

*The Whole Counsel of God*  
**Study 25**

**THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST**

***Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and shall call his name Immanuel***

***Isaiah 7.14***

The virgin birth of Christ is presented in three biblical passages. In Isaiah 7 it is prophesied, and in Matthew 1 and Luke 1 it is given as gospel. Both prophecy and gospel make important contributions to doctrine. Prophecy sets forth what must happen in history for God to fulfil his purposes, and from this we learn why the virgin birth was necessary. The gospel is news that tells what actually happened. Prophecy presents the historical necessity, and gospel presents the historical reality of the great events in the life of Christ.

The gospel as news presents Christ in terms of historical facts rather than mere ideas and speculative thought. Luke points to the historical nature of the gospel in the prologue to his Gospel. He states that the Gospel is “a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us” (Lk 1.1), which are the facts of history that are behind the reports of the ministers of the word (v 2). The first great event of the gospel of Jesus Christ that Luke narrates is his virgin birth, and his prologue makes it clear that he, as well as the ministers of the word, took this event as historically real. It is part of the news.

The Gospel narrative is not simply a matter of historical fact, i.e., that these things actually happened. It is the foundation for Christian doctrine. Luke points to this in his purpose statement in Lk 1.4: “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.” The things taught by the apostles and those who worked with them were not mere narratives. They taught the great truths of Christ, and these truths were presented as being historically real. The gospel leaves no room for speculative thought, fiction or myth in Christian doctrine. All theological truth must be based on and taken from what happened and was demonstrated in history.

The good news of God concerning his Son generates all the ideas of Christian doctrine. Doctrinal study is thus inductive study. The human mind does not think up ideas about God and Christ. Rather, it is to explore the facts given in historical revelation and discover the truths inherent in what has happened. Faith comes by hearing and not by thinking.

The virgin birth of Christ is the threshold event through which the incarnation took place. In the miraculous conception in the womb of Mary, the Son of God became flesh, and the entire doctrine of Christ depends on this event. It is a universal fact that a person is what he became through his birth. This is true of Christ as well. His unique person as God and man is rooted in his unique birth. Without this miraculous birth, he would simply be a person like all others.

Christ’s unique person is the subject of the gospel, and this was demonstrated on the stage of world history in his resurrection. Though his birth occurred in the private life of a young virgin in a remote village of not public significance, it established the uniqueness of his person as a man. The virgin birth is not the headline of the good news, but it is an important detail in the Gospel narrative. As we explore this detail, we will see how the incarnation fits into the historical and biological realities of human birth.

We will first look at how the virgin birth places Christ within the development of salvation history. Then we will turn our attention to the significance of the virgin birth for the doctrine of the person of Christ.

**A. THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OT**

In each of the biblical passages on the virgin birth, the focus is on the son of David. Isaiah 7 deals with the crisis in the house of David, and the prophecy of the virgin birth of Immanuel is addressed to the royal house (Ish

7.13-14). Matthew 1 presents Jesus as the son of David (v 1) and tells the story of his birth from the point of view of Joseph who is addressed by the angel of the Lord as “Joseph, son of David” (v 20). The magi came to Jerusalem to seek him who was born king of the Jews (Matt 2.2). In Luke 1 the story is told from the point of view of Mary. She is introduced as being betrothed to Joseph, the son of David (Lk 1.26), and the angel told her that God would give the one born of her the throne of his father David (v 32).

The theme of the son of David must be understood in terms of the Davidic covenant and the way this covenant fits into the development of OT history. The point of this covenant is not limited to the mere fact that a son of David would rule over Israel or Judah. Rather, the key issue is God’s relationship to Israel and the world. Through the covenant, God bound himself to the son of David so that his rule would be realized on earth through the Davidic king. This point is developed and opened up in the messianic Psalms that present the son of David receiving God’s rule over the whole earth and holding a divine position (Psalms 2, 45 and 110). The vision of these Psalms is taken up in the NT as being fulfilled in Christ who is seated at the right hand of God. That Jesus holds this position of divine rule over all is essential to the gospel, and that is why the fact that he was the descendent of David is part of the formal statement of the apostolic gospel (Rom 1.3; 2Tim 2.8).

