

The Virgin Birth of Christ

Chapter 15 CONCLUSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

by
J. Gresham Machen

Note: In the following paper, click the footnote number, and it will take you to the footnote at the bottom of this page.

In the preceding discussion we have considered, first, the virgin birth tradition itself, and, second, the attempts which have been made to account for it, supposing it not to be true.

We have shown, under the former head, that in the early patristic period no gradual formation of the tradition can be traced, but that the tradition appears just as firmly established at the beginning of the second century as at the close. We have shown that in the New Testament it does not appear as a late addition, but had an original place in the First and Third Gospels and was plainly attested in Palestinian sources, oral or written, underlying those Gospels. We have shown that the two infancy narratives containing it are independent but not contradictory. We have shown that it is not contradicted by the rest of the New Testament and that it is as strongly attested as we should expect it to be on the assumption that it is true.

Under the second head, we have shown that if the virgin birth tradition is not true the efforts at explaining the origin of it have so far resulted in failure. It did not originate on the basis of Jewish ideas or in order to show fulfilment of a misunderstood prophecy. It was no mere reflex among Gentile Christians of the pagan notions about children begotten by the gods. It was no ancient pagan idea already naturalized in the pre-Christian Jewish doctrine of the Messiah. The advocates of one of these theories are often the severest critics of the advocates of another; and none of the theories has obtained anything like general assent.

What, then, shall be said about the central historical question: was Jesus of Nazareth born without human father or was He born as all other men are born? That question obviously cannot be answered when it is considered in isolation from everything else; it cannot be answered unless it is taken in connection with what we know in general concerning Jesus Christ.

Even in isolation, indeed, the story of the virgin birth should give the thoughtful historian pause. There is a startling beauty and vividness and originality about the first chapters of Matthew and Luke. Only superficiality can detect a similarity here to the coarse and degrading stories which are found in the surrounding world. Whence came this supremely beautiful tale, so unlike the products of human fancy, so unlike the myths of all the peoples that have lived upon the earth? Whence came such a story not in later generations, but in close proximity to the time of the narrated events? Whence came the self-evidencing quality of this narrative, so simple yet so profound?

These questions, we think, are unanswerable. Even if the story of the virgin birth stood alone, it would at least present an insoluble problem to the man who would regard it as untrue. But it would be hard for this bewilderment to issue in belief. The story of the virgin

birth is the story of a stupendous miracle, and against any such thing there is an enormous presumption drawn from the long experience of the race.

As it is, however, that presumption can be overcome; it can be overcome when the tradition of the virgin birth is removed from its isolation and taken in connection with the whole glorious picture of the One who in this tradition is said to be virgin-born. What shall we think of Jesus Christ? That is the question of all questions, and it can be answered aright only when the evidence is taken as a whole. It is a fact of history, which no serious historian can deny, that in the first century of our era there walked upon this earth One who was like none other among the children of men. Reduce the sources of information all you will, and still that mysterious figure remains, that figure who is attested in the Epistles of Paul, that figure who walks before us in lifelike, self-evidencing fashion in the Gospels, that figure upon whom the Christian Church was built. Many have been the efforts to explain Him in terms of what is common to mankind, to explain Him as a product of forces elsewhere operative in the world. Those explanations may satisfy the man who treats the evidence, in pedantic fashion, bit by bit; but they will never satisfy the man who can view the whole. View Jesus in the light of God and against the dark background of sin, view Him as the satisfaction of man's deepest need, as the One who alone can lead into all glory and all truth, and you will come, despite all, to the stupendous conviction that the New Testament is true, that God walked here upon the earth, that the eternal Son, because He loved us, came into this world to die for our sins upon the cross.

When you have arrived at that conviction you will turn with very different eyes to the story of the virgin and her child. Wonders will no longer repel you. Rather will you say: "So and so only did it behoove this One, as distinguished from all others, to be born."

At this point, indeed, a misunderstanding lies ready at hand. Are we not arguing that a man will accept the story of the supernatural conception in the virgin's womb only when he is already convinced, on other grounds, of the supernatural dignity of Him about whom that story is told? Do we then mean that the tradition of the virgin birth hangs as a dead weight upon the man who accepts in general the New Testament account of Jesus Christ; do we mean that a man can believe in the supernatural person of Christ merely despite, and not at all because of, the story of the virgin birth?

