

Sermon File # 1116

Scripture Text: Matthew 1:18-25; Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-38, followed by Text.

Sermon Title: *I Believe in Jesus, Conceived by the Spirit and Born of the Virgin Mary* (3rd in series on The Apostles' Creed)

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached

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For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

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I Believe in Jesus, Conceived by the Spirit and Born of the Virgin Mary

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Matthew 1:18-25, as we continue our series on the Apostles' Creed, that earliest of Christian confessions and foundational, orthodox statement of the church throughout the ages. We have already stated our belief in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. Last Sunday we asserted that we believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

Today we will affirm that we believe that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, as we look at the birth of the Savior as a miracle of the virgin conception through Mary. This miracle is usually referred to as the virgin birth. And, of course, Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, who remained a virgin until after Jesus was born. But the birth itself was not the miracle. Jesus was born in a very normal way, as are other babies. The miracle was the way he was conceived supernaturally within Mary's womb, without the involvement of a human father, and that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' birth.

Matthew, who writes to evangelize a largely Jewish readership, begins his gospel with a record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, beginning with

Abraham, “the father of the Jewish nation.” When the genealogy comes to Joseph, it does not say Joseph was the father of Jesus, but rather that he was the husband of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus (Matthew 1:16). Verse 17 before our text states that Jesus’ earthly lineage is traceable from Abraham, to David, the greatest of the Jewish kings, and to Christ. Jesus was miraculously born of an earthly mother but without the need of an earthly father.

One New Testament scholar says that verses 18 through 25 are a “footnote” to explain how Joseph “begat”/gave birth to Jesus legally as a son of David (of the lineage of David), and how God “begat” Jesus as the Son of God (Krister Stendahl, quoted by Raymond Brown in *The Birth of the Messiah*). But our text is far more than a footnote. It features the importance of the virgin conception of the Savior. As our text will make clear, we must accept that the genesis or conception of Jesus was miraculous, or else conclude that Jesus was born illegitimately, which some liberal scholars, who reject the biblical evidence, are prepared to conclude.

Luke’s Gospel gives us the account of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary, to announce to her that she had been chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah, and will do so miraculously through the Holy Spirit. In Matthew’s account we note how the angel later announced to Joseph this amazing and to him, quite perplexing news.

Follow as I read this account in Luke 1:26-38, then our text, **Matthew 1:18-25**.

It seems that the only time we read or hear sermons based on these passages is during the Advent Season. So, maybe today we can have a little celebration of the real meaning of Christmas during the middle of summertime. Surely the wonder of Jesus’ birth as God’s great gift to humankind should not be confined to the last few weeks of the year.

The conception and virgin birth of Jesus was a miracle, which is defined as “a wonder, marvel, an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs” (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). “The conception of Jesus was not an act of man, but was an act of God, which he determined before the genesis of creation. God the Father planned it. God the Holy Spirit planted the fertilized seed in Mary. And God the Son, at that very moment, took on human form. The form of an embryo in the womb. The form of a fetus.” (Jeffrey S Gangel, *World Magazine*, December 5, 1998).

The conception of Jesus was integral to the whole plan of salvation history, God’s plan to redeem fallen and lost mankind. We have noted our belief in the miracle of God’s creation of all that exists, in the cosmos and the heavenly realms. Last Sunday, continuing with our study of the Apostles’ Creed, we affirmed our belief in the miracle of the incarnation of God’s Son, fully God and fully man, as the life-changing, eternity-implanting Word of God. Today we look at the miracle of the conception and birth of Jesus within the virgin Mary. And this miracle, though microscopic, impacted the world and will, in God’s time impact all of creation.

First of all, the miracle of the virgin conception was...

A miracle from God

This “most important birth in all history” (Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, page 59) through the conception of Jesus Christ within the virgin Mary, was a miracle...

