

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 3: THE INCARNATION OF THE SON OF GOD

Lesson 7

The Virgin Birth of Christ

Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

Why This Doctrine Is Non-Negotiable in Orthodox Christology

Key Texts: Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38; Galatians 4:4

“The Holy Spirit Will Come Upon You”

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SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is one of those doctrines that serves as a theological watershed: those who accept it and those who reject it are not merely disagreeing about a peripheral detail of the Christmas story; they are operating with fundamentally different understandings of what Christianity is, what Scripture is, and what kind of God is at work in the world. The doctrine is ancient, apostolic, and universal, confessed in the Apostles' Creed ("born of the Virgin Mary"), the Nicene Creed ("by the power of the Holy Spirit He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary"), and the Chalcedonian Definition. It is not a medieval accretion or a product of later theological speculation; it is among the earliest and most universal convictions of the Christian church, drawn directly and explicitly from the testimony of two independent Gospel sources (Matthew 1:18–25 and Luke 1:26–38) and from the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.

The doctrine states simply and precisely that Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, without a human father. Mary was a virgin at the time of the conception; the Holy Spirit "came upon" her (Luke 1:35, NASB 1995) and the power of the Most High "overshadowed" her, so that the child conceived in her womb was "holy" and would be called "the Son of God" (Luke 1:35, NASB 1995). Joseph, to whom she was betrothed, was not the biological father of Jesus; he is introduced in the Matthean genealogy as "the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born" (Matthew 1:16, NASB 1995), with the passive "was born" deliberately distinguishing Jesus's birth from the biological pattern established throughout the preceding genealogy ("X became the father of Y").

This lesson works through the biblical testimony to the virgin birth in both Matthew and Luke, examines the Old Testament prophetic background in Isaiah 7:14, addresses the major objections raised against the doctrine (historical, theological, and apologetic), and makes the case that the virgin birth is not merely a peripheral embellishment of the Christmas story but a theologically significant and non-negotiable element of orthodox Christology. The lesson then turns to the four great theological significances of the doctrine: it safeguards Christ's sinlessness, announces His divine origin, demonstrates the supernatural character of redemption, and connects the incarnation to the creative power of the Holy Spirit. It closes, as every genuine christological study must, in doxology.

I. THE BIBLICAL TESTIMONY: MATTHEW 1:18–25

The Evangelist's Account: The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

A. The Setting and the Problem

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is structured as a resolution to a legal and moral crisis within the framework of Jewish betrothal law. Mary and Joseph were betrothed, a legal relationship in first-century Judaism that was binding as marriage, required a formal divorce to dissolve, and obligated both parties to full marital fidelity, even though physical consummation had not yet taken place. The discovery that Mary was pregnant before the marriage had been consummated placed Joseph in an agonizing position: he was legally entitled to pursue a public divorce that would expose Mary to disgrace and, in the most severe application of the Law, to capital punishment; or he could seek a private divorce ("dismiss her secretly," Matthew 1:19, NASB 1995), which would preserve her from the most severe public consequences while still dissolving the betrothal.

Matthew describes Joseph as "a righteous man" who was "unwilling to disgrace her" (v. 19, NASB 1995) and who chose the more merciful path of private divorce. But before he could act on this decision, "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream" (v. 20, NASB 1995) with the message that resolved the crisis with an explanation that exceeded anything Joseph could have anticipated. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (v. 20, NASB 1995). The phrase "of the Holy Spirit" (ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου, *ek pneumatos hagiou*) is unambiguous: the origin of the child in Mary's womb is not human but divine. No human father is involved; the conception is the direct work of the Holy Spirit.

B. The Fulfillment Formula and Isaiah 7:14

Matthew's characteristic fulfillment formula follows immediately: "Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:22–23, NASB 1995). Matthew is citing the Septuagint text of Isaiah 7:14, which renders the Hebrew 'almah (עַלְמָה) with the Greek *parthenos* (παρθένος), meaning "virgin" in the strict sense. The apostolic identification of the virgin birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 is made under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and carries definitive hermeneutical authority: whatever the near historical referent of Isaiah's prophecy, its ultimate fulfillment is the virginal conception of Jesus.

The name Immanuel, "God with us", is Matthew's christological announcement compressed into a single word. The one born of the Virgin Mary is not merely a divinely sent messenger, not merely a uniquely gifted human prophet, not merely the greatest of Israel's kings: He is God with us, the presence of the living God in the most personal, physical, and permanent form conceivable. The virgin birth is the means by which God comes to be with us; Immanuel is the theological declaration of what His coming means. The two are inseparable: the supernatural conception announces the supernatural Person, and the supernatural Person gives the supernatural conception its full theological significance.

C. Joseph's Obedience and Its Significance

The account concludes with Joseph's obedience: "And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus" (Matthew 1:24–25, NASB 1995). Two details in this conclusion carry theological weight. First, Joseph "kept her a virgin until she gave birth", the explicit statement that Mary's virginity was intact at the birth confirms the virginal conception as a historical reality, not merely a symbolic claim. Second, Joseph "called His name Jesus", the naming of the child by Joseph, in obedience to the angelic command, constitutes a legal act of adoption through which Jesus becomes a son of David by legal lineage. Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus; he is the legal father, and through his legal paternity the Davidic lineage of Jesus is established.

