

“Jesus Was Born of a Virgin”—Addenda

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Here are some additional thoughts on the virgin birth of Jesus that didn't make it into today's sermon.

Virgin Conception

Theologians often refer to the virgin conception of Jesus. This distinction is to indicate that Mary's birth was not one unlike any other. The birth surely included labor and pains, in contrast to what some Catholic Church theologians have taught about the birth.¹ Consider Micah 5:2-3, a prophecy regarding Jesus' birth:

² “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”

³ Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when *she who is in labor gives birth*
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.

Transmission of Sin

Some Christians assume that Jesus' sinlessness is the direct result of the virgin conception. Often, it is assumed that sin is somehow passed on genetically from the parents to children. I have even heard it said that sin must be passed on through the father, because in this case Jesus, without a human father, was not tainted by original or inherited sin.

A few points to make: One, the Bible does not link Jesus' sinlessness directly to the virgin conception. Luke 1:35 seems to connect Jesus' holiness (his moral purity) to the Holy Spirit's activity in the conception. The angel told Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,

¹ Ludwig Ott, a Catholic theologian, claims, “Mary gave birth in miraculous fashion without opening of the womb and injury to her hymen, and consequently without pain” (Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch [Rockford, IL: Tan, 1960], 205, quoted in Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014], 133 n. 52).

and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” I think we can say quite simply that Jesus was without sin because he is God. He didn’t cease being God when he became man. Here are some wise words from Donald MacLeod: “We need say no more than that the humanity of Christ was created by the Holy Spirit, rather than procreated by sexual intercourse, and that as such it partook of the essential character of all that God creates: it was very good.”²

Two, however, it does seem important that Jesus did not have two human parents. There is a break in the great line of descent from Adam and Eve. Without trying to figure exactly how he interrupts the flow of human sin, it is important to know that a new covenant head is introduced into history. This is a hard concept for individualistic Americans to understand, but every human being is either represented by Adam or Jesus. They are the two great covenant heads. In a way, this is like saying that all Americans are represented by the President, whether they voted for him or not. We are represented by another. The first man, Adam, sinned and all of us are sinful (we have the power of sin at work within us) and sinners (we break God’s commandments). The last man, Jesus, is neither sinful nor a sinner. All of us will be represented by one or the other, according to Romans 5:12-19. According to Wayne Grudem, “the fact that Jesus did not have a human father means that the line of descent from Adam is partially interrupted. Jesus did not descend from Adam in exactly the same way in which every other human being has descended from Adam. And this helps us to understand why the legal guilt and moral corruption that belongs to all other human beings did not belong to Christ.”³

Three, I do think that our sin nature is somehow transmitted through parents, but I don’t think it’s genetic. I believe that there are realities that are not material, that cannot be detected under a microscope. I don’t think science will ever find a “sin gene,” and we should be wary of claims that scientists have found an “alcoholism gene” or “gay gene” or any other gene that dictates human behavior. (I’m not denying that people have a bent towards certain sins; I’m only denying that such a bent is found in one’s DNA.) There are important realities—such as thoughts and emotions and, more importantly, God—that are immaterial. To believe that sin is genetic is to buy into a non-Christian worldview.

² Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 40-41.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 530.

To conclude, inherited or original sin is an immaterial reality that all of us experience. Jesus, because he is God and because his earthly life was conceived by the Holy Spirit, did not have original sin. He didn't have sinful desires. His mind was not affected by sin. He was unlike any other person who ever lived.

Theological Significance of the Virgin Conception/Birth

Here are some reasons why the virgin conception matters. (I'm borrowing heavily from MacLeod and Grudem.)

“First, it [the virgin conception] is highlighting the essentially supernatural character of Jesus and the gospel. . . . It stands on the threshold of the New Testament, blatantly supernatural, defying our rationalism, informing us that all that follows belongs to the same order as itself and that if we find it offensive there is no point in proceeding further.”⁴ The miraculous nature of the event shows that salvation of sinful man is impossible without a miracle from God. The beginning of Jesus' earthly life is marked by a miracle (the virgin conception) and the end of his earthly life is marked by miracles (the resurrection and the ascension). The Bible is full of miracles. Would we really want a God who couldn't do things that are seemingly impossible?

“Secondly, the virgin birth is a sign of God's judgment on human nature. The race needs a redeemer, but cannot itself produce one: not by its own decision or desire, not by the process of education and civilization, not as a precipitate of its own evolution. The redeemer must come from the outside.”⁵ Humans cannot save themselves. This is the shocking nature of the Christian message.

“Thirdly, the virgin birth is a sign that Jesus Christ is a new beginning.”⁶ I stressed this point in the sermon, and the discussion of the transmission of sin fits into this point as well. The special creation of Jesus also parallels the special creation of Adam: “Just as God made the first man upright, even though he was formed from the dust of the ground (Gn. 2:7), so he makes the Last Man upright, even though he was born from a sinful mother.”⁷ It is also interesting to compare how Eve was made from Adam's rib, yet the last Adam, Jesus, was made from the virgin Mary's womb.

⁴ MacLeod, *Person of Christ*, 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

Fourthly, the virgin conception and birth was the perfect way for Jesus to be both God and man. Grudem describes this very well:

The virgin birth made possible the uniting of full deity and full humanity in one person. This was the means God used to send his Son (John 3:16; Gal. 4:4) into the world as a man. If we think for a moment of other possible ways in which Christ might have come to the earth, none of them would so clearly unite humanity and deity in one person. It probably would have been possible for God to create Jesus as a complete human being in heaven and send him to descend from heaven to earth without the benefit of any human parent. But then it would have been very hard for us to see how Jesus could be fully human as we are, nor would he be a part of the human race that physically descended from Adam. On the other hand, it probably would have been possible for God to have Jesus come into the world with two human parents, both a father and a mother, and with his full divine nature miraculously united to his human nature at some point early in his life. But then it would have been hard for us to understand how Jesus was fully God, since his origin was like ours in every way. When we think of these two other possibilities, it helps us to understand how God, in his wisdom, ordained a combination of human and divine influence in the birth of Christ, so that his full humanity would be evident to us from the fact of his ordinary human birth from a human mother, and his full deity would be evident from the fact of his conception in Mary's womb by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.⁸

⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 530.