



## **The Virgin Birth of Our Lord**

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## THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF OUR LORD

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There can be no doubt that there are grave difficulties in the minds of many educated men and women of this generation in the way of their acceptance of the doctrine of the virgin birth. However much older men, trained in a different theological atmosphere, may regret it, and be unable to understand it, we should not hesitate to recognize that the situation exists. Therefore we cannot overcome these difficulties by a mere appeal to the authority of the church, or in any dogmatic way. We must squarely meet them by removing misconceptions and so restating the doctrine that it will no longer be open to reasonable objection.

The doctrine of the virgin birth is historically and dogmatically involved with the doctrines of the incarnation and the divinity of Jesus Christ; but that by no means implies that men may not hold to the divinity and incarnation of our Lord without the definite acceptance of the virgin birth. The apostle Paul is firm in his statement of the divinity of Jesus Christ, and in many passages he discusses the incarnation of the pre-existing Son of God from several different points of view; but nowhere does he directly or indirectly give us the least hint that he thought of a virgin birth. The author of the prologue of the Gospel of John is still more emphatic in his doctrine of the divinity of Christ and of the incarnation and he seems to approach very closely to the doctrine of the virgin birth. If we follow the ancient reading of vs. 13 in Tertullian, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr: "He who was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God," we get something very near the virgin birth. This reading from Latin texts of the third century cited by Tertullian, one hundred years earlier than the earliest extant Greek codices, and from Greek texts, nearly two hundred years earlier cited by Irenaeus and Justin Martyr, is favored for rhetorical reasons and by the fact that it is the most difficult reading. But on the other

hand, the external evidences of Greek codices and versions are overwhelmingly against it, and we cannot reasonably build our faith upon it. So that in fact while this gospel may possibly have implied the virgin birth, this is at most a probability, and there certainly is no explicit statement of it.

The authors of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Book of Revelation teach plainly enough the divinity of Christ, but there is not the slightest trace of a virgin birth in their writings. There is no more reasonable connection between the woman in childbirth of Rev., chap. 12, and the virgin Mary than the fancies of allegorists, revived in recent times by mythologistic interpreters.

The virgin birth is known only to the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. What then does this situation teach us as to the doctrine? What else can we say than that the virgin birth rests upon the authority of these gospels alone? The other New Testament writings that set forth the divinity of Christ and his incarnation, so far as we know, did not connect these doctrines with the virgin birth.

And yet on the other hand we cannot permit the opponents of the virgin birth to pervert this silence into authority against the doctrine. The argument from silence cannot be used as a nose of wax to prove anything you please. It has its laws and its limitations like any other argument.<sup>1</sup> If the other writers of the New Testament do not indorse the doctrine there is nothing whatever in their language that can be cited against it. Indeed sufficient reasons may be given for this silence in the earlier writings of the New Testament. If the authors knew of this doctrinal fact, they would have abstained from mentioning it for prudential reasons lest they should expose the mother of our Lord to scandal during her lifetime—such scandals as did in fact arise so soon as the virgin birth was declared, and which were certain to arise, as any sensible person could foresee. The Jews did not assert that Joseph was the father of Jesus, but that his father was a soldier named Ben Pandera. This is evidently a fiction based on Ben Parthena, son of the virgin, and this implies the Christian doctrine which it antagonizes. Jesus himself set the example of such prudence when he refrained from declaring or acknowledging his messiahship until near the close of his life, and even then forbade his disciples to

<sup>1</sup> See my *Study of Holy Scripture*, pp. 101 ff.

make him known.<sup>2</sup> St. Peter, St. Paul, and the early Christian preachers followed their master in the same Christian prudence and reticence in their early teaching and preaching.

Much is made by modern opponents of the virgin birth, of the representation that Jesus was the son of Joseph, and that the son of God was born of the seed of David, according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3). But how else could the New Testament writers speak if Jesus were indeed the son of Joseph by public and private recognition, and so the son of David and heir of the messianic promises? He was the legal and acknowledged son of Joseph, and that accounts fully for all such statements. They do not imply that Jesus was begotten by Joseph any more than the term "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4) implies that Jesus was born of a woman in the ordinary way.

It is indeed astonishing that reasonable men should make so much of the four instances in the gospels in which Jesus is said, not by the evangelists, but by the people, to be the son of Joseph the carpenter. Two of them are in Luke 4:22 and Matthew 13:55, gospels which definitely tell us of the virgin birth previously, and therefore they could not have been so inconsistent with themselves as to assert and deny the virgin birth within the limits of a few pages. Two of them are in John 1:45, 6:42, the gospel which gives us throughout the highest conception of Jesus as the Son of the Father, the pre-existent divine being. Mark, singularly enough, does not in the parallels to Matthew and Luke give us "son of Joseph," but simply "son of Mary" (6:3). We have in this situation a much better reason to claim that "son of Mary" in Mark implies virgin birth than to say "son of Joseph" in Matthew and Luke implies that Joseph was his natural father.