## 1. The end of succession

The theme of the virgin birth of the Messiah is struck up in scripture by Isaiah’s prophecy, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Ish 7.14). We must understand this prophecy in its context.

### a. The covenant crisis

This announcement is set within a crisis in the history of the house of David. The king of Syria was in league with the northern kingdom of Israel, and together they plotted to invade Judah, conquer it and set a puppet king over it. The threat did not just pose a military and political crisis for the house of David; it was a spiritual crisis. God was bound to the throne of David by covenant, and any move against that throne came up against God.

Under the terms of the covenant, it was God’s duty to establish the house of David. So, God intervened and decreed that the plot would not be realized. God thus kept his covenanted commitment. But, the covenant also placed on the son of David the duty to have faith in God. Since God kept his commitment unconditionally, the only thing at stake in the crisis was the position of the king. Isaiah confronted Ahaz with this in a saying that puns on the Hebrew word for faith. This Hebrew word has the basic meaning of being steadfast or firm. When the house of David was told of the plot against it, we are told that the heart of Ahaz and of the people “shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind” (v 2). This shaking of heart is the opposite of the steadfastness of heart in response to the word of God, which is faith. In Ish 7.9, the prophet says to Ahaz, “If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.” While God would protect the throne of David, the king on that throne had to be firm in his response to God’s word, and if not, he would not be firm or established in his reign.

To say that Ahaz was not a man of faith is an understatement. This king was an idolater who had no interest in the LORD. Nonetheless, God offered to support the king in his exercise of faith by telling him to ask for any sign (Ish 7.11). The stakes were high in this crisis since the fortunes of the house of David turned on Ahaz’s response to God, so God went all the way to support the human side of the covenant. Ahaz, however, declined the offer and, in effect, turned down any call to faith. God did not deal with this rejection as a personal sin of Ahaz but as the sin of the house of David (v 13). The whole succession of kings was at stake.

The prophet said that God would proceed on his own and give his own sign to the house of David. While the human partner rejected the covenant, God would not be defeated in his covenantal commitment. The sign that God would keep the Davidic covenant on his own apart from the cooperation of the house of David was that the virgin would conceive and bear a son who would be called Immanuel (Ish 7.14). This sign was a two edged sword that cut two ways. On the one hand, through the birth of Immanuel God would provide the one through whom the Davidic covenant would be fulfilled. On the other hand, it was a sign that the unbelieving house of David would be judged because being born of a virgin the male succession of kings would be cut off.

Our interpretation develops the flow of thought in Isaiah 7.1-14 in terms of the covenantal logic involved in the crisis and accepts the messianic understanding of v 14. This messianic interpretation of Ish 7.14 is based on two points that have been contested: that Immanuel is the Messiah and that Isaiah had a virgin rather than just a young maiden in mind.

#### **b. The identity of Immanuel**

The theme of Immanuel is developed throughout chapters 7 to 11 in Isaiah's prophecy. The vision of this figure grows as the prophecy develops so that these chapters have been called, Immanuel's Book. In Ish 8.8, the land of Judah is called, Immanuel's land, and this suggests that he is the heir of the land, which points to his royal position. In Ish 8.9-10, any counsel against God's people will come to nothing and any word spoken will not stand because of Immanuel, "for God is with us." Immanuel is the security of God's people. In Ish 9.6-7, the prophetic vision of the child to be born is opened up, and here it becomes clear that this child is the Messiah. The theme of Immanuel (i.e., God with us in the child to be born) comes through in the divine names that he will bear; the virgin mother will call him Immanuel (7.14), and the people will call him Mighty God and Everlasting Father among other names (9.6). In Isaiah 11, this king who arises from the stump of Jesse establishes a kingdom that will bring peace and reconciliation to creation. The reference to the stump of Jesse refers to the fallen house of David (11.1). This king is not just a descendent of David, he stands alongside David the son of Jesse. As the prophetic vision unfolds, it becomes clear that Immanuel is, indeed, the Messiah, and a divine Messiah at that.