As a matter of fact that is not our meaning at all. To our mind, the story of the virgin birth, far from being an obstacle to faith, is an aid to faith; it is an organic part of that majestic picture of Jesus which can be accepted most easily when it is taken as a whole. The story of the virgin birth will hardly, indeed, be accepted when it is taken apart from the rest; but when taken in connection with the rest it adds to, as well as receives from, the convincing quality of the other things about Jesus which the New Testament tells. [\[1\]](#)

At this point we are brought to the last question with which it is necessary for us to deal--the question, namely, as to the importance of belief in the virgin birth to the Christian man. That question is being argued eagerly at the present day; there are many who tell us that, though they believe in the virgin birth themselves, they do not think that that belief is important for all men or essential even to the corporate witness of the Church.

This attitude, we are convinced, is radically wrong, and with a brief grounding of this conviction regarding it our discussion may properly be brought to a close. What is the importance of the question of the virgin birth?

In the first place, the question is obviously important for the general question of the authority of the Bible. It is perfectly clear that the New Testament teaches the virgin birth of

Christ; about that there can be no manner of doubt. There is no serious question as to the *interpretation* of the Bible at this point. Everyone admits that the Bible represents Jesus as having been conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary.^[2] The only question is whether in making that representation the Bible is true or false.

If the latter alternative is chosen, if the Bible is regarded as being wrong in what it says about the birth of Christ, then obviously the authority of the Bible, in any high sense, is gone. It is true, men use that word "authority" in very loose senses today. Why may not the Bible be authoritative, they say, even though what it says about the birth of Jesus without human father is not true? Why may not the Bible be authoritative in the sphere of religion even though it is not authoritative in the sphere of history or of science? May not Jesus still be the Master of human hearts even though the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are wrong about the way in which He came into the world? May not even these stories of His birth, which we are obliged to reject as history, possess a profounder authority as expressions of the homage due to Him who led men into communion with the Father God?

Such is the attitude of many modern men. Give the Bible its proper place, they say, as a book of religion and not of science, as a book of inspiration and not of external history, and its authority will be quite independent of all that historical science may say. Thus the modern denial of the virgin birth, as of other elements in the Gospel account of Jesus, so disturbing at first to devout Christian feeling, may, it is thought, turn out to be a blessing in the end. By removing false notions of Bible authority it may establish a true authority which will stand forever firm.

What shall we say of such an attitude as that? Briefly we can say this of it--that if it is correct the Christian religion, as it has existed for some nineteen hundred years, must now at length be given up. It is not this or that element of the Christian religion that is here at stake, but all elements of it, or rather the Christian religion as an organic whole. What is this modern religion that is founded upon a Bible whose authority is altogether in the sphere of inspiration and not at all in the sphere of external fact? Is it not a religion whose fundamental tenet is the ability of man to save himself? Give us the moral and spiritual values of the Christian religion, it is said in effect, give us the inspiration of the teaching and example of Jesus, and we have all that is needed for our souls; not for us is there any need of dependence upon the question what happened or did not happen in the external world nineteen hundred years ago. Dependence upon those things belonged to the childhood stage of religion, but we, as distinguished from the men of past ages, find our God here and now in the depths of our own souls. What care we how Jesus entered into the world? However that may be, His teaching stirs our souls and leads us out into a larger life.

Such is the modern religion that is independent of events like the virgin birth. The adherents of it are, indeed, seldom quite consistent; for if they were consistent they could not depend upon the example of Jesus, as many of them do. The authority of the Bible, they say, lies altogether in the sphere of religion and ethics and not at all in the sphere of external history. But what is the logical result of a principle like that? Is it not to make the authority of the Bible and to make the Christian religion independent of the question whether such a person as Jesus ever lived upon this earth? That Jesus lived in Palestine nineteen hundred years ago is surely an assertion in the sphere of external history; and if so the authority of the Bible and the truth of the Christian religion cannot, according to the principle with which we are now dealing, be staked upon it. Thus upon this principle we have logically what B. B. Warfield aptly called a "Christless Christianity";^[3] even the very existence of Jesus is unnecessary to this sublimated religion that is independent of events in the external

world.

There are some modern men, like D. C. Macintosh in America,^[4] who do not shrink from this logical result of their position; Christianity, they say, could conceivably exist in its inmost essence even if no such person as Jesus ever lived. But many men shrink from a logic that is so thoroughgoing as that. They say, on the one hand, that Christianity and the authority of the Bible are quite independent of events in the external world; and yet on the other hand they do make both of these depend upon certain external events, after all. We shall not endeavor to explain how otherwise intelligent persons can stick in a halfway position that is so utterly inconsistent and absurd; but stick in it they certainly do, and they must be reckoned with in any complete account of the modern religious world. They are indeed losing ground rapidly at the present time; a Christianity dependent upon the so-called "historical Jesus" is gradually giving place to a Christianity that is dependent upon no Jesus at all--a Christianity that is content to use the ethical and religious ideas contained in the Gospels without settling the question whether the person who is said to have enunciated these ideas ever really walked upon the earth. But such consistency, even though it is being attained among scholars, has not yet won any general acceptance among popular exponents of "Liberalism" in the Church; and such popular exponents of Liberalism, with disregard of all logic, go cheerfully on asserting that the authority of the Bible lies altogether in the sphere of ideals (or what they call "religion"), while all the time they do regard as essential to the Bible its attestation of the existence of Jesus and so its attestation of an external fact.