Much is made by some recent writers of the recently discovered old Syriac text which in Matt. 1:16 reads "Joseph, to whom was betrothed Mary the virgin, begat Jesus called the Messiah." It is quite possible that this may have been in the original text, as Allen in his recent *Commentary on Matthew* thinks, but even then, as Allen shows, "beget" is used, not in the sense of natural, but of legal, sonship, for the reasons: (a) that the genealogy of Matthew was composed by the author on the basis of the genealogy of Chronicles, and

<sup>2</sup> See my *New Light on the Life of Jesus*, pp. 91 ff.

gives the official line as distinguished from Luke's genealogy, which was based on private documents of the family of Jesus and gives the natural line. (b) In several instances the term "beget" is used when the natural meaning is impossible for two reasons, one that there is an occasional leaping over one or more names, and the other that the one begotten is sometimes not the real son, but the son of another line and only the son by inheritance. Therefore "beget" is at times nothing more than legal descent and does not imply any more than that Jesus was his legal father. Furthermore, it can hardly be doubted that the author of the gospel was the author of the genealogy, and he could not be so inconsistent as to say in vs. 16 that Joseph was the natural father of Jesus and then in vs. 18-25 that Jesus was virgin-born and that Joseph was only his legal father.

It did not come within the plan of St. Mark and St. Paul and other writers of the New Testament to state the mode of the incarnation but only the fact. Indeed Mark carefully abstains from any statement whatever as to the life of Jesus before his baptism. Mark represents Jesus as the son of God, fulfilling the predictions of Isaiah and Malachi as to the advent of Yahweh, and therefore implicitly as the Yahweh of the Old Testament, the God of the Jews. He certainly could not have thought of his entrance into the world in the ordinary way of human birth. His silence may most reasonably be accounted for under the circumstances as an intentional silence as to the birth and early life of our Lord, in order to avoid an awkward controversy in the early days of Christianity.

The same might be said of St. Paul. It is evident that he represents Jesus as pre-existing as the theophanic angel of God of the Pentateuchal history (I Cor. 10:3-4), and in Godlike majesty and glory before he entered the world by incarnation (Phil. 2:5-11), which he magnifies in several passages without mentioning human father or mother.<sup>3</sup> This careful avoidance of the birth of Jesus, except in the general phrase, "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4) and "of the seed of David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1:3) may have been for prudential reasons; for St. Paul clearly teaches that Jesus Christ was the second Adam, the man from heaven with a life-giving spirit (I Cor. 15:45-49), a spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:4), and that while himself

<sup>3</sup> See my *Messiah of the Apostles*, pp. 520 ff.

of the race of Adam, he was apart from the race in that he alone was possessed of sinless and incorruptible flesh (Rom. 5:12 ff.; 8:1-4; II Tim. 1:10). St. Paul avoids telling us how Jesus Christ was born son of Adam, and at the same time different from every other son of Adam as Son of God. But the Christian church saw very clearly that the necessary and inevitable consequences of his teaching were, that such sinless, incorruptible flesh could not be born of a human father by ordinary generation, but only of a pure virgin; and that such a holy and life-giving spirit could only originate by the power of the Holy Ghost, as the Gospels of Luke and Matthew tell us.

This avoidance of the doctrine of the mode of the incarnation by most of the writers of the New Testament, while emphasizing its reality, is an interesting and significant fact. This situation, which is so clear in the New Testament, ought to teach us that it is quite possible that many men today may be convinced of the divinity of our Lord, and of the reality of his incarnation, but who for various reasons, are reticent as to the virgin birth, and are not able to see its necessity to confirm these other doctrines.

The virgin birth does however rest upon the authority of two of the holy gospels, and that authority must be regarded as sufficient for those who recognize their divine inspiration. It has never been regarded by the Christian church as necessary that a doctrine should be sustained by a large number of passages. It is sufficient that the doctrine be clearly and unmistakably stated. That is undoubtedly true of the virgin birth. It is impossible by any mode of explanation to remove that doctrine from these two passages of Holy Scripture.

It used to be urged by the opponents of the virgin birth that it was a myth or a legend that grew up gradually in the apostolic community and was eventually tacked on to the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Biblical criticism has made it evident that no such opinion is tenable. This is only one of many instances in which biblical criticism verifies and confirms Christian doctrine. It is certain that these passages in Matthew and Luke were in those gospels when they first came from their authors hands. It is also certain that they were not altogether composed by these authors, but were based on older sources, which they edited, adapted, and explained. These sources belong to the earliest layer of Christian documents, such as the original

Mark, the Logia of Matthew, and the epistles to the Galatians and Corinthians. They were among those sources which, St. Luke tells us, he made use of in composing his gospel.

Furthermore these were poetic sources, in the measures and strophical organization of Hebrew poetry. They undoubtedly were composed in Semitic originals, and were translated by the authors of our gospels into Greek.<sup>4</sup> This takes them back to the Palestinian community before the destruction of Jerusalem, when it was under the superintendence of St. James, St. Jude, and St. Simon, the half-brothers, or cousins of our Lord. It may be shown by the most probable literary and historical evidence that these poems were composed subsequent to the death of Mary between the years 55 and 64 A. D. They were used independently by the authors of Matthew and Luke, who both depend upon the same poetic sources, but use them in a different way without any relation to one another.