#### **c. Immanuel's mother**

The Hebrew word Isaiah used for the mother of Immanuel is '*almah*'. This word is translated in the LXX with the Greek word *parthenos* which means virgin, and this rendering is cited in Matt 1.23. However, this translation of Ish 7.14 is widely contested among scholars. It is argued that the Hebrew word for a virgin is *betulah* and that the word '*almah*' refers to a young maiden of marriageable age. For an examination of the way the Hebrew words are used, see *Knowing the Christ You Follow: Son of Man, Study 7, The Historical Setting for the Birth of Christ*, pp. 4-6. Here we will simply present the results of that investigation for our study. Neither Hebrew word bears the strict meaning of virginity. Our concept of virginity concerns the woman's own body, whereas the Hebrew terms refer to the woman's relational and social status. Of the two words, *betulah* is the one with a specific sexual reference. It refers to a woman who is being kept for a first sexual relationship or who is in the initial relationship as a young bride. The use of this term in Ish 7.14 would have suggested an initial sexual union. The word '*almah*' is used in contexts that do not have the sexual concern involved in virginity. This word refers to a young woman who is not sexually united with a man as a wife or concubine. It is a neutral term that presents the woman apart from any reference to an existing or future sexual relationship.

The precise force of the word '*almah*' in Ish 7.14 is to be determined by how the pregnancy of the '*almah*' functions in the larger prophetic message. We have seen that the stress in this prophecy is on the fact that the child is not born of the house of David or through the male succession in the dynasty. To make this point, Isaiah used the term for a woman that is not defined by a sexual relationship with a man, and this means that she is presented as a virgin. To this we should add that a conspicuous feature of the prophecy, which lies on the surface, is that the mother is presented apart from the father of the child. This point stands out since children are normally identified by their father (8.8.1-4 and 18) and especially since the royal succession passed through the father and not the mother.

In the prophetic vision, the end of the succession of the house of David gives way to the everlasting government of the Messiah (Ish 9.6-7). The kings in the house of David were volatile, and in the succession of such kings the house failed. The one in whom God's purpose for an everlasting kingdom would be fulfilled would be different. He would be a king of divine stature, and this fact is rooted in his virginal conception.

In Isaiah's prophetic vision, the necessity of the virgin birth of Christ is presented. The fact that the house of David failed in its commitment under the covenant brought the judgment of God down on the dynasty, which terminated the succession of kings through normal procreation. The fulfilment of the Davidic covenant and all

of God's promises had to be taken over by God, and God brought this about through a person who by his birth was different from the kings.

## **2. The end of genealogy**

The theme of kingdom taken up by God in the Davidic covenant reaches back to the divine mandate given in creation (Gen 1.26-28). According to the blessing of Gen 1.28, procreation was the divinely ordained means of transmitting the authority to rule and of accomplishing mankind's goal. The OT is consistent with this creational decree. God's covenant relationships and promises are always and only passed on through procreation, and this is shown in the OT genealogies.

Matthew sets the account of the virgin birth of Jesus in the context of his genealogy. He introduced Jesus as the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt 1.1), and then traced Jesus' genealogy from Abraham through David to Jesus. By doing this, Matthew set up his Gospel to introduce Jesus as the heir of the covenants with Abraham and David.

Luke presents a genealogy of Jesus at the head of his account of the public ministry of Jesus (v 23) and moves back from Jesus to Adam and God (Lk 3.23-38), thus putting the focus on Jesus as the heir of Adam and of God.

The virgin birth marks a break in the genealogy. All previous links were added by natural procreation, and the succession was determined by the fathers. Luke notes the difference in the case of Jesus when he points out that Jesus was supposed to be of Joseph (v 23). With this anomaly, biblical genealogy ends. After Jesus, the Bible shows no further interest in genealogy. Jesus is the final son of David who received from God an eternal kingdom. He has no successor. We will not reign in God's kingdom by virtue of our natural birth. As Jesus pointed out to Nicodemus, we must enter this kingdom or reign by being born again. Jesus is the one promised seed of Abraham, and in him we are Abraham's seed by faith (Gal 3.16, 29). He is also the Son of Man, the last Adam, and we are a new man in him.