At any rate, even such an attitude, though it shrinks from the full consequences of the radical principle with which it begins, is, itself also, quite contrary to the Christian religion. What is this religion that is founded upon a historical Jesus, and yet is independent of events like the virgin birth? Is it not still a religion whose fundamental tenet is the ability of man to save himself? Jesus attained to sonship with God, say the adherents of this religion in effect, and we, if we will only follow Him, can attain to that sonship, too. Certainly men who think thus will not be much interested in the fact of the virgin birth. Indeed, if they are interested in it at all, they can be interested only in rejecting it. The fundamental notion of their religion is that Jesus showed us what man can do; but if so it is important for our encouragement that He should be thought to have begun where we too must begin. If He was born of a virgin He had an advantage which we do not possess; how, then, can we in that case be sure that we, who were not virgin-born, can do what He did? Capocrates and the Ebionites of Epiphanius have here come to life again in the modern world. We can all be Christs if we will only follow Christ's example--that is the essence of this religion of the imitation of Jesus. Such a religion, both in ancient and modern times, will, if it be logical, have nothing to do with the story of the miracle in the virgin's womb.

It seems never to have occurred to the adherents of this religion that there is such a thing as sin, and that sin places an awful gulf between man and God. But those convictions, though they are unpopular at the present time, are certainly quite central in the Christian religion. From the beginning Christianity was the religion of the broken heart; it is based upon the conviction that there is an awful gulf between man and God which none but God can bridge. The Bible tells how that gulf was bridged; and that means that the Bible is a record of facts. Of what avail, without the redeeming acts of God, are all the lofty ideals of Psalmists and Prophets, all the teaching and example of Jesus? In themselves they can bring us nothing but despair. We Christians are interested not merely in what God commands, but also in what God did; the Christian religion is couched not merely in the imperative mood, but also in a triumphant indicative; our salvation depends squarely upon history; the Bible

contains that history, and unless that history is true the authority of the Bible is gone and we who have put our trust in the Bible are without hope.

Certainly, whatever we may think of it, that is the view of Bible authority which the Bible itself takes. The Biblical authors are not intending merely to give their readers inspiring poetry or an instructive philosophy of religion; but they are intending to narrate facts. The prologue of the Third Gospel is really typical of the Bible from beginning to end; faith, according to the Bible, is founded upon an account of things that have happened in the external world, and it is the purpose of the Biblical writers to set forth those things in an orderly and trustworthy way. The Bible, in other words, does not merely tell us what God is, but it also tells us what God did; it contains not merely permanent truths of religion and ethics, but also a gospel or a piece of good news.

An integral part of that piece of news, to the authors of the First and Third Gospels, was the fact that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary. If that fact is rejected, then the witness of these writers--and hence the witness of the Bible--is in so far not true.

If, therefore, the virgin birth be rejected, let us cease talking about the "authority of the Bible" or the "infallibility of Scripture" or the like. Let us rather say plainly that that authority and that infallibility are gone. We may indeed hold that many things which the Bible says are true, even though this thing that it says is untrue. Many earnest souls--if we may for the moment speak in general terms and without reference to the virgin birth--adopt such a mediating position. They hold that, although the Bible is wrong in many particulars, although it displays no supernatural freedom from the errors that beset other books, yet it contains some things that are true, and upon those things we can ground our hope for time and for eternity. Far better is it to say that these men are right, to say that the Bible is not infallible but only partly true, than to say that the Bible is infallible in the sphere of religion and ethics, and that the external happenings that it relates are matters of indifference to our souls. Many earnest Christians hold the former position; but a man who really holds the latter position cannot logically be a Christian at all. Christianity is founded upon the redeeming work of Christ which was accomplished in Palestine nineteen hundred years ago; to be indifferent to the record that set forth that work is to reject the gospel in which Christ is offered as our Saviour from sin and wrath.

