



# Central Peninsula Church

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Matthew 1:18–25  
Luke 1:26–38  
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## Was Mary Really a Virgin?

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How many of you believe in the Virgin Birth of Christ? How many of you find it just a little hard to believe? If you do believe it, how many of you could tell me why it is such an important part of our faith?

One of the vivid and sad memories of my adolescence took place at Christmas time. I had wanted a ten speed bike for a long time. It was a big thing to graduate from the three speed Sting Ray to the sleek ten speed. When I found that gold Schwinn under the tree I was ecstatic. I couldn't wait to get it out on the street and cruise around in front of envious neighbors. During the week after Christmas, when my friends and I were out of school, I rode it everywhere. So I can't recall exactly where I parked it when I went into the store, but I forgot to lock it, and when I came out of the store it was long gone.

It was a bitter lesson, but I never made a similar mistake again. I learned from experience how important it is to guard carefully what I consider precious and valuable.

That's true in the spiritual realm as well. If we don't guard what is precious and valuable, the Enemy will try to steal it from us. His normal strategy is to take something that seems insignificant and small and cause people to doubt it or even to deny it. But it's like removing a linchpin from an axle—once it's gone the entire wheel falls off. That's why this issue of the birth of Jesus by the virgin Mary is so critical. Some people see this as a unimportant article of faith. What does it have to do with Christ dying for my sins? But, remove this teaching and the entire superstructure of the Christian faith falls apart.

So it matters that the Mormon church teaches that Mary was not a virgin, but instead she was impregnated by a God who came to her in flesh and blood. It matters when a new book called, *The Virgin Mary Conspiracy*, claims that Christ was really the illegitimate son of Herod, which is why he was called the King of the Jews. And it matters when a few years ago the pastor of one of our nation's largest churches said in an interview, "I could not in print or in public deny or affirm the virgin birth of Christ. When I have something I can't comprehend I just don't deal with it." That's a subtle way of saying the virgin birth doesn't matter.

I want to talk to you about why it does matter. I know that for many of you this is not a big issue. The Bible says it, you believe it, that settles it. But I want to go a little deeper, and I want to equip you to talk about this issue with those who don't believe it.

### I. What do we mean by the virgin birth?

It's important that we understand what we're talking about when we talk about the virgin birth. The Bible tells us that while Mary was still a virgin, during the period of betrothal to a man named Joseph, she was miraculously found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Two out of the four gospels explicitly teach this. Mt.1:18 says, "**Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.**" Later, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "**Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.**" Luke says the same thing, telling the story more from the perspective of Mary. He says she was "**a virgin, engaged to be married to man named Joseph**" when an angel appeared to her and told her she would bear a son. When Mary asked how that could be since she had never been with a man, he answered, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God... For nothing shall be impossible with God**" (Lk.1:35,37).

So that's it. The Bible doesn't explain in detail HOW or even exactly WHEN it happened. It doesn't get into biology. There's still a lot of mystery in this story, but according to Scripture it happened, and it happened by the Holy Spirit. But let's be clear: it wasn't really a virgin birth, it was a virginal conception. The birth of Jesus was like any other birth; there was nothing spectacular about it. But the conception of Jesus took place in the womb of a virgin, and therein is the miracle.

Some people confuse this with the immaculate conception of Mary, which says that Mary herself was conceived in a virgin. That is nowhere taught in Scripture. It wasn't until 1854 that the Pope declared the

immaculate conception of Mary a doctrine of the Catholic church.

And it should be also said that the Bible never claims that Mary remained a virgin. Scripture teaches that she went on and had a normal relationship with her husband Joseph and they had several sons and daughters as the years went by.

Now that seems pretty clear. The virgin birth is what the church has always affirmed. The Apostles Creed, which Christians have confessed for the last 1,900 years says, *“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary...”* And so we might wonder why is this even an issue? Let me give you three of the most famous arguments against the virgin birth.

## II. The virgin birth has been attacked on various grounds.

**A. The argument from science:** The most common objection to the virgin birth is that it's biologically impossible. It would require some kind of spontaneous generation that's contrary to the laws of biology. Such a thing has never really been scientifically duplicated in Scripture or in life.