It is incredible that St. Luke, who tells us in his preface that he "traced the course of all things *accurately* from the first," and that he wrote to Theophilus that he might "know the *certainty* concerning the things wherein thou wast instructed" (1:3, 4), could have used these poems setting forth a doctrinal fact of such uniqueness and importance, without consulting with the immediate family of Jesus, represented as it was by the chiefs of the Palestinian community. How can anyone think that Christian poems stating so clearly the virgin birth of our Lord could have been written and circulated in the Palestinian community during their presidency without their sanction, and have attained such an authority as to be recognized by St. Luke, after the most careful and accurate inquiry, as valid sources alongside of the Gospel of Mark and the Logia of Matthew for the life of our Lord? Under these circumstances we should recognize that the virgin birth has the authority of the immediate relatives of our Lord, who alone could by any possibility know anything about it. It is therefore vain to appeal to the Gospel of Mark as giving the original teaching of the apostles with reference to Jesus over against Matthew and Luke who give a later tradition; for these gospels get the story of the virgin birth from poetic Palestinian sources just as truly as they get the greater part of their narrative from Mark and the greater part of the teaching

<sup>4</sup> See my *Messiah of the Gospels*, pp. 45 ff. .

of Jesus from the Logia of Matthew. Mark does not speak of the virgin birth because he says nothing about the life of Jesus prior to his baptism by John, as we have seen.

Much is made by some critics of the representation of Matthew that the virgin birth of Jesus is in fulfilment of the prophecy of Immanuel in the earlier Isaiah. But this use of Old Testament prophecies is a characteristic feature of the Gospel of Matthew alone,<sup>5</sup> which is not found in Luke, and which was not in the poetic sources used by both evangelists. Therefore it is absurd to make the prophecy of Immanuel the source of the supposed myth or legend.

It is impossible on the principles of historic criticism to explain the virgin birth as a myth or a legend. It has not their characteristic features.<sup>6</sup> The statement of this dogmatic fact is too near the event, too close to the family of Jesus for this to have been possible. Besides, the virgin birth of our Lord, though it has analogies in the mythologies of other nations, as the early Christian writers recognize, yet differs from all these in an unparalleled uniqueness in that all these mythological births are by natural generation by God, who assumes the forms of man or animals for the purpose, and therefore these are not virgin births; whereas the birth of our Lord was by the power of the Holy Spirit without any generation whatever, whether of man or God. The efforts of some scholars to find a basis in oriental myths are still greater failures, for the reason that it is impossible to show in these early Christian poems any trace whatever of such myths, and because the early Christian poems tell of the virgin birth in such a simple, artless way that it is altogether unreasonable to think of them as depending upon grotesque and highly colored oriental myths.

It must be plain to everyone that such a unique event as the virgin birth of our Lord would have been an insoluble mystery even to Joseph and Mary. They needed special divine communications, such as the gospels record, to enable them to think of its possibility. But they received no explanation of it, and could not understand its purpose. The gospel, in simple and lucid terms, tells us that Mary "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." Joseph and Mary could not report them to others. They would have been

<sup>5</sup> See *Messiah of the Gospels*, p. 319.

<sup>6</sup> See *Study of Holy Scripture*, p. 522.



laughed to scorn. It is therefore simple perversity to use the statements of the gospels as to the relations of Joseph and Mary and his brethren to Jesus as an argument against the virgin birth. Mary's secret knowledge that she had conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, and given birth to him in her virginity, would not prevent her from bringing up Jesus as her child. She could not do other, even under these circumstances, than look upon the boy as her boy, and the man as her son, and feel for him the natural maternal anxieties and responsibilities. The virgin-born was yet a babe in her arms, a boy under parental discipline, a man under maternal solicitude and affection. His sorrows were her sorrows, his joys her joys, his trials pierced her heart. The same set of sacred canticles that Luke used in giving us the "Hail Mary" and the virgin birth gives also the words of Simeon to Mary: "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also." St. Luke found no inconsistency here; no more will any man who is not anxious to find it.

From the nature of the case the report as to the virgin birth of our Lord could only emerge from his own near relatives after his divinity and his incarnation had been made evident, not only to the family of Jesus, but also to the entire apostolate and the Christian church. It is hardly conceivable that Mary would have kept altogether secret the fact as to the virgin birth of our Lord after it had been made evident that he was the Messiah and was indeed divine. Her natural modesty and holy purity would have withheld these most delicate facts from the Christian public, but inevitably she would have confided them to her confidants and especially to the chiefs of the Christian community. They would most certainly have been kept esoteric as long as the virgin mother lived, in order to save her from scandalous misrepresentations, but after her death when the Christian church had become firmly established under the headship of James and Simeon, the reasons for such reticence would soon pass away, and so soon as it was necessary to combat the Ebionites who denied the divinity of our Lord and asserted that he was the son of Joseph and simply a human Messiah, it became necessary for the chiefs of the church to make public the doctrinal fact of the virgin birth, which in itself made the Ebionite position untenable, and speedily forced them to become truly Christians, or to leave the church. Thus the doc-

trinal fact of the virgin birth was made known just about the time when we could reasonably expect it. One would be unreasonable to ask for it at an earlier date.

