

## Foundations 3: I Believe in Jesus Christ, ...Who Was Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

January 30, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

### Luke 1:26-27, 35

<sup>26</sup> *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

<sup>35</sup> *The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*

We are continuing our series on the twelve statements of the Apostles' Creed, which has formed in summary for almost 2000 years the foundation of why we Christians believe what we believe. Each statement is based on Scripture. This week we will focus on the statement, **I believe in Jesus Christ, ...who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.**

Last week we talked about Jesus being God born in the flesh, fully human and fully divine. The statement this week gives some more details on that. Jesus' one parent was human: Mary the Virgin. His other parent was the Holy Spirit. Joseph served as a type of foster father while Jesus grew as a human here on earth.

God the Son has been around for all eternity. Yet it was in the fullness of time that God the Son became incarnate – that is, God come in the flesh. It had been 400 years since any prophet had spoken in the nation of Israel. Since then, the nation of Israel had been conquered by one foreign nation after another. At the time of Joseph and Mary the nation of Israel was under the occupation of the armed forces of the Roman Empire. The people had been calling out for generations for God to save them. Wasn't God even hearing their cries amidst all their suffering? And then, when God determined that the time was right, Jesus, God the Son, was born into this world. Just think of that. The one through whom all the world was created was born into that world of creation.

Jesus was not half God, half human. He was fully God and fully human. The circumstances of Jesus are one of a kind, never done before and never to be done again. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit – one of the Persons of our Triune God. And he was delivered from the womb of a human woman. And not just any human woman, but one who was a virgin. The kind of birth she gave was scientifically impossible. It could only come about through a miracle of God.

Mary is the only person of faith to be mentioned by name in the Apostles' Creed. Pontius Pilate also has his name in the creed, but for a different reason. He was far from being a person of faith. Mary represents a person of faith who hears, obeys, and submits to the will of God.

God the Son was conceived by the Holy Spirit and clothed in flesh in the womb of Mary, one of God's humble servants. We should always honor Mary as a wonderful example of obedience and submission to God. Her humility and obedience is recalled by virtue of her name appearing in the creed. ...Jesus' obedience to the Father is mirrored by the obedience of a young, Jewish peasant girl on earth. Indeed, in the wonderful providence of God, the great themes of salvation and redemption do not unfold on the earth apart from many small acts of obedience and faithfulness by people like you and me. God does take the initiative to redeem the world. However, he also chooses to do it with the cooperation and involvement of ordinary people.<sup>1</sup>

So, why is it important that the Scriptures and the Apostles' Creed point out that Mary was a virgin? To answer that we have to briefly consider the doctrine of original sin.

When Adam rebelled against God in the garden [of Eden in Genesis chapter 3], he was not just acting on his own. He was the *representative* [hu]man, acting on behalf of the whole human race. When Adam eats [of the forbidden fruit], we are all brought into this rebellion. Adam had a real choice to obey or disobey. However, since he disobeyed, we are all swept into the rebellion and are born with a sinful nature. This means that we have a tendency toward sin and a physical and spiritual inertia driving us toward death. Every day, we confirm our choices that this is indeed our natural state. ...Thus, for Jesus to be the spotless Lamb of God without sin, he has to not only live a sinless life, but also be born without a sin nature or any stain of Adam's guilt. The virgin birth and Holy Spirit conception solves this dilemma by, on the one hand, assuring that he is fully human by coming forth from the womb in the same way all of us have. Yet, on the other hand, by being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is not tainted by Adam's sins and, therefore, can come into the world as the second Adam. He can recreate Adam's choices, choosing obedience where the first Adam chose to rebel.<sup>2</sup>

Now, some may ask, "Wasn't original sin passed down through the bloodline of the human, Mary?" Roman Catholics resolve that problem by believing that Mary herself was born sinless. That is why we have some Roman Catholic churches named, "Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary," such as one of the Roman Catholic churches we have here in Berwick that we have nicknamed, "St. Mary's." Almost all Protestant churches reject that theory, primarily because there is no Scriptural reference to substantiate it. Secondly, how is it that one is supposed to believe that Mary was

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Tennent, "Foundations of the Christian Faith," pp. 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

miraculously immaculately conceived when Jesus' immaculately conception was not enough to remove original sin? And thirdly, because it would have been unnecessary since the stain of original sin was removed through the pairing of a human woman with the divine Holy Spirit.

One of the great novels in English literature is Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. The story depicts the life of the son of King Henry VIII who was heir to the throne of England. He met a poor, ragged pauper boy on the streets of East London, and they realized that they shared a remarkable resemblance. They agreed to trade clothes. The Prince, the future King of England and heir to the throne, went out into the streets of London dressed as a pauper and nobody recognized him. People spat on him and pushed him aside, little knowing that he was the heir to the throne.

Likewise, the eternal Son of God clothed himself in our humanity and walked among us and most did not recognize him. John 1:10, 12 says, "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him... Yet all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."<sup>3</sup>

Here's one of the wondrous things about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He came to be as one of us, so that we could better understand who God is and why God loves us so much. The irony is that for one who came to teach us how much God loved us, we do all we can to prove how much we hate God. We do not listen to the words of His Son. As sinners, we take part in the reason why he was nailed to the cross. Yet, God the Son continues to love us anyway. He loves us so much that he prayed for our hard heartedness while he was on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) Even though we turned against him, Jesus loves us unconditionally. He loves us enough to die for our sins – enough to die for our sin, even if we were the only one to die for.

The words to one of my favorite hymns, "And Can It Be that I Should Gain," says it all:

And can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Savior's blood!  
Died he for me? Who caused his pain!  
For me? Who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be that I Should Gain." United Methodist Hymnal #363, verse 1.

This statement in the Apostles' Creed emphasizes the mystery of our Lord and God who became flesh to become one of us, to be with us, and to guide us home. It affirms our belief in the mystery of the incarnation.

One way to illustrate this mystery is found in Trafalgar Square in London. The central monument in that great square is Nelson's Column. Horatio Nelson, of course, is the great eighteenth-century naval hero in British history. In 1805, he defeated both the French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar, which is still considered to be one of the greatest naval victories in the history of the world. However, he was fatally wounded in the battle and died on ship soon after he heard the news of the victory. To honor him, the British built Trafalgar Square and erected a huge column with his statue on top. However, the column is so high (169 feet, 3 inches!), a visitor to the square cannot actually get a glimpse of Nelson. Visitors to Trafalgar Square have no idea what he looks like. So, the British have an exact replica, a duplicate of Nelson's image, at the ground level so that visitors can look him in the eye and see him face-to-face.

This is a picture of the incarnation. The triune God is so high and exalted that we couldn't know him or see him. However, in the incarnation, God came down in Jesus Christ so that we could behold him face-to-face and see his glory.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tennent, p. 20.