

THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF JESUS
 SELECTED SCRIPTURES
 ABC 12/11/22

In the late 1700s & early 1800s, there was an English group of literary folks who'd gather at Charles Lamb's home to talk. One evening they began discussing what they'd do & say if the great people of history were to come visit them. At one point Charles Lamb said, *If Shakespeare were to come to the door, we would all stand in respect & in honor of this bard of Stratford-on-Avon.* Then he added, *But if Jesus the Christ were to come through the door, we would all kneel down & bow in reverence & holy devotion.*¹

That is so true. As we've seen, Jesus is 100% God & 100% man. How did this happen? By a virgin conceiving a child. It's the most miraculous of births. Unfortunately, we live in a day of *cafeteria* Christianity where people go through the line & say, *I'll have some of this, but I don't want any of that.* They pick & choose what suits them, as if they're free to take whatever they like from God's Word & ignore the rest. Of course, all Christians enjoy the story of the birth of Jesus. The familiar narrative of Joseph & Mary, their trek to Bethlehem, no vacancy at the inn, laying Jesus in a manger, & the adoration of the shepherds makes for a story we never grow tired of hearing. But there's one part of the story that many choose to ignore or leave out. What is it? The virgin birth of Jesus. The virgin birth isn't a take-it-or-leave-it matter; the issue touches whether we believe in God's supernatural intervention in the world, the biblical teaching on sin, the unique parallel between Adam & Christ, & the plain meaning of Scripture. Jesus' virgin birth, or more accurately, the virginal conception of Jesus, teaches that Jesus was born apart from the normal, biological process of procreation. He was supernaturally conceived in the womb of a virgin girl by the power of the Holy Spirit, & born without sin. This is the means by which Jesus was born holy & sinless, different from all other births. While those of us who believe the Bible is God's inerrant Word have no trouble believing this, others do. Thomas Jefferson discounted it as a fable.² Robert Schuller once said, *I could not in print or in public deny the virgin birth of Christ, but when I have something I can't comprehend I just don't deal with it.*³ That's not right either. Rather, as Donald Macleod writes, *The virgin birth is posted on guard at the door of the mystery of Christmas; & none of us must think of hurrying past it. It stands on the threshold of the NT, blatantly supernatural, defying our*

¹ Quoted by WA Criswell, *The Marvel of the Virgin Birth*, <https://wacriswell.com/sermons/1989/the-marvel-of-the-virgin-birth/>

² *Letters to John Adams*, April 11, 1823

³ Quoted by John MacArthur, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2181/the-virgin-birth>

*rationalism, informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself & that if we find it offensive there is no point in proceeding further.*⁴

Some doctrines are fundamental to the Christian faith. Christians may differ on their understanding of non-fundamentals, such as end-times, spiritual gifts, & modes of baptism. But to deny the basics of the faith is to depart from the core of what it means to be a Christian. The virgin birth is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. To deny it requires that we deny the authority & truth of the Bible, the deity & sinless humanity of Jesus, & that He's the only Savior. In the late 19th & early 20th centuries, controversy over the virgin birth tore the church apart. It was one of the fundamentals. Liberals denied it & called it an unnecessary & irrational doctrine. In 1892 Adolf Harnack, a German scholar, said he didn't believe in miracles; therefore, he didn't believe in the incarnation of God in Jesus.⁵ In 1900 Friedrich Loofs stated, *I think it the duty of truthfulness to state openly that the virgin birth arose out of false, fabulous tradition.*⁶ On May 21, 1922 Harry Emerson Fosdick delivered a sermon entitled, *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?* In it he aimed his attention at *the vexed & mooted question of the virgin birth*. He allowed that Christians may hold *quite different points of view about a matter like the virgin birth*. He accepted the fact that many Christians believed the virgin birth to be historically true & theologically significant. He likened this belief to trust in *a special biological miracle*. Nevertheless, he insisted that others, equally Christian, could disagree with those who believe the virgin birth to be historically true. He said, *...side by side with them in the evangelical churches is a group of equally loyal & reverent people who would say that the virgin birth is not to be accepted as an historic fact. To believe in the virgin birth as an explanation of great personality is one of the familiar ways in which the ancient world was accustomed to account for unusual superiority.*

He went on to explain that those who deny the virgin birth hold to a specific pattern of reasoning.

Those 1st disciples adored Jesus--as we do; when they thought about his coming they were sure that he came specially from God--as we are; this adoration & conviction they associated with God's special influence & intention in his birth--as we do; but they phrased it in terms of a biological miracle that our modern minds cannot use.

