

The New Genesis

Genesis 1:26–31, Matthew 1:18–25

During the fall, as we prepared for the election of a new elder, I preached a series of sermons on the church and its officers. Today, I am beginning a short series on Matthew's account of the birth of Christ. I had originally intended to treat this text in a single sermon, but as I began working with it it became evident that there is too much here to fit into one sermon. Here, then, is the first in a short series on the birth of Christ.

As you know, December is fast coming to a close, and the thoughts of many turn to Christmas. We have a neighbor—not a church attender—who has a large display of Christmas lights. It gets bigger and bigger every year. She loves Christmas—but does she love Christ? It is possible to love Christmas without loving Christ, and the question that all of us must answer is: do I love Christ?

The Reformed do not follow a church calendar, since it is not something taught in the New Testament. The Bible doesn't require ministers to preach on the birth of Christ the Sunday before Christmas—*Christmas* is not even a Bible term! But since it is a Bible doctrine, it *is* appropriate to preach on Christ's birth any Sunday of the year.

The title of this morning's message is "The New Genesis." Now it just happens that this is the name of a fictional planet in a comic book series; but I did not take my title from *that*! So where did it come from? From the opening words of the text that was just read in your hearing: "Now the *birth* of Jesus Christ was as follows." In the original Greek the word for "birth" is the word "Genesis"—literally: "the *genesis* of Jesus Christ"! Remember that the very *words* of Scripture are inspired by the Holy Spirit, who meticulously superintended the composition of this gospel. Matthew, a former tax collector called by our Lord as one of his first disciples, was moved by the Holy Spirit to write the words "the *genesis* of Jesus Christ." As a matter of fact, that's how his gospel begins: literally, "The book of the *genesis* of Jesus Christ."

That ought to ring a bell for Bible-readers. The first book of the Old Testament is Genesis. It tells the story of the creation of Adam, the first man and covenantal head of the human race. The climax of the creation account was the creation of Adam, the first human—the crowning glory of creation. In like manner, the first book of the *New* Testament tells of the "genesis" of Jesus Christ, the crowning glory of the *new* creation and the covenantal head of the *redeemed* race. The same Holy Spirit that inspired the *words* of Scripture also superintended the *order of the books* of Scripture. It is not a coincidence that Matthew is the first Gospel, and the first book of the New Testament. Make no mistake: It was God's intention that the first subject treated in the New Testament is the "genesis" of Christ.

What is a genesis? The dictionary defines *genesis* as *the origin or coming into being of something*. *Genesis* is related to *gene*, *genealogy*, *genetics*, *generation*, etc. Matthew calls Christ's birth "the *genesis* of Jesus Christ." Jesus' birth was unlike that of any other human being. Biology and observation tell us that every single human is the product of two parents: a father and a mother. Until the last few years, when political correctness began to dominate, that was a generally-accepted fact. Birth certificates traditionally had a space for the child's name, date and place of birth, sex, name of father, name of mother, and other identifying information. This information would be unique for each birth. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, had something even better: his name, ancestry and birth are recorded in inspired Scripture.

Every human person is unique and important. Every human person is made in the image and likeness of God himself. Adam and Eve were told to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. God is pleased to behold his image in every human person. Contrariwise, he is angered and outraged at the unjust taking away of the life of any person. The sixth commandment is: "Thou shalt not kill." As our Catechism teaches, this forbids "the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbor unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto." To fail to protect human life is a violation of the sixth commandment. The unjust taking away of innocent human life is *murder*, whether committed by a private individual, a criminal gang, an army, or a sitting president. Every human being is legally innocent until proven guilty. Murderers will face the wrath of God at the last day.

Matthew records the birth of a very special person made in the image of God, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as every birth certificate is unique, so the birth of Jesus Christ is unique. The name "Jesus" was a common name among first-century Jews. It is the Greek form of "Joshua," which means *Jehovah is salvation*. We'll have more to say about this as we continue this series, as verse 21 has "thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." The literal meaning is: thou shalt call his name *Jehovah is salvation*, for he shall *save* his people from their sins. Sinners who place their hope and trust in Jesus shall never perish, but have everlasting life. That is the Gospel, which the true church of Jesus Christ has always preached. If a church stops preaching the gospel, or starts preaching that sinners *save themselves*, then it is no church of Jesus Christ at all but a synagogue of Satan, and true believers must come out of it.

