

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

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[0 : 00] We had a few technical issues with the start of the recording of this sermon, so I'm re-recording the very beginning, sat here in my study for you. We started by watching a recording of the 1957 BBC Panorama broadcast on the spaghetti harvest. If you want to have a look, there'll be a link in the description on the website or in the notes in your podcast player. It's really entirely up to you, but if you're intending to do so, this is your moment.

One of my favourite anecdotes about that story of the spaghetti harvest is that the production team making that recording did such a good job of keeping their intentions hidden that the Director General of the BBC first saw it as it was being broadcast, and he immediately got up to go and find his encyclopedia, exclaiming, I didn't know spaghetti grew on trees, only to have his wife draw his attention to the date, which was of course the 1st of April 1957.

There are plenty of people today, even plenty, who would call themselves Christians. Plenty of people sat in the pews up and down the country. Perhaps even some of you sat here this morning. Plenty who would say that to believe in the virgin birth is simply nonsensical. It's foolish, a relic of bygone days when no one knew any better. It's just a story made up for theological reasons, which obviously shouldn't be taken as scientific fact. Like that news report, maybe it would have fooled a few credulous people, but of course it was never supposed to be taken seriously.

Everyone knows better than that, and if they didn't then, well we certainly do now. Now folks, there are some parts of the Bible that intends to teach a theological point without being historical fact. The parables are the most obvious example thereof. There are some sections of God's Word that are not meant to be taken literally in that sense. But folks, our faith is not built on air, but rather it is built upon solid foundations. Our beliefs are supported by history.

[2 : 00] We don't believe in spite of the evidence, but rather in accordance with it. And therefore, when we come to God's Word, we have to ask ourselves what the author intends us to understand as they write it. I don't think we're meant to read Revelation and believe that one day we will see four horses riding across the sky. The Bible does use metaphors and similes. But if you pay attention, it isn't hard to see what kind of genre of literature it is that you're reading. The Psalms are obviously different to the Book of Kings. We expect more flowery language in the poems, more metaphors and similes.

But to dismiss or to avoid the accounts of the virgin birth as if they were somehow metaphorical, as if they were parables or a straight-up fabrication, to come at those accounts with that kind of attitude just doesn't fit with how they are presented to us. Maybe you remember a couple of years back now when we first looked at Luke's Gospel. Luke opens his Gospel by presenting himself as a careful historian. He makes reference to his sources and then he launches into an account of miraculous births. Similarly, Matthew here begins with a genealogy, with a recitation of ancestry.

He roots his account in history. This is not once upon a time. This is based on historical fact. And therefore, if we want to take God's Word seriously, then we must. We are required to assert these lines in the Apostles' Creed. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.

Now, actually, this shouldn't surprise us. It might be difficult to believe in the virgin birth if you're coming to it cold. After all, it's true that it doesn't match up with our scientific understanding of how these things normally come about. Ask your parents later, kids. But we don't come to this in isolation. We come to this in continuity with what has gone before. God has been in this business for quite some time before we get to Jesus. You're probably familiar, most of you, with the miraculous birth of Isaac to Abraham and to Sarah, and Samson the judge, and Samuel the great prophet who anointed the first kings of Israel. Several times through the Old Testament, God

chooses to act by means of a miraculous pregnancy. These are key markers and turning points in God's dealings with his people.

Isaiah 54 speaks to a people in exile, and it promises a time of restoration, promises that into this place of struggle, now hope is coming. After barrenness comes joy. The children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord. And then when we come on into the New Testament, the birth of John the Baptist to Elizabeth, it is akin to these foregoing miraculous pregnancies. And then the birth of Jesus just goes one step further, if you like.

[5 : 00] So this isn't just another miracle story. This isn't theological eccentricity. The account of the virgin birth is the culmination of God's faithfulness to his people Israel. Jesus stands in this long line, fulfilling that promise to Abraham as the greatest of all of the judges, as the perfect prophet, and as the true deliverance from exile. The virgin birth by the power of the Holy Spirit is not just a line in the creed, but is clearly taught by scripture, a historical reality that roots our faith in continuity with the Old Testament purposes of God, and with theological implications that we will consider shortly. So let's remind ourselves how the creed fits together, and then we'll dive in to some of those implications. So, I told Brian it was supposed to be on one slide. Here's the creed.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day, he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

I've mentioned before a few times the Westminster shorter catechism or the longer catechism, those questions and answers that teach us about the fundamentals of our faith.

But as we're considering the Apostles' Creed, there's another catechism that's quite helpful to us. There's a catechism called the Heidelberg Catechism, and it has a whole section which expands upon the Apostles' Creed.

And so in question 35, it asks, What is the meaning of these words? He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary. And the answer that they give makes it clear that what we're concerned with here is God's eternal Son, without in any way compromising his divinity.

