

Dear Friends

At this time of the year we remember the Psalmist's confidence in the certainty of God's help: *"But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble."* (Psalm 59:16). We've sensed times of trouble in the land over the last year, with the ANC recalling President Mbeki six months before the end of his term. This has been followed by resignations, dismissals, and now the formation of a new party. We need to pray that the coming election, seemingly now in March 2009, will be peaceful. At the same time Zimbabwe is sinking deeper into trouble and millions are starving, thousands crossing into S.A., Botswana and Mozambique. These are times of trouble, but God is our refuge. Whatever happens, God is on the throne.

Christmas reminds us that God has done something about the human condition, and the ongoing problems that men and governments create. The coming to earth of Jesus (the incarnation) was a vital and necessary part of God's plan of salvation. Without the incarnation there would have been no atonement. No crib, no cross, no crown, no baby, no Saviour. The one anticipates the other. Yes, there is mystery, and we need to experience something of the mystery and the sheer beauty of the glory of God in the face of Christ. And it is this sense of awe and reverence that will deepen our experience, strengthen our faith, and enrich our worship.

The fact that God has kept His promises, intervened in history, and so made possible our redemption, gives us great confidence that we can trust such a God to help us in times of trouble in our nation and region.

Please support our carol and Christmas services, and above all bring family and friends with you; they are most welcome.

Wishing you a blessed Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Peter

Mary, you did not bear this Child for yourself alone. The Child is not yours; you did not bring Him forth for yourself, but for me, even though you are His mother, even though you held Him in your arms and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and picked Him up and laid Him down....I know none, neither people nor angels, who can help Me except this Child whom you, O Mary, held in your arms.

If people could put out of his minds all that they are and have except this Child, and if for them everything – money, goods, power, honour – fades into darkness and they despise everything on earth compared with this Child, so that heaven with its stars and earth with all its power and all its treasures become as nothing to them, that person would have the true gain from this message of the angel.....To you is born the Saviour..... Then ought you to say, “Amen, I thank you dear Lord.

Martin Luther

There was nothing great about Bethlehem. It was but a shepherd village, yet here the great purpose of God became fact.....The city is poor, but its lowliness makes it more suitable as a birthplace of Him who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor. It is the house of bread, fit dwelling for Him who is the Bread of God.....At Bethlehem our world's history began, for His birth has influenced all history, sacred and secular, before and behind. Christ, Immanuel, Jesus, are our Lord's names in time; but the Word and Son are expressive of His eternal standing. The inaccessible Godhead becomes approachable; the incomprehensible becomes comprehensible.....Thus Bethlehem becomes a link between heaven and earth. Would you learn the way of God? Go to Bethlehem. Go to the manger where the Lord of glory lies....where the Highest became to lowest. Would you learn humility?.....See the Word made flesh. Bonar.

*O let my see Thy footmarks, and in them plant my own,
My hope to follow duly is in Thy strength alone.
O guide me, call me, draw me, uphold me to the end;
And then in heaven receive me; my Saviour and my friend!
O Jesus, Thou hast promised, to all who follow Thee,
That where Thou art in glory there shall Thy servant be;
And, Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend.*

E. John Bode.

CCB BIBLE GROUP TRAINING - JANUARY 2009

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN CULTURE? STUDIES IN EPHESIANS

The background to this year's group training series lies in the belief that the Bible is the strongest civilizing force that is in the world.

In South Africa, Christianity has suffered serious collateral damage because of its role in sustaining the previous dispensation's discriminatory cultural development policies. This damage, together with the more recent strong influences of modern secularism, leaves us in danger of believing that current social trends towards total secularisation of culture are irreversible.

The Bible begs to differ and in this year's group training we are going to explore what Ephesians teaches about what it means to be comprehensively Christian. For it is only as we recover the radically transforming message of the gospel in our own lives and in the life of our church, that we can again become the force that 'changed the world upside down' in the first century.

In his commentary on Ephesians, John Stott speaks of the church as 'God's new society' in a sinful and dying world. We will look at the teaching of Ephesians in four talks and then four practical sessions in which we will think what it means to be so culturally Christian that we influence our world.