We may therefore say with the utmost confidence: there is no valid reason, so far as biblical or historic criticism is concerned, to doubt the doctrinal fact of the virgin birth.

The doctrine of the virgin birth became imbedded in the primitive Roman creed, which cannot be dated later than the middle of the second century. But it is evident that the Roman creed was only a gradual development of baptismal creeds based on the trinitarian formula going back to the apostles themselves. Every clause of that creed is biblical and apostolic in its character. Not one of its statements can be regarded as a later development of Christian doctrine. There is not the slightest trace of any evidence in the Christian church of the second century to impeach the doctrine of the virgin birth apart from Ebionite and Gnostic sects. It was only natural that the Gospel of the Roman physician, St. Luke, should influence the Roman creed, rather than the Gospel of John, which was more influential in Asia.

It is quite true that the primitive form of the Nicene Creed does not contain the statement of the virgin birth, but that cannot be used as an argument against it, or against its importance. It was precisely the same situation that we meet in the New Testament in St. Paul and St. John, who are the chief dogmatic writers, and who therefore must be the basis for any dogmatic creed. The fathers of Nicea did not, under the circumstances of the Arian heresy, feel the need of stating the virgin birth, which was not involved in that controversy. They had one definite purpose, to overcome and destroy Arianism. It is clear however that in the East as well as in the West the doctrine of the virgin birth was considered essential; for the Synod of Antioch, which condemned Paul of Samosata in 269 A. D., said in its official acts:

We confess and proclaim that the Son, being with the Father, God and Lord of all created things, and being sent by the Father from heaven and incarnate, has assumed man, wherefor the body, taken from the Virgin, containing all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, has been, without capability of change, united with the Godhead, and has been deified.

When the creed of Nicea was enlarged and presented to the

Council of Chalcedon (A. D. 451) as the faith of the Fathers of the previous council of Constantinople, the virgin birth appears as an essential part of the historic Nicene faith in that form of the creed which for nearly fifteen centuries has been the creed of the entire Christian church. No one thought of questioning it during these centuries, whether at the division of the East and West, or of Protestantism from Rome, except a few Anabaptists and Socinians, until recent times.

I know that there are some excellent scholars and historians who give an interpretation of the article of the virgin birth which weakens its importance. They tell us that virgin birth is one thing, and that born of the virgin Mary is another thing; that the latter term was used merely to emphasize the reality of the birth of our Lord over against Docetic heresies, which denied his entrance into the world by birth. This is certainly a novel interpretation. It cannot be sustained either by grammatical exegesis or by historic interpretation. It is quite true that it was necessary to emphasize the reality of the birth of Jesus Christ into the world. But that might have been done by saying: "born of Mary," a phrase as old as Ignatius, or "of Mary of Nazareth," or, "Mary, the wife of Joseph." When they said "Mary, the virgin," they distinctly recognized that the mother of our Lord was known in the church as "the virgin." It seems to me altogether probable that this meant what the Roman church has always claimed that it meant: that Mary was not only a virgin when she gave birth to our Lord, but that she always remained a virgin. She was consecrated to be the mother of God: how could she ever be the mother of merely human children? But whether the traditional Roman interpretation be true or not, certainly the very least that we can put into the term, *Virgin Mary*, in the old Roman creed, is that she was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus our Lord.

There are some who urge that all the articles of the creed have received new and different interpretations from that which was designed by their authors. This is true in the sense that they have received fuller and richer explanations, and that they have been relieved of misinterpretations; but it is not true in the sense that any of them has lost its real original meaning. It is always necessary in any doctrinal statement to distinguish between the form and the

substance of doctrine, between that which is essential and that which is unessential and temporary. What if we mean by creation something different now from what the Fathers meant? We do not deny that God made the world. What if our conceptions of flesh and body differ from those of the ancients? We no less hold to the resurrection of the body. Our opponents would have us interpret the phrase, "born of the Virgin Mary," in a sense which excludes the virgin birth altogether, or makes it a mere detail of the reality of the birth. That is not interpretation: it is denial of this article of the creed.

There is no fact, no Christian doctrine that is more emphasized by early Christian writers than that of the virgin birth of our Lord. It was indeed the burning question from Ignatius to Tertullian, from the close of the first century to the middle of the third century. Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, overlapping one another in linked succession in their combat with Jew and Ebionite and Gnostic, show through their writings that the virgin birth was the doctrine which overthrew Jew and Ebionite on the one side, in its assertion of the divine origin of our Lord, and Gnostic on the other side, in its assertion of his true humanity as born of the Virgin Mary. It is therefore a perversion of history for anyone to say that "born of Mary the virgin" means any less than what St. Luke gives us, or than Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Tertullian battle for.

