

Christ: Systematic Summary of Christology, IV

We are studying the person of Christ and now we are down to the virgin birth. In our systematic summary of Christology we have thought about the pre-existence of Christ and the Incarnation, and next we will look at the virgin birth. Let us go to Luke 1:26-27, which says, “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!’—that is Hail Mary by the way, which means greetings—“The Lord is with you.”” Hail Mary in its original context had nothing to do with worship or veneration because “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.’” In other words, God was gracious to her. “‘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.’”

Her question in verse 34 is not like that of Sarah of old who laughed at God and not even like Zachariah who disbelieved when God revealed that Elizabeth would have a child in her old age. Instead it is an honest question: “‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’” I might say it also shows that the Bultmannian reconstruction of the New Testament is just ridiculous. He would have us believe that virgin births happened every day, that these were pre-scientific people who had no idea where babies came from. She does have a problem. She knows basically where babies come from. She is not a scientist, but she knows she cannot become pregnant apart from knowing a man: “‘How can this be 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 [...] 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.”

Let us go to Matthew and get it from Joseph’s side. I heard a godly man for whom I have great respect preach on this and he showed me that I had been reading between the lines. He said that Mary told Joseph and Joseph did not believe her. Now it does not say that, but it does not say what I think, either, so I have been humbled in my interpretation. What my interpretation was and still is, although it is not as firm as it once was, is that Mary did not tell Joseph about the Lord appearing to her, but that she waited for the Lord to explain. Matthew 1:18 says, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together”—that is a euphemism for sexual intercourse—“she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” So he knows that she is expecting. He also knows, although he is not a scientist either, that he and Mary did not come together and he cannot conceive of her being involved with another man, but that is what he concludes. It goes against all his knowledge of her, but what is he supposed to think? He does not immediately think of angels and the Holy Spirit. He had no reason to think of anything like that. He cannot understand it, and if my interpretation is right, he really hurts because he really thought he could trust Mary. This is just so against her character, but there it is. I just cannot understand it. If my interpretation is right, she gets a lot of credit for being silent and for just letting the Lord do His work while she suffers. Can you imagine living with Joseph’s misunderstanding? Give him credit. Instead of having her stoned publicly, which he could have done if he had pressed the letter of the law, he was going to have a private divorce. It would have been divorce because their betrothal was much more serious than ours and it had to be broken by a divorce. “After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream”—and he awoke a happy man, to say the least—“‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is

conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.” This is in fulfillment of Isaiah 7, the Immanuel prophecy. Verse 24 says, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave Him the name Jesus.” I am not sure which of those interpretations is right concerning whether Joseph disbelieved Mary or she just waited for God to reveal it to Joseph, but in any case, he must have been really relieved and thought things like, “I knew I could trust my Mary; this is wonderful.” By the way, Mary also probably lived with a stigma the rest of her life. There is a hint of that in John 8 where Jesus’ enemies say, “We are not illegitimate children.” The implication may be that this was the gossip concerning the conception of our Lord. What a terrible thing.

The virgin birth—having read the passages now, we can more precisely designate it as the virginal conception. We have not said anything about His birth being abnormal. There is a strain of Roman-Catholic exegesis—this was never made into official teaching by the church—that teaches that there was a supernatural birth as well. This is part of the dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary. They thought that would be jeopardized if Jesus passed through her birth canal. It seems like a mythological teaching to me and the Catholic Church has never endorsed it officially. Today, it would be rare to find people who would hold it, but some have taught that He came into the world without passing through her birth canal. That certainly is wrong, but the conception was the miracle. It was a miracle of God, the Holy Spirit.