II. THE BIBLICAL TESTIMONY: LUKE 1:26–38

The Annunciation: The Angel Gabriel and the Virgin of Nazareth

A. The Setting and the Announcement

Luke's account of the virgin birth approaches the event from Mary's perspective rather than Joseph's, providing a complementary and equally explicit account of the virginal conception that is entirely independent of Matthew's source. The angel Gabriel is sent by God "to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary" (Luke 1:26–27, NASB 1995). Luke's twice-repeated identification of Mary as a virgin (παρθένος, parthenos, vv. 27a, 27b) is deliberate and emphatic, the virginal status of Mary is not a peripheral detail but a theologically essential identification that the narrative requires.

Gabriel's announcement to Mary is the most theologically compressed declaration of the incarnation in all of Scripture: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35, NASB 1995). Three elements of this announcement demand close attention. First, the agent of the conception is the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who hovered over the waters in Genesis 1:2, who anointed the kings and prophets of Israel, who is the personal, divine, creative power of God at work in the world. The virgin birth is, from the perspective of its divine causation, a work of the Spirit.

B. The Causal Logic of Luke 1:35

Second, the overshadowing of the "power of the Most High" deliberately echoes the language of the divine glory cloud that "overshadowed" the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 40:35, LXX: ἐπεσκίασεν, epeskiasen, the same Greek verb as Luke 1:35). The creative, life-giving power of the Most High descends upon Mary as the divine glory descended upon the tabernacle, making her the

locus of the divine presence in the most intimate and physical way imaginable. Mary is the new tabernacle, the place where the divine glory takes up its human dwelling in preparation for the birth of the one who will “tabernacle among us” (John 1:14).

Third, and most importantly for the theological significance of the virgin birth, the angelic announcement draws a causal connection between the miraculous conception and the divine identity of the child: “for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.” The Greek connective διὸ καί (dio kai, “for that reason” or “therefore also”) establishes a logical, causal link between the Holy Spirit’s action in the conception and the divine Sonship of the child. This does not mean that the Son’s divine Sonship originated at the incarnation, the doctrine of eternal generation (Lesson 4) has already established that the Sonship is eternal. It means that the supernatural character of the conception is the appropriate, fitting, and divinely appointed expression of the divine origin of the one who is conceived: the eternal Son, entering human existence, does so in a manner that announces and reflects His divine nature.

C. Mary’s Response: The Handmaid of the Lord

Luke’s account concludes with Mary’s extraordinary response: “Behold, the bonds slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38, NASB 1995). The word translated “bonds slave” is δούλη (doulē), the feminine form of doulos, the standard New Testament word for a slave, one who belongs entirely to another and whose life is given over to the will of another. Mary’s response is a model of the obedience of faith: she does not fully understand what the angel has announced (verse 34, “How can this be?”), but she trusts the God who has announced it and submits her body, her reputation, and her future to the divine purpose. The virgin birth is not merely a miracle performed on Mary; it is a miracle performed through Mary, with her willing, faithful, and self-giving cooperation.

The pastoral significance of Mary’s response should not be underestimated. She is betrothed to Joseph; an unexplained pregnancy will cost her the relationship, her reputation, and potentially her safety. She is “troubled” (v. 29, NASB 1995) and “disturbed” by the angel’s greeting. She is, by any human measure, in an extraordinarily vulnerable position. And yet she says: “May it be done to me according to your word.” The God who draws near to the humble and the lowly chose to enter the world through a young woman who had every earthly reason to be overwhelmed, and whose faith, expressed in this simple surrender, is among the most beautiful acts of obedience recorded in all of Scripture.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.”

LUKE 1:35, NASB 1995

III. THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Four Reasons Why This Doctrine Is Non-Negotiable in Orthodox Christology

A. The Virgin Birth Safeguards Christ's Sinlessness

The first and most directly soteriological significance of the virgin birth is its role in safeguarding the sinlessness of Christ. The New Testament is unambiguous about the sinlessness of Jesus: He was “holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners” (Hebrews 7:26, NASB 1995); He “did no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth” (1 Peter 2:22, NASB 1995); He was “make Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NASB 1995). This sinlessness is not merely morally exemplary; it is soteriologically necessary: only a sinless sacrifice can atone for sin, and only a sinless representative can provide the positive righteousness that justification requires.

The question of how Jesus could be born of a fallen human woman without inheriting the guilt and the corruption of original sin has generated considerable theological discussion. The Reformed tradition has generally answered the question by pointing to two factors. First, the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in the conception: Gabriel declares that the child will be “holy” (ἅγιον, *hagion*, Luke 1:35), set apart from sin at the moment of His conception by the divine creative act of the Spirit. Second, and more fundamentally, the absence of a human father is significant because the transmission of original sin, in the Reformed understanding, is connected with natural generation from Adam through the federal headship of the human father. The virgin birth interrupts the ordinary channel of transmission: the eternal Son enters human existence not through the normal pattern of human generation from a human father but through the supernatural creative act of the Spirit, who forms a human nature for the Son that is genuinely human (drawn from Mary's substance) yet preserved from the corruption that natural generation would otherwise transmit.

