

I. Please turn with me to Luke, chapter 1.

A. We are officially turning the corner on this Communion Sunday and beginning the celebration of Advent

B. Allow me to read from Luke 1:26<sup>1</sup>

1. In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

C. The Christmas narratives begin with what many consider to be a fabulous, unbelievable claim<sup>2</sup> about the virgin birth of Jesus Christ

1. The claim that His birth was the result of a miraculous conception.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew also records the birth narrative, but Luke gives it a fuller treatment. He actually describes not only the origin of John the Baptist and of Jesus side by side, showing how their lives intersect even before they are born and how far superior Jesus is to John, but also highlights the similarities and differences between the way Zechariah and Mary received the word from Gabriel about their sons. Zechariah is reproved for his unbelief (1:20) while Mary is blessed for her belief (1:45). John Piper, *The Virgin Birth of the Son of God*, Desiring God Ministries, Nov. 23, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Hundreds of years ago, during the Western missionary era in China, the Emperor was told that "these foreign devils" were converting people to their faith. The Emperor asked whom they proclaimed and was told, "the Man from Nazareth who was born from a Virgin, who suffered and died on the Cross," the Emperor remarked, "Leave them alone, who in his right mind would ever believe such a crazy story?" Notes from Dr. Winfred B. Verga, *"The Mystery and Power of the Virgin Birth,"* sermon posted on the web.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek reads *ek pneumatos hagiou*, or "through the Holy Spirit."

2. No human father was involved, rather He was conceived in the womb of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

D. This claim does not come up often in Scripture.

1. It's only given direct attention in brief accounts in Luke and Matthew.
2. I've not heard nor preached a sermon on it before

E. But I decided to this year after realizing that people fell into four camps on this – with three of them being trouble.

1. For starters there are those who do not believe in miracles and for whom this is nonsense.

a) They would say, “Come on now. Mary was not the first young woman to find herself in a compromising position and start telling stories. This one is a bit unique – blame God! Not a bad plan actually, since He's not around to defend himself.

b) But, let's be adults. Miracles don't happen. This didn't happen.<sup>5</sup>

c) I take issue with this generalized rejection of miracles. I think it's arbitrary and indefensible. But, that's a different sermon and there are probably not too many folks in this camp here this morning.

2. A second group believes in miracles, but, for reasons I don't completely understand, seem to have problems with this one.<sup>6</sup>

a) It's dismissed with a wink and a chuckle, or, at the very least, just not defended.

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<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of the Virgin Birth must not be confused with other doctrines concerning Mary, such as her perpetual virginity, her immaculate conception or her assumption – which are not accepted by Protestants. (*The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 1143).

<sup>5</sup> Some in this camp will argue that what is suggested here is similar to stories found in Greek legend – where there are many accounts of a divine person having sexual intercourse with a human (usually a god with a woman). But these are not really relevant. The angel Gabriel spoke “with reverent reserve” in stating that the Holy Spirit will “overshadow” her. There is no claim to sexual relations. Rather, the claim is that Mary was a virgin – and a virgin birth is unique. (The Tyndale Commentary on Luke, Leon Morris, 1974, p. 71-73).

<sup>6</sup> The accounts in Luke and Matthew do not read like myth at all, a point worth stressing in part because some argue that the virgin birth is a myth. Others label the Virgin Birth a theologoumenon – a story invented by the early church to buttress its Christological dogma (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 1143).

b) Which isn't a very defensible position. After all, this Book contains more than a few miracles. Many of which are a lot bigger than this one.

(1) The parting of the Red Sea

(2) Mana falling from heaven

(3) The feeding of 5000

(4) The resurrection of the dead

(5) Hey, the creation of everything out of nothing.

c) If you are going to pick up a red pen and start editing I'd sure like to know how you decide what stays and what goes. And I'm pretty sure you do not understand how much trouble you'll be in if you draw a red line through the Virgin Birth.

d) And it really seems quite silly.

(1) If you want to find something hard to believe in it's not the Virgin Birth. It's that God would become a man and die in our place

(2) That is hard to believe.

(3) That a God who created everything would be able to

(4) It's not a huge leap to believe He could. It's a huge leap to believe that He would.

3. There is a third group who has no problem affirming a Virgin Birth because it's in the Book and those in this camp are willing to take the book at face value.

a) But, to be honest, those who live here have not thought much about this doctrine.

b) And it stands alone, not as critical piece in the description of character of Jesus.

c) It's got to be true. But you'd be hard pressed to say why it's important.