Date	Programme
Tues 6 Jan	Preparation: 'The scope of these blessings' pp 45-50 Message: We are the subjects of God's eternal purposes Practical: Does the world's view of the church matter?
Tues 13 Jan	Preparation: 'The portrait of God's new society' pp 104-112 Message: We are a family united by Christ's reconciling work Practical: What makes for an effective culture in the world?
Tues 20 Jan	Preparation: 'Growth' pp 169-172; 'Life' pp 178-183 Message: We are growing to become like God in true holiness Practical: How our culture can help or hinder communication
Tues 27 Jan	Preparation: 'The church is the key to the world' pp 126-130 Message: Engaging the world in families, society and religion Practical: Things we can do to heal past hurts and alienation

“Jesus Christ.....made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

Philippians 2:5-7

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in His hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

King of Kings yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth He stood.
Lord of Lords in human vesture,
In the Body and the Blood
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heav'nly food.

At His feet the six-winged seraph;
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the Presence.
As with ceaseless voice they cry,
“Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.
Lord most high!”

Traditional French Carol

“The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.”

John 1:14

*We could not tell what God’s thoughts about us were until He showed us them to us in a way that we could understand. He let us know them by sending Jesus Christ into the world. He took a body like ours in order that we might know God’s thought about us, and the more we know Jesus the more we know God’s mind. He is the Word, **God’s thoughts made flesh.....***

Christ came down to the tabernacle of our nature, which had broken down and become a ruin, to raise it up and repair it, making it fit for habitation of God by His own indwelling.

Bible Illustrator

Can a Christian Deny the Virgin Birth?

Can a true Christian deny the virgin birth? This question would perplex the vast majority of Christians throughout the centuries, but modern denials of biblical truth make the question tragically significant. Of all biblical doctrines, the doctrine of Christ's virginal conception has often been the specific target of modern denial and attack.

Attacks upon the virgin birth emerged in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, with some theologians attempting to harmonize the anti-supernaturalism of the modern mind with the church's teaching about Christ. The great quest of liberal theology has been to invent a Jesus who is stripped of all supernatural power, deity, and authority.

The fountainhead of this quest includes figures such as Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann. Often considered the most influential New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, Bultmann argued that the New Testament presents a mythological worldview that modern men and women simply cannot accept as real. The virgin birth is simply a part of this mythological structure and Bultmann urged his program of "demythologization" in order to construct a faith liberated from miracles and all vestiges of the supernatural. Jesus was reduced to an enlightened teacher and existentialist model.

In America, the public denial of the virgin birth can be traced to the emergence of Protestant liberalism in the early 20th century. In his famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?," Harry Emerson Fosdick--an unabashed liberal--aimed his attention at "the vexed and mooted question of the virgin birth." Fosdick, preaching from the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church in New York City, allowed that Christians may hold "quite different points of view about a matter like the virgin birth." He accepted the fact that many Christians believed the virgin birth to be historically true and theologically significant. Fosdick likened this belief to trust in "a special biological miracle." Nevertheless, Fosdick insisted that others, equally Christian, could disagree with those who believe the virgin birth to be historically true: "But, side by side with them in the evangelical churches is a group of equally loyal and reverent people who would say that the virgin birth is not to be accepted as an historic fact. To believe in the virgin birth as an explanation of great personality is one of the familiar ways in which the ancient world was accustomed to account for unusual superiority."

Fosdick explained that those who deny the virgin birth hold to a specific pattern of reasoning. As he explained, "those first disciples adored Jesus--as we do; when they thought about his coming they were sure that he came specially from God--as we are; this adoration and conviction they associated with God's special influence and intention in his birth--as we do; but they phrased it in terms of a biological miracle that our modern minds cannot use."

Thus, Fosdick divided the church into two camps. Those he labeled as "fundamentalists" believe the virgin birth to be historical fact. The other camp, comprised of "enlightened" Christians who no longer obligate themselves to believe the Bible to be true, discard this "biological" miracle but still consider themselves to be Christians.