The battle for the virgin birth continued through the third and fourth centuries though subordinate to more profound and subtle Christological problems. As it was necessary to maintain the reality of the birth of the Son of God over against those who held that the Son of God attached himself to the man Jesus, either at his baptism, or when he first appeared in the temple, or after his birth; so it was just as necessary to maintain the virgin birth over against a more subtle form of Docetism which thought that the Son of God attached himself in the womb of Mary to the child conceived by Mary; for in all these cases alike the same situation emerges that the man Jesus is a separate and distinct being from the Son of God, the union between them being only external or ethical, not at all vital and organic. Over against any such doctrine not only do the two gospels that teach the virgin birth cry out, but also St. John and St. Paul, and the entire apostolic teaching. For St. John does not tell us that the Son of

God took possession of the man Jesus, whether prior to his birth or later; but that he became man, and so became just as truly man as he had been truly God. So St. Paul tells us that the pre-existing Son of God was born of a woman, and that he who was in the form of God took to himself the form of man, and that this pre-existing divine person suffered and died, rose again and reigns with the name above every name. If only two writings teach the virgin birth directly, yet the whole New Testament cries out with one voice, without dissent, against any such idea as that the pre-existing Son of God merely attached himself to the man Jesus.

All those New Testament writings which emphasize the pre-existence of Christ think naturally of the divine side of the incarnation, and are only concerned with its reality on the human side. It is significant that the two gospels, which alone give the virgin birth, have nothing to say about the pre-existence of Christ. Interested in the life of Jesus, naturally they are most concerned with the mode of his entrance into the world. There is no inconsistency here, but only complementary teaching, both being necessary to the completed doctrine.

It is true that I said in my sermon on the virgin birth,<sup>7</sup> alluding to the previous discourses of the series: "All that we have thus far learned of the incarnation from the teachings of Jesus and the writings of St. Paul, St. John, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, would stand firm, if there had been no virgin birth; if Jesus had been born of Joseph and Mary, having father and mother as any other child." I see now that this language was not sufficiently guarded, and so it has been misinterpreted by many. I said this in a sermon in which I strove to maintain the reality and importance of the virgin birth, and I meant by this statement nothing more than what I have said already in this paper, that the express teaching of these passages does not give the virgin birth, and therefore cannot be used for or against it, or even against the opinion that Joseph was the father of Jesus. But when it comes to making logical deductions from these statements and reconciling them with the pre-existence and divinity of Jesus Christ, and constructing a consistent dogma, it is an entirely different matter. These passages then also cry out against a human father, because a

<sup>7</sup> See *The Incarnation of Our Lord*.

child begotten by ordinary generation would yield us an individual man, a separate and distinct person and being, from the second person of the Trinity; God and man, not one person and being, the God-man.

In these days when the authority of the church counts but little to many minds, and when even the authority of the Holy Scriptures is questioned by not a few Christian scholars, it is inevitable that the whole range of Christian doctrines will come into the field of criticism, and that these will be compelled to maintain themselves against every variety of attack; most of all the fundamental doctrine of Christianity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, and the related doctrines as to his incarnation and virgin birth.

Undoubtedly the divinity of Christ is the most essential doctrine, the incarnation is secondary to this, and the virgin birth of a third grade of importance. I have already recognized that a man may doubt or deny the third without, in his own mind, denying the second, or the first. And yet, from a historic and dogmatic point of view, he surely has put himself in an untenable position, which he cannot long maintain. Historically and logically the divinity of Christ and the incarnation are bound up with the virgin birth, and no man can successfully maintain any one of them without maintaining all.

The early Unitarians departed from the historic faith in the Holy Trinity at first into semi-Arianism, then they divided between Sabellianism and Arianism; but it was not long before most of them abandoned altogether the divinity of Christ, and recognized him only as the greatest of all the prophets. The departures from the Nicene faith in recent times have taken another direction. Some have advocated a more subtle Nestorianism; but the most recent fad is to make Paul of Samosata the wronged apostle of their creed. According to this ancient heretic the man Jesus was inhabited by the Son of God, and was divine in the sense that God dwelt in him and influenced all his mental, moral, and physical activities. This theory gives nothing more than an ethical union of deity with humanity. It is true that they try to bridge the chasm between the creator and the creature by denying that the creature man is of any different nature from his creator; and therefore the ethical union may be conceived of as so close that no practical difference exists. But in this they simply add pantheistic tendencies to an ancient heresy, and do

not thereby improve it, but really make it all the more dangerous. Difficulties, numerous and of great magnitude, spring up on every side much greater in many respects than those involved in the faith of the Christian church. They still name Jesus Christ God, and think of his entering the world by incarnation, yet not in the historic sense of the Bible and the church, but only in a sense which Bible, history and sound reason all alike condemn; for Jesus thus inhabited by the Son of God is really no longer divine as the one only unique Son of the Father, the second person of the Holy Trinity, but the first-born son of an innumerable family of sons of God—all gods as truly as Jesus Christ himself, when they shall eventually become as fully inhabited by God as Jesus was. The incarnation of the Son of God is then only a prelude to an indefinite number of incarnations of sons of God in all perfected Christians. Of course from the point of view of this error, virgin birth is no more needful for Jesus than it is for the Christian brethren. It is evident that they use "Son of God," "divinity," and "incarnation" in unbiblical and unhistoric senses, merely as a cloak to cover doctrines which are as wide apart from the Nicene faith as earth from heaven.