4. And then there is a fourth camp. Those who've thought about this and studied this and see here a claim that is absolutely critical to the Gospel.

- a) You understand that if you try to yank on this thread that entire Gospel begins to unravel.

II. I'd like to move you all to camp four. And hope to do so by making four points.

A. Number one: Scripture proclaims that Jesus is eternal.

1. John 1 reads, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."
  - a) Not, "In the beginning Jesus came into being."
  - b) But, in the beginning Jesus already "was."
2. In Phil 2 Paul tells us that Jesus existed in the form of God in heaven before He was born. But He set that aside for us in order to become a man and enter time and space
3. In John 17 Jesus Himself spoke about the glory He enjoyed before the foundation of the world.
4. So, for starters, we are not talking about an ordinary birth, which is the beginning of life for everyone else. We didn't exist before conception
  - a) God knew us before the foundation of the world – and loved us
  - b) But we didn't exist in heaven
  - c) We were not alive in some previous life form
  - d) We didn't exist.
5. But Jesus did. He is eternal.
6. And this is an important theological point
  - a) Back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the church was engaged in a battle with the Arian heresy which claimed that Jesus was God-like but not God. And even put this phrase to music.
    - (1) And among the charges the Arians made was that Jesus was made.
    - (2) That there was a time when the Son was not.
  - b) And the leader of this movement, a man named Arius, was quite a charismatic leader and led many astray. And one of the ways he got his point across was to put his theology to songs. So

there were actually crowds rioting in the street over this stuff, singing and chanting, “There was a time when the son was not.”

7. In response to that those holding onto truth put their theology to song. We call it the Gloria Patri:

- a) Which we occasionally sing in the Classic service.
- b) The words are: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be (there was never a time before Jesus) World without end. Amen

8. What we celebrate at Christmas is not the beginning of Christ’s life, it is the beginning of His life as man.

- a) While remaining fully God He becomes fully man. He takes on a body.
- b) It’s a profound miracle, greater in many ways than the resurrection.<sup>7</sup>

c) We refer to it as the incarnation.

(1) Which comes from the Greek word for body or flesh, *caros*.

(a) A carnivore eats flesh

(b) A carnal Christian is one who is not led by the Spirit of God

d) But the important point is that the incarnation is not when Christ’s life begins. It is the celebration of the eternal God entering time and space. It is the first “advent” – or literally, the first coming of Jesus in the flesh.

e) We should hardly expect it to be a normal birth.

B. Point 2: The idea of the Virgin Birth is developed in the Old Testament

1. In fact, we receive our first hint of the Virgin Birth way back in Gen. 3.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We certainly do not fully grasp or appreciate what was involved in the Creator lowering and debasing Himself by becoming part of His creation.

<sup>8</sup>I am indebted to a sermon by Mark Adam at Redland Baptist Church for this insight. [www.redlandbaptist.org](http://www.redlandbaptist.org).

a) Turn to Genesis 3 – what theologians refer to as the proto-evangelion

(1) The first (proto) telling of the evangel (good news)<sup>9</sup>

b) In verse 14, this is shortly after the fall of man, God says to the serpent:

(1) Cursed are you above all livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.

c) Please notice that it says, “her offspring.”<sup>10</sup> I actually like the NASB which translates this “her seed.”

(1) This is odd because you do not talk about the seed of woman, you talk about the egg or the womb of a woman, but you talk about the seed of a man.

(2) But Jesus is going to be born to a virgin. There is no male seed involved. And so when God the Father makes the promise about the coming of the Rescuer (Jesus) He says to Eve, “your seed will crush His head, though he will strike your heel.”

d) So the Gospel starts with the Father promising not only that Jesus will be sent on a rescue mission

(1) During which He will crush the head of evil

e) But, that first promise also contains a hint of the unique way through which He will enter the world – a Virgin Birth

2. A second Old Testament reference to the Virgin Birth – one that is much more direct – is found in Isaiah 7

a) Where the prophet Isaiah, living 700 years before Christ was born, giving us more information about Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> As Philip Yancey has written, “As the first echo from the crunch from the first bite of the forbidden fruit was echoing through the Garden of Eden, Jesus was preparing for Calvary.”

<sup>10</sup> In a similar manner, in Mark 6:3 Mark refers to Jesus as being Mary’s son, an odd way to describe anyone in the culture of the first century.

(1) It's a prophecy – a foretelling or prediction and description – about the Messiah.