B. The Virgin Birth Announces Christ's Divine Origin

The second theological significance of the virgin birth is its function as a divine announcement and authentication of the divine origin of the one who is conceived. This is the logic of Luke 1:35: “for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.” The supernatural mode of His conception is the divinely appointed sign of His divine identity. The virgin birth does not cause the divine Sonship, the eternal generation of the Son (Lesson 4) is the eternal ground of His Sonship, but it announces and reflects it. The eternal Son, in entering human existence, does so in a manner that is appropriate to and revelatory of His divine nature: not through the ordinary channel of natural generation, but through the extraordinary, creative, supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit.

This announcement function of the virgin birth is visible in the way Matthew structures his Gospel. The opening genealogy traces Jesus's legal lineage back to Abraham, establishing His historical rootedness in the covenant people and His legal claim to the Davidic throne. But the genealogy

arrives at Joseph, not at Jesus, through the normal biological pattern, and then it pivots. The pattern of “X became the father of Y” breaks: Joseph is described as “the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born” (Matthew 1:16, NASB 1995). The passive “was born” signals the departure from the normal genealogical pattern; and the following narrative explains the departure. Jesus is in the line of David and Abraham by legal lineage; but His origin is not from human generation. He is “God with us”, and His birth announced it.

C. The Virgin Birth Demonstrates the Supernatural Character of Redemption

The third theological significance of the virgin birth is its function as a declaration of the wholly supernatural character of the redemption it inaugurates. The salvation that comes through Jesus Christ is not the product of human initiative, human effort, or human achievement; it is the product of divine action, divine grace, and divine power operating from outside the human situation and within it simultaneously. The virgin birth embodies this truth at the level of its very origins: the Redeemer Himself is not the product of human generation. He comes from God, in the fullest sense, not merely as one sent from God (as the prophets were sent), but as one who has no human father, whose very existence in the human world is the result of a divine creative act.

J. Gresham Machen, in his magisterial study *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930), makes this point with characteristic force: the virgin birth is “in full accord with the redemptive character of the Christian religion.” Christianity is not a religion of human ascent toward God; it is a religion of divine descent toward humanity. God takes the initiative; God provides the Savior; God accomplishes the redemption; God applies the benefits. The virgin birth is, at the level of its very historical occurrence, a declaration of this theological reality: the Savior does not arise from within the human condition as its greatest achievement; He comes from outside it, from above it, as God’s answer to a problem that humanity itself is incapable of solving.

D. The Virgin Birth Connects the Incarnation to the Spirit’s Creative Power

The fourth theological significance of the virgin birth is its identification of the incarnation as a work of the Holy Spirit, and thereby its connection of the beginning of the new creation with the beginning of the old. In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God “was moving over the surface of the waters” (NASB 1995) as the divine creative power that brought order and life out of the formless void. The Spirit’s hovering over the chaos is the creative prelude to the divine Word that speaks creation into existence. In Luke 1:35, the Spirit “comes upon” Mary and the “power of the Most High overshadows” her, the creative power of God, the same power that brought the first creation into being, is now at work in the new creation. The virginal conception of Jesus is the first moment of the new creation: the Spirit who hovered over the waters in Genesis 1 now hovers over the Virgin Mary, and from this second creative act comes the one who is “the beginning of the new creation of God” (Revelation 3:14, NASB 1995 margin).

This pneumatological dimension of the virgin birth connects the entire arc of the Spirit’s work in Scripture: from the creative brooding of Genesis 1:2, through the anointing of the kings and prophets of Israel, to the Spirit’s descent upon Jesus at His baptism (“The Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove,” Luke 3:22, NASB 1995), to the Pentecostal outpouring by which the risen and ascended Christ sends the Spirit upon His people (Acts 2). The same Spirit who was the agent of the incarnation is the agent of the new birth in every believer: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6, NASB 1995). The virgin birth is not an isolated miracle; it is the inaugural event of a new order of creation brought into being by the creative power of the Holy Spirit.

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.”

MATTHEW 1:23, NASB 1995

IV. AGAINST THE DENIALS: WHY THE VIRGIN BIRTH IS NON-NEGOTIABLE

Engaging the Major Objections to the Historical and Theological Credibility of the Doctrine

A. The Historical Objection: Late or Legendary Development

The most common historical objection to the virgin birth is the claim that the tradition is a late development, a legendary embellishment added to an originally simpler story, perhaps modeled on the pagan myths of gods fathering children with human women (the “similar pagan stories” argument), or perhaps developed within the early Christian community as a theological elaboration of the significance of Jesus. Several responses to this objection are decisive.