But this argument rests on the assumption that we live in a closed universe where nature always operates according to fixed laws. If we can accept the miracle of Christ's resurrection, or even of his ability to heal, why can't we accept the virgin birth? Given our understanding of who Jesus was, it stands to reason that he would enter this world in a miraculous way. The real question is, “Is there a God?” If there is a God, wouldn't he have both the power and the right to intervene occasionally and do something outside the laws of nature? If the NT presented the virgin birth as commonplace, then we might doubt the integrity of the writers. But the Bible presents this as something out of the ordinary. That's why Mary asked, *“How can this be?”* So, if science is God and if the universe is a closed system, then this argument works. But if we believe in a God who occasionally intervenes in the normal functioning of the universe, then this miracle is no different than others.

**B. The argument from Scripture:** The second argument that people use, believe it or not, is based on Scripture. Some scholars point back to Isaiah 7:14, which is a prophecy that says, **“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: ‘Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she**

**will call His name Immanuel.”** The word that is used there for “virgin” is the Hebrew word *alma*. That word is NOT the technical term for virgin in the Hebrew language. The word *alma* generally describes a young woman who doesn't have to be a virgin. Hence the argument that the Bible never intended to teach anything more than that a young woman would have a baby. But, the fact is, the word *alma* at least strongly suggests virginity. It's a bit like the English word maiden. We don't use that word much anymore, and though it's not the same as the word, virgin, it strongly communicates the idea of purity. Not only that, but when Matthew quotes this prophecy as fulfilled in Christ, he understood it to mean just that. Why else would he say, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, *before they came together* she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit”?

Other scholars point to the fact that the virgin birth is mentioned explicitly only twice in the entire NT. Why didn't Mark or John spell it out in their gospels? Why doesn't Paul or Peter teach this in their letters? As a result, some say, “Well, it must not be that important. Maybe Matthew and Luke just made it up to spice up the story.” But if we believe the Bible is the Word of God, how many times does it have to say something for us to believe it? Take another subject like the ascension of Jesus, in which Jesus went up to heaven 40 days after his resurrection. That's an important teaching, but Luke is the only one who mentions it. Mark, John, Matthew, Paul, and Peter say nothing about the ascension. Does that mean we call it into question? No! And, even so, there ARE other strong allusions to the virgin birth in Scripture. Way back in Genesis 3:15 as God cursed the devil he said, **“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.”** This is about the coming Messiah who would come from “her seed.” For God to say “her seed” is very unusual. Normally he would say “his seed.” This is at least a hint that the Messiah would come from a woman without the help of the male seed. Maybe that's why the apostle Paul says in Gal.4:4, **“But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.”** Why would he say “born of a woman” and not a man? Again, it's very likely that's at least an allusion to the virgin birth.

**C. The argument from mythical parallels:** A third argument that's used is the fact that in mythology as well as other religions there are stories that parallel the virgin birth. It was common in Greek mythology for a male god to fall in love with a woman, come down to earth and have a one night stand with her, after which she becomes pregnant and

gives birth to a god-man-hero. People say, "Well, Matthew and Luke just kind of borrowed from those stories to show that Jesus really was special. But there are some problems with that theory. First of all, the Greek writers were not really intending to write history as we think of history. The biblical writers were. Compare the gospel of Luke with Homer and you will see what I mean. Second, just because those Greek myths were written first doesn't mean they influenced the biblical writers. You have to prove a literary connection, and there is none.

### III. The virgin birth is an essential part of what Christian's believe.

The bottom line, the Scripture teaches that Jesus was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The OT predicted it and the NT describes it. Maybe the real question is, do we believe what the Bible says? Do we believe that this is the Word of God? If we decide that we can pick and choose what parts of it we want to believe and what parts we can throw out, then what's to keep us from throwing it all out?

But there is even more at stake here than the truth of Scripture. Someone asked Larry King, "If you could select any one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?" Mr. King's answer was that he would like to interview Jesus Christ. When asked, "And what would you like to ask him?" King replied, "I would like to ask him if he was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me."

Larry King is right. It's interesting that the enemies of Jesus knew this as well. In Jn.8 Jesus is in a confrontation with the Pharisees. Jesus says, "Your father is the devil." They say, "Abraham is our father." Jesus says, "If Abraham is your father, why are you trying to kill me? If Abraham is your father, do the deeds of Abraham." And then they said to him, "**We were not born of fornication. We have one Father, even God**" (Jn. 8:41). Do you see what they're saying? They're saying Jesus was born illegitimately. And because he was born illegitimately, he couldn't be who he said he was. It's interesting that Jesus responded to this accusation by saying, "**If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded forth and have from God...**" (v.42).

