

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

Isaiah 7:10–17, Matthew 1:18–25

As I announced last week, we are doing a mini series on the Matthew account of the birth of Christ. Today we focus on verse 20. Speaking of Joseph, our text says, “But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him 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.’” Notice the reference to Jesus’ conception: “That which is *conceived* in her is of the Holy Spirit.” Another way the Greek could be translated is: “That which is *begotten* in her is of the Holy Spirit.” To *beget* is to *procreate as the father*. Begetting is the father’s role, as bearing is the mother’s role. The message that the angel of the Lord sought to impress upon Joseph was that the tiny son who was at that very moment developing in Mary’s womb was not conceived in sin, from Mary’s having committed fornication, in violation of God’s law. The angel asserts that the child in Mary’s womb was not fathered by a human father but by the supernatural working of the third Person of the Holy Trinity, the blessed Holy Spirit. Surely this was not the message Joseph was expecting! He knew full well that *he* was not the little one’s biological father—so who had gotten Mary pregnant? Although Joseph loved Mary and knew that she was a woman of good character, he was perplexed. She was obviously “with child.” Where had this child come from?

Remember, Joseph and Mary were from the small town of Nazareth in Galilee. Their families surely knew one another. Joseph is called a “just man”—a man of good character. He was a tradesman—a carpenter—able to provide for Mary and their children. He appears to have been older than Mary. This is concluded from the fact that Mary only was present at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee in John 2. Why would Mary attend such an event alone? The last time Joseph is mentioned in the biblical narrative is in connection with the journey to Jerusalem, when Jesus was twelve years old. His name does not appear in connection with the record of the crucifixion along with that of Mary. It is probable that he died before Jesus began his public ministry.¹

The reason I bring up these details is that the situation surrounding Joseph and Mary’s betrothal was quite different from our own. It was a close-knit covenant community, where people generally lived their entire lives in the place where they were raised. It was quite unlike a modern secular American urban area where sexual experimentation is the norm, fornication abounds, and having multiple sex partners is not frowned upon, but even expected. The writer of the first Gospel wants his readers to understand that Joseph was *not* Jesus’ biological father. He

¹ Easton’s Bible Dictionary, “Joseph” (Logos Bible Software)

was his legal father who would raise him and provide for him, but he was not his biological father. He wants to establish the fact that the little child whose heart was beating in Mary's womb was none other than the Son of God, sent by the Father to save his people from their sins. The Lord Jesus was, in the words of the familiar carol, the "holy Child of Bethlehem."²

Why is this important? If Jesus were purely human, and not the incarnate Son of God, then there would be *no hope* for lost sinners. Jesus could not save us. His death on the cross would not have infinite value. If he were sinless but just a man, and not divine, he would, at best, be able to save one other person. But Jesus was unique: he is the God-man. As the sinless substitute he would die, not for any sin of his own, but for the sins of all those given to him by the Father before time began—his elect. He came to earth with the specific intent of representing his people in his sacrificial death. He took our sins upon himself—"Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures."³ And he gives his perfect righteousness to all who believe in him, as did Abraham, who "believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."⁴ To do this, he would have to be the sinless Son of God.

Our Old Testament reading was from Isaiah 7. In that chapter we have a key messianic prophecy—"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son"—in a rather unexpected context. The background is this: Ahaz, king of Judah, is being threatened by the king of Israel, who is in league with the king of Syria (Israel and Syria were Judah's northern neighbors). These two kings had marched up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but were unsuccessful. Now, Ahaz has learned that Syria's armies were quartering in the northern tribe of Ephraim, preparing for a renewed joint attack on Jerusalem. It was a very real threat. God sends Isaiah the prophet to deliver good news: "thus says the Lord GOD: 'It shall not stand, nor shall it come to pass Within sixty-five years, Ephraim will be broken.'" God would protect Judah. Jerusalem would not fall to its northern enemies. This was a reminder that even though Judah was currently ruled by a wicked king, Ahaz, they were still God's covenant people, and he loved them. The LORD prods Ahaz to ask a sign that God was going to keep his word. He could ask any sign that he might wish for. But Ahaz declines and says, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" He couches his refusal in spiritual-sounding rhetoric: "I will not test the LORD!" but God was displeased. God had said, "Ask a sign." That is exactly what God wanted him to do. When God commands, what he expects is exact obedience. He does not want us to negotiate; he wants us to do exactly what he commands.