First, the pagan parallel argument collapses on close examination. The pagan stories of divine-human unions (Zeus fathering Hercules, etc.) involve the physical union of a god with a human woman, a fundamentally different and explicitly sexual conception. The New Testament virgin birth involves no sexual union of any kind; the Holy Spirit’s creative action is explicitly distinguished from human fatherhood. The parallels are superficial at best and involve categories that the New Testament account specifically excludes. Second, the two Gospel accounts (Matthew and Luke) are independent of each other, approach the event from different perspectives (Joseph’s and Mary’s respectively), and agree on the essential details (virginal conception, Holy Spirit as the agent, betrothal to Joseph, birth in fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14). The existence of two independent, consistent accounts arguing for the same event is a strong indication of historical reliability.

Third, and most powerfully, the criterion of embarrassment applies with full force. The virgin birth was not a theologically convenient story for the early church to invent; it was a source of ongoing

social and legal embarrassment. The charge that Jesus was illegitimate, “born of fornication” (John 8:41, NASB 1995), was apparently current in the first century and was later developed in the Jewish polemical tradition (the *Toldot Yeshu*). A community fabricating a birth narrative would not have chosen a story that exposed its founder to the charge of illegitimacy; it would have chosen something less susceptible to malicious interpretation. The virgin birth is precisely the kind of embarrassing, socially costly claim that the criterion of embarrassment identifies as unlikely to have been invented.

B. The Theological Objection: Is the Virgin Birth Necessary for Christology?

A second category of objection is theological rather than historical: even granting the historical occurrence, is the virgin birth theologically necessary? Could the eternal Son have become incarnate through ordinary human generation while remaining fully divine and fully sinless? Some theologians in the liberal and neo-orthodox traditions have argued that the virgin birth is theologically superfluous, that it adds nothing to the Christology that cannot be established on other grounds and that its denial does not damage the gospel.

The response to this objection is not merely that the virgin birth is attested in Scripture and therefore must be believed (though this is true and sufficient), but that the denial of the virgin birth has a revealing logic: it consistently accompanies a diminished Christology and a diminished view of Scripture. The theologians who deny the virgin birth do not, as a rule, simply excise it from their Christology while leaving everything else intact; they typically also hold a lower view of biblical inspiration, a more naturalistic account of the incarnation, and a reduced soteriology. The virgin birth functions as a kind of christological canary: its presence or absence signals the health of the broader theological ecosystem. Machen’s observation is as trenchant as ever: the attack on the virgin birth is always, at its root, an attack on the supernatural character of Christianity itself.

C. Why the Denial of the Virgin Birth Is a Denial of a Necessary Doctrine

The Reformation confessions and the classical evangelical tradition have consistently held the virgin birth to be an essential doctrine, not in the sense that every error about it automatically forfeits salvation, but in the sense that its denial is incompatible with the historic Christian faith as confessed in the ecumenical creeds and as taught in Holy Scripture. It is confessed in the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Chalcedonian Definition; it is explicitly and repeatedly taught in two independent Gospel accounts; and it is the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy that Matthew’s authoritative apostolic interpretation identifies as the virginal conception of Jesus.

The pastor who is tempted to treat the virgin birth as a secondary or peripheral doctrine, as a question that reasonable Christians can disagree about without serious consequence, should consider what is at stake in its denial. If Jesus was born through ordinary human generation, then either His divine Sonship is not what the New Testament claims (because the causal connection between the Spirit’s creative action and His divine identity, as stated in Luke 1:35, is severed), or the transmission of original sin does not affect Him (which requires an account of why it does not that is more ad hoc

and less textually grounded than the account provided by the virgin birth itself). The difficulties created by the denial of the virgin birth are greater than the difficulties created by its affirmation. The believer who holds it on the authority of Scripture and the credal tradition of the church is on far more secure ground than the one who dismisses it on the authority of a methodological naturalism that the Scripture itself does not recognize.

V. THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND THE QUESTION OF ORIGINAL SIN

How Christ Could Be Born of a Woman Yet Without Inherited Guilt

The question of how Jesus could be born of a fallen human woman and yet be free from the guilt and corruption of original sin is one of the most technically demanding in all of Christology, and the history of the church's engagement with it is instructive. The Roman Catholic tradition resolved the difficulty by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (formally defined in 1854), according to which Mary herself was conceived without original sin, so that Jesus could be born of a sinless mother without inheriting the corruption of the fallen human race. This solution, however, is without biblical warrant, introduces a new problem (how was Mary preserved from sin in her own conception?), and involves an unnecessary addition to the apostolic tradition.

The Reformed tradition offers a more biblically grounded account. The transmission of original sin, in the Reformed understanding, is connected with natural generation from Adam through the federal headship of the human father: sin is not merely a biological infection transmitted through the female line, but a legal-relational status into which every human being born of a human father enters in solidarity with Adam as the federal head of the human race. The virgin birth removes Jesus from this chain of federal solidarity: He does not have a human father, and therefore He does not enter human existence under the federal headship of Adam. He enters human existence through the supernatural creative act of the Holy Spirit, who forms for the eternal Son a human nature from the substance of Mary that is genuinely human, and therefore capable of representing humanity, while being preserved by the sanctifying work of the Spirit from the corruption and guilt that natural generation from Adam would otherwise transmit.