**A. It is essential for the deity of Christ:** You see, even the enemies of Jesus knew that his claim to be the Son of God, to be God in the flesh, is dependent upon the virgin birth. Remember what the angel said to Mary? "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God**" (Lk.1:35). So the virgin birth is the underlying assumption behind

everything the Bible says about Jesus; everything Jesus claimed about himself. To throw out the virgin birth is to throw out what we call the incarnation—God invading the planet earth in the person of His Son, which as even Larry King knows, defines history. John doesn't start his gospel with the virgin birth, but he does start it with what is true because of the virgin birth. He says, "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God**" (Jn.1:1-2). And then a few lines later he says, "**And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth**" (Jn.1:14). That's pretty clear, isn't it?

On Billy Joel's daughter's 12th birthday, she was in New York City, and he was in Los Angeles. He phoned her that morning, apologizing for his absence, but told her to expect the delivery of a large package before the end of the day. The daughter answered the doorbell that evening to find a seven-foot-tall, brightly wrapped box. She tore it open and out stepped her father, fresh off the plane from the West Coast. Can you imagine her surprise? But our gift came in the flesh too. Jesus was God in the flesh; the virgin birth attests to that.

**B. It is essential for our salvation:** But there's something else. If Jesus wasn't born of a virgin, then our salvation wouldn't even be possible. The Bible says that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. As a result, we're separated from God. A holy God cannot ignore sin. And nothing we can do on our own can make it all right. So we need to be rescued from this situation; we need salvation. That's where Christ comes in. We know that Jesus was a man, a human being like all of us. But if he was JUST a man, like the rest of us, then he shares our need for salvation. He's then a part of our problem, not the solution to our problem. So there has to be some essential difference between Jesus and other human beings, if Jesus is to be our Savior. On the other hand, if Jesus is God, and God alone, he has no point of contact with us. He can't relate to those who need salvation, nor can he represent us. His humanity provides that point of contact with us.

It's like two people, we'll call them Joe and Bob. They have a close relationship but something happens and the relationship breaks down. Bob is convinced that Joe is wrong and Joe is convinced that Bob is wrong and they both cling tightly to their hurt and anger and refuse to even talk. How can this situation be resolved? What's needed is a mediator, a

go-between. But who is qualified to act in that capacity? The best mediator is someone who both Joe and Bob know and respect, and who will be impartial. So Kevin comes along as a mediator. Kevin has to represent Joe to Bob and Bob to Joe. He can't be too identified with either Bob or Joe, but he has to have points of contact with both if he's to do the job. He has to be close enough to both of them to represent them both and yet not be totally identified with either. That's what's needed in a mediator.

Jesus Christ is that mediator between God and us. The Bible says, "**For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ**" (1Tim.2:5). Paul talks about how God "reconciled" us to himself through Christ (2Cor.5:18-19). He can do this because he represents God to us, and us to God. When he was on the cross paying for our sins, which God's justice demanded, he could represent us because he was one of us, but he could also be totally pleasing to God because he was God. Do you see how crucial the virgin birth is to our salvation? If he wasn't born of a virgin, he wasn't God and his work of salvation, which was the very reason he was sent, has failed.

## CONCLUSION

I hope you can see how important it is to affirm the virgin conception of Jesus as part of our faith. And, you know, when it comes right down to it, it does require faith. Everything I've said this morning is so left brain, so rational, but part of the problem is that we can't grasp this with our finite minds. How WAS that egg fertilized within Mary? What DID happen? And how could an infinite God be reduced to a microscopic embryo? It's a mystery. And it should remain a mystery. It should inspire wonder and worship. Remember what I said last week: truth is the fuel of worship; the heart is the furnace of worship; and the Holy Spirit is the fire of worship. Let me close with a poem about this mystery from the pen of Lucy Shaw that might help pour fuel on the fire of your worship:

*After the bright beam of hot annunciation  
fused heaven with dark earth  
his searing sharply-focused light  
went out for a while  
eclipsed in amniotic gloom:  
his cool immensity of splendor  
his universal grace  
small-folded in a warm dim female space—  
the Word stern-sentenced to be nine months  
dumb—  
infinity walled in a womb until the next  
enormity—the Mighty,  
after submissions to a woman's pains  
lay helpless on the barn-bare floor  
first-tasting bitter earth.  
Now, I in him surrender  
to the crush and cry of birth.  
Because eternity was closeted in time  
he is my open door to forever.  
From his imprisonment my freedoms grow, find  
wings.  
Now part of his body, I transcend this flesh.  
From his sweet silence my mouth sings.  
Out of his dark, I glow.  
My life, as his, slips through death's mesh,  
time's bars, joins hands with heaven,  
speaks with stars.*

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