immaculately conceived. Luke 1:47 makes that plain where Mary refers to “God my Savior.” You don’t need a Savior unless you’re a sinner. Some theologians have speculated that the sinful nature is communicated through the male, but we cannot say for certain. The earliest prediction of a Savior (Genesis 3:15) mentions Him as the seed of the *woman*, not of man (see also Gal. 4:4, 5). What we can say for certain is what the angel asserted, that because Mary would conceive miraculously through the Holy Spirit, her offspring would be the holy Son of God. The virgin birth is necessary to affirm the sinless humanity of Jesus Christ.

Thus, belief in the virgin birth is necessary to affirm the Word of God; the deity, and the sinless humanity of Jesus Christ. Finally,

4. Belief in the virgin birth is essential to affirm that Jesus Christ is the Savior.

Christmas isn’t just a story to make us feel warm and fuzzy about family, friends, and peace on earth. At the heart of the Christmas story is that the human race is lost, alienated from the holy God because of our sin. The angel told Joseph, “You shall call His name Jesus [= Jehovah saves], for it is He who will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Today you are either *in* your sins, alienated from God, facing His judgment; or, Christ has saved you *from* your sins, so that you are reconciled to God through faith in Christ. If you are lost, your greatest need is for a Savior. The virgin-born Jesus is the only Savior.

To be our Savior the Messiah had to be a man, because only man could die for the sins of the human race. The wages of our sin is death (Rom. 6:23) and that penalty must be paid either by the sinner or by an acceptable substitute. But that substitute must Himself be without sin. Furthermore, He must be more than a man to die for the sins of the whole human race. He must be God in

human flesh. Bishop Moule once said, "A Savior not quite God is a bridge broken at the farther end."

In his classic book, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* ([Baker], p. 395), J. Gresham Machen wrote,

How, except by the virgin birth, could our Savior have lived a complete human life from the mother's womb, and yet have been from the very beginning no product of what had gone before, but a supernatural Person come into the world from the outside to redeem the sinful race?... A noble man in whom the divine life merely pulsed in greater power than in other men would have been born by ordinary generation from a human pair; the eternal Son of God, come by a voluntary act to redeem us from the guilt and power of sin, was conceived in the virgin's womb by the Holy Ghost.

The virgin birth is a picture of the new birth that God wants to bestow on every sinner. The initiative and power were totally from God. Mary could do nothing except passively receive what God would do for her. She couldn't offer her best efforts, she didn't need to promise to try hard to bear the Messiah. All she did was to say, "Be it done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). God did it all. You can't try to save yourself or get into heaven by your own efforts. All you can do is receive what God has done in Christ. James explains, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth," and concludes, "Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:18, 21).

Conclusion

Radio commentator Paul Harvey tells of a man who did not believe that God had taken human flesh in the person of Jesus. He was a kind, decent family man, but he was skeptical about the message of Christmas and couldn't pretend otherwise. So on Christmas eve, he told his wife that he was not going to church with her and the children, because he just couldn't believe. So they went without him.

Shortly after the family left, snow began to fall. As he sat in his fireside chair reading the paper, he was startled by a thudding

sound against the house, then another, then another. At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against the living room window. But when he went to investigate, he found a flock of birds, huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his window.

He didn't want to leave the poor creatures there to freeze. He thought of the barn where his children stabled their pony. He put on his coat and boots and tromped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the door wide and turned on the light. But the birds didn't come in. He went back to the house and got some bread crumbs and sprinkled a path to the barn, but the cold creatures ignored the food and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow.

He tried catching them and shooing them into the barn, but they scattered in every direction, frightened by his well-meaning actions. As he puzzled over how he could help save these frightened creatures from sure death, the thought struck him, "If only I could become a bird and speak their language, then I could show them the way to safety in the warm barn." At that moment, bells from the church rang out through the silent, falling snow, heralding the birth of the Savior. The message of Christmas suddenly made sense, and he dropped to his knees in the snow.

It is possible to believe in the virgin birth and incarnation of the Savior and yet not be saved. Salvation does not depend upon affirming the creeds. "The demons also believe" (James 2:19). Salvation depends upon personally receiving the free gift of eternal life which God offers to you through His eternal Son who took on human flesh through the virgin Mary on that first Christmas, who offered Himself as the substitute for sinners on the cross. If God is truly with us in Christ, then we must come to God only through Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. A person says to you, "It doesn't really matter *what* you believe, just so you believe in something." How would you answer him?
2. Some who claim to be evangelical Christians say that the Bible contains errors, but that it is infallible on matters of faith and practice. Why is this view dangerous? How would you refute it?
3. Some critics argue against the virgin birth because Mark, John, and Paul are silent on it. How would you answer them?
4. How would you answer a critic who said that the virgin birth sounds like other pagan legends?
5. How would you witness to a person who says, "I don't believe in miracles. Show me a miracle and I will believe?"

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