Originating in the heart of God

Our text is in the context of Matthew’s gospel story, written to evangelize primarily the Jews. Matthew shows that the miracle of Jesus’ birth was according to God’s eternal plan, coming about according to the long history of his people, in fulfillment of Scripture’s promise of a Savior from the house and lineage of David. The birth of the Savior was conceived first within the heart of God even before the creation of the world (1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8). In Genesis 3:15, the Lord God prophesied to the serpent about the “seed” of the woman being at enmity with Satan’s offspring. The offspring of the woman, the Christ, would crush the head of Satan. Salvation history began with God’s calling and promise to Abraham to be a father of a great multitude (Matthew 1:1-2; Genesis 12:1-3). The covenant promise of salvation was first issued to Abraham and found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The conception and birth of Jesus is the expression of the love of God in his taking the initiative for our salvation. The world was lost and steeped in sin, and God initiated a plan that had its genesis within his eternal purposes. What happened in Bethlehem 2000 years ago was conceived from before the creation of time and space. And, I might add, your experience of salvation had its genesis in God’s heart before creation (Ephesians 1:4).

God’s conceiving the greatest gift of Jesus was not some romantic notion, but rather was purposeful—to meet our desperate need. The miracle of Jesus’ incarnation is not only that God *could* save us through the gift of his Son, but that God *would* save us. It’s a miracle of love and grace that he would love us that much, in spite of our sin and unworthiness. In our society, often our gifts are with the hope that they will be appreciated by “the man who has everything” (How many of you can even remember the gifts you received this past Christmas, just 7 months ago?) God’s gift was conceived because he knew our desperate need.

Humankind in our pride may scorn the idea of needing God, yet life and certainly death have a way of emptying even the most proud and self-sufficient of our own resources. Most, even in Jesus’ days on earth, failed to recognize their desperate need of him. John writes in his Prologue, The Word, Jesus, “came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:11-12). The miracle of the virgin

conception originated in God's heart, and is a gift that was delivered by the Holy Spirit.

Coming through the Holy Spirit

The angel appeared to Joseph to explain the inexplicable. Joseph was bewildered by the discovery of his beloved fiancée's pregnancy. To be engaged in that first century Galilean culture was to be legally and permanently bound to one another. A first century Jewish marriage began with three phases: 1) the engagement; 2) a legal betrothal of one year during which the couple were promised to each other and legally bound to one another; and 3) the wedding. The engaged/betrothed couple did not consummate the marriage sexually until after the wedding. Joseph and Mary were still in the second stage. Mary's pregnancy could be explained only by the fact that she must have been unfaithful to her fiancé, Joseph. Her apparent sin was punishable by death (Deuteronomy 22:24), and at the very least was disgraceful (See Michael J Wilkins, *Matthew: NIV Application Commentary*, page 75). *The Message* paraphrases verse 19 as, "Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced." Being a righteous and kind man, Joseph decided to "divorce her quietly."

At that moment of crisis, the angel of the Lord appeared to tell Joseph that his virgin fiancée was pregnant by the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit. The child was to be named Jesus; the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Joshua," meaning Savior (verse 21). He would save from the dire sin, guilt and death problem facing all mankind. The miraculous conception of Jesus was an essential component in God's becoming a man and yet being divine, in his being the God-Man. The angel said also that this special Son would be called "Immanuel—which means, "God with us" (verse 23). So, the two names of this special Child speak of his humanity, like the Old Covenant leader Joshua, and the eternal God with us.

As Wayne Grudem says, the virgin birth (conception) made possible the uniting of the full deity and the full humanity of God in one Person. Only by his being born of a woman could we think of him as fully human as we are. And if he were born of man and woman it would be difficult to think of him as fully divine, if his origin were like ours in every way. The virgin birth (conception) makes possible Christ's true humanity without the inherited sin, legal guilt, and corrupt moral nature that all human beings have inherited from the fall of our first father, Adam. God in his wisdom, says Grudem, ordained a combination of human and divine influence with the conception of Christ. (Pages 529 ff, *Systematic Theology*).