The Christ of the Bible and the church is not merely a divinely inhabited man, but the God-man. The deity and the humanity are inseparable, and eternally united in one and the same divine person. Mary the virgin, the mother of Jesus, was the mother of God because she gave birth, not simply to a man, but God who had become man in her womb when she conceived him by the Holy Ghost. Christ is not God in the sense that he is the elder brother of an indefinite number of gods; but in the sense that he is, and always will be, the one only unique Son of the Father, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Only by a virgin birth could such a God-man be born into the world. A birth by human generation would give us only an individual man, inhabited by the Son of God, and so two distinct persons, the second person of the Trinity and the person of the man Jesus. That cannot in any way be reconciled with the faith of the Bible, or the church. It is simply the revival of ancient errors rejected by the church once for all and forever nearly fifteen centuries ago.

These opponents of the virgin birth are masking behind biblical criticism and the new theology. But biblical criticism gives them

no countenance. The chief biblical critics of our day are against them. And the new theology, so far as I know it, knows them not. How absurd to revive errors exploded fifteen centuries ago, and call them new theology. Let these opponents tell us something new and worthy of attention and we will give heed to them; but it is vain for them to suppose that they can dress up ancient errors and ask us to accept them as new theology.

Some months ago I was conversing with a number of gentlemen on an ocean steamer and explaining to them the doctrine of the virgin birth. The next day one of them came to me, and said: "I have had a talk with a biologist on board. He said: 'I wish I had Dr. Briggs in my laboratory. I would show him that there could be no such thing as a virgin birth.'" This biologist was careful not to make this statement to me. If he had I would surely have said to him: "My dear sir, I have no need to go to your workshop to know how a man-child is born into this world, and I am very sure you cannot show me how the God-man must be born." It should be said that St. Luke who gives us the fullest statement as to the virgin birth was a physician as well as a historian, and undoubtedly aware of the biological processes connected with conception and generation. Doubtless modern biologists know more than he did about those subjects; but the ancient Jewish, Greek, and Roman physicians knew as much as the moderns of everything connected with conception and generation that can in any way have to do with the doctrine of the virgin conception and virgin birth. If Luke saw no biological difficulties, and if the greatest physicians the world has produced have not hesitated to accept the doctrine, it is vain for any modern biologists to object to it. They do not in fact object from biological reasons, but because they are unwilling to accept the supernatural, or any kind of divine interposition in the world.

We say born of a virgin. What we mean however is that his mother was a virgin at his birth; she had not known man. It is more properly therefore virgin conception than virgin birth. We say virgin birth because we mean to imply that the mother retained her virginity from conception to birth.

Of course, if Jesus Christ were merely a man, or the second person of the Trinity had simply attached himself to an individual man,



there would be no reason for the birth of such a man in any other way than by generation from a human father. But when you begin with a divine person, and ask how that divine person was to become man and be conceived in the womb of a woman, biology has no information whatever to give us. The Bible and the church teach that Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit; that there was a theophany at the conception, a divine overshadowing of glory, such as there were at the Transfiguration, and at the taking possession of the ancient temple and tabernacle by the glory of God. Whether that was so or not, biology cannot tell us of its own knowledge. All the physical sciences combined cannot deny it, because it is altogether beyond their sphere of investigation. It is a mystery of dogmatic fact, for which we require sufficient evidence. That evidence is given, by those best qualified to know, in the gospels; and it is sustained by the proprieties of the case, for it is evident that in no other way than by the conception by a virgin could God become really incarnate. He could inhabit an individual man conceived in the ordinary way, but he could not become man, taking to himself all that is essential to human nature while remaining himself divine in his personality, and constituting, not an individual man, but an individual God-man.

We have in the gospels two births in close connection, that of John the Baptist and that of Jesus. John the Baptist was born in just the way that our opponents would have it that Jesus was born. John the Baptist was born in a remarkable manner, as was Isaac of ancient times, of old people, and of a woman who had been barren from youth to old age. John the Baptist was "filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb." That is, he was divinely inhabited from birth. The birth of Jesus is distinguished from such a birth. He was not simply filled or inhabited by the divine Spirit from birth: he was conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin Mary. This antithesis between John and Jesus in their births shows how impossible it is to regard Jesus as merely a divinely inhabited man without altogether discarding the gospels.

I was told recently by one of the younger members of the ministry, who is unsettled as to the virgin birth and the Nicene faith, that modern philosophy does not regard the doctrine of two natures in one person as possible. It is evident to anyone who has gone over the