This account is not without its difficulties, and the precise mechanisms of the transmission of original sin and its absence in Christ are matters on which the Reformed tradition has not always spoken with complete unanimity. What is clear from the biblical testimony is the fact: Jesus was sinless (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; 2 Corinthians 5:21), Jesus was genuinely human (Hebrews 2:14–17), and the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in the conception was the divinely appointed means by which the human nature assumed by the eternal Son was formed holy (Luke 1:35: "the holy Child"). The theology

reaches as far as the text takes it, and then acknowledges mystery, which is the appropriate posture before the most astonishing event in the history of the universe.

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: THE GOD WHO DRAWS NEAR TO THE LOWLY

Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) is the proper doxological response to the mystery of the virgin birth, and it is also the proper conclusion to any theological engagement with the doctrine. "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant" (Luke 1:46–48, NASB 1995). The God who chose to enter the world through the womb of a young, unnamed, socially marginal woman in an occupied territory at the edge of the Roman Empire is the God whose characteristic pattern of operation is the reversal of human expectations: He has scattered the proud, brought down the mighty, exalted the humble, filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty (vv. 51–53). The virgin birth is the most dramatic expression in all of history of this divine pattern: the eternal Son, before whom angels veil their faces, chose to enter the world through the most vulnerable and the most unlikely of all possible human channels.

The pastoral implication is of inexhaustible richness. The God to whom you bring your weakness, your insignificance, your social marginality, your sense that you are too small or too broken to be of use to the divine purposes, this is the God who chose a teenage girl in occupied Palestine as the locus of the most important event in the history of the universe. He "has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant" (Luke 1:48, NASB 1995). The word translated "humble state" is *ταπεινώσιν* (*tapeinōsin*), the noun form of the word translated "humble" in the great Philippians 2 kenosis passage. The God who "humbled Himself" (Phil. 2:8) in the incarnation chooses the humble as the instruments of His purposes. He regarded Mary's lowly state. He regards yours.

The virgin birth is not a doctrine to be defended reluctantly against the skepticism of the modern world; it is a doctrine to be proclaimed with joy as one of the most revealing moments in the entire biblical narrative, a moment that discloses, with extraordinary clarity, the character of the God who became our Savior. He did not come as a conquering king, announced by heralds and welcomed by the powerful. He came as an infant, to an unknown young woman, in a provincial town, in a manner so surprising and so contrary to human expectation that only an angel announcing it and a Spirit working it could make it credible. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16, NASB 1995). The virgin birth is the historical form of that giving, the moment at which the love of God for the world took on flesh and blood in the womb of a willing servant who said: "May it be done to me according to your word."

Key Texts: *Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:16, 18–25; Luke 1:26–38, 46–55; Galatians 4:4; Luke 1:35; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; 2 Corinthians 5:21*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Virgin Birth	The doctrine that Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, without a human father. Mary was a virgin at the time of the conception and remained so until after the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:25). The doctrine is attested in two independent Gospel sources (Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38), confessed in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, and presented as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. The virgin birth is not merely a peripheral embellishment of the nativity narrative; it is a theologically significant and non-negotiable element of orthodox Christology with direct implications for Christ’s sinlessness, divine identity, and the supernatural character of redemption.
Virginal Conception	The more precise theological term for the event described in Matthew 1:18–25 and Luke 1:26–38, emphasizing that the miracle involved is specifically the conception of Jesus without a human father, by the creative power of the Holy Spirit. ‘Virginal conception’ is technically more accurate than ‘virgin birth’ (the miracle occurred at conception, not at birth), though ‘virgin birth’ is the term established by credal and confessional usage. The virginal conception distinguishes the miraculous origin of Jesus from all pagan myths of divine-human unions (which involve physical, sexual generation) and grounds His unique identity in the direct creative action of the Spirit.
Immanuel	Hebrew: ‘God with us’ (עִמָּנוּאֵל, ‘immanu ‘el). The name given in Isaiah 7:14 to the child to be born of the ‘almah, interpreted by Matthew 1:23 as the fulfilled name of Jesus. The theological significance of the name is the identification of the incarnate Christ as the presence of God with His people in the most personal, physical, and permanent sense possible. Matthew frames his entire Gospel with Immanuel theology: the Gospel opens with the announcement ‘God with us’ (1:23) and closes with the promise ‘I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ (28:20, NASB 1995). The virgin birth is the historical means by which Immanuel, God himself, comes to be with His people.
Parthenos	Greek: ‘virgin.’ The term used by Luke (1:27, twice) to describe Mary, and by the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew ‘almah in Isaiah 7:14. In Greek usage, parthenos unambiguously denotes a woman who has not had sexual intercourse. The Septuagint translators’ choice to render ‘almah with parthenos reflects their understanding that the Isaiah 7:14 prophecy pointed toward a