As of the coming of Christ, the promises of God are no longer passed on through procreation to be fulfilled in a future generation. Rather, he is the fulfilment of all promises, and we enter this fulfilment through faith. To be born of a man is now set in contrast to being born of God, by which birth we become the children of God (Jn 1.12-13). Attention is turned from birth through a mother's womb to being born of the Spirit (Jn 3.4-5).

The virgin birth of Jesus marks the end point of biblical genealogy. It was important for Jesus to have his genealogy that he might be the rightful heir of all relationships that God had previously established, but his birth also marks the end of all natural succession in the history of salvation.

## **3. The last biblical birth story**

Unlike Matthew, Luke does not set the birth of Jesus in the context of OT genealogy. Rather, he presents the story of two births, the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.

The two birth stories reflect the order of the gospel. John came first and preached repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord, and then Jesus came announcing the time of salvation (Lk 4.17-21). The apostle Paul followed this order in his proclamation, testifying of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Ac 20.21). John the Baptist and Jesus together reflect the whole Bible. John was the last of the prophets who stood at the end of the OT period, and Jesus brought in the NT (Lk 16.16).

### **a. The birth at the end of the OT**

The birth story of John the Baptist takes up the theme of the special birth stories of the OT, the births of Isaac, Samson and Samuel, in which a barren woman gives birth according to God's word. In each case, God prepared for a new beginning in the history of salvation through the son born. Through Isaac, God began to make a new

beginning by raising up a family to become a nation through which he would take his place in the world of nations. Through Samson, God began to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, a process completed by David. Through Samuel, God founded the kingdom in Israel, though Samuel only played the preparatory role. John the Baptist had the similar role of preparing a people for the Lord (Lk 1.17).

The fact that these special men were born of barren women makes a significant point about God's ways. Birth makes a new start in the human race or life of a people. The fact that God used barren women points to the fact that the people had reached an end, and out of the barren state God worked to move history forward. At the Tower of Babel, all the nations left God and were lost in idolatry, and God did not work through what was naturally produced through them. Through the birth of Isaac, God raised up a new family by his purpose and power. At the end of Judges, the people of Israel settled under Philistine rule, for the Philistines did not oppress but simply colonized Israel. As a consequence, the people did not cry out to the Lord, and there was nothing in the people of Israel that God would work through to bring about deliverance. So, God made a beginning in providing deliverance through one man whom he set apart for his purposes. Samuel lived at the close of the period of judges, being the last judge. The period of judges had run its course, and the need for a change, that is, for a king, had become a historical reality. John the Baptist arose in a time when the Jews as a people were in need of being turned to the Lord (Lk 1.16-17). When John saw the crowds of religious Jews, he rebuked them for their religious complacency (Lk 3.7-9). The Jews, for all their orthodoxy, were spiritually barren.

Israel as a nation had run its course, and there was nothing left in the people that warranted an extension of the history under the old covenant. The fullness of times had arrived. John's birth from an old couple symbolized his position at the end of OT history, and the fact that the mother was barren and way past the time of natural childbearing symbolized the spiritual condition that prevailed. The prophets prophesied that at this end of Israel's own potential the Messiah would come and make a new beginning.

#### **b. The birth that marked a new beginning**

The fact that Mary was young, just before her marriage to Joseph, symbolized this new beginning. If John stood at the end of an age, when that age had lost its potential for any spiritual productivity, Jesus stands at the new beginning.

Mary asked how she as a virgin could give birth. In answer, Gabriel referred to the fact that Elizabeth, who was barren, had conceived and was six months pregnant (Lk 1.36), which was a sign that nothing is impossible with God (v 37). The virgin birth of Jesus is thus connected to the birth of John the Baptist which ties back to the special birth stories of the OT. In exploring this link, we must first of all see the difference between the birth miracles. The birth of John the Baptist was only a miracle of providence. God worked through the natural means of a man's seed in a woman's womb. The miracle consisted in the fact that the barren woman gave birth, and added to this she gave birth in old age. In the case of the virgin birth, the miracle was truly supernatural, i.e., above the natural. God brought about the conception without the natural means. This supernatural miracle of birth both fulfilled the sign in the providential miracles of birth and went beyond these births. The birth from a barren and very old woman showed that God can bring life out of that which has lost all power to give birth and further hope. In the virgin birth, God went the step further. He was not just extending the history of God's people through birth but was finally providing the needed salvation which was beyond human capacity to bring about.