history of philosophy that great confusion prevails among modern teachers. I cannot see that there is any such thing as a consensus as to what modern philosophy is. I certainly know of no consensus of philosophic opinion that is inconsistent with the formula of Chalcedon. The faith of Chalcedon was formulated and has maintained itself on the basis of the two greatest philosophic systems the world has ever seen, those of Plato and Aristotle. All modern philosophy builds upon them. New philosophers arise of various degrees of importance, but after they have had their say the world generally swings back toward either Plato or Aristotle. Moreover the greatest philosophical theologians of our age, who have been entirely familiar with the best modern philosophy, have maintained the virgin birth of our Lord. But in fact philosophy has no more to say on this question of the virgin birth, and the two natures in one person, than has science, because the question is beyond her sphere. She can tell us something about human personality and the faculties of the human mind, heart, and will, and of the relation of these to the human body. Philosophy can speak guardedly about metaphysical relations; but philosophy has no knowledge of the divine person, or of the nature of the divine mind, affections, and will, except so far as these are reflected in man, and nature, and Holy Scripture; and all this, as any thinker must admit, can only be very inadequate. Christian philosophy, when it builds on Christian theology, may help much today, as it has ever in the past, in the explanation of the mysteries of our religion; but when it disregards Holy Scripture and Christian theology, it is impotent to tell us anything whatever of the Holy Trinity, or the mode of the incarnation of the Son of God. It is altogether beyond the range of philosophy to say that the second person of the Trinity may not take a human nature to himself, as the faith of Chalcedon implies, without taking therewith human personality.

The church adopted this formula, because it alone was consistent with biblical statements as to the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ—a formula not altogether adequate, it is true, for it makes a statement with reference to one of the greatest mysteries of our faith, but a statement made necessary by historical circumstances, to harmonize the statements of Holy Scripture and apostolic tradition, and to ward off dangerous errors. It is quite true that modern philosophy

may justly object to many statements that have been made by theologians ancient and modern, as to the human side of the formula of Chalcedon. It may say that it sees no reason why original sin may not be transmitted through the mother as well as through the father. Quite true: theologians have sought out many ways of accounting for this, other than the immaculate conception of the blessed Virgin. It is not necessary for us to overcome this difficulty in our minds; for it would certainly be presumptuous for anyone to say that God could not overcome it, even without a miracle.

It may be said that personality and individuality may come from the mother as well as from father and mother. If that were so it would not by any means imply that when the second person of the Trinity became man, he assumed the personality and individuality of man from the virgin. The personality was in the divine nature of the second person of the Trinity when he assumed human nature. Why should anyone suppose that he must assume another and a human personality with the human nature, even if such a thing were possible in the passive element in the conception? The Son of God became man according to the purpose of the incarnation. He was not obliged by any moral or physical necessity to become any more of man than he chose to become.

The conception was by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not by any kind of parthenogenesis, as some of our opponents would state it. The church has never thought of any such thing as parthenogenesis. The doctrine based on St. Luke as given in the Apostles' Creed is: "Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary," and in the Nicene Creed: "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man." A parthenogenesis would give us an individual man with a human personality, and therefore be just as much against the Christian faith as the natural fatherhood of Joseph. Hippolytus says (*Com. Luke 2:7*): "The Word was the first-born of God who came down from heaven to the blessed Mary and was made a first-born man in her womb." Irenaeus says (*Haer.*, iii, 22:2) "Why did he come down into her if he were to take nothing from her?" Tertullian says: "This Word called His Son, under the name of God, was seen in divers manners by the patriarchs, heard at all times

in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and power of God into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb" (*Haer.*, 13). Athanasius says: "When he was descending to us he fashioned his body for himself from a virgin."

The gospels make the Holy Spirit the active agent; early Fathers make the second person of the Trinity; but what matters it? In all divine actions, the three persons of the Trinity co-operate. In all these cases it is clear that the conception of the holy seed by Mary was by divine power, and therefore we are not to think of it as of an ordinary conception, or that that which was conceived was identical with what mothers conceive under other circumstances. What Mary conceived was different from that which any other mother ever conceives, for it was not mere man, but the God-man, and even as man different from every other son of Adam as possessed of sinless, incorruptible flesh and a holy, life-giving spirit; and if so it is folly to insist that the human nature then conceived must have had human personality and individuality, for that personality and individuality must be centered in the divine person, the active agent in the incarnation.

The doctrine of the Bible and the church is that the second person of the Trinity entered the womb of the Virgin, and became incarnate there, when she conceived, by the power of the divine spirit, the God-man. If God is immanent in nature, especially in the person of the Logos, or second person of the Trinity, surely there is no valid philosophical objection to the opinion that the divine presence, which was really there, as in all things, took to himself that primal human nature, which was appropriate to the mother's womb to be nourished there until the birth. He who manifested himself to man in so many theophanies, as the biblical narratives record, now brought the theophanic manifestations to their culmination in a permanent incarnation.

Under the general conception of the virgin birth there are many possible explanations that may be made; doubtless some that no one has yet proposed; and it is quite possible that we may never learn the real method of the conception of Jesus. Neither the Bible nor the church requires anything definite here. Only we cannot admit any such definition of the conception of Mary as excludes the divine activity, or represents that Jesus must have been conceived by Mary just exactly as every other man child is conceived when begotten by a

human father, with a distinct individuality, to which the second person of the Trinity could be united only externally or ethically, as a second and distinct being.