More contemporary attacks on the virgin birth of Christ have emerged from figures such as retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong and German New Testament scholar Gerd Luedemann. Luedemann acknowledges that "most Christians in all the churches in the world confess as they recite the Apostles' Creed that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. Now...modern Christians completely discount the historicity of the virgin birth and understand it in a figurative sense." Obviously, the "modern Christians" Luedemann identifies are those who allow the modern secular worldview to establish the frame for reality into which the claims of the Bible must be fitted. Those doctrines that do not fit easily within the secular frame must be automatically discarded. As might be expected, Luedemann's denial of biblical truth is not limited to the virgin birth. He denies virtually everything the Bible reveals about Jesus Christ. In summarizing his argument, Luedemann states: "The tomb was full and the manger empty." That is to say, Luedemann believes that Jesus was not born of a virgin and that He was not raised from the dead.

Another angle of attack on the virgin birth has come from the group of radical scholars who organize themselves into what is called the "Jesus Seminar." These liberal scholars apply a radical form of interpretation and deny that the New Testament is in any way reliable as a source of knowledge about Jesus. Roman Catholic scholar John Dominic Crossan, a member of the Jesus Seminar, discounts the biblical narratives about the virgin birth as invented theology. He acknowledges that Matthew explicitly traces the virgin birth to Isaiah 7:14. Crossan explains that the author of Matthew simply made this up: "Clearly, somebody went seeking in the Old Testament for a text that could be interpreted as prophesying a virginal conception, even if such was

never its original meaning. Somebody had already decided on the transcendental importance of the adult Jesus and sought to retroject that significance on to the conception and birth itself."

Crossan denies that Matthew and Luke can be taken with any historical seriousness, and he understands the biblical doctrine of the virgin birth to be an insurmountable obstacle to modern people as they encounter the New Testament. As with Luedemann, Crossan's denial of the virgin birth is only a hint of what is to come. In *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Crossan presents an account of Jesus that would offend no secularist or atheist. Obviously, Crossan's vision also bears no resemblance to the New Testament.

For others, the rejection of the birth is tied to a specific ideology. In *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, Jane Schaberg accuses the church of inventing the doctrine of the virgin birth in order to subordinate women. As she summarizes: "The charge of contemporary feminists, then, is not that the image of the Virgin Mary is unimportant or irrelevant, but that it contributes to and is integral to the oppression of women." Schaberg states that the conception of Jesus was most likely the result of extra-marital sex or rape. She chooses to emphasize the latter possibility and turns this into a feminist fantasy in which Mary is the heroine who overcomes. Schaberg offers a tragic, but instructive model of what happens when ideology trumps trust in the biblical text. Her most basic agenda is not even concerned with the question of the virgin birth of Christ, but with turning this biblical account into service for the feminist agenda.

Bishop Joseph Sprague of the United Methodist Church offers further evidence of modern heresy. In an address he presented on June 25, 2002 at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, this bishop denied the faith wholesale. Sprague, who serves as Presiding Bishop of the United Methodist Church in northern Illinois, has been called "the most vocally prominent active liberal bishop in Protestantism today." Sprague is proud of this designation and takes it as a compliment: "I really make no apology for that. I don't consider myself a liberal. I consider myself a radical." Sprague lives up to his self-designation.

In his Iliff address, Bishop Sprague claimed that the "myth" of the virgin birth "was not intended as historical fact, but was employed by Matthew and Luke in different ways to appoint poetically the truth about Jesus as experienced in the emerging church." Sprague defined a theological myth as "not false presentation but a valid and quite persuasive literary

device employed to point to ultimate truth that can only be insinuated symbolically and never depicted exhaustively." Jesus, Sprague insists, was born to human parents and did not possess "trans-human, supernatural powers."

Thus, Sprague dismisses the miracles, the exclusivity of Christ, and the bodily resurrection as well as the virgin birth. His Christology is explicitly heretical: "Jesus was not born the Christ, rather by the confluence of grace with faith, he became the Christ, God's beloved in whom God was well pleased."

Bishop Sprague was charged with heresy but has twice been cleared of the charge--a clear sign that the mainline Protestant denominations are unwilling to identify as heretics even those who openly teach heresy. The presence of theologians and pastors who deny the virgin birth in the theological seminaries and pulpits of the land is evidence of the sweeping tide of unbelief that marks so many institutions and churches in our time.

Can a true Christian deny the virgin birth? The answer to that question must be a decisive No. Those who deny the virgin birth reject the authority of Scripture, deny the supernatural birth of the Savior, undermine the very foundations of the Gospel, and have no way of explaining the deity of Christ.