⁴ *The Person of Christ (Contours of Christian Theology)*, p 37

⁵ www.bible.ca/trinity/trinity-Harnack.htm

⁶ Quoted by WA Criswell, *The Marvel of the Virgin Birth*, <https://wacriswell.com/sermons/1989/the-marvel-of-the-virgin-birth/>

Fosdick divided the church into 2 camps. Those he labeled as *fundamentalists* believe the virgin birth to be historical fact. Whereas *enlightened* Christians no longer obligate themselves to believe the Bible to be true & discard this *biological* miracle but still consider themselves to be Christians.⁷ He later said, *Of course I do not believe in the virgin birth or in that old-fashioned substitutionary doctrine of the atonement, & I know of no intelligent person who does.*⁸ German NT scholar Gerd Luedemann summarized by saying, *The tomb was full & the manger empty.*⁹ It just gets kookier from there. In her book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, author Jane Schaberg accuses the church of inventing the doctrine of the virgin birth in order to subjugate women. She summarizes: *The charge of contemporary feminists, then, is not that the image of the Virgin Mary is unimportant or irrelevant, but that it contributes to & is integral to the oppression of women.*¹⁰ She states that the conception of Jesus was most likely the result of extra-marital sex or rape. Which takes us back to the 2nd century where Celsus, a Greek philosopher, wrote that Mary had been guilty of adultery & that Jesus' father was a Roman soldier named Panthera.¹¹ While we may be tempted to laugh this off as the work of a few nuts, we need to take it seriously. 1st you attack the birth, then you attack the Baby; 1st the miracle, then the Man. Once you deny Jesus' miraculous entrance into this world, it's a short step to deny His deity. Behind this kind of thinking stands a theology that attacks the central truth that God became a Man in the Person of Jesus Christ. From the very beginning, Christians have believed in the virgin birth. Remember the words of the Apostles' Creed? *I believe in Jesus Christ who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.* That points to the fundamental fact that in Jesus, God became one of us. The NT clearly declares the virgin birth as fact. Matthew & Luke both tell the story as historical reality. The Bible clearly teaches the virgin birth. You can say it isn't true if you want but you can't deny that the Bible teaches it & that it's a central part of the Christmas story. Let's read the gospel accounts & then get to it. **Mt 1:18-25** & **Lk 1:26-38**

⁷ Albert Mohler, *Can a Christian Deny the Virgin Birth*, <https://albertmohler.com/2003/12/19/can-a-christian-deny-the-virgin-birth-5>

⁸ Quoted at <http://looneyfundamentalist.blogspot.com/2006/08/remembering-harry-emerson-fosdick-1878.html>

⁹ *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary & Her Son Jesus*, p 149

¹⁰ p 13

¹¹ John Patrick, *The Apology of Origen in Reply to Celsus*, pp 22–24

Matthew's source was either Jesus or Mary or both & Luke probably got his facts directly from Mary. Matthew's quotation of Is 7:14 confirms that Isaiah, 700 years earlier, predicted the virgin birth of Jesus. **The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child & bear a son, & she will call His name Immanuel.** Did Isaiah know what he was writing about? Probably not, but Matthew did. The OT predicted Jesus' virgin birth & the NT says that's the way it happened. How do you respond to that? Some say it's impossible because miracles don't happen. Others, who profess to be followers of Jesus & acknowledge that miracles do happen, believe this miracle never took place because it's too far-fetched. There's a 3rd group that believes the virgin birth simply because it's in the Bible. They say, *If it's in the Bible, I believe it.* But they aren't able to explain why the virgin birth is important. The final group is made up of those who not only believe the virgin birth but also understand how critical it is to the gospel. What must we know?

1. THE VIRGIN BIRTH WAS THE BIRTH OF GOD HIMSELF If Jesus is the son of human parents through the natural biological process, then He isn't God in human flesh. It's that simple. Under those circumstances, He might be a man indwelt by God, a man upon whom God's Spirit rested but He would still be just a man. His existence would have begun at conception. He wouldn't & couldn't be the eternal God in human flesh. The Scriptures repeatedly affirm the full deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jn 1 opens by saying, **In the beginning was the Word, & the Word was with God, & the Word was God** (1). John didn't write, *In the beginning, Jesus was created.* Jesus was already there. In Jn 17, Jesus talks about the glory He enjoyed with the Father before the foundations of the world (5, 24). In Phil 2 Paul talks about the fact that Jesus was God Himself in heaven & enjoyed the glory of God. But Jesus humbled Himself to become a man so He could go to His death on a cross in our place. When we talk about the virgin birth, we're not talking about a birth like yours or mine. Our souls didn't exist in a spiritual state on some shelf in heaven, waiting for God to pull us down & give us a body & send us to earth. No, our lives begin at conception. But Jesus has always been. He's God eternal. The virgin birth was the birth of none other than God Himself. God taking on human flesh, God incarnate, Immanuel, God with us. No natural union of a human husband & wife could ever bring God into this world. That's the core truth of the Christmas story; 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. Our Savior isn't only a man, but the divine Son of God. He is uniquely the God-man, the only One who can accomplish salvation.