But even if the former position is taken, even if we do continue to rest for salvation upon part of the record of facts which the Bible contains, still, if we reject other parts, our belief in the authority of the Bible is gone. We may hold that many things which the Bible tells us are true, but we can no longer depend upon the Bible *as such*. We can no longer say, as many simple Christians say, "I believe this or that because God has told it to me in His book."

We are not now arguing the question whether this attitude of simple "Bible Christians" is right or wrong; we are not arguing the question whether the infallibility of Scripture can really be maintained in the modern world. But what we are saying is that if the infallibility of Scripture is to be abandoned, there should be no concealment from simple Christians of the full seriousness of the step. Let us stop speaking of the "infallibility" of a book that we hold to be in considerable measure untrue. Really the issues are too momentous, and human souls are too deeply concerned, to permit of any such trifling as that. A man may hold what opinion he will about the doctrine of Biblical infallibility, he may denounce it all he pleases, as involving us in a slavish religion of a book; but the importance of the doctrine he cannot possibly deny. It is a thing to which countless souls cling today, for weal or for woe. If it is a bad thing, let it by all means be abandoned, but let it be abandoned at least in a perfectly

straightforward and open way.

Certainly that doctrine of Biblical infallibility is involved in the question of the virgin birth. It seems strange that we should ever have been obliged to argue the matter at all, but there are scarcely any limits to the confusion of religious discussion at the present day. The Bible teaches the virgin birth of Christ; a man who accepts the virgin birth may continue to hold to the full truthfulness of the Bible; a man who rejects it cannot possibly do so. That much at least should be perfectly plain.

In the second place, the question of the virgin birth is important as a test for a man to apply to himself or to others to determine whether one holds a naturalistic or a supernaturalistic view regarding Jesus Christ. There are two generically different views about Jesus, and they are rooted in two generically different views about God and the world. According to one view, God is immanent in the universe in the sense that the universe is the necessary unfolding of His life; and Jesus of Nazareth is a part of that unfolding, a supreme product of the same divine forces that are elsewhere operative in the world. According to the other view, God is the Creator of the universe, immanent in it but also eternally separate from it and free; and Jesus of Nazareth came into the universe from outside the universe, to do what nature could never do. The former view is the view of modern naturalism in many different forms; the latter view is the view of the Bible and of the Christian Church.

How can it be determined which of these two views is held by any particular modern man? Obviously that question is best answered when it is made concrete, and it is best made concrete when it deals with the supernatural as it appears in the New Testament books. But at what point may the issue best be raised; what question may be asked to determine whether a man holds a naturalistic or a supernaturalistic view of Jesus Christ?

The matter is by no means so simple as at first sight it might appear. Perhaps the first question which might occur to the layman, as being the question to ask, is the question, "Do you believe in the deity of Christ?" But that question obviously will not do at all. It is difficult to imagine any assertion more utterly meaningless in the religious parlance of the present day than the assertion, "I believe in the deity of Christ," or the assertion, "I believe that Jesus is God." These assertions have meaning only when the terms that they contain are defined; the assertion, "Jesus is God," depends for its significance altogether upon what is meant by "God."

But unfortunately that term, like the term "deity," is often defined today to mean something entirely different from what the simple Christian holds it to mean. The simple Christian, like Jesus of Nazareth, is a convinced theist; indeed, he is such a convinced theist that no other view of God save the theistic view ever comes into his mind. But many leaders of the modern Church and hosts of modern ministers, unlike the simple Christian and unlike Jesus of Nazareth, are not theists at all. They are either pantheists or positivists, and their pantheistic or positivistic opinions determine what they mean by "God."

If they are pantheists, "God" means to them the mighty process of the world itself or else (if their pantheism is not quite consistent and complete) the spiritual purpose that pulsates through the world. On that view Jesus is God in a sense not essentially different from that in which all men are God. Efforts may be made to preserve for Him some sort of uniqueness; He may be regarded as the supreme manifestation of the divine life or the like; but, after all, according to such a view the presence of the divine life in Him is not essentially different from its presence in other men.

If positivism rather than pantheism is the way of thinking that is chosen, then the assertion,

"Jesus is God," merely means that Jesus is the highest thing that we moderns know. We have given up the old notion, it is said in effect, that there is a personal Creator and Ruler of the world; such things belong, at any rate, merely to metaphysics, and not at all to religion, and upon such speculations little reliance can be placed. But the word "God" is a useful word; it releases certain worthy emotions of reverence and love which humanity cannot afford to do without; we shall therefore retain it to designate the highest thing that we know. But the highest thing that we moderns know is not a mysterious Creator and Ruler, or indeed anything else that is beyond the confines of the universe; for in such a Creator and Ruler we have ceased to believe, and beyond the confines of the universe we are no longer bold enough to look. So the highest thing that we moderns know must be something that we can see and hear, something within the course of this world. But within such limits the highest thing that we know, the thing most worthy to evoke our reverence, is the moral life of Jesus of Nazareth. To that moral life of the man Jesus, therefore, we do honor by applying to Jesus the word "God."