So how do we know which Jesus is the Jesus who saves? Matthew makes that clear. The opening verse of his Gospel can be literally translated: "The book of the genesis of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham"—not just any Jesus, but this particular Jesus. The original Greek has "genesis." In verse 1 it is translated "genealogy," and in verse 18 it is translated "birth." The translators are

not being sneaky, they are trying to translate the precise nuance of the word in context.

So the first book of the New Testament announces the new Genesis. The old covenant, with its animal sacrifices, is coming to an end. The types and shadows of the Old Testament are about to be replaced by the *reality*—the perfect obedience and sacrificial death of the only Savior for sinners. Verse 1 gives the summary: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham,” and verses 2–17 give the details. There are two genealogies of Christ in the Gospels. Matthew’s gives the genealogy of Joseph. It begins with Abraham and ends with “Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ.” This is Jesus’ legal genealogy, ending with his *legal* father, Joseph (who is *not* his biological father). The genealogy in Luke 3 gives the genealogy of Mary. It is in reverse order, beginning with the words: “Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph”—note: not the biological son of Joseph, but being raised by him as his son—and ending with “the son of Adam, the son of God.”

So between the two accounts is far more detail than that contained on any birth certificate. Jesus is the true and perfect man—the perfect human. He was made like us in every way, except he was without sin. He was the sinless One who died for unworthy sinners, that he might bring us to God. Here is Christ, the new genesis—the coming of Jesus Christ is that special! He is the second Adam who succeeds where the first Adam failed. He is the promised Messiah who fulfills the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. The first Adam was the covenantal head of the whole human race. When he chose to sin and rebel against God, he represented the whole human race in that fateful decision. He represented you and me. Each of us has two strikes against us: we sinned in Adam and inherited the guilt of his first sin. In addition to that, we sin by the voluntary choice of our own will.

This is undeniably the teaching of Scripture. The apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says, “As in Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22). “In Adam’s fall we sinned all.”¹ When Adam sinned, he died *spiritually*, bringing spiritual death upon the whole human race. Spiritual death is infinitely worse than physical death, for it is the separation of the sinner from the comfortable presence of God in the fires of hell *eternally*. Man tries to evade this truth. He says: “That’s not fair! I was not consulted. I never gave permission.” But if we don’t like the idea of covenantal headship, we can never be saved, for “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” Notice the contrast between “in Adam” and “in Christ.” The whole human race falls in Adam, but the Lord Jesus Christ is the covenantal head of the *redeemed* race—those who are saved and go to heaven. In

¹ *New England Primer*

Revelation 5, the saints in heaven sing, “thou wast slain, and hast *redeemed* us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.” The word *redeemed* means to buy by the payment of a price. Christ is the Redeemer who saves his people at the cost of his own precious blood. There was never a higher price paid for anything. There is no other way for sinful men to be saved than by the precious blood of Christ.

The first man, Adam, was born without a sin nature. He had no natural predisposition to sin. God put him into a perfect environment, the Garden of Eden. He gave him everything he needed for his comfort and pleasure. He had every advantage. He gave him dominion over the whole earth. Nothing was withheld from him except one tree out of thousands in the Garden: the tree of the knowledge of God and evil. Yet, tempted by the devil, speaking through the serpent, Adam decided to give in to temptation and disobey the voice of God.

Now, with that background, let’s look at Jesus’ remarkable birth: a *virgin* birth. Verse 18 states: “The birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.” Verse 20 adds: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”

Note Matthew’s careful language: Jesus’ mother, Mary, was a virgin (v. 23). This had been prophesied in the Old Testament, as we shall see later. Mary was “betrothed” to Joseph (v. 18—that is, pledged to him in marriage, but the wedding vows had not yet been taken publicly). So before Mary was legally married she was found with child of the Holy Spirit (v. 18). Such would be scandalous, were we not told that Mary’s pregnancy had been brought about by the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit of God. (The Greek idiom for *pregnant* or *with child* is literally “having in the womb.”) Humanly speaking, there was no way that Matthew the evangelist could have known this intimate detail, but the fact that he uttered this astounding truth under divine inspiration assures us that it is in fact what actually happened. As 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches, “All Scripture [that is, the word and testimony of God, committed to writing] is given by inspiration of God [literally: breathed out by God].” The words committed to writing are as much the Word of God as if they had been spoken personally by him in our very presence. As a matter of fact, the Holy Scriptures written down are a “*more sure* word of prophecy”—that is, more sure and verifiable than the spoken word. So when Matthew, writing under divine inspiration, asserts that Mary “was found with child of the Holy Spirit,” this is a fact. After all, God “cannot lie” (Tit. 1:2). If the God of heaven were to utter false witness, then he is not without sin, and there is no hope of heaven—and nothing at all is certain.