[7 : 18] That's who we're talking about. And he took the true nature of humanity, being made of the flesh of Mary. And this was by the power of the Holy Spirit, which means, amongst other things, that he was preserved from the taint of sin.

So let's flesh out some of that. The implications, first of all, of Jesus being born of the Virgin Mary. Firstly, this means we must assert the true humanity of our Savior.

There's an ancient heresy called docetism, or docetism. That comes from the Greek *dokea*, which means I seem. The docetists believed that Jesus only looked human.

But in fact, he wasn't human. He had the semblance of humanity, but in fact was not. If you've seen the film *Men in Black*, one of the aliens in that film, an ambassador to Earth, he's actually a tiny alien sitting inside the head of what appears to be a human being.

And you can see the head kind of opened out to show the tiny alien there. You can just about see it, even on that rubbish wall. That's docetism. Not actually human.

[8 : 26] There's nothing human there, just the appearance of it. Just God pretending to be human. Now, that is not in and of itself a completely implausible idea.

After all, we were thinking a few weeks back about Jacob wrestling with God. It seems likely that to a great extent at that point, God at that point looked human, but wasn't.

That that was the appearance of a man, but not a man. And there's various other angelic and or divine beings that seem to take the appearance of human beings at various points in the Old Testament narrative.

It's also easy to see how a desire to protect the vital truth of Jesus' divinity, how that might result in such a downplaying of the humanity that it vanishes altogether.

But against this idea that it is just pretending to be a human being, against this we see the gospel writers, and we see Jesus himself for that matter, we see him refer to Mary as his mother.

[9 : 33] Donald MacLeod says we can say, an ordinary ovum, produced in the ordinary way, was miraculously fertilized by the power and benediction of the Spirit.

We'll come back to the role of the Spirit, but for now notice the role of Mary. Mary is Jesus' mother in every sense. The man who walked around in first century Nazareth would have looked like her. His temperament would have resembled hers. He was truly and fully human, possessed of a human mind, a rational being, having emotions and experiencing hunger.

What would have been the point of the devil coming and tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread if Jesus weren't actually hungry? And if he were but an apparition, a phantasm, a seeming of humanity, then it would be a nonsense for him to hunger or grow tired.

So Mary contributed all that a human mother contributes to her child, the chromosomes, nurtured within her womb for nine months, and for that matter, raising him thereafter.

[10:41] So we deny the heresy of docetism. Jesus' humanity was true and complete, not a sham or a semblance. Furthermore, our assertion of the virgin birth, or more specifically, our assertion of the virgin conception, it stands against the heresy of adoptionism.

Think Spider-Man. Peter Parker is nothing special. He's just an ordinary teenager, and then one day he is bitten by a radioactive spider, and bam, superpowers.

He's nothing special. Something happens. He becomes something else. Those who espouse this view with respect to Jesus, they've tended to view Jesus' baptism as the point at which a divine nature was added to a human one that had already lived for some 30 years.

Or even in a spectacular misunderstanding of Romans 1, even some have said only at the point of his resurrection did he become the Son of God.

That is not at all what Poyle is saying in Romans. See, if the first century man Jesus had been conceived in an ordinary way, if Joseph were his father in a genetic sense, then it would be hard to avoid adoptionism, because there would have been a human nature brought into existence in an ordinary way to which a divine nature was then later added.

[12:13] But Jesus' virgin conception means that there was never a moment when the human nature of Christ, the human nature of Jesus, there was never a moment when that human nature existed except as the humanity of God.

The angel told Joseph that what was conceived in Mary's womb was from the Holy Spirit. There is not one single point at which this human nature becomes God's human nature.

No, this human nature, this human being, comes into existence united to God, and to assert otherwise is heresy. So we have the true humanity of Jesus.

But we do also have to be clear that he is not merely human. This virgin birth makes it quite blindingly obvious that this is not just another ordinary person. And to be clear, we're saying much more than that this is no ordinary person.

One more superhero this morning who's not like Jesus, this time Wonder Woman, daughter of Zeus and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. Or you can go Heracles if you prefer your illustrations rather more classical.

[13:26] The pages of ancient mythology are rife with these demigods, the offspring that result when one of the gods decides to impregnate a mortal woman.

The gospel accounts, however, are scrupulous in avoiding the merest hint that Jesus' birth was the result of some kind of sexual union between Mary and the deity.

We would hardly refer to it as the virgin birth or virgin conception if she ceased to be a virgin as a result of said act of conception. To believe that would be a variety of what's called Eutychianism, which asserts that Jesus had only one nature that was kind of a compound of the human and the divine.

These demigods, that they possess some of the attributes of gods, most commonly superhuman strength. But they're not fully divine, are they? And they're not really fully human either.

Well, if that's what you think about Jesus, then that is heresy too. Because what we say of Jesus Christ is that he was at one and the same time both fully man and fully God.

