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Why is the Virgin Birth so Important?



Theological Accents
Theologische Akzente

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Why Is the Virgin Birth So Important?!

Thomas K. Johnson

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

Every year at Christmas time the attention of Christians comes back again and again to one miracle in the Bible: the Virgin Birth of Jesus. Our Christmas carols repeatedly mention this miraculous event. Handel’s Messiah boldly proclaims the words of Isaiah. And every time we recite the Apostles’ Creed we mention this event twice, when we say “conceived by the Holy Spirit” and then add “born of the Virgin Mary.”

The question is: Why? Why do we give so much attention to one of the many miracles the Lord has done? After all, there are many other miracles in the Bible that rarely get mentioned in our churches. I don’t know if I have ever heard a sermon or hymn on Elisha’s provision for the widow or on the plant that grew over Jonah. Might we be mistaken in giving so much attention to just one of the acts of God? Or is there good reason for doing so?

I think there is a good reason for doing this. In this regard the Christian tradition contains a lot of wisdom. One reason, I believe, is that the Virgin Birth of Jesus gives us a distinct and valuable

perspective on the whole Christian message, a very personal “spin” on the whole gospel.

When Reformed people attempt to summarize the Christian message, we often use the little summary Sin, Salvation, and Service. (I love the simplicity.) I would like to show that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth illuminates all three essential “Ss.”

SIN: Through the Virgin Birth God unmasks and condemns our sin at its very roots

When Christians have discussed the *roots* of sin, whatever it is that comprises the *origins* of sin behind particular sinful acts, two themes have been dominant: *pride* and *unbelief*. Augustine would emphasize the role of *pride* in Original Sin, while Martin Luther is liable to say that *unbelief* is at the heart of sin. These are, I suppose, two sides of the same coin. Pride says, “No one will tell me what to do,” and “I don’t need anyone’s help.” Unbelief says, “God isn’t relevant to the real world anyway,” or “I don’t need the God hypothesis.” The very first mention of the Virgin Birth in the Bible, in Isaiah, confronts these basic attitudes in the life of King Ahaz.

Ahaz was a king in Judah, who were the people of God, but unlike some of his ancestors, he was not a godly king. He practiced and promoted idolatry. He was facing an imminent war against Israel and Aram; and we're told that "his heart shook like the trees of the forest are shaken by a wind" (Isaiah 7). At this point he should have turned to God for help, but he did not. He trusted in his own political schemes instead.

God sent Isaiah to Ahaz with a very generous offer: Ahaz should ask for a sign that God would indeed help. But Ahaz put on mock humility and refused a sign. Isaiah rebuked Ahaz rather sharply, and in this rebuke comes the first mention of the Virgin Birth. Some details are still obscure to me, but it seems that the Virgin Birth would present a choice to Ahaz. He could either believe or disbelieve the promised sign. If he rejected the sign, it would signify God's wrath on his unbelief and pride. But if he accepted the sign, it would convey the promise that God would be with him like he had been with David in giving victory in battle. Tragically, Ahaz rejected the offer of a sign.

It is very interesting to me that in the history of the church, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth has served as a sign to unmask unbelief. In the early twentieth century, when the churches in North America were struggling through the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth played a very distinctive role. It served as a watershed issue, a sign that divided unbelief expressed in religious language

from belief in Christian truth claims. There were numerous religious leaders who could not affirm the doctrine of the Virgin Birth in any normal way, and this showed that their religiosity was much like the mock humility of Ahaz. It was all very false.

Most of our readers will be quite comfortable affirming the Virgin Birth in our worship, but we should not become too comfortable. Whenever we doubt that God is the living God who is our help and strength right now, we follow the lead of Ahaz. Through the Virgin Birth, by showing that He is the God who not only rules the affairs of nations but also very directly intervenes in the lives of individuals, God calls us to repent of our unbelief and pride. Whenever our hearts shake with fear, instead of turning to our own ridiculous schemes, we should turn to God for help. The Virgin Birth can be a sign for us that God has done the impossible before, and we should trust that He will do it again.

SALVATION: The Virgin Birth of Jesus serves as a sign of God's grace and mercy that should deepen our faith and love. It does this in three distinct ways

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has long been an interesting biblical character for me. She faced a problem that no other human being has ever faced: she had to believe in her own flesh and blood son in order to be saved. What makes this

so difficult may be summarized in the old proverb, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” This contempt was certainly seen in the other people of Nazareth. When Jesus started preaching there, they asked, “Isn’t this just Mary and Joseph’s son?” And some of them probably thought, “Isn’t He the reason they had to get married?”

Mary (and probably Joseph too) was delivered from this contempt in a very interesting way. She really knew that this child was different from her other children because He was conceived in a totally different way. What could be more vivid to her? And in this way, I think, we see God’s care for her in the process of coming to faith. God graciously gave her a sign to help her believe that her son was in fact the Savior of the world.

This should show us God’s specific care for the individual, especially in the struggles of coming to a deep and lasting faith. If you struggle with believing, this may help you. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth shows us that God cares about our individual process of believing. This should encourage us to ask God to help us in the process. God’s grace even extends to individuals who might doubt sometimes.

Second, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is a sign that God takes the initiative and plays the decisive role in salvation. When the angel was talking to Mary, the angel first told Mary the great things that Jesus would do. Then Mary asked how this could happen, seeing she was a virgin. The angel

answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. . . . Nothing is impossible with God.” The focus is entirely on what God would do, specifically on what God would do to provide a Savior for mankind.

I think this is the most important meaning of the Virgin Birth. If Jesus had been conceived in the ordinary way, a human being would have had a decisive, active role in providing salvation for lost men and women. Then at least one person could have said, “I contributed to my salvation.” But Scripture asserts over and over again that God has to save us because we cannot save ourselves. The Virgin Birth reminds us that God is the only one to provide the Savior.