Term	Definition
	virginal conception. Matthew’s citation of the Septuagint reading in 1:23, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, definitively establishes the virginal character of the birth of Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophetic sign.
Betrothal	The Jewish legal institution of formal engagement, which in first-century Judaism was legally equivalent to marriage in most respects: it was binding, required a formal divorce to dissolve, and obligated both parties to marital fidelity. A betrothed woman who engaged in sexual relations with another man was subject to the same legal consequences as an adulterous wife. Joseph and Mary were betrothed at the time of the virginal conception, which explains both the legal seriousness of the situation (Joseph’s consideration of divorce) and the legal significance of Joseph’s subsequent taking of Mary as his wife (which established the legal paternity that gave Jesus His Davidic lineage).
Fulfillment Formula	Matthew’s characteristic introductory phrase (‘Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet’) used to introduce Old Testament citations that the evangelist identifies as fulfilled in the events of Jesus’s life. Matthew uses this formula ten times in his Gospel (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9), always in connection with specific events of the incarnate life that he identifies as the fulfillment of specific prophetic texts. The fulfillment formula reflects Matthew’s overarching hermeneutical conviction that the life of Jesus is the goal toward which the Old Testament prophetic tradition was moving.
Immaculate Conception	The Roman Catholic dogma, formally defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854, holding that the Virgin Mary herself was conceived without original sin, by a singular privilege and grace of God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ. The doctrine is intended to explain how Jesus could be born of a sinless mother; but it is without biblical warrant, conflicts with the universal scope of original sin (Romans 5:12: ‘all sinned’), and introduces a new problem (how was Mary preserved from sin?). The Protestant and Reformed traditions reject the Immaculate Conception as an unscriptural addition to the apostolic tradition, and account for the sinlessness of Christ through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the virginal conception itself.
Tapeinōsis	Greek: ‘humble state,’ ‘lowliness,’ ‘humiliation.’ Used in Luke 1:48 (Mary’s Magnificat: ‘He has had regard for the humble state of His bondslave’) to describe the social and religious lowliness of Mary that God ‘regarded’ in choosing her as the mother of the Messiah. The term is the noun form of tapeinoō, the verb used in Philippians 2:8 for Christ’s self-humbling in the incarnation. The linguistic connection between the tapeinōsis of Mary and the tapeinōsis of Christ is theologically suggestive: the God who ‘humbles Himself’ in the incarnation chooses the humble as the instruments and the companions of His redemptive purposes.

Term	Definition
Federal Headship	<p>The theological principle by which Adam acts as the representative head of the entire human race, so that his sin is legally imputed to all who are ‘in Adam’ by natural birth (Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:22). Federal headship is one of the primary categories used in the Reformed tradition to explain how original sin is transmitted and how the virgin birth preserves Christ from inheriting it: since Christ has no human father, He is not in the line of Adam’s federal headship in the ordinary way, and is therefore not subject to the legal imputation of Adam’s sin that natural generation from a human father would entail.</p>
Magnificat	<p>The canticle (hymn) of Mary in Luke 1:46–55, named from its opening word in the Latin Vulgate (‘Magnificat anima mea Dominum,’ ‘My soul magnifies the Lord’). The Magnificat is the proper doxological response to the annunciation and the virginal conception: Mary’s song of praise expresses both her personal gratitude (‘He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant’) and the cosmic significance of what God is doing in the incarnation (scattering the proud, bringing down the mighty, exalting the humble, fulfilling the covenant promises to Abraham). The Magnificat has been sung in the church’s liturgy from the earliest centuries and remains the paradigmatic expression of incarnational doxology.</p>

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the virgin birth is a historical event, a real, datable, geographically locatable occurrence in the life of a real woman named Mary in first-century Palestine, and that the denial of its historical reality is not a theologically neutral position but a position that involves the rejection of the explicit and consistent testimony of two independent Gospel sources, the apostolic identification of the event as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and the universal confession of the ecumenical church. The virgin birth is not a matter on which evangelical Christians can agree to disagree; it is a matter on which the church's confession has been clear, consistent, and universal from its earliest days.

We must also believe that the virgin birth is theologically significant and not merely historically miraculous. The four theological significances identified in this lesson, the safeguarding of Christ's sinlessness, the announcement of His divine origin, the declaration of the supernatural character of redemption, and the connection of the incarnation to the Spirit's creative power, are not secondary embellishments but primary reasons why the doctrine matters for the whole of Christology and soteriology. The pastor who understands these theological connections will not preach the virgin birth merely as an annual Christmas obligation; he will preach it as one of the most theologically rich and pastorally significant doctrines in the entire theological encyclopedia.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let Mary's response to the annunciation become the model of your own response to the mystery of the incarnation: "May it be done to me according to your word." Not the detached assent of the theologian who has solved a problem, but the surrendered trust of the creature before the Creator, the willingness to receive what God has declared, to submit to what God has purposed, and to find in the divine word the sufficient ground for a faith that exceeds the capacity of human understanding to fully grasp. The virgin birth is not merely a doctrine to be believed; it is an invitation to the kind of trust that Mary modeled, the trust that says yes to the divine word even when the yes costs everything.