It should be perfectly clear that the adherents of both of these ways of thinking are far more remote from the Christian faith than were the older Unitarians; for the older Unitarians, in something like a Christian sense, no doubt still believed in God. The man who says, "There is a God who is Creator and Ruler of the world, and Jesus is not that God," is far nearer to the Christian faith than the man who says, "There is no God who is Creator and Ruler of the world, but Jesus is 'God' in our modern sense." In countless cases the assertion, "Jesus is God," is not the most Christian, but almost the least Christian, thing that modern religious teachers say. Yet the plain man often goes away from his hearing of such utterances much impressed. When he goes away much impressed, we have the distinct feeling that he has been trifled with. About such serious matters there should be, above all, great plainness and openness of speech. At any rate it is perfectly clear that the question, "Do you believe in the deity of Christ?," or the question, "Do you believe that Jesus is God?," is in itself quite valueless today to determine whether a man holds a Christian or a non-Christian, a supernaturalistic or a naturalistic, view of Jesus Christ.

Evidently, therefore, if we want to discover anyone's position in the great religious issue of the present day, we must be more specific; we must single out some particular manifestation of the supernatural as the point at which the issue shall be raised. But where shall such a point be found; what particular miracle shall be singled out to find whether a man believes in the supernatural or not?

Our first impulse might be to single out the supreme miracle in the New Testament--namely, the resurrection of Christ. Surely, it might be held, if a man is willing to say, "I believe in the resurrection of Christ," he has parted company with modern naturalism and has taken his stand squarely with the despised believers in the supernatural Person whom the New Testament presents.

But here again first appearances are deceptive, and an assertion that to the plain man seems to be very definite is in modern parlance not definite at all. The assertion, "I believe in the resurrection of Christ," has in itself today almost as little meaning as the assertion, "I believe that Jesus is God," so abysmal is the intellectual morass into which we have been flung by the modern business of "interpreting" perfectly plain language in a sense utterly different from the sense in which it has always hitherto been used. The truth is that the expression, "resurrection of Christ," is used in widely different senses today. Some men mean by it merely the continued influence of Jesus; others use it in a mystical sense to indicate the presence of "the living Christ" in human souls; others mean by it the continued personal

existence of Jesus, or what might formerly have been called the immortality of His soul.

We do not for one moment mean to say that these new interpretations of the expression are justifiable in the least. Surely we are bound, in our use of the word "resurrection" as applied to Jesus, by the meaning which the earliest sources attribute to the term. And about what that meaning is there can really be little doubt. Evidently the New Testament books do not mean by the resurrection of Jesus merely His continued personal existence. In that sense the disciples believed in His resurrection even during the sad three days when they were in such despair. They were certainly not Sadducees; they did not believe that Jesus' personal identity was lost, and no doubt they believed that He would rise from the dead as all other men would rise at the end of the age. But it never occurred to them to call that continued existence of Jesus "resurrection," and only when they became convinced of the real resurrection, the actual emergence of the Lord's body from the tomb, did they become the instruments in founding the Christian Church. To use the word "resurrection" in any other way than this way in which it is used by the New Testament books is merely to confuse our discussion of this theme.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that such other uses of the word, however unjustifiable they may be, are very common at the present time; so that for a man to say that he believes in the "resurrection" of Christ means in itself, prior to careful definition, practically nothing at all.

But it is somewhat different when we come to deal with the virgin birth. If a man affirms that Jesus was born without human father, being conceived by the Holy Ghost in the virgin's womb, it is difficult to see how he can escape the plain meaning of such terms; and thus when he makes that affirmation, he has taken the momentous step of affirming the entrance of the supernatural into the course of this world. Misguided apologetics, we know, may sometimes have obscured the issue; defenders of the virgin birth have sometimes talked about "parthenogenesis" and thus have sought to bring the conception by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb into some sort of analogy with what nature can produce. But such apologetic expedients, fortunately, are rare; and certainly they are contrary to sound sense. It still remains true in general that the question of the virgin birth brings us sharply before the question of the supernatural and that a man who accepts the virgin birth has taken his stand squarely upon supernaturalistic ground. There is possibility of evasion even here, but it is much less serious than in the case of many other points at which the issue might be raised.