Anyone who claims that the virgin birth can be discarded even as the deity of Christ is affirmed is either intellectually dishonest or theological incompetent.

Several years ago, Cecil Sherman--then a Southern Baptist, but later the first coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship--stated: "A teacher who might also be led by the Scripture not to believe in the Virgin Birth should not be fired." Consider the logic of that statement. A Christian can be led by the Bible to deny what the Bible teaches? This kind of logic is what has allowed those who deny the virgin birth to sit comfortably in liberal theological seminaries and to preach their reductionistic Christ from major pulpits.

Christians must face the fact that a denial of the virgin birth is a denial of Jesus as the Christ. The Savior who died for our sins was none other than the baby who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, and born of a virgin. The virgin birth does not stand alone as a biblical doctrine, it is an irreducible part of the biblical revelation about the person and work of Jesus Christ. With it, the Gospel stands or falls.

"Everyone admits that the Bible represents Jesus as having been conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. The only question is whether in making that representation the Bible is true or false." So declared J. Gresham Machen in his great work, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*. As Machen went on to argue, "if the Bible is regarded as being wrong in what it says about the birth of Christ, then obviously the authority of the Bible in any high sense, is gone."

The authority of the Bible is almost completely gone where liberal theology holds its sway. The authority of the Bible is replaced with the secular worldview of the modern age and the postmodern denial of truth itself. The true church stands without apology upon the authority of the Bible and declares that Jesus was indeed "born of a virgin." Though the denial of this doctrine is now tragically common, the historical truth of Christ's birth remains inviolate. No true Christian can deny the virgin birth.

Albert Mohler

I do not wonder at any miracle, but I do marvel at this, which is a miracle among miracles, that God should become human.
Cyprian of Carthage

"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins."
Matthew 1:21

The first reason for the gift of the Incarnate Son to a perishing world is that He might be a sacrifice for its sin. The second reason is that He might be an example of a godly life to those who believe in Him. We cannot invert the order and say that He was given, first as our example, and secondly as our sin-offering before God. We cannot imitate Him until He has redeemed us from the power and guilt of sin; the first need of a sinner is pardon and moral freedom, the second, the ideal of a new life.

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

Luke 2:10

If you can sing: “The Son, who is proclaimed to be the Lord and Saviour, is my Saviour”; and if you can confirm the message of the angel and say yes to it and believe it in your heart, then your heart will be filled with assurance and joy and confidence, and you will not worry much about... the best this world has to offer.

Faith is not only to believe in Mary's Son but, rather, that He who lies in the virgin's lap is our Saviour, that we accept this and give thanks to God who loved us that He gave us a Saviour who is ours, And for a sign He sent the angel from heaven to proclaim Him, in order that nothing else should be preached except that this Child is the Saviour. We should acknowledge and accept Him; confess Him as our Saviour in every need, call upon Him and never doubt that He will save us.

Martin Luther

“I have sent you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” John 13:15

A PLOT OF FREE GRACE

“...the mystery of godliness is great: God appeared in a body....”

1 Timothy 3:16

In the creation, man was made in God's image; in the incarnation God was made in man's image...Why was Jesus made flesh?

1. The *causa prima*, and impulsive cause, was free grace. It was love in God the Father to send Christ, and love in Christ that He came to be incarnate. Love was the intrinsic motive. Christ is God-man, because He is a lover of man....Christ's taking flesh was a plot of free grace, and a pure design of love. Christ incarnate is nothing but love covered in flesh.
2. Christ took our flesh upon him, that He might take our sins upon Him. He was, says Luther, the greatest sinner, having the weight of the sins of the whole world lying upon Him.... and so appease God's wrath.
3. Christ, clothing Himself with our flesh makes the divine nature more amiable and delightful to us. We need not be afraid to look upon God through Christ's human nature. Through the lantern of Christ's humanity we may see the light of the Deity.

Thomas Watson.

We cannot understand Christmas without Good Friday; the meaning of the cradle unless we see the shadow of the cross. He stooped down to enable us to be like Him. Where He is, He will lead us. What He Is, He will make us.

A. MacLaren.