

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