We do not mean that a modern man who accepts the virgin birth has necessarily accepted all of Christianity. Certainly that is far from being the case; for sometimes acceptance of the virgin birth is an isolated Christian survival in a man's thinking, which goes along with a rather general rejection of the Christian view of Christ. At any rate, the importance of the virgin birth should never blind our eyes to the importance of other things; and we are in little agreement with those who make the Apostles' Creed, in which the virgin birth is contained, the be-all and the end-all of their Christian profession. Just as important is the Christian doctrine of redemption--the Christian doctrine of sin and grace--about which the Apostles' Creed says scarcely a word.

But the two elements of Christian truth belong logically together; the supernatural Person of our Lord belongs logically with His redemptive work; the virgin birth belongs logically with the Cross. Where one aspect is given up, the other will not logically remain; and where one is accepted, the other will naturally be accepted, too. There may be halfway positions for a time, but they are in unstable equilibrium and will not long be maintained.

Certain it is that men who reject the virgin birth scarcely ever hold to a really Christian view of Christ. Conceivably, indeed, a man might reject this miracle and yet accept other miracles that the New Testament contains; conceivably a man might hold Jesus to be a supernatural Person and yet reject the Gospel story about the manner of His entrance into this world. But it would perhaps be difficult to find a single New Testament student of any prominence who holds to such a view today.^[5] In the overwhelming majority of cases those who reject the virgin birth reject the whole supernatural view of Christ. They often profess belief in the "incarnation"; but the word is apt to mean to them almost the exact opposite of what the New Testament means when it says that "the Word became flesh." To these modern men the incarnation means that God and man are one; to the New Testament it means rather that they are *not* one, but that the eternal Son of God became man, assumed our nature, by a stupendous miracle, to redeem us from sin. Seldom does any real belief in the incarnation go along with a rejection of the miracle of the virgin birth.

Thus we have held that the virgin birth is important, in the first place, because if it is rejected the authority of the Bible is denied, and, in the second place, because it brings before a man in particularly unambiguous fashion the great question of the supernatural in connection with the person of our Lord. But that is by no means all that needs to be said. It is not true that the virgin birth is important only as a test of Bible authority or as a test case of the supernatural. On the contrary, it has an importance of its own, which the Christian man can ill afford to miss. Without the story of the virgin birth there would be something seriously lacking in the Christian view of Christ.^[6]

It is important at this point to make clear exactly what we mean, since in recent discussion there has often been considerable confusion of thought. We do not mean, in the first place, merely that the virgin birth was important for God's plan; for that goes without saying if the virgin birth was a fact. If Jesus Christ was really born without human father, it that was really God's way for our Saviour to enter into the world, then it may certainly be assumed that it was the best way and that any other way would have been wrong. We are not concerned now to assert anything so self-evident as that. But what we do assert now is not only that the virgin birth was important as an event, but that it is important for us to know--that we could not have remained ignorant of it without loss.

In the second place, we do not mean merely that it is important for us to accept the story of the virgin birth now that it is presented to us in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. To assert that would be merely to repeat what has already been said. We have already argued that a man cannot reject the testimony of the New Testament at this point without serious peril to his soul. But what we are now proposing is to imagine the case of a man who had never heard of the virgin birth at all, and yet had accepted everything else that the New Testament contains. Would such a man be worse off or not worse off than the devout Christian who possesses and accepts our existing New Testament, including the first two chapters of Matthew and of Luke?

It can hardly be emphasized too strongly that such an hypothetical case is quite different from any case which can actually arise at the present day. Never to have heard of the virgin birth is an entirely different thing from rejecting it after one has heard it attested by the New Testament books. Yet these two entirely different cases are frequently confused by those who today represent acceptance of the virgin birth as a matter of indifference to the Church. These persons frequently maintain that there was a time in the primitive days of Christianity when true disciples did not know of the virgin birth, and that if those primitive disciples got along without accepting the virgin birth we can do so today.

Of course, if the primitive time referred to in this argument is the time prior to the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord, then the argument at once falls to the ground for anyone who believes in our Lord's redeeming work. No one who believes that our Lord came into the world to redeem men by His death upon the cross and to complete His redeeming work by His glorious resurrection from the dead can possibly desire to return now to the preliminary, pre-Pentecostal days when the disciples walked with Jesus on Galilean hills. The full meaning of redemption could be made clear only after the redeeming work was done. Thus the whole custom of appealing to the faith of those who met Jesus in Galilee as though it could be an example for faith today does despite to the thing that Jesus came into the world to do.