I have in my sermon on the Kenosis<sup>8</sup> distinctly stated the limitations to which the God-man subjected himself in his life in this world, and have urged the doctrine of a gradual incarnation, perfected only at the resurrection and ascension. I certainly cannot see any inconsistency between such a kenosis and the formula of Chalcedon. All these supposed inconsistencies are in the minds of our opponents, or of those who in the supposed interests of Christian liberty of opinion weaken the doctrine of the virgin birth so as to empty it of reality. I have fully recognized the difficulties that beset the denial of human personality to Jesus. I have given what seemed to me a possible solution of the difficulty:

Complete personality of the Godhead, in the human sense, was in the unity of the divine nature. There is only one divine person in this sense. Therefore it was necessary that the Son of God should take up into himself all those elements of personality which are necessary to an individual, as a distinct and separate being, which he did not have as the Son of God, and which therefore he must have as the Son of man. Accordingly we are compelled to think of a divine human personality for the God-man; that is, of certain elements of human personality in which human nature was centered, as in organic union with the central, divine, personal distinction of the Word of God.<sup>9</sup>

The formula of Chalcedon as the necessary unfolding of the doctrine of the virgin birth, is not responsible for any particular theory of human personality, or for any of the particular explanations of the difficult problems involved, whether those of Leontius of Byzantium, John of Damascus, whom Christian theologians have generally followed, or any other ancient or modern divine. There is room here for considerable difference of opinion, and fresh study in which philosophy may be helpful. All that the church doctrine requires as it faithfully adheres to the teaching of Holy Scripture, is that we should recognize that the unity of the God-man is in the person of the Logos; that there are not two distinct beings, God and man, in Jesus Christ, united only by an ethical union of indwelling, but one unique being, the God-man, with a single, not a dual personality, or individuality.

<sup>8</sup> *The Incarnation of Our Lord*, Scribner's.

<sup>9</sup> *Incarnation*, p. 201.

The modern mind uses by preference the inductive method. I have used this method all my professional life, as much probably as anyone else in the field of Holy Scripture and theology. But it is not the only method. All legitimate methods should be used for the discovery and the verification of truth and fact. It is evident that the inductive method has its place and importance; but it ought not to be so exaggerated as to make men skeptical of other methods. We cannot limit our knowledge, especially in theology, to what induction gives us. We can never know God save very inadequately by the inductive method. We may be scientists, and in a measure philosophers and historians of a certain grade, without going beyond it; but it is impossible to be biblical scholars or theologians resting on that method alone, and it is difficult even to be Christians. The Holy Scriptures have vindicated their divine authority for nineteen centuries, and the creeds of the church formulated on their basis for nearly so long—the Apostles' Creed since the middle of the second century, the Nicene since the early fourth, the faith of Chalcedon since the fifth. It is vain to suppose that Christians will abandon their faith in Holy Scripture and the creeds simply because inductive reasoning does not yield their doctrines, or because science and philosophy cannot vindicate them. If they could, the Christian religion would be reduced to the level of commonplace, and its divinity be open to suspicion.

The evidence for the faith of the church in the virgin birth is as strong as anyone could reasonably exact. What stronger evidence would men have? It was impossible to present any evidence that science, philosophy, or ordinary investigation in any department of knowledge could altogether verify. We may surely ask scholars to be reasonable, and not exact impossibilities.

It has seemed to me for a long time that modern preachers and writers have exaggerated the human nature of our Lord. This is, it is true, a reaction from the exaggeration of the divinity and neglect of the humanity in former times. But this reaction has already gone too far. It is necessary to a true biblical and historical faith that the humanity and the divinity should be more comprehensively studied. It is not merely the virgin birth that is in question, in the interest of the more complete humanity of our Lord, it is also the doctrine of

original sin and the sinlessness of Jesus; it is also his bodily resurrection and ascension, and the giving of his body in the eucharist. It is moreover the whole nature of the atonement and Christian salvation with its doctrine of sacrifice and propitiation. All of these doctrines are trembling in the balance in those very minds which doubt or deny the virgin birth. Those who give up the virgin birth will be compelled by logical and irresistible impulse eventually to give up all of these.

Jesus Christ was man, but not an individual man, altogether like other men. He was unique in his humanity, because he is the only God-man. The center of his complex being was not human but divine. Jesus Christ became man to identify himself with man and nature forever. If Jesus were only loosely connected with the divine being within him, if the union were merely an ethical one, then there could not have been any real sacrifice for the sins of the world; his death would be only that of a martyr and his blood have only educational value. If the Son of God were only loosely joined with the man Jesus, a resurrection of his body would be useless, and if no resurrection of the body, then no giving of his body in any sense in the holy eucharist, and that most sacred sacrament of our religion would become merely a love feast. A second advent and a world judgment also disappear from the scheme of such a theology. And what have we left? A religion such as the brilliant Harnack gives us in his *Essence of Christianity*, a quintessence indeed, but with all the life and glory of Christianity squeezed out of it, a religion such as never has existed, and never can exist, except in speculative brains.

I do not mean to say that men may not hold to many, if not the most, of the essential doctrines of our religion without belief in the virgin birth; but I do say that the very same influences which lead some men to discard the virgin birth lead others to discard, some, one of these doctrines, some, others; and that these are really to the logical mind all linked together in one massive chain, a comprehensive whole, the historical faith of the Christian church; not of any one denomination of Christians, but of them all; not as special to any particular age, but as the one faith transmitted from Christ and his apostles; not merely dogma, but the vital experience of all generations of Christians for nineteen centuries.