It is more properly called the virginal conception. There was apparently a normal birth; the conception was miraculous. It was not the result of the union of Joseph and Mary. It attests to our Lord’s deity for He did not begin to exist. It certainly does speak of the beginning of His human nature. I have a problem here to think about. Why was Jesus born sinless? How does the virgin birth account for that? Some of the answers I commonly get in adult Sunday school when I ask that question are these: there was no sexual intercourse, therefore He was born sinless. That is not a right answer. Sexual intercourse is not sinful. The most common answer concerns the absence of a male: there was no sinful male involved. I often hear that one—something like the male passes on the sinful genes and original sin comes through the male. The women like that. Seriously, think about it, the church has historically confessed that Mary was really His mother, that she made a contribution to His humanity. That He took some of His genes, if you will, from her. I suppose we could be very scientific and say that God supernaturally fertilized her egg. I do not know that for sure, but maybe that is right. We are not given a biological explanation. In fact, we are only given a very general explanation. (I will give more about that in a moment.) But the text itself tells us how we account for His sinlessness. It is not because of the absence of sexual relations, nor because of the absence of a sinful male. If the church is right that she made a contribution, it must take into account that she is a sinful female. Even some Roman-Catholics do not know what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception holds that Mary was born without original sin. That is not biblical. Granted, she is in a unique place in redemptive history, for she carries her savior in her womb—that is a remarkable thing and being chosen by God in His grace to bring the Messiah into the world was a great privilege—but she was a sinner and she needed forgiveness through the Son of God who became her son. Again, it is mysterious and wonderful that God became a man, but Mary is not presented as a sinless being. So if she made a contribution, that would be sinful. What purified Mary’s contribution if it was sinful? The answer is in these texts: the sanctifying work of God the Holy Spirit. The Luke text says, “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.” The holy one to be born—it was due to the influence of the Holy Spirit, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. I see a parallel to the inspiration of the Bible in the virgin birth. When we talk about inspiration we say we reject these false views and we believe in the right view. The right view is often called organic inspiration, although I hold to it I

sometimes think that we think we understand more than we do. When we affirm organic inspiration, we say it speaks of a living view, a dynamic view of inspiration. Although that word, “dynamic,” is used actually of a false view, we mean a kind of dynamism—God and human beings working together; it is organic. God worked to give His Word through prophets and apostles so that their humanness is evident on every page in their vocabularies, their emphases, and so on. It is a human book, but most importantly we emphasize that God was big enough to work with them and through them organically to produce His own holy Word. The more that I have thought of that organic view of inspiration over the years, the more I have realized that it is not wrong, but it does not tell us how God did it. It is a miracle in the end. How He worked in the minds, hearts, arms, and hands of apostles and prophets to give us His Word, we do not really know. We do know He worked and they worked and the result was His Word in human words, the very Word of God without error. It is more of a statement that the Bible is the Word of God, the end result, the product, than it is of the means. It does not really tell us the mode of inspiration, except in very general terms. It is the same with the virgin birth. It tells us more about God bringing His Son into the world and the product—that this baby is God and human in one person—than it tells us about how God did that. In a general way it tells us how. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and “that which is conceived in you”—it says twice in Matthew—“is from the Holy Spirit. The emphasis is on the Holy Spirit being responsible for the conception. We do not know exactly how anymore than we know how God worked through the biblical writers. Do you understand the parallel? The Bible is God’s truth and the baby in Mary’s womb was not a product of Mary and Joseph’s love but of the Father, who worked by the Spirit to cause a virgin to conceive. This certainly shows, as Karl Barth so emphatically pointed out in his *Church Dogmatics*, that under the title, *The Miracle of Christmas*, salvation is not of human devising. It is not human beings reaching up to God. If we were to pick a savior we would pick the biggest, bravest, and strongest. God chooses to use a handmaiden. She is not going to save anybody. She is about as capable of saving us as Joseph is of producing an offspring. She has got the equipment to hold an offspring if God would give it to her, so God chooses her. But she cannot produce a savior. God can produce a savior and He does it through her. “Lord, how can this be?” She submits; she is a servant and claims no creativity in the matter. It is not of her doing. She and Joseph did not think this up. The elders of Israel did not come to this great conclusion. No, God in heaven came to this conclusion and sent His Son to be born from a virgin’s womb. In human weakness it shows the power of God in providing salvation for His people, in providing salvation for the world, for the baby in the manger was the Savior of the world.