Desire a deeper appreciation of what it means that the eternal Son entered the world through Mary's womb, through the most intimate, most vulnerable, most physically dependent of all human experiences: prenatal existence. The one who upholds all things by the word of His power was upheld in his early human existence by the biological systems of a young woman who said yes to the word of an angel. The condescension involved in this is almost too profound to articulate. Let it move you to a worship that is not merely intellectual but visceral, not merely theological but personal: the God who loved you enough to become an embryo is a God who can be trusted with every dimension of your existence.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read J. Gresham Machen's *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930). This is the most thorough and most rigorous scholarly defense of the historical and theological credibility of the virgin birth ever written. Machen works through the textual, historical, and theological objections with exhaustive care and unfailing precision. It is not light reading, but every pastor who has worked through it will be equipped to engage the objections his congregation will encounter with both intellectual rigor and pastoral confidence.
- Preach the Magnificat as a full christological and theological sermon, not merely as a Christmas warm-up. Luke 1:46–55 is one of the most theologically rich and most emotionally powerful passages in the New Testament. Its themes of divine reversal, covenant faithfulness, and the humility of the instrument through whom God enters the world deserve extended treatment that goes beyond their usual liturgical function as a seasonal reading. The congregation that has sat with the Magnificat as a full theological text will understand the character of the God who comes to them in Jesus in a deeper and more transforming way.
- Engage the apologetic challenges to the virgin birth in your preaching and teaching context. The challenges are real and your congregation will encounter them: the 'almah debate, the pagan parallels argument, the claim of late legendary development, the theological objection that the doctrine is superfluous. Equip your people with the responses this lesson provides, and supplement them with Machen's more detailed treatment. The believer who has worked through the objections and understands why the virgin birth is historically credible and theologically indispensable will be a more confident and more effective witness.
- Use the doctrine of the virgin birth to teach the relationship between the Testaments. The fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:22–23 is a paradigmatic instance of the christological hermeneutic of the New Testament, the way in which the risen Christ and His apostles read the Old Testament as a unified testimony pointing toward its fulfillment in Jesus. The lesson that worked through Isaiah 7:14 in Lesson 5 of this series can be profitably revisited here, deepened by the Gospel accounts of its specific fulfillment in the virginal conception of Jesus.
- Pray the Magnificat regularly as an act of personal devotion and corporate worship. Luke 1:46–55 has been prayed and sung in the church's liturgy (as part of the Daily Office) from the earliest centuries of the Christian tradition. Incorporating the Magnificat into your personal prayer life, or into your congregation's worship, especially in the Advent season, is a way of joining the church's long, unbroken doxological response to the mystery of the incarnation, in the very words that Mary herself spoke in the moment of its first dawning. "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Before studying this lesson, how important did you consider the virgin birth to be in relation to the rest of the Christian faith? Was it a doctrine you held firmly, held loosely, or had questions about? How has the lesson affected your understanding of its theological significance and its relationship to the broader structure of Christology?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read Matthew 1:1–25 carefully. Trace the genealogical pattern established in verses 2–15 ('X became the father of Y') and identify where and how the pattern breaks in verse 16. How does the phrase 'by whom Jesus was born' (v. 16) signal something unusual about Jesus's birth? What does the angel's declaration in verse 20 ('the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit') clarify? How does Matthew's citation of Isaiah 7:14 in verses 22–23 interpret the significance of what he has narrated?

3. Read Luke 1:26–38. Identify every piece of information Luke provides about Mary before the angel's arrival. Why does Mary ask 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' (v. 34)? What three elements of Gabriel's explanation in verse 35 describe the divine action in the conception? What is the logical force of the connective 'for that reason' (διὸ καὶ) in verse 35? How does Mary's response in verse 38 demonstrate the obedience of faith?

4. Read Luke 1:46–55 (the Magnificat). Identify the specific claims Mary makes about God's character and His actions in this canticle. What theme of divine reversal runs through verses 51–53? How do verses 54–55 connect the incarnation to the Abrahamic covenant? How does the Magnificat function as a theological commentary on the annunciation and the virginal conception?

5. Read Isaiah 7:1–16. What is the historical context of the prophecy? Who is being addressed, and what is the specific situation that prompts the sign? What does the name 'Immanuel' mean, and what significance does it have both for the immediate historical context and for its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus? How does Matthew's citation in Matthew 1:22–23 interpret the ultimate significance of the prophecy?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson argues that the causal connection drawn in Luke 1:35 ('for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God') does not mean the divine Sonship originated at the conception, but that the supernatural mode of conception is the appropriate and divinely appointed expression of

the divine origin of the one who is conceived. How does this interpretation relate to the doctrine of eternal generation studied in Lesson 4? What would be lost theologically if we read Luke 1:35 as teaching that the Son's divine Sonship originated at the virginal conception?