As Jesus is the last link in biblical genealogy, his is the last birth story in the Bible. Through his birth, a new reality entered the world, and this leads us to our next theme.

### **B. THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND THE PERSON OF CHRIST**

In the scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ is tied to the nature of his person. His unique conception lies behind his unique person.

## **1. The connection made between the virgin birth and the deity of Christ**

In our study on the doctrine of procreation, we saw that the biblical expression, “born of a woman,” focuses attention on a person’s human nature. The person who is born of woman is a being of flesh in the dependent and humble status of mankind. Paul uses this expression for Jesus in Gal 4.4: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law....” Here the apostle works with the contrast between the divine status of the Son of God and the subordinate position he entered when he became human. As an authentic human being, he was born under the law in the status of a slave within the divine household.

The fact that Jesus was born of Mary seals the fact that he was a genuine human being, as truly human as any other person born of woman. The virginal conception by the operations of the Holy Spirit does not alter this. As we saw in our study on procreation, God forms the human being in the womb from the moment of conception to the time of birth. The birth of Jesus was true to this. From the moment of conception to the time of birth, all was regular and normal. No miracle took place. Jesus was formed in the womb like everyone else. The real miracle involved was not in the birth but in the conception. To direct the focus on what was unique in Christ’s birth, we should speak of the virginal conception.

### **a. The focus on the conception**

The three biblical passages that present the virgin birth put the focus on the conception. Isaiah 7.14 says, “Behold (i.e., stop and take special notice of this), a virgin shall conceive....” Matthew tells the narrative, not of the birth of Jesus but of the miraculous and apparently scandalous conception from the point of view of Joseph (Matt 1.18-25). As for the birth, he simply points out that Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary until she had given birth to a son, Jesus (v 25). Luke gives the account of Jesus’ birth, but here there is no miracle of birth (Lk 2.1-6). The great miracle is related in his account of the conception in the womb of Mary (Lk 1.26-28).

### **b. The connection between virginal conception and the divine stature of the son born**

In the three scriptures we are reviewing, the virginal conception is linked to the divine status of the child to be born.

#### *i. Isaiah*

Isaiah prophesied that the son conceived in the virgin womb will be called Immanuel. As he unfolds this theme throughout Isaiah 7 to 11, the divine stature of this son is brought into view (Ish 9.6).

#### *ii. Matthew*

Matthew takes up Isaiah’s prophecy and connects it to the virginal conception of Jesus in Matt 1.23. The evangelist is not simply registering a fulfilment of some prophecy. The citation of Ish 7.14 sets a major theme that is developed throughout Matthew’s Gospel. In Matt 1.23, Matthew gives the meaning of the Hebrew name, Immanuel—God with us—and this theme is echoed in the last line of his Gospel in the promise of the risen Christ to be with his disciples to the end of the age. In this closing scene of the Gospel, Jesus is seen in his full divine status and glory. The disciples respond to him as people respond to God: they worship him (Matt 28.17). He declares that he has all authority in heaven and on earth, and so is equal to God in the scope of his authority. He also joins his title as the Son with the Father and Spirit in one name. Finally, his promise to be with his disciples as they spread out over the face of the whole earth amounts to a claim to omnipresence, and this is also affirmed in the promise to be with those who gather in his name (Matt 18.20). The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as Immanuel in the fullest sense of that name. He is God with us. This divine presence is fully manifested and realized in the risen Christ, but it is rooted in his conception. Jesus did not attain to a mere divine status through his work. By virtue of the virginal conception, he is in his very person the man who is God.

iii. Luke

Luke presents the virginal conception through Gabriel's message to Mary in Lk 1.26-38. Gabriel gave the announcement in terms of Isaiah's prophecy. To see this, we will present the prophecy in Ish 7.14 and the announcement in Lk 1.31 in parallel:

Behold	the virgin	shall conceive	and bear a son	and shall call his name	Immanuel
And behold	you	will conceive in your womb	and bear a son	and you shall call his name	Jesus

While Gabriel switched the name Immanuel for the name Jesus, he by no means dropped the meaning of the name assigned by the prophet. Jesus, which in Hebrew is Joshua, was the human name. But, the angel went on to add that he would also be called the Son of the Most High (v 32), and this takes up the meaning of the name, Immanuel.