2. THE VIRGIN BIRTH IS ESSENTIAL TO THE SINLESS HUMANITY OF JESUS If Jesus was born of natural parents then He was born a sinner like all other humans & He'd have needed a Savior for Himself. If He had sin of His own, He couldn't have died as the substitute for others. The Scriptures clearly teach that the whole human race, since Adam onward, is born under the curse of sin (Rom 5:12; Eph 2:1-3). To redeem humanity from sin, Jesus had to be identified with us in our humanity but be sinless Himself. Just as the Scriptures teach the full deity of Jesus, they also clearly teach His full humanity. He wasn't a hybrid God-man, ½ of each. He is undiminished deity & perfect humanity united in one Person forever. He had to have at least one human parent or He wouldn't have shared our humanity. Through the involvement of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was able to be born as fully human & yet sinless. The angel tells Mary that because the Holy Spirit will come upon her & the power of the Most High will overshadow her, **for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God** (Lk 1:35). The earliest prediction of a Savior mentions Him as the seed of the *woman*, not of man (Gen 3:15). Because Mary conceived 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. The virgin birth shows us that our Redeemer is fully, truly a man, yet without sin. Jesus was born supernaturally, but not in a way that makes His humanity different from ours (Heb 2:10-11). As One who was conceived uniquely of a woman by the agency of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is unstained by original sin & stands uniquely parallel to Adam. Were Jesus to have been born with a sinful nature, He wouldn't be the sinless Savior. The virgin birth is the means by which the holy Son of God was incarnate & born without sin. Thus, belief in the virgin birth is necessary to affirm the deity & the sinless humanity of Jesus Christ.

3. THE VIRGIN BIRTH FULFILLED OT PROPHECY. When we talk about the virgin birth it's important to realize the story doesn't begin with the angel's announcement to Mary. Writing some 700 years prior,

Isaiah says, **the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child & bear a son, & she will call His name Immanuel** (7:14). God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, says, *I'm going to give you a sign, & this is how you'll know for sure that God has sent His Messiah, He'll be born of a virgin*. What is the sign? That the Messiah will be born of a woman? No, that wouldn't be much of a sign. The sign is He'll be born to a virgin. Furthermore, Matthew quotes this claiming that all these things took place so the prophecy would be fulfilled (1:23). When Matthew quotes this in Greek, the word he uses can only be referring to a *virgin*. Are there other references to the virgin birth in the OT? Gen 3:15 says that the Messiah will be born of the **seed of the woman**. That phrase has long been understood as a reference to the virgin birth. Much more could be said, but even if the virgin birth was taught in only one biblical passage, that would be enough to obligate us to believe it. We have no right to measure the truthfulness of biblical teachings by their repetition. We can't claim to believe that the Bible is the Word of God & then turn around & cast suspicion on what it says.

4. THE VIRGIN BIRTH IS IMPLIED IN OTHER NT TEXTS. Obviously, the clearest places where the virgin birth is taught are in Matthew & Luke, the only 2 places in Scripture where Jesus' birth is narrated. Luke contains the most details about Jesus' birth. In the account of Gabriel's visit to Mary (Lk 1:26–38) the virginity of Mary is mentioned explicitly in Lk 1:27 & 34 when Mary wonders how she could be with child since she has never known a man. Instead of the normal process of procreation, Gabriel tells Mary the child to be born of her comes by the agency of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35). This reveals a close relationship between the Holy Spirit & the holiness of the Child. The Holy Spirit will ensure that the Child born of Mary (herself a sinner) would be sinless & holy. Mary's Son will occupy the throne of His father David & will reign over a kingdom that won't end (Lk 1:31–33). Mary gives birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, the city of David (Lk 2:5), fulfilling prophecy (Mic 5:2). In Mt 1:20 the Holy Spirit is again identified as the means of Mary's pregnancy, which happened before she & Joseph were united sexually (Mt 1:25). The term *virgin* is applied to Mary in Matthew as it is in Luke. Matthew clearly understands Mary to be a virgin. Matthew develops his account around Joseph. The angel expects Joseph to believe Mary when she says she has no idea how she got