(2) There are about

(3)

b) . In this one, in verse 14 Isaiah states:

(1) Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and he will call him, Immanuel (God with us)..

c) Now perhaps you've heard that this word "virgin" doesn't really mean virgin, it means "young woman."

d) That is true but misleading.

(1) The Hebrew word we are translating here (alma) can be translated "young woman."

e) But, of the nine times it occurs in the Old Testament, seven of the other eight are clearly references to a "virgin"

f) And, more importantly, so is this one.

g) Think about it. The prophet stands up on his soap box and says, "God has given me supernatural insight into how the Son of Man – the Messiah Himself – will be born. You will be able to tell that the Messiah is the Messiah because (drum roll please) He will be born to a woman!

h) OK, well that narrows it down to everyone. Thanks Isaiah. You're really taking some risks with that one!"

i) The word is not to be translated "young woman" it's to be translated "virgin."

3. And – in the margin here – let me ask again, "Why wouldn't we expect something altogether different for one who is altogether different."

4. Remember, Jesus would have a completely unique nature.

a) His being or essence would be that of the Father. In fact, the Nicene Creed – one of the two or three most important creeds in Christendom, which was crafted in order to refute the Arian heresy I mentioned earlier (those who wished to deny the deity of Christ)

– the Nicene Creed states that Jesus was “begotten” of God the Father.

b) We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made,

5. His birth is unique because He was begotten of God not of a human male.<sup>11</sup>

6. They chose this word because while God can make anything

a) A rock, a tree, a fish or a planet, He can only beget (or father) something in His own nature.

7. As C.S. Lewis states: When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds.”<sup>12</sup>

8. By analogy, when God begets (when God fathers) Jesus, he begets God.

9. And, as Paul states in Colossians 2:9, “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.”

C. Well, so far we’ve noted that

1. Scripture speaks of Christ’s eternal nature – which suggests a different type of birth

2. And that the Old Testament introduces the idea that the Messiah would have a special birth – with Isaiah stating specifically the He will be born of a Virgin

D. The next stop here is the New Testament.

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<sup>11</sup> The Nicene Creed opens: We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made;

<sup>12</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Beyond Personality*, 1948, p. 5, quoted in John Piper, *The Virgin Birth of the Son of God*.



1. Where, in the Gospel of Luke<sup>13</sup> - the passage we opened with – we are told that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to tell her that she has found favor with God and will have a child.

a) And she asks, “How can this be, for I am a virgin?”

2. We have a similar account in Matthew’s Gospel where the angel came to Joseph – her fiancé – who was, understandably quite troubled by all of this and was making plans to quietly divorce her.

a) In the first century being engaged represented a more serious commitment than it does today

b) It was a year long period where the couple was referred to as husband and wife, where if your fiancé died you were called a widow, and where if you violated the marriage vows and slept with someone else both you and that someone else were to be taken to the gate to the city and stoned to death.<sup>14</sup>

c) After a year there would be a big wedding feast like that described in Matthew 25 and the couple would begin to live as man and wife.

3. Joseph is a just man. And he doesn’t want to cause her any problems. But what he knows for sure is

a) He is engaged to Mary

b) She went to visit her cousin Elizabeth

c) She is gone three months

d) When she comes back she is pregnant

e) He is not the father. So he is trying to break it off.

4. But, in Matthew 1 we are told the angel Gabriel makes a return visit to Nazareth and says to Joseph, “Do not fear to take Mary as your wife. Because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Luke is one of two Gospel writers to mention the Virgin Birth directly, and he writes as both a careful historian and a physician. In reading Luke it is clear by his frequent descriptions of dates and locations that he is not writing mythology. And the statement about Mary’s virginity follows immediately after he tells Theopholis that he engaged in a careful investigation and interviewed eye witnesses. (Some scholars believe that Luke interviewed Mary herself about this).

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 22:23 reads: “If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death.” It’s not clear how often this was actually practiced during the New Testament era, but it was the mandate of the OT.

E. Now there are other passages that factor into the Virgin Birth – some that state that Christ is eternal, some that speak of a very different relationship He has with the Father – but this is enough for now.<sup>15</sup>

III. The last point I want to make is to explain why this is so important.

A. Or, why else is this important. Implied in what I've said so far is a need to affirm what is written because of my belief that this Book has authority in my life.

1. As a follower of Christ I affirm that He is – as He claimed to be – fully God and fully Man. The Creator of heavens and earth. Eternal and all wise.
2. In light of that I need to line up my view of this Book with His view of this Book. And so, having established that He honors this book
  - a) States that He came to fulfill it not overturn it.
  - b) Quoting it when He's in trouble.
3. I feel as though I have no choice but to trust it. Even when that requires that I make that trust in part in faith.
4. So there is value in defending the account on that basis.
5. So there is a reason to defend this doctrine because it is clearly taught.