Gabriel made the direct link between the virginal conception and the divine status of the son born in his explanation to Mary in v 35. First he explains how it will be possible that Mary as a virgin will conceive. He says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...." Then he points out the result of this conception by the Spirit's work, "...therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God." The result of the virginal conception is the divine status and nature of the human being born.

## 2. The difference virginal conception made

To fully appreciate the significance of the virginal conception, we have to see Jesus' birth in comparison with birth in the created order. By beginning his Gospel with two birth stories, Luke invites such a comparison.

### a. John's relation to the divine

John's birth was within the order of creation. It was natural. He had a human father and mother. God's role was that in all births, for God opens the womb to make conception possible and he is at work crafting the human being in the womb. From a biblical point of view, the miracle consisted in the timing. God opened the womb of Elizabeth long past the normal childbearing years.

John's relationship with the divine was, in principle, not outside of the normal order. He was to be a Nazarite (Lk 1.15) who was dedicated to the Lord by prescribed abstinence. This consecration or holiness was added to his person. He was also filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Again, the filling of the Spirit was added to his person as in the case of those who spoke by the Spirit (Lk 1.41, 67), the only unusual feature being that he was filled from the womb.

### b. Jesus' relation to the divine

The relationship between Jesus and God was categorically different. The Spirit's work in Mary's womb replaced the contribution that the human father makes to conception. This had a twofold effect on the person of Jesus. Gabriel pointed this out in his explanation of the virginal conception in Lk 1.35. He described the divine work with two clauses:

- A. The **Holy** Spirit will come upon you
- B. And the power of **the Most High** will overshadow you

He then pointed out the twofold result

- A. Therefore the child to be born will be called **holy**
- B. The Son of **God**

The operation of the Holy Spirit made the child to be born holy, and the work of the Most High, i.e., God the Father, meant that the child would be the Son of God.

### **c. The indispensable Christ**

In the OT, there is one God who works through many persons in a variety of ways (Heb 1.1). Each of these persons was dispensable. God chose them and used them, and when their time was up they passed on to make room for others. There was nothing inherent in a patriarch, leader, priest or prophet that meant that God could only do his work through him. There was nothing about Moses that meant that he was the one and only person who could be the lawgiver. God could have just as well used another. This was also true of John the Baptist. Jesus said that among those born of woman, none was greater than he (Matt 11.11), but this was just a matter of his role, and even here it was just a matter of degree. Being born of a father and mother, he was just a man, distinguished only by calling, consecration and position in history relative to Christ. Due to the virginal conception, however, Jesus is different. His unique role in history could only be carried out by his unique person. He is the only man in all of history who is indispensable. He was not different in degree but in kind. He is the indispensable Christ, and this sets true Christianity off, in principle, from all other religions and philosophies.

## **3. The person of Christ from the point of view of his birth**

Holiness in the Bible is being separated to God from what is common. Intrinsically, God alone is holy, and creatures are only holy by being separated to him by his act or word. People are born common human beings and are made holy or separated to God by some special event. This is the kind of holiness that John the Baptist had. By virtue of the virginal conception, Jesus was different.

### **a. The holiness of Jesus from conception**

We will look at the holiness of Jesus from both the negative side, by which he was separated off from common humanity, and positive side, by which he was separated to God.