pregnant. *It was God's doing, she says. The Holy Spirit came upon me, & I'm pregnant.* What a shock for Joseph. Engagement in that culture was binding. In essence, the couple was considered married. When Mary comes back from visiting her Aunt Elizabeth, she's pregnant. Joseph knows he's not the father, so he begins making plans to quietly divorce her. God sends Gabriel to stop Joseph from ending the relationship: *You're to marry this woman, he tells Joseph. What is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit* (Mt 1:20). Clearly the Bible teaches the virgin birth of Jesus. Could God have done it differently? Probably. But I bet you can't come up with a better way than what He did with the virgin birth. Jn 1:14 says that **the Word became flesh**, which refers to the Incarnation of Jesus as the Son of God in human flesh. While it doesn't demand a virgin birth, it certainly implies a supernatural entrance into the world. Paul doesn't mention the virgin birth, but his writings assume it. Paul speaks of Jesus as a real man (Gal 4:4; 1 Cor 15:21) who came from the line of David (Rom 1:3–4), yet who existed before His incarnation (Phil 2:6; Col 1:15–20). 1 Tim 3:16 summarizes Jesus' birth by saying He **appeared in a body**, which sounds like Jesus didn't come into the world the usual way. Gal 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? In Rom 5:12–21 Paul speaks of Jesus in parallel with Adam. Adam was the 1st man & through his representative failure sin & death spread to all people. In contrast, through Jesus comes righteousness & life to all who are in Christ. Paul deals in Rom 5 with 2 heads of humanity, Adam & Christ. Both are representatives whose actions have consequences for others. It's difficult to see how Paul's Adam-Christ parallel would stand, & how Jesus wouldn't have been implicated in the sin of Adam, if Paul didn't believe in the virgin birth (cf 1 Cor 15:22, 47–48). Though no other NT writer mentions the virgin birth explicitly, the NT emphasizes both the preexistence & divinity of Jesus, who took on flesh & blood (Heb 1:2–3; Js 2:1; 2 Pt 1:1; Jude 5; 1 Jn 1:1–4; Rev 1:17–18). The preexistence of the Son of God & His virgin birth should be understood as closely related. The Christmas story doesn't begin, *Once upon a time in a faraway land, a young virgin gave birth.* This isn't a fairy story or a bedtime story. This is the truth. It really happened exactly as the Bible says. It doesn't make it more true if it's mentioned once or 1,000 times. God's truth is God's truth.

5. THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF JESUS IS CRITICAL TO GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION The virgin birth shows us God's initiative in salvation. It's a critical piece of God's plan for salvation. Christmas isn't just a story to make us feel warm & fuzzy about family, friends, & peace on earth. At the heart of the Christmas story is that the human race is lost, alienated from God because of our sin. The angel told Joseph, **you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins** (Mt 1:21). Today, you're either *in* your sins, alienated from God, facing His judgment or Jesus has saved you *from* your sins, so that you're reconciled to God through faith in Christ. If you're a sinner, & you are, 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) & 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. In his classic book, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, J Gresham Machen wrote,

How, except by the virgin birth, could our Savior have lived a complete human life from the mother's womb, & 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 pulsated 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 & power of sin, was conceived in the virgin's womb by the Holy Ghost.¹²

The virgin birth is a picture of the new birth that God wants to bestow on every sinner. The initiative & power are totally from God. Mary could do nothing except passively receive what God would do for her. She couldn't offer her best efforts nor did she need to promise to try hard to bear the Messiah. All she could say was, **may it be done to me according to your word** (Lk 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...** & then concludes, **Therefore, putting aside all filthiness & *a//* that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls** (Js 1:18, 21). We believe the virgin birth because the Bible teaches it & because it's absolutely critical for our

