

Born of a Virgin

Christmas is amazing. Isn't it amazing that a baby born in a stable 2,000 years ago can cause so much activity and ... spending? I am thankful for this season – there is so much in the traditions of Christmas to bring joy into our lives.

Christmas also reminds us of the first great miracle of the Christian faith. You know, the one we confess when we say the *Apostles Creed, I believe in Jesus Christ who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.* This is basic to the *meaning of Christmas: that in Jesus Christ God became one of us.* The New Testament clearly declares that the Virgin Birth actually happened in time and space. Matthew and Luke both tell the story as sober, historical reality. You can say it isn't true if you want to. But you can't deny that the Bible clearly teaches it; and it is something that all Christians have always believed. Can we, in our day, still believe in the Virgin Birth?

No Miracle At Christmas

Just to clarify, there were no miracles at the physical birth of Jesus Christ. Even though we often speak of the Virgin Birth of Christ, it's important to remember that *the real miracle took place nine months earlier.*

What does it really mean that Jesus was begotten of the Holy Spirit? Since Jesus was born of Mary, we know that He was truly human. *Begotten of the Holy Spirit tells us that He was more than a man.* Through the virgin birth, the Son of God entered the human race, with all aspects of true humanity, yet without surrendering any aspect of His deity. The Virgin Birth was God's way of announcing to the world that deity and humanity were joined together in Jesus. It's really a miracle.

Mary's pregnancy followed the normal course of all human pregnancies. Then she gave birth to the Lord Jesus in a stable. From time to time, we read of women giving birth in strange places—in a car, in an airplane, at the mall, at a restaurant—sometimes alone, sometimes attended by a very frightened husband. Like these, *the birth of Jesus was a true and normal event though in an abnormal situation.*

I. Reasons to Doubt the Virgin Birth

A. No Medical Explanation

By definition *miracles are beyond human explanation... and even harder to believe.* Joseph didn't understand at first. [That's why he intended to give Mary a private divorce. Evidently, he assumed she had been unfaithful to him.] It wasn't until the angel informed him in a dream that he could accept the truth. But Mary didn't understand either. Luke makes it clear that she was completely baffled and even frightened by the angel Gabriel's amazing announcement.

No one really knows how it happened – physiologically. The angel Gabriel uses non-medical language when speaking to Mary. *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you"* Luke 1: 35. The verb for *"overshadow"* speaks of the direct, personal presence of God. The same verb is used in all three accounts of the Transfiguration to describe the cloud that enveloped Jesus, Moses and Elijah – witnessed by Peter, James, and John on the mountain, (Luke 9). From that cloud came a voice saying, *"This is my Son,"* even as Gabriel told Mary, *"The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*

Through some means unknown to us, during the "overshadowing," He created within the womb of Mary the unborn (yet fully human and fully alive) Person of Jesus Christ. There is no medical explanation, nor can it be duplicated.

B. Only Mentioned in Matthew and Luke

Only two of the four gospels mention the Virgin Birth. *It's never explicitly mentioned in Acts or the letters of Paul or Peter or John.* Nor is it mentioned as part of the evangelistic sermons recorded in the book of Acts. While there are certain texts that seem to imply the Virgin Birth (especially Galatians 4:4)

and while it is certainly compatible with the picture of Jesus presented in John 1, it is never directly mentioned outside of Matthew 1 and Luke 1-3.

C. Similar Stories In Ancient Cultures

The Romans invented legends surrounding the births of some emperors. The Greeks concocted crude stories regarding their gods and heroes, including Hercules. Some have suggested that the Virgin Birth is simply a sanitized version of those ancient myths.

D. Message More Important Than Details

Some Christian preachers and theologians in the early 20th century contended that the early Christians wanted to believe He was the Son of God, so they created the legend of his miraculous conception. If the Virgin Birth is not true you really only have two choices: you can say that Joseph was the real father of Jesus and that the Virgin Birth was invented to make Jesus seem divine. Or, you can argue (as certain Jews did) that Mary had an illicit affair [with a Roman soldier]. Evidently this rumor had circulated even during Jesus' lifetime. It's hinted at in the reply of the Jews to Jesus in John 8:42, when Jesus told them that they were children of the devil, they replied, "We are not illegitimate children," which may be a sly way of implying that Jesus himself was. (It may also be implied by the comments in Mark 6:3 *Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?* And they took offense at him.)

We could pass all this off as not worth the discussion - does it really matter? The important thing, after all, is that He taught good things that we should follow, right? But if He is not divine why should we listen to Him rather than some other religious teacher? Denying the Virgin Birth is really a subtle attack on the central truth of Christian faith that God became a man in the Person of Jesus Christ. It's only a short step from denying the virginity of Mary to denying the deity of Jesus Christ. Once you deny His miraculous entrance into the world, it's short work to deny His deity, or that He ever existed at all.

And even if you deny the Virgin Birth, you still have to account for Jesus. Where did he come from? Whose son is he? And who is he really?

II. Reasons to Believe

Now let's consider some positive reasons to believe in the Virgin Birth.