In the biblical view of the formation of a human being, the father and mother play different roles. We should add that the Bible does not deal with science, so we are not talking about genetics. The scriptures are concerned with God's relationship with people, and this is what we must consider. In the OT the father imparts the inherited family status. That is why genealogies (which give the succession that carries the covenant relationships) are the records of the succession of males. The mother plays a different role. It is in her womb that God forms the body, and to be born of her is to be truly human in nature. We see the difference between the two roles in the two ways the new birth is set in contrast to our natural birth in John's Gospel. Being born of a human father is set in contrast to being born of God by which we have the right to be children of God (Jn 1.12-13). Being born from a mother's womb is being born as flesh of flesh and is set in contrast to being born of the Spirit (Jn 3.4-8).

The father's role in procreation is signalled in scripture by Gen 5.1-3 which stands at the head of the genealogy of Adam. The image of God does not just flow through the father but is given to the son as the father's own likeness and image (Gen 3.1-5). In our study on the doctrine of man, we saw that to be made in the image of God was to be created in a relationship with God in which man represents God. From this it follows that for a father to transmit his own image to the son is for him to transmit his relationship with God to the son, and through this sin comes into play. Our study of the doctrine of original sin showed that Adam did not only pass on his created relationship with God but also his status as sinner.

Through the covenants of the OT, God renewed and developed his relationship with certain men who were heads of families and passed that relationship on to their offspring. However, the relationship between fallen man and God persisted and was passed on through the men who were chosen by God. If Jesus had been born of a human father, he would be no different than anyone else. His human father would have transmitted to him the full human status of the image of God in sin. The fact that he was conceived in the womb without the

contribution of a human father set him apart. This is the negative side of his holiness. Heb 7.25 says, he was holy, innocent, unstained, separate from sinners, and the virginal conception gives the basis for this in the very foundation of his humanity.

**b. His divine status**

The three passages on the virgin birth focus on the positive side of Jesus' holiness, i.e., his divine status. The Holy Spirit replaced the function of a human father in the act of conception, and this means that Jesus' humanity was formed within the relationship between the Spirit and the Most High rather than within the relationship a human father has with his creator. As Gabriel pointed out, this secured for the human being, Jesus, the fact that he is the Son of God.

That the Holy Spirit's working replaced the role of a human father in conception is a fact. But, we must be careful as to how we conceive of this work of the Spirit. Gabriel's explanation removes any idea of a sexual role. The Holy Spirit is not presented as the father of Jesus. The Most High is the Father. The Spirit's work in the virginal conception is like his role in creation when he hovered over the earth and was the power that brought into effect the word of God (Gen 1.1ff.).

**c. His real humanity**

After the act of conception, the body of Jesus was formed in the womb in the way God normally forms bodies in the womb. In the scriptures, this work of God is seen in parallel with his work in forming Adam from the dust of the ground. However, there is this great difference. In the creation of Adam, God brought flesh out of dust. Within the womb, he brings flesh out of flesh. This point is important for the doctrine of the humanity of Christ. His flesh or human nature was taken from Mary, and through Mary it was taken from our common humanity, and this made Jesus a member of the human family.

When we speak of Christ's flesh, we must be radically biblical. In our study on the doctrine of man, we saw that in biblical language flesh is not the physical part of man in contrast to his soul and spirit. Rather, man in his entire being (body, soul and spirit) is flesh. When we say that Jesus took flesh from Mary, we mean that he took his entire humanity from her.

**d. Deep probe**

To understand what it meant for Jesus to take full humanity from Mary, we have to probe into scriptural revelation. We must begin with Gen 1.27 which affirms that both male and female were created in the image of God. When Adam said that the woman was flesh of his flesh (Gen 2.23), he affirmed that the woman had the human nature that he had. So, when Jesus was formed in the womb as flesh from Mary's flesh, he was formed in the image of God and received the full human nature that God created in Adam and imparted to the woman. Here we must observe a fine distinction. The father only contributes to the conception, and through this he begets (fathers) a son in his own likeness and according to his own image and so transmits his natural relationship with God to him. Mary, however, did not give birth to Jesus according to her likeness and in her image. Rather, according to the biblical understanding of what happens in the womb, God crafted the human Jesus within the womb as flesh of Mary's flesh. Through this, Jesus was made in the created image of God and was a full member of the human race, but since the woman does not transmit the status of sin Jesus was not born in Adam's sin and under the universal sentence of death for that sin.