Why does it have to be a virginal conception? Why could Mary not have had children beforehand? Perhaps there is a hint in Matthew 1:25: “He had no union with her until she gave birth to a son and he gave Him the name Jesus.” I am not prepared to say that human sexuality is sinful. I do not think that is the reason. I think the reason is God is emphatically showing, along the lines that I was just summarizing from Barth, that He is producing the Savior. That is, it is from a woman, even if people did not believe it and if they mocked and made fun of her. God is showing that He is the one to do it. That is the reason for the instruction to Joseph. Presumably after the birth they had normal relations and the brothers and sisters we read of in the Gospels are half-brothers and sisters, if you will, the product of Joseph’s and Mary’s love. So my understanding is—again this is a deduction, not said directly—that God was showing that He was bringing the Redeemer into the world. It is an emphatic way to do it.

Would other people not have assumed that Jesus was their son through normal relations and without ever knowing about any notion of him being illegitimate? That is what they would have thought; they would not have automatically thought of the virgin birth. As we said, that was an exceptional thing, but it did become part of the Gospel story for the benefit of Christians in understanding. We do not know who was told. As a matter of fact, that plays little part in the biblical record outside of these passages. They would have assumed He was a normal human being, just as we read in the gospels: “Is this not the

carpenter's son? Are not his brothers and sisters with us?" Apparently Joseph and Mary did not go around making extravagant claims, and it was not even God's will, that is, there was a time for Him to begin His public ministry, and the Father from heaven would be the one to say, "This is my Son" and not Mary or Joseph. Tradition says Joseph died while Jesus was pretty young, though he was still alive when Jesus was 12. He certainly is gone by the time of the cross because Jesus entrusts Mary to John, so somewhere in between there Joseph died.

Would they not have had a date along with their Jewish betrothal? I think the answer is yes. Would there not have been some problems with her pregnancy and either changing the date or then keeping the original date? I think there would have been. Are you implying they would have had to give some explanation to neighbors and friends and family? I cannot oppose this either.

The question is how Joseph came to learn that she was pregnant. If he learned, would not others have known it too? My guess is they were as good at counting months then as we are and it was a scandalous thing in Israel. In my own lifetime, pregnancy outside of marriage has gone from being scandalous to being increasingly accepted. There are strengths and weaknesses of this; I am not getting into all the ethics of that. Churches certainly should minister to people.

I want to introduce the deity of Christ. This is one of the most important aspects of the person of Christ. Since God became a human being, the God-man, Christ Jesus has two natures: one human and one divine. Our order here is the opposite: first the deity and then the humanity. There are many proofs for the deity of Christ. If one of these five proofs is good then we are obligated to worship Him as the Son of God. Friends, all five of them are good. He is of the very nature of God. That which makes God to be God is true of Him. He has a divine nature. He has the titles of God. I am just previewing what we will discuss later in detail. The claim here is not that these titles are only used of deity. Lord, for example, is used of human masters with servants. The claim is that in the context when these are used of Jesus, they are divine titles. He has qualities that only God possesses. Perhaps what is most important is that He does the works of God. This alone is sufficient to demonstrate the deity of Christ. He does the works that only God does: creation, providence, redemption, and wrapping everything up in the end. Angels do none of those works. Angels do not make the world and it is ludicrous to have to say that human beings do not make the world. Angels do not sustain the world. Then how can people say that He is an angel? Angels do not provide redemption. You do not believe in the angel Gabriel to be saved. You believe in the Lord to be saved, another case of Old Testament background being directed toward the Son of God. Angels or human beings do not raise the dead and wrap everything up in the end. God does, the Son of God does. Therefore, He is God. Jesus receives the worship that is due the true and living God and then the somewhat speculative consideration of the so-called extra-calvinisticum, I will astound you on that one, guaranteed. These are five proofs of the deity of Christ. He receives the worship due God alone, He does divine works, has divine qualities, has divine titles, and has the very nature of deity.