ANS Lane says that the role of Christ requires there be both continuity and discontinuity between him and us, that he should be one of us (as in Hebrews 2:10-18) and yet different from us (pages 708-710, *New Dictionary of Theology*). And the Incarnation shows that the God-Man came to redeem fallen humanity, which can be raised to perfect Christlikeness. This miracle came from God and was delivered to us through the young virgin Mary.

Within the virgin Mary

The miracle was conceived first and eternally within the heart of God, but actually and historically within the womb of the virgin Mary. When Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy, the angel of the Lord convinced him of her miraculous, Spirit-wrought conception. So, Joseph took Mary to be his wife, although they did not consummate their marriage in sexual union until after the birth of Jesus. So Jesus was both virgin conceived and also virgin born. Mary did not remain a perpetual virgin. After the birth of Jesus, she through her union with Joseph conceived other children naturally, and these were the half-siblings of Jesus.

(Although as evangelicals we do not recognize the biblical or historical evidence for the Immaculate Conception, perpetual virginity or bodily assumption of Mary, we nevertheless honor her as the godly, humble earthly mother of the Lord Jesus. As the angel Gabriel announced to Mary when she received her visit, she was "highly favored" by the Lord, who chose her to be the mother of Jesus {Luke 1:28}. We can only imagine the heavy weight of responsibility placed on this young Jewish mother of Jesus. In his gospel account, Luke presents Mary's faith as an example to all of us who believe. The teaching of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches about Mary's perpetual virginity was no doubt prompted by the view that even married sex somehow defiles the body and soul, which is an unbiblical notion. God honors marriage and teaches that husband and wife are to enjoy their sexual relationship, and are to "be fruitful and multiply," as God provides. Mary was no less godly and no less highly favored by the Lord after she gave birth to Jesus and then subsequently had normal sexual relations with Joseph, who fathered her other children.)

Mary was chosen by the Lord, as we note in Luke's gospel (Luke 1:26-38), to give birth to the Messiah, uniquely and miraculously. This is what Helmut Thielicke called "something equivalent to the creation." Pagan myths abounded about gods descending to impregnate women. But this creation of the Christ Child was holy God, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, creating within Mary the zygote and embryo of the Son of God, the one-of-a-kind God-Man.

The real, fundamental miracle is the Incarnation. As Peter Rhea Jones said, we don't believe in the deity of Jesus because of the virgin birth, but we believe in the virgin conception and birth because of the deity of Jesus. He is the divine, uniquely born Son of God. The miracle was not even so much how he could be fully God and fully man, but *why*. Why the perfect, sinless, glorified Son would submit to taking on our humanity and why he would submit to the abject humiliation of his lowly birth, his difficult and opposed public ministry, and his ignominious, unspeakable suffering in his cross.

The miracle of the virgin conception is a miracle of love and grace, from God to us. As such it is...

A miracle for us

The virgin conception is a miracle for us, and is a miracle...

To seek and to save us

In verse 21, the angel told Joseph that Mary would give birth to a son, and that his name would be Jesus, "because he will save his people from their sins." Joshua means "one who saves," and the Jews were looking for a deliverer who would bring immediate political liberation and an outwardly forceful kingdom on earth. Few expected that Messiah would be a suffering servant who would stoop to the level of mankind and be a humble servant, even to the point of dying on a cross (Philippians 2:6ff). Because the miracle was created within Mary, it is now possible for God to save us from our sins. Jesus came to seek and to save that which is lost (Luke 19:10).

Years ago I read a story from one of world-wide evangelist Billy Graham's sermons that gives us a homely but also a helpful illustration of the miracle of the Incarnation. Says Graham, "One day I was walking along the road with my (then) little boy, who was five years of age, and we stepped on an anthill. We killed a lot of ants and wounded a lot of others, and I said to Ned, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could go down there and help those ants rebuild their house and bury their dead and take care of their wounded?" He said, "But Daddy, we are too big. We can't get down there and help those ants." I thought for a moment, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could become an ant and live in an ant world?" (*20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, volume XII, page 317).