¹² p 395

salvation that Jesus is both fully God & fully man. He's the Savior of the world, uniquely positioned as Mediator between holy God & sinful man, which is exactly what we need in order to be reconciled to a holy God. We defend the virgin birth, because it's only through the virgin birth that God provides a Savior who is unstained by original sin. Sin entered the world through one man & death through sin (Rom 5:12). The global pandemic of sin has infected us all (Rom 3:23). We're not called sinners because we sin; we sin because that's our nature. We've inherited it as people. In order for us to have a perfect substitute sacrifice, Adam's work had to be bypassed. The 2nd Adam, the perfect Man & Savior of the world, Jesus Christ was sent to us through a virgin's womb & the agency of the Holy Spirit, in order to perform a union of God & man without sin. Because He was born of Mary, He's fully human. Because He's conceived by the Holy Spirit, He's fully God. Because He's born holy & remained sinless, He's fully qualified to be our Savior. He's fully able to stand in our place, taking our guilt, shame, & punishment. He could pay for our sins precisely because He had no sin & no guilt of His own. **He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him** (2 Cor 5:21). Because God wanted to save the world, He took the initiative & sent His Son through a virgin girl. The virgin birth teaches us that salvation is entirely by God's grace. The virgin birth isn't just some quaint doctrine or archaic myth. It's absolutely critical to our salvation, because what we need is a Savior. The Bible presents Jesus as being fully human. He was born like us, lived like us, & died like us. Whatever it means to be truly human, was true of Jesus. He was as much a Man as any man who ever lived. He wasn't an alien or an angel or a half-man, half-God creature. He was fully human. He was also fully divine, fully God. That's why miracles marked His entrance & exit from this world.

What are the ramifications if you deny the virgin birth? You really only have 2 choices. 1st, you can say that Joseph was the real father of Jesus & that the virgin birth was invented to make Jesus seem divine. Or you can argue that Mary had an adulterous relationship with someone else. Those who deny the virgin birth reject the authority of Scripture, deny the supernatural birth of the Savior, undermine the very foundations of the gospel, & have no way of explaining the deity of Christ. Both Matthew & Luke clearly say that the conception of Jesus took place while Mary was a virgin

through the power of the Holy Spirit. This isn't open to question or debate. Those who give some other explanation must do so at the expense of the plain meaning of Scripture. It's impossible to make the terminology of the virgin birth refer to something other than the virgin birth. It's a miracle which we may believe or deny. If you say, *Miracles can't happen*, then you'll find some way to explain away the virgin birth. & you won't be the 1st to do so. If you doubt the virgin birth, I'm not going to ask you to study the facts & make up your mind. Rather, I want you to pray that God would reveal His truth to you & then go read the gospel story from beginning to end. Take any of the gospels & read it through. After that, you'll either believe or you won't. The virgin birth doesn't explain who Jesus is. Who Jesus is explains the virgin birth. How do you account for Jesus? Who is He? Answer that question & you'll also have your answer about the virgin birth. Of course, there's much that's not explained that we'd like to know. The Bible tells us just enough to anchor our faith, but not enough to satisfy our curiosity. Everyone always asks how did this happen? No one knows! Gabriel uses discreet, non-specific language to describe the actual conception. In Lk 1:35 the angel tells Mary, **The Holy Spirit will come upon you, & the power of the Most High will overshadow you; & for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.** The verb **overshadow** speaks of the direct, personal presence of God. The same verb is used in all 3 accounts of the Transfiguration to describe the cloud that enveloped Jesus, Moses, & Elijah on the mountain. From that cloud came a voice saying, **This is my beloved Son** (Mt 17:5), even as Gabriel told Mary, **The holy Child shall be called the Son of God** (Lk 1:35). No one can explain the virgin birth or duplicate it. It stands absolutely alone. Nothing can be compared to it because no other birth has been, or ever could be, like it. The miraculous conception of Jesus lets us know that this isn't some ordinary Baby like every other baby. To deny the virgin birth of Jesus is to open the door to denying everything said in the Bible. Anyone who claims that the virgin birth can be discarded even as the deity of Christ is affirmed is either intellectually dishonest or theologically incompetent. The virgin birth was never meant to stand alone. It's not a random truth plucked from thin air. God never says, *Pick & choose what you want to believe*. It's not a buffet line. History teaches us that when men begin to doubt the virgin birth, they don't stop there. One doubt leads to another until the Jesus they believe in

isn't the Jesus of the Bible. In truth, the virgin birth is no more miraculous than the resurrection. They stand or fall together. Do I understand it? No. Do I believe it? Yes. Why? Because the Bible teaches it & because it makes perfect sense. The Baby whose birth we celebrate is Immanuel, God with us. The virgin birth is a sign from God that He's entered the human race. God stooped low to be born in a manger. On the human side, His mother is Mary. On the divine side, His Father is God. Jesus took on our humanness & entered our sin polluted world without ever being tainted by it. He took our guilt, bore our griefs, carried our sorrows, was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, died for our sins, went to heaven to prepare a place for us, sent His Spirit to dwell within us, makes intercession for us now, & will someday come to take us to be with Him. Don't take the virgin birth for granted. Instead, thank God for it & worship Him in awe because of it & what it means to each one of us.