B. But why else? The reason is because it is through the Virgin Birth – this union of God and man – that we are given the Mediator. The one who is uniquely qualified to bridge the gulf between a holy God and broken people

1. In I Timothy the Apostle Paul states as much. He writes, “there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. Jesus and Jesus alone is positioned as the reconciler because of His dual nature – what theologians refer to as the hypostatic union.

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<sup>15</sup> Consider just two: 1) At the age of 12 Jesus stays in the temple when his parents and the others he had entered Jerusalem with took off for home. In an era before cell phones it took Mary and Joseph three anxious days to find him. When they did He said, rather matter-of-factly, “where did you think I'd be but in my Father's house?” Jesus called God the Father, “Father” and later “Abba” (Daddy). No one else had done this before and it was quite scandalous when He taught the disciples how to pray, beginning with the opening, “Our Father...”; 2) In John 8 Jesus was engaged in a debate with some religious leaders. As they start to lose they begin to call him names, eventually saying, “We are not illegitimate,” implying, of course, that He is. Jesus responds by stating that He was alive at the time of Abraham. In this passage we not only have the suggestion that rumors of his “illegitimate birth” were known by his enemies, but also of His preexistence before the incarnation.

3. Now, if I were preaching in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century I'd probably be emphasizing the human side of his conception and birth in order to emphasize the fact that while remaining fully God Jesus became fully man. Because, while it was common for people in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century to believe that Jesus was God, more than a few denied that He was man.

a) So people like Ignatius and other Church Fathers had to emphasize that He was really one of us.

4. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the problem is the exact opposite. And so it's necessary to emphasize the divine side of the equation and protect the doctrine of the Virgin Birth.

C. And to go beyond that and note that if Jesus is not God – if He has a human father – then the whole thing unravels because he would be infected with the same sin nature that you and I have. And His death would be required to pay for his own sin.

D. I hope you understand that Jesus didn't just come to make a grand appearance

1. And He didn't come just to teach us how to live
2. And He didn't just come to show us how to love

E. He came to rescue us

1. To lay down His life as a ransom for many.
2. This is what the angel Gabriel stated to Joseph before he was born
  - a) You are to give him the name Jesus because He will save his people from their sins.”

F. This rescue mission was necessary because we are unable to rescue ourselves

1. In order to enter into a personal relationship with a holy, just and all powerful God we must be holy.
  - a) Not mostly holy.
  - b) Not better than average.
  - c) Perfectly pure through and through.
2. We are not.
3. In fact, we are fatally flawed because of a sin nature we have inherited from our parents, who inherited from their parents.

4. It is viral and it has infected 100 percent of the population.
  - a) This is what Paul meant when he said, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
5. The way to be reconciled with God is for our moral debt to be paid.
6. The way it is paid is through the shedding of blood.
  - a) The terms of the deal, explained all the way back in the beginning of the book, are that sin is a capital offense.
  - b) But, substitute deaths are viable.
  - c) An innocent third party may die in the place of a guilty sinner.
7. This is the basis for the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament – where hundreds and thousands of animals gave their life as an act of atonement.
  - a) To pay a person’s debt.
8. But these sacrifices didn’t get the job done. There was a need for a perfect sacrifice. And that is why God became man. He was born to die.
9. But in order to become a man without having a sin nature He had to be supernaturally born.
10. Jesus came as the perfect man – the new Adam, the unblemished lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world.
11. God by-passed the sins of the human race by placing His Son in the womb of a virgin.
12. The Virgin Birth is nothing to wink at or be casual about. The entire Gospel rests on it.

#### IV. Miscellany

A. Peter Larson has written: Despite our efforts to keep Him out, God intrudes. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin’s womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered the world through a door marked “No entrance” and left through a door marked “No Exit.”<sup>16</sup>

B. “Is belief in the virgin birth ‘necessary’? It is possible to be saved without believing it; saved people aren’t perfect people. But to reject the virgin birth is to

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Larson, *Prism* (Jan/Feb 2001), quoted in *Christianity Today*, Dec. 2005, p. 62.

reject God's Word, and disobedience is always serious. Further, disbelief in the virgin birth may lead to compromise in those other areas with which it is vitally connected."<sup>17</sup>

C. What is the application?

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<sup>17</sup> J.M. Frame, *The Virgin Birth of Jesus*, *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 1145.