Isaiah 11.1 (which introduces the climax of Immanuel's Book) may contribute prophetic insight to our probe. The Messiah is not presented as a branch from the tree of David, which would be the case if he arose within the house of David. Rather, he is seen as a shoot coming forth from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his (i.e., Jesse's) root. David was the son of Jesse, and here the Messiah is presented as springing from Jesse who was the root of David and of his house. This makes the Messiah stand alongside David as a second and a greater David.

The image of a shoot coming forth from a root is that of birth, and such a birth is seen as the beginning of a new tree or kingdom. This turns the mind back to Ish 7.14, the prophecy that started the theme of God's new beginning in a birth. If we put together the prophecies of the shoot from the root of Jesse and of the virgin birth, we can arrive at a significant insight. Virginal conception bypasses the cumulative result of male succession and gives a new start rooted in the beginning before the male succession took place. We must keep in mind that the prophet does not spell out this theory, but then prophets do not theorize. Prophets present the great facts in salvation history in their interconnectedness, and the connection that we are noticing fits in with all that we are finding as we probe into biblical revelation.

The fact that God's Son came into the world through the woman without a human father echoes the first decrees of God in the fallen world in Genesis 3. The law with its sentence of death was given to Adam and through him it was passed on to Eve. In his judgment on the first sin, God made Adam (not Eve) responsible for not obeying his command (Gen 3.17) and passed the death sentence over him (v 19). Paul catches the full force of this when he says that sin and death entered the world through Adam and passed to all from him (Rom 5.12). To the woman, God assigned the role of giving birth and so the hope of life came through her. The seed that would defeat the serpent was called her seed (Gen 3.15). This is an unusual expression in the Bible, since the seed is normally spoken of as the seed of the father. Adam caught the point when he named the woman Eve because she was the mother of all living (Gen 3.20). Death came through man, and the hope of life for the fallen race came through the woman. Since the man and not the woman was the head, God could work through the woman's created role to provide the hope of life under the sentence of death passed over the man.

The decree of Gen 3.15, which is the first gospel of the Bible, also assigns to the man his role. If the hope of life under the sentence of death came through the woman, the seed that would fight and defeat the serpent was masculine. The scriptures say, "He shall bruise his head." The mandate to guard and the rule was given to the man in the first instance, and so it must be fulfilled through the conquest by a man. So, in fulfilment of Gen 3.15, the woman conceived and gave birth to a son.

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The virgin birth of Jesus marks a threshold in salvation history. The OT is an open ended book. At each point of its history, we find a generation that is the heir of the relationship with God handed down from previous generations. But, no generation in the OT realized fulfilment. Each generation only inherited promises and had a heritage of a hope to be realized in a future generation. It is not just the case that a promise with the hope of fulfilment was passed down; the promises and the vision of fulfilment were developed through the experiences of successive generations. The light at the end of this long tunnel of history was the Messiah who would bring in the everlasting kingdom. With his birth, that final birth took place that fulfilled the promise in all births, that the hope of the ages would be fulfilled. The birth of Jesus thus was tied to the past, but it also marked the break from the past and signalled the new beginning in the divine-human relationship.

Natural procreation perpetuated the relationship set up between God and mankind in creation. In this relationship, the distance between God and mankind was and had to be maintained. Man was made in the image of God, but he was not God. He was flesh in contrast to spirit which is the divine nature. The first law imposed this distance between God and man. Either man would have to maintain his difference from God by not making himself like God through knowledge, or God would impose on man his mortality and reduce the creature who crossed the boundary to dust and so prove that indeed he is just dust from dust. Procreation perpetuated this relationship through time in hope that the purposes of God for mankind will be realized. And that is all that procreation could do. The virgin birth of Christ took place within this relationship of failure and hope. It was the one birth that fulfilled the hope passed on through natural birth. But, it also changed the relationship between the divine and human. Through the virginal conception of Jesus, a new relationship between God and mankind was formed. This is not the relationship in which human nature is separated off from the divine but joined in perfect union with the divine. This union brought into history the eternal.