[14:38] Not half one and half the other, fully both. Perfectly, completely, in every sense, both a human being and God. Now folks, you don't have to be able to wrap your head around how this works.

But to be an Orthodox Christian, if you want to stand within the bounds of these ancient truths, if you want to still assert this today, if you want to follow the faith that is proclaimed by the apostles, then we must assert Jesus' true humanity and his true divinity.

So we say today that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. And for Jesus, this goes far beyond those previous miraculous conceptions.

Sarah was 90 when she gave birth to Isaac. But in September last year, Eramati Mangayama, she gave birth to twins at the age of 74. So birth at 90, I suppose, is just a tiny step beyond that.

And there are some animals that are capable of parthenogenesis, that is, virgin birth. But Homo sapiens is not. Even beyond those previous miraculous births, this one, recounted for us by Matthew and by Luke, this one is special, even beyond those previous ones.

[15:59] And that's a good thing. That's a good thing because, as Donald MacLeod says, the race needs a redeemer but cannot itself produce one. Not by its own decision, not by its own desire, not by the processes of education and civilization, not as a precipitate of its own evolution.

The redeemer must come from outside. Folks, in order to atone for the sins of all, we need a savior of infinite capacity.

In order that he might atone for the sins of others, we need a savior who was himself sinless. That means he needed to live a sinless life while he was here on earth.

But more relevantly for what we're talking about at the moment, that means he also needed to be born without original sin. Romans 5 tells us, sin entered the world through one man and death through sin.

And in this way, death came to all people because all sinned. One trespass resulted in condemnation for all people. This is what we call the doctrine of original sin, that all of us are guilty because we are in Adam, because we inherit, if you like, his sin.

[17:16] So how is it then that the virgin birth preserves Jesus from that taint, yet without compromising his true humanity? Well, let's be clear that to be without sin does not in and of itself in any way compromise humanity.

We do say that as human beings we have a sinful nature, and that's true and right to assert. But that is not to say that that sinful nature is a fundamental part of humanity.

In the new creation, we will always be without sin. We will no longer have a sinful nature. Adam, on that first day back in Eden, he was without sin. He was not created out of the dust of the earth with a sinful nature, but was created good.

So it doesn't inherently compromise Jesus' humanity for him to be sinless. That's good. But we still have this question of how he avoided that taint of sin. Down through the ages, there have been those who have said that Christ was preserved sinless because his conception did not involve sexual intercourse.

But the idea that the sexual act itself is sinful and that virginity is especially virtuous, that idea does not enjoy the support of Scripture. The point is not that Mary was a virgin.

[18:38] The point is certainly not that she was herself without sin. That is untrue. Now we assert two things. First, the humanity of Christ was created by the Holy Spirit apart from the normal manner, not created in the normal way.

And therefore, this human nature has the character of all that which God creates. In other words, it was very good. as a commentator by the name of Zacharias Arsenis, and he raises and knocks down a possible objection at this point.

Objection. Christ was born of a mother that was a sinner. Therefore, he himself had sin. Answer. The Holy Ghost knows best how to distinguish and separate sin from the nature of man.

For sin is not from the nature of man, but was added to it from the devil. In other words, he's saying it is not inherent in human beings to be sinful, but rather that is something that was added to humanity by the devil coming and tempting Eve in the garden.

And therefore, the Holy Spirit is able to preserve Jesus at that point of creation from that taint of sin, even as he makes him with a true human nature.

[20:02] This means this means wonderfully that we have a high priest who, as Hebrews 7 puts it, is holy, blameless, pure. We have a high priest whose one sacrifice is sufficient to cover your sins and mine because he was born of a virgin.

He was created out of the ordinary manner. We looked back at the start of question 35 of the Heidelberg Catechism that asks for the meaning of this line of the creed, but it doesn't stop there. Question 36 continues by asking what difference it makes. What is the benefit to you and to me of the fact that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary?

What is the benefit? Answer, He is therefore a suitable mediator. Being both fully God and fully man, He is able to save us to the utmost.

That, that preexistent, eternal, uncreated Son of God, He became a man in this miraculous way. [21 : 16] He took to Himself a true human nature, perfect and sinless. Two natures joined in one person in order to redeem and sanctify you and me.

Hallelujah. What a Savior. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we confess that we find it hard sometimes to wrap our heads around all that was involved in your miraculous birth and life and death.

Lord, thank you that you have given us sufficient knowledge and sufficient understanding that we can see these boundary markers of what we know to be true, what you have made clear to us.

Thank you that you have shown yourself to be a true and fitting mediator on our behalf. thank you that you are able to take our sins upon yourself having none of your own.

Thank you that being truly divine you are sufficient in capacity to take all this weight of sin and thank you that being truly human you partake of our nature and so can take those sins upon yourself.

[22 : 39] Lord, help us to think and to speak truly of who you are because of what it shows us of your glory and of your goodness to us.

In your name we ask. Amen.