This is illustrated in the life of King Saul. In 1 Samuel 15 God told Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites. God was going to use Saul to punish Amalek for

² <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/o-little-town-of-bethlehem/> accessed 12-28-25

³ 1 Cor. 15:3

⁴ Rom. 4:3

ambushing Israel when they had recently come out of Egypt, carrying Egypt's gold. After the battle, when Samuel came to Saul to check up on him, Saul protested: "I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. . . . I brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But *the people* took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God." Saul maintained that he had obeyed, even though he hadn't followed the LORD's exact command. Samuel delivered the LORD's verdict: "Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king."

As with Saul, so it was with Ahaz. God had said, "Ask me a sign," but Ahaz had refused. Ahaz's refusal indicated a disobedient heart. No matter how much he might protest, saying "No" to God was an act of rebellion. It always is.

Child of God, are you committed to obeying the LORD, whatever he may ask, even if obeying is difficult, or you may not fully understand why God requires it of you? God does not say, "Obey me as long as it makes sense to you" or "as long as the people around you approve." The fact is, the world may scorn you when you obey God, but you must obey anyway. To obey now is better than sacrificing later.

Ahaz had disobeyed, but God uses the occasion to deliver a message, and it is one of the most important prophecies of the Old Testament: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

Here is a most remarkable thing: a true miracle: a *virgin*—a woman who had taken seriously the Lord's call to live a life of sexual purity, who had never had an illicit relationship with a man—would conceive and give birth to a son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He would be called **עֲמָנוֹ אֱלֹהִים** (*immanu el*), Hebrew for *God with us* (using **אֱלֹהִים** *el*, the short term for God (the longer and more common term is **אֱלֹהִים** *elohim*)). **עֲמָנוֹ אֱלֹהִים** is transliterated into English as *Immanuel* (with an *I*—Hebrew) or *Emmanuel* (with an *E*—Greek).

Here is the only conception and birth in the history of the human race where a baby was born without being begotten by a biological father. Jesus' conception was absolutely unique.

Notice the language of the passage: "Behold, *the* virgin shall conceive." The use of the article ("the") is intentional—not just any virgin, *the* virgin—the virgin that had long been promised. The language "the" virgin ultimately harks back to Genesis 3:15, the text called "the first gospel," the *protevangelion* (Greek) or *protoevangelium* (Latin), is derived from the Greek words meaning "first" ($\pi\tau\omega\tau\omega\zeta$ *protos*) and "gospel" ($\epsilon\nu\alpha\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\iota\omega$ *evangelion*). It refers to the earliest announcement of the gospel message in the Bible, which promises a future victory over evil through the seed of the woman ("her Seed"). The LORD, in response to Adam's sin of eating the forbidden fruit, says to the man: "I will put enmity

between you and the woman, and between your seed and *her Seed*; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”

This was intentional on the part of the Holy Spirit of God. Nature teaches us that every human child has two parents: a father and a mother. At its core the nuclear family has three persons: father, mother, and child. Each person understands and accepts his or her God-given role. To accept and embrace one’s God-given role brings happiness and fulfillment. To reject it and seek to obliterate it brings misery and confusion. “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil!” (Isa. 5:20). To seek to mix up God’s categories brings God’s wrath.

In accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah some 700 years before, the virgin Mary would conceive and bear a Son, and call His name Immanuel. All this would take place and be fulfilled without fail. Clearly, this is a notable miracle, brought about by the power of the God who knows the end from the beginning, the God who works all things after the counsel of his own will. Who of us can predict with perfect precision a specific event that is going to take place 700 years from now? I’m so glad that *God himself* holds the key to the unknown. With him on the throne there is no need to worry. The key to peace of mind is to commit every aspect of our life, our future, and our eternal destiny into the hand of him who loved us from eternity past.

This is the background of the Christmas story. It is not just a heartwarming tale, it is the truth of God’s Word. It is what actually happened a little over 2,000 years ago. The church’s creeds and confessions bear witness to the importance of this amazing event. Consider the three ecumenical creeds that are reprinted in the back of our hymnal (pp. 851–853), and notice that each of them makes mention of our Lord’s supernatural conception.