7. The lesson presents four theological significances of the virgin birth: (1) safeguarding sinlessness, (2) announcing divine origin, (3) declaring the supernatural character of redemption, and (4) connecting the incarnation to the Spirit's creative power. Which of these four significances do you find most theologically compelling, and why? Are there additional theological significances that the lesson does not discuss but that you would want to add?

8. The lesson rejects the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as an unscriptural addition to the apostolic tradition, and offers instead a Reformed account that grounds Christ's sinlessness in the sanctifying work of the Spirit at the virginal conception and the absence of a human father (and therefore of Adam's federal headship). Evaluate this Reformed account. What are its strengths? What are its remaining difficulties? How would you explain this to an ordinary member of your congregation without technical theological vocabulary?

9. The lesson argues that the denial of the virgin birth is consistently associated with a diminished Christology and a reduced view of Scripture, that the virgin birth functions as a 'theological canary,' and that its presence or absence signals the health of the broader theological ecosystem. Do you agree with this observation? Can you point to historical examples that support or complicate this claim? What does the association between denial of the virgin birth and broader theological liberalism suggest about the theological logic of the doctrine?

10. The lesson addresses the pagan parallels argument (that the virgin birth is modeled on pagan myths of gods fathering children with human women). What specific differences between the New Testament account and the pagan stories make the parallel argument collapse on close examination? How would you explain these differences to a skeptical friend who had encountered the parallel argument in a popular book or documentary?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

11. The lesson describes Mary's response to the annunciation ('May it be done to me according to your word') as a model of the obedience of faith. What specific aspects of Mary's situation made this response costly and difficult? In what area of your own life is God calling you to a similar response, to say yes to a divine word that costs something, that exceeds your understanding, and that requires a trust that goes beyond what your circumstances can confirm?

12. The lesson suggests that the Magnificat deserves treatment as a full theological sermon rather than merely a liturgical reading. Have you ever preached or taught from Luke 1:46–55 as a complete, standalone text? If you were to preach a sermon on the Magnificat, what would be your main theme, what structure would you use, and what application would you press upon your congregation? How

would you connect its themes of divine reversal and covenant faithfulness to the specific circumstances of your congregation?

13. The lesson argues that the virgin birth is not a matter on which evangelical Christians can agree to disagree, because its denial is incompatible with the historic Christian faith as confessed in the ecumenical creeds. How would you respond to a theologically thoughtful member of your congregation who said: ‘I believe in Jesus and trust Him as my Savior, but I have serious doubts about the virgin birth, can’t we just agree to disagree about this?’ What pastoral tone would you take, and what theological arguments would you use?

14. This lesson completes the first three lessons of Unit 3 on the Incarnation. Looking ahead to Lessons 8 (the True Humanity of Christ) and 9 (the Full Deity of Christ), how does the virgin birth, which involves both divine action (the Spirit’s creative power) and genuine human experience (gestation in a woman’s womb), provide a foundation for the subsequent discussions of both the true humanity and the full deity of the incarnate Son? How does the virgin birth embody the mystery of the hypostatic union before that mystery is formally defined in the following lessons?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson’s prayer time with a reading of Luke 1:26–55 in its entirety, from the annunciation through the Magnificat. Read it slowly and attentively, as if for the first time, attending to the emotional and theological movement of the narrative: from Gabriel’s arrival and Mary’s troubled response, through the staggering announcement of verse 35, through Mary’s surrender in verse 38, to the explosion of praise that opens the Magnificat. Let the group notice that the movement of the passage is the movement of authentic faith: from confusion and fear, through the reception of the divine word, to the surrender of the creature, to doxology. This is the pattern of every genuine encounter with the gracious, powerful, mysterious God who draws near to the lowly.

Spend time in adoration of the Holy Spirit for the creative, sanctifying, incarnating work described in Luke 1:35, the work of the Spirit who is both the agent of the new creation and the one who forms the human nature of the eternal Son in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Spirit who brooded over the waters in Genesis 1:2, who anointed the kings and prophets of Israel, who descended on Jesus at His baptism, who was poured out at Pentecost, who indwells every believer, this same Spirit accomplished, in the womb of a young woman in Nazareth, the most significant creative act since the creation of the world. Adore Him for it. And let the recognition that the same Spirit who formed the human nature of the Son now dwells in you (“The Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,” Romans 8:11, NASB 1995) fill you with wonder at the grace that has made you a participant in the new creation.

Pray specifically for those in your congregation and community who have doubts about the virgin birth, for those who have encountered the historical-critical objections in university classrooms or popular media, for those whose scientific or philosophical commitments make the miraculous conception seem implausible, and for those whose faith in the supernatural character of Christianity has been eroded by the relentless naturalism of contemporary culture. Pray that God would open their eyes to see that the God who spoke the universe into existence from nothing is fully capable of forming a human nature in the womb of a virgin; and that the real question is not whether miracles are possible but whether the God of Scripture is the God of reality.

Close with the Magnificat spoken together as an act of corporate doxology, not merely as a reading but as a confession, in Mary's own words, of the character of the God who has come to be with us in the flesh of His eternal Son:

"My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; for behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name."

LUKE 1:46–49, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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