Additionally, we have the testimony of the angel of the Lord who appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you

Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” (v. 20). Mary’s fiancé Joseph should not for a minute think that Mary had cheated on him. He had been chosen for a special calling, and that was to be the earthly father of the Son of God. We’ll look more at the character of Joseph in our afternoon sermon today.

A few moments ago I used the word “scandalous.” Scandal is outrageous immoral behavior—something that was not tolerated among first-century Jews. The law of God is quite specific. Leviticus 20:10 says: “The man that committeth adultery with another man’s wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbor’s wife, *the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.*” Under God’s holy law, sexual activity outside lawful marriage is not only a sin, but a crime.

But how times have changed! To say that our own culture is tolerant of sexual promiscuity is an understatement. Unmarried couples announce “We’re going to be parents” on Facebook. There is no shame.

The fruit of the Spirit is self-control, not self-fulfillment, but many Christians seem not to have gotten the message. Some of the larger, “seeker-friendly” churches do not preach God’s moral law, and soft-pedal the biblical teaching on sexual purity for fear of offending people and driving away visitors. Scripture teaches: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust”² God wants us to be “sanctified”—that is, set apart for him. He wants us to avoid sexual immorality. His commandments are not burdensome. They are not intended to prevent us from being happy. God knows what is best for us. “No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:11). Live a life of obedience to God, and you will never regret it. If you have sinned in the past, confess that sin and forsake it. “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.”³

But the One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas is the *virgin-born* Son of God. Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father. Jesus received his humanity from Mary—he was fully human—and from eternity was always truly God. The divine Son became man. The technical term for this is *incarnation*, which literally means *in flesh*—human flesh. The Incarnation is God coming in human flesh. One of the best descriptions of this was given by Charles Wesley in his hymn, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” where he writes: “Late in time behold him come, offspring of the Virgin’s womb. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th’incarnate Deity, pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.” “Emmanuel” is Hebrew

² 1 Thess. 4:3–5

³ Prov. 28:13

for *God with us*. In the miraculous virgin birth of Christ, the second Person of the Godhead took on human flesh and dwelt among men. In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, to redeem us—to buy us with the purchase price of his life-blood—that we might become the adopted sons and daughters of God Most High.

God wanted to save and redeem man, and the only way he could do that was if he himself took on human flesh. This he did in his incarnation. As our Confession teaches, the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, yet without sin. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. He is very God, and very man, the only Mediator between God and man.⁴

If there were no incarnation, there would be no gospel. There would be no hope for us, the fallen sons and daughters of Adam. But there *is* hope! The Son of God took on human flesh. The Lord Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, his tiny body wrapped tightly in strips of cloth and laid in a manger, since there was no other furniture available. Here was an event that would transform human history, yet it took place in obscurity. The only witnesses, in addition to the cattle, were Joseph and Mary. Yet while it was happening, the angels and the heavenly host were announcing the birth, not to kings and queens, but to simple shepherds—mostly boys and young men—out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. They heard the announcement and were riveted. “The angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”⁵

In response, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.”

Here is the Lord and Creator of heaven and earth, having taken on human flesh, receiving the worship of simple shepherds who believed the angels' message and came to worship. This should be the response of each one of us. God is incarnate, dwelling among us in human flesh. One day he will grow up and go to the cross to die for unworthy sinners. This is the gospel.

⁴ Adapted from the Westminster Confession of Faith 8.2, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_08

⁵ Luke 2:9–14

Should not we, as the shepherds of Bethlehem so long ago, fall down before his face and worship him? Let us love him and enthrone him in our hearts. The virgin-born Son of God is our Savior forever! Amen.