Consider first the Apostles’ Creed. Here is a historic expression of the Christian faith. The church confesses its belief in “God the Father Almighty, and in his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who was *conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary*.” Grace OPC recites the Apostles’ Creed most Sundays. Why do we do this? So these key truths can be impressed on our minds and hearts. But there is always the danger that they become mere words, without our pondering and understanding their importance. Here is testimony that the ancient church understood that Jesus’ supernatural conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary was a crucial part of the Gospel. No mere human, but only the virgin-born Son of God, could have saved us.

Consider second the Nicene Creed. This is the creed we will profess today, before the Lord’s Supper. I have reproduced part of the wording in today’s bulletin to make it easy to reflect upon: “I believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with

the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was *incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man.*”

Here, the church professes the trinitarian faith explicitly: first, “I believe in one God,” then a statement on each of the Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Notice that the part dealing with the Son is the longest part; this is because of the prevalence of ancient heresies. Note particularly that the Lord Jesus Christ is “the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds”—that is, from eternity past. That means that there was never a time that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity was not the only begotten Son of God. Our Savior is not a mere creature—a mere man—as is taught by the so-called Jehovah’s Witnesses and other cults. It is amazing that the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* blatantly adds the word “other” (in square brackets] to the text of Colossians 1:15 because the inspired word, as written, doesn’t teach their false doctrine. The apostle Paul, writing under divine inspiration, carefully writes: “by him were *all things* created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: *all things* were created by him, and for him. And he is before *all things*, and by him *all things* consist.” Note the fourfold repetition of the phrase “all things.” This is clearly intentional. Here is a plain statement that the Lord Jesus Christ is the great Creator who created “all things” for himself. The Jehovah’s Witnesses mistranslation inserts the word “other” four times, though the word is not found in the inspired text, rendering it “all [other] things were created in the heavens and upon the earth . . . All [other] things have been created through him and for him. Also, he is before all [other] things and by means of him all [other] things were made to exist.” What this does is to reduce the eternal Son to a mere creature, the first created being, having a definite beginning, whom for some strange reason the Father used to create everything else. This is a blatant denial of the church’s teaching that “the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds,” was “incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man.” According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses cult the Lord Jesus Christ was most definitely *not* the second Person of the Holy Trinity, but a mere creature who cannot save.

There is one other ecumenical creed (that is, a creed believed by the whole church), and that is the Athanasian Creed, named in honor of Athanasius of Alexandria, the chief proponent of Trinitarianism against Arianism. The Athanasian Creed contains the following words (beginning with statement 29): “But it is necessary for eternal salvation that one also believe in the *incarnation* of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully. Now this is the true faith: that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is *both God and man, equally*. He is

God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is man from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely man, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity. Although he is God and man, yet Christ is not two, but one.”

There is a lot to unpack here, but notice that the church taught that belief in the incarnation and the equality of Jesus Christ with the Father are “necessary for eternal salvation.” These doctrines are that important!

Remember that Jesus expressly taught that mankind must “hear the church”: “If he neglect to *hear the church*, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:17). How do we “hear” the church? By hearing what the church has formally taught in her creeds and confessions. These are statements pored over word-by-word by international councils, that the whole church adheres to. Any sect that denies the Trinity or the deity of Christ is outside the pale of true Christianity.

Why did the church consider these doctrines to be so important? Because only the Jesus of the Bible can save! A Jesus of human imagination cannot save. We must put our trust in the Jesus of the Bible for the salvation of our souls.

“Incarnate” means to take on human flesh. The Lord Jesus had real human flesh. He was not just an idea. He was not a phantom or an apparition. He was real. He was a true descendant of Adam, the first man. He had to take on human flesh in order to die for sinful men. “Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.” “Christ also . . . once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.” Here is a key doctrine of the Christian church. It is professed by all churches.

In Romans 10 the apostle Paul says, “The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

This is why GOPC confesses our faith most every Lord’s day. We need to know the particulars of the faith that we confess. If we confess the Christ of Scripture as our personal Lord and Savior, we will be saved. If we deny the Christ of Scripture, he will deny us.

Dear brothers and sisters, “let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering,” to the salvation of our eternal souls.

Thank God, from the bottom of your heart, that Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory was “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.” Amen.