But even if the supposed primitive Christians who got along without knowledge of the virgin birth are to be put after the death and resurrection and not before, still their case was entirely different from the case of men who do not believe in the virgin birth today. They (supposing they ever really existed) had never heard of the virgin birth; but these modern men reject that of which they have heard full well. The real question at this point is not whether there were primitive Christians who had never heard the story of the virgin birth, but whether there were primitive Christians who rejected the story when once it was heard. It is this latter point which has not been proved. The Ebionite deniers of the virgin birth have never been traced back to primitive times, and it has never been shown that they were at heart Christians at all.

Thus in considering the case of the man who has never heard of the virgin birth, as distinguished from the man who has heard of it and rejected it, we are considering a purely hypothetical case which can hardly be actual in the modern world. Yet the consideration of that purely hypothetical case is not without value; for it will show whether our knowledge of the virgin birth possesses independent value or whether it is important merely because of its connection with the question of the authority of the Bible or with the question whether the supernatural has or has not entered into the course of the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Would our knowledge of our Saviour be essentially complete if the New Testament did not contain the passages which narrate the virgin birth?

That question, we think, should be answered with an emphatic negative; without the story of the virgin birth our knowledge of our Saviour would be impoverished in a very serious way.

Exaggerations, indeed, should be avoided at this point. Even without the infancy narratives we should have much upon which to rest our faith. Christ would still be presented in the New Testament as both God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever; the significance of His Cross would still stand out in all its glorious clearness; He would still be offered to us in the gospel as our Saviour.

Yet there would be a serious gap in our knowledge of Him, and questions would arise which would be full of menace for the souls of men. How did this eternal Son of God enter into the world? Did the Son of God unite with the man Jesus at the baptism as the Gnostics supposed; was the man Jesus received up gradually into union with the eternal Son? Erroneous answers to such questions would, without the story of the virgin birth, be all too ready to hand. No doubt those erroneous answers would still be capable of refutation to a mind ideally logical and really filled with the convictions which all the Gospels and Epistles would provide. Yet they would be only too natural to the minds of men as they actually are. Without the story of the virgin birth we should be living constantly in a region of surmises like the errors of the heresiarchs in the ancient Church.

Such surmises would deprive us of the full doctrine of the incarnation upon which our souls can rest. To that doctrine it is essential that the Son of God should live a complete human life upon this earth. But the human life would not be complete unless it began in the mother's womb. At no later time, therefore, should the incarnation be put, but at that moment when the babe was conceived. There, then, should be found the stupendous event when the eternal Son of God assumed our nature, so that from then on He was both God and man.

Our knowledge of the virgin birth, therefore, is important because it fixes for us the time of the incarnation. And what comfort that gives to our souls! Marcion, the second-century dualist, was very severe upon those who thought that the Son of God was born as a man; he poured out the vials of his scorn upon those who brought Christ into connection with the birth-pangs and the nine months' time. But we, unlike Marcion and his modern disciples, glory just in the story of those things. The eternal Son of God, He through whom the universe was made, did not despise the virgin's womb! What a wonder is there! It is not strange that it has always given offence to the natural man. But in that wonder we find God's redeeming love, and in that babe who lay in Mary's womb we find our Saviour who thus became man to die for our sins and bring us into peace with God.

Moreover, the knowledge of the virgin birth is important because of its bearing upon our view of the solidarity of the race in the guilt and power of sin. If we hold a Pelagian view of sin, we shall be little interested in the virgin birth of our Lord; we shall have little difficulty in understanding how a sinless One could be born as other men are born. But if we believe, as the Bible teaches, that all mankind are under an awful curse, then we shall rejoice in knowing that there entered into the sinful race from the outside One upon whom the curse did not rest save as He bore it for those whom He redeemed by His blood.

How, except by the virgin birth, could our Saviour have lived a complete human life from the mother's womb, and 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? We may not, indeed, set limits to the power of God; we cannot say what God might or might not have done. Yet we can say at least that no other way can be conceived by us. Deny or give up the story of the virgin birth, and inevitably you are led to evade either the high Biblical doctrine of sin or else the full Biblical presentation of the supernatural Person of our Lord. A noble man in whom the divine life merely pulsed 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 and power of sin, was conceived in the virgin's womb by the Holy Ghost.

What, then, is our conclusion? Is belief in the virgin birth necessary to every man if he is to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? The question is wrongly put when it is put in that way. Who can tell exactly how much knowledge of the facts about Christ is necessary if a man is to have saving faith? None but God can tell. Some knowledge is certainly required, but exactly how much is required we cannot say. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief," said a man in the Gospels who was saved. So today there are many men of little faith, many who are troubled by the voices that are heard on all sides. It is very hard to be a Christian in these times; and there is One who knows that it is hard. What right have we to say that full knowledge and full conviction are necessary before a man can put his trust in the crucified and risen Lord? What right have we to say that no man can be saved before he has come to full conviction regarding the stupendous miracle narrated in the first chapters of Matthew and Luke?