Look again at the role of Mary. Notice that she did not take the initiative in having a special place in the birth of Jesus. She did not apply for the job of being the mother of our Lord. God chose her for the job. God sent the angel to her with the message. God specially caused the conception in a most unusual manner. Mary’s role in all this was that of simply accepting and believing. Oh, yes, later Mary had a lot of work to do with Jesus. There probably were nights when she collapsed into bed totally exhausted from her hard work as a mother of a small child. There may have been nights when she prayed earnestly that Jesus’ cold or colic would not wake Him, because they both needed a good night’s sleep. But at the decisive point of Jesus’ con-

ception, Mary was totally passive. God sovereignly provided a Savior for lost people.

It is important to remember this when we think about our salvation. If we look at ourselves honestly, we will despair because of our sin and weakness. But then we can remember the Virgin Birth. God provided a Savior. And He took the initiative in a very distinct and personal way. He also took the initiative in our personal salvation. Just as Jesus was physically born by God's initiative, so we were born spiritually by God's initiative. John emphasized that believers are children of God, "born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:13). Salvation is from God, from first to last. In this we can rejoice and be grateful.

A *third* way God points us to His grace by the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is that it is a sign that God is beginning a new humanity.

There are only two occasions in the Bible when God created a person apart from using the normal means. The first was Adam. The second was Jesus. We know the sad story of Adam, and every time we listen to the news we are reminded that his sin still shapes the world. And we, even as Christians, too often act like Adam in revolt. But in the Virgin Birth, God intervened to start the creation of a new race, the race of the second Adam. And those who believe now have the Spirit of the second Adam at work in them. Our new nature and the new humanity will not reach matu-

riety until eternity. Then we will be a whole new race, a whole new humanity shaped by Jesus instead of by Adam. For this we can hope confidently. And even now we can look to God for the first fruits. The story of the first humanity ends in despair. The story of the second humanity ends in praise. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth proclaims to us the amazing grace of God.

SERVICE: The doctrine of the Virgin Birth calls us to give ourselves into God's hand that He may bring spiritual fruit into the world.

Notice that Mary was given an impossible task: to give birth to a child while still a virgin. Her response was beautiful: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." And through her God sovereignly brought salvation into the world, but it did not happen apart from her giving herself to God in faith.

Francis Schaeffer called this attitude "active passivity." He said we must actively give ourselves into God's hand and then passively expect God to do the impossible through us. Schaeffer thought this attitude was quite important for the Christian life.

Notice the multiple impossible things God has given us to do: He places us in a world filled with every sort of sin, and then He calls us to live lives truly marked by the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

We cannot do this by our efforts. We have to daily place ourselves in God's hand, asking Him to do the impossible through us, and then it becomes possible. Love, joy, and peace can begin to break out.

God has also given us the impossible task of making disciples of all nations. After centuries of work, the job seems to be just getting started. God has placed us in a country (the Czech Republic) where only about 1/2 of 1 percent of the people claim to be evangelical Christians (and there are not many active Roman Catholics around either). Evangelizing the Czech Republic (or your country!) is an inhumanly great task. But it may become possible if we put ourselves in God's hand day by day. The Spirit who did the impossible in Mary is still at work today. Nothing is impossible for God!

Our attitudes need to become more like Mary's. If we actively give ourselves into God's hand, passively expecting

Him to work in us, our activity, our service for the glory of God may be radically transformed.

The Message of the Virgin Birth

It is good for us to remember the Virgin Birth every Christmas and every time we use the great Christian creeds in worship or prayer. The Virgin Birth gives us a very personal side to many major themes of the faith. It calls us not to follow Ahaz, but rather to repent of our unbelief in God's promises. It shows us much about God's grace, His personal concern for the struggle of faith, His decisive initiative in salvation, His dramatic plan for a new humanity. And we are called to face our impossible God-given tasks with a faithful attitude much like Mary's. Sin, Salvation, Service: This is what makes one miracle so important.

Annotation **Anmerkungen**

¹This Christmas meditation is by Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D., who is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America serving as a missionary in the Czech Republic since 1996. He has been a church planter, a professor in both

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The Author

Über den Autor



Prof. Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D., has served as pastor of three evangelical churches, including serving as a church planter, and has taught philosophy or theology in eleven universities and theological schools in nine countries, including the dissident, anti-communist European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, and Charles University in Prague.

Dr. Johnson is presently Vice President for Research, Martin Bucer Seminary; Special Advisor for the International Institute for Religious Freedom (WEA); Professor of Philosophy, Global Scholars; Board President of the Comenius Institute (Prague); and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. In March 2016, he was appointed Religious Freedom Ambassador to the Vatican, representing the World Evangelical Alliance and its 600 million members; in December 2016, he was honored for his international human rights efforts with a knighthood from the Sovereign Imperial House of Ghassan.

The first edition of Johnson's *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* (2008) was widely read and became a standard evangelical resource. The second edition (2016) was jointly published on behalf of the WEA and the Vatican-based *Dignitatis Humanae Institute*. He has written five other books and some two hundred articles and essays; he has edited 20 books on issues of religion and society as well as numerous human rights reports. Many of his writings are available on the Martin Bucer website. Though traveling extensively to meet with senior Roman Catholic representatives along with other diplomats and scholars, he lives in Prague with his wife, Leslie P. Johnson. She was the first director of the Christian International School of Prague and is now an educational consultant for the Association of Christian Schools International. They have three grown children as well as grandchildren.

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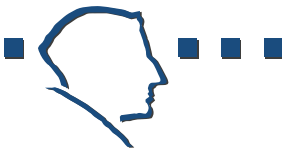
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