A. Universally Believed By The Church

The Apostles' Creed has been a standard confession of faith for Christians for almost 2,000 years. It states: "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary." And every other major Christian creed also contains the Virgin Birth. Outside of a few heretical groups (such as the Ebionites), every Christian church worldwide has always affirmed the Virgin Birth. No Christian denomination even thought to question it until the rise of scientific rationalism during the Enlightenment. [Men such as Thomas Paine and the French philosopher Voltaire led the charge against the Virgin Birth. The fight continued during the early years of the 20th and some churches split over whether this doctrine was essential to Christianity]. There are well over 1 billion Christians in the world today, the overwhelming majority of believing in the Virgin Birth.

B. All Major Branches Of The Christianity Believe It

Evangelical churches of every stripe believe in the Virgin Birth. The Catholic Church strongly affirms this doctrine. So do the various Orthodox Churches. It stands in our official UMC doctrines. Around the world where the church is growing fastest (Asia and Africa) virtually 100% of those Christians believe in the Virgin Birth and would be shocked to hear anyone deny it.

C. New Testament Explicitly States It

Both Matthew 1 and Luke 1 clearly say that the conception of Jesus Christ took place while Mary was a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit. Other explanations must ignore the plain meaning of the biblical text. As one writer put it, "It is extremely difficult to make the terminology of the Virgin Birth refer to something other than the Virgin Birth." I would simply change "extremely difficult" to "impossible."

D. Agrees With The Rest Of The Bible

The Virgin Birth is implied in several other Bible verses. Here's just a couple: **1) Isaiah 7:14** clearly predicts that a virgin will conceive and bear a son called **Immanuel**. The angel who appears to Joseph in a dream quotes this passage as proof that the Virgin Birth is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. (I know there are those who argue that the Hebrew word doesn't mean exclusively a "virgin" it can also mean a young woman or girl. However, there are counter arguments that say otherwise, based on how this and other words are used throughout the O.T. See my footnote.)ⁱ **2) Galatians 4:4** states that Jesus was "born of a woman." Indeed he was, but **why use such a strange expression unless there was something unusual about his birth?** And there are others.ⁱⁱ Yet the Bible does not focus on the mechanics of His birth. The Bible tells us just enough to anchor our faith, but not enough to satisfy our curiosity. The important fact is that this baby, though human, is of divine origin and came into the world to accomplish the reconciliation of God and humanity.

The Man For Us

After all is said and done, we can no more explain the Virgin Birth than we can explain walking on water. The Bible presents Jesus as being fully human. Whatever it means to be truly human, that was true of Him. The Bible presents Jesus fully divine, fully God. That is why miracles marked His entrance and His exit from this world. In Him the thin curtain that separates us from the realm of God and the angels is pulled back.

He was like us in his birth ... He was unlike us in his birth. He was hungry and thirsty ... he fed the 5000. **He slept in a boat ... he walked on water.** He wept at the tomb ... then raised Lazarus from the dead. **He was just like us ... He was nothing like us.** He walked among us ... He came from God above. He was the son of Mary ... He was the only-begotten Son of God. He is a man of humble origins ... He is the Sovereign Lord. **He is our friend ... He is our Savior.** He is uniquely the Man for us.

There is a miracle here we may believe, or we may deny. There is enough reason to believe for those who wish to believe. There is enough reason to doubt for those who care to doubt. **Miracles** are like that. They **don't force us to believe. They invite us to make a decision.**

Martin Luther once remarked that the Incarnation consisted of three miracles: "The first, that God became man; the second, that a virgin was a mother, and the third, that the heart of man should believe it."

The Virgin Birth doesn't explain who He is. Who He is explains the Virgin Birth. Immanuel ... God with us ... it is a miracle!

ⁱThe Hebrew word here is *almah* and *almah* does not literally mean virgin. *Almah* means a young woman of marriageable age. Now today that doesn't necessarily mean a virgin, but back then it did. Not only that, but there is another word, *betulah*, that literally does mean virgin. The rabbis will say if Isaiah really meant virgin, he would have used *betulah* and not *almah*.

However, the word *betulah* shows up numerous times in the Bible not referring to a virgin. For example, in Joel 1:8, *betulah* refers to widows. Hmm. So that word is not as precise in its context as *almah*, which again means a young woman of marriageable age but not yet married, and therefore in normal parlance in Isaiah's day a virgin. Not only that, when the rabbis who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in Alexandria 400 years before the coming of Jesus translated "virgin," they used the Greek word *parthenos*. *Parthenos* is the definitive Greek word for virgin. So this amazing text gives us more information. Micah tells us *where* Messiah would be born, and Isaiah tells us *how* he would be born.

ⁱⁱGenesis 3:15 says that the Messiah will be born of the "seed of the woman." But women have no seed in themselves. That must come from the man. Such an unusual phrase has long been understood by Christian theologians as an early reference to the Virgin Birth.

John 1:14 says that the “Word became flesh,” which refers to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God in human flesh. While it does not demand a Virgin Birth, it certainly implies a supernatural entrance into the world.

I Timothy 3:16 summarizes Jesus’ birth by saying that he “appeared in a body,” which sounds like Jesus did not come into the world the usual way.

None of these verses (outside of Isaiah 7:14) explicitly mention the Virgin Birth but they are all perfectly compatible with it.