We desire, however, at this point not to be misunderstood. We do not mean by what we have just said that denial of the virgin birth is to be treated as a matter of indifference by the wise pastor of souls. The soul of man in its depths, indeed, is beyond our ken; our judgments regarding those depths are not the judgments of Him who "needed not that any should testify of man," because "He knew what was in man." Yet if we are to help our fellow-men we must give counsel on the basis of the best knowledge that we in our weakness can obtain. And certainly even with that weakness we can say that perhaps not one man out of a hundred of those who deny the virgin birth today gives any really clear evidence of possessing saving faith. A man is not saved by good works, but by faith; and saving faith is acceptance of Jesus Christ "as He is offered to us in the gospel." Part of that gospel in which Jesus is offered to our souls is the blessed story of the miracle in the virgin's womb.

One thing at least is clear: even if the belief in the virgin birth is not necessary to every Christian, it is certainly necessary to Christianity. And it is necessary to the corporate witness of the Church. Sad is it when men who will not affirm this doctrine are sent out into the ministry to lead Christ's little ones astray. Such men are learners, it is said; they will grow in knowledge and in grace; let us deal patiently with them and all will be well. Now we have all sympathy with those who are immature in the faith, and we hope that by the blessing of God they may be led into clearer and stronger convictions as to the truth of His Word. But the place for such learning, so far as the basic things are concerned, is not the sacred office of the Christian ministry. Let these men learn first by themselves, let them struggle, let them meditate, with such help as we and others can give them; and then, if God leads them aright, let them aspire to the holy ministry of the Word. But to send them out before they have attained such convictions, as official representatives of a Church whose faith they do not share--that is simply to trifle with human souls.

Let it never be forgotten that the virgin birth is an integral part of the New Testament witness about Christ, and that that witness is strongest when it is taken as it stands. We are not averse, indeed, to a certain logical order of apologetics; and in that order the virgin birth certainly does not come first. Before the virgin birth come the things for which testimony in the very nature of the case can be more abundant than for this. To those things no doubt the inquirer should be directed first, before he comes to consider this mystery which was first attested perhaps only by the mother of the Lord. But though that is true, though theoretically a man can believe in the resurrection, for example, without believing in the virgin birth, yet such a halfway conviction is not likely to endure. The New Testament presentation of Jesus is not an agglomeration, but an organism, and of that organism the virgin birth is an integral part. Remove the part, and the whole becomes harder and not easier to accept; the New Testament account of Jesus is most convincing when it is taken as a whole. Only one Jesus is presented in the Word of God; and that Jesus did not come into the world by ordinary generation, but was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the Holy Ghost.

Footnotes

[1] Compare B. B. Warfield, "The Supernatural Birth of Jesus: Is It Essential to Christianity?", in *American Journal of Theology*, x, 1906, p. 21: "I certainly make no question that additional evidence of tremendous weight is brought to this fact by its place in the system of Christianity, commended as this system as a whole is by the entire body of proof which we call the 'Christian evidences.' But I do not believe that it needs this additional evidence for its establishment. And I prefer my readers to understand that I proceed to the consideration of its place in the Christian system with it in my hands, not as a hypothesis of more or less

probability (or improbability), but as a duly authenticated actual occurrence, recognized as such on its own direct evidence, and bringing as such its own quota of support to the Christian system of which it forms a part." See also, with regard to the connection of the virgin birth with the whole New Testament account of Jesus Christ, J. A. Faulkner, "The Miraculous Birth of our Lord," in *The Aftermath Series*, Number 10, 1924, p. 473.

[2] The curious views of Badham and C. C. Torrey (see above, pp. 128 f., 304 f.) may surely be left out of account. Even they do not eliminate the supernatural from what they regard as the thought of the authors of the First and Third Gospels.

[3] Warfield, "Christless Christianity," in *Harvard Theological Review*, v, 1912, pp. 423-473.

[4] *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 1926, pp. 135-138.

[5] Compare James Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 1907, pp. 18 f., 183 f.

[6] On the whole subject of the doctrinal importance of the virgin birth, see especially, in addition to the article by B. B. Warfield, which has been cited in the preceding footnote, the full and illuminating discussion by Orr (op. cit., pp. 16-29, 182-227).