I don't aspire to be an ant, even to embark on such a noble project, but Graham was giving his son a good object lesson at a teachable moment. For God's eternal Son, the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, to condescend to rescue us humans in his kenosis was an even greater self-humiliation than it would be for us to stoop to the level of an ant (Philippians 2:6-11).

John's Gospel, in the Prologue (1:1-18), says Jesus Christ is the Word who came to earth to speak everyone's language. And I'm amazed at how the limited level of the Dutch language I have mastered has opened the way for a relationship with my landlord, neighbors, local bakery owners, cycle repairman and others. When I speak English to the local people I presumptuously take the upper hand and place myself in a position of power and control, and put them on the defensive, even though I am a guest in their country. When I struggle with my Dutch, their mother tongue, they know I value their language and they usually are happy to help me speak and learn. I take the position of weakness to speak their heart language and to communicate on their terms.

Jesus came, not in power, but in weakness, like an ant, to show the way, and to offer himself for us, and take us off the defensive. That is perhaps why God chose Mary, of lowly birth and social circumstances herself, to give birth

to his Son. You may have been building up and holding defenses against the inroads of God's Spirit. You may have become defensive against and resistant to the witness of the church, supposes we are trying to impose the gospel on you. Only God can come to you and awakening you, not by overpowering your will, but through the "gentle whisper" of the Spirit, and the "weak power" of the cross.

The miracle of the virgin conception was for God to rescue us and...

To be with us

The angel told Joseph that Jesus would be called Immanuel—which means, "God with us" (verse 23). Jesus came to be with us primarily in order to die for our sins. The gift conceived within Mary and delivered to us was uniquely for our salvation. Only the God-Man, the Son of God and Son of Man, could save and change us. God chose Mary and Mary chose to allow this miracle to take place within her womb.

The Gospel of Matthew begins and ends with "God with us." Here in our text the angel tells Joseph that Jesus, who will be conceived and born through Mary, is to be called "Immanuel—which means, 'God with us.'" And the Gospel ends with the risen Lord Jesus giving his promise after the Great Commission: "And surely I am with you always, even to the very end of the age" (Matthew 1:23; 28:20). The miracle of the virgin conception is to take place within the willing heart of the believer, the one who lets salvation happen in his or her life. And Jesus comes into our lives to stay.

The birth of the Savior means that the Triune God has come to earth and into the lives of all who believe in Jesus. This is an amazing thought, that holy God, the transcendent mighty Creator who dwells in inapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16), has come to make himself available to us as our sympathetic and approachable Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14ff, and Craig Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC, page 61).

And when we trust in Christ as our crucified, risen Savior, he is miraculously conceived in our hearts. He is received...

By grace through faith

What distinguished Israel from other nations was simply the grace of God. Hosea reminded them that there was a time when they were "not a people" (Hosea 1:9). Peter tells us that we were once "nobody's nothings," but now by grace we are the people of God (1Peter 2:10). Mary and Joseph had nothing to offer. God, however, took the initiative. He made their lives take on great significance. God's gracious gift of eternal life enriches and completes a longing, empty world.

By grace through faith in Christ Jesus, he is born into our hearts. Just as was true for Mary and Joseph, there is nothing we have done for Jesus to be born

and there is nothing we can do to contribute to his presence in our lives. It's all the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9).

His presence makes all the difference...

To transform us

The gift of the new birth is one that lasts. This gift of saving grace stays with us, grows and changes us. Missionary statesman E Stanley Jones (1884-1973) said that the word "Christlike" is the finest word in human speech (*20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, volume IX, page 321). There is no higher concept. When we by faith conceive Christ in our hearts, that is, submit to God's conceiving him within our hearts, we are born again. Paul writes that God the Father "chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world, *to be holy and blameless in his sight*" (Ephesians 1:4). When we receive Christ by faith, the lifelong process toward Christlikeness is inexorably begun.

As Michael Horton writes, the incarnation of Christ ended forever the false dualism between the human and the divine (and I might add, between the sacred and the secular). Immanuel means "God with us," and "God within us." There is no characteristic that belongs to us as human beings that did not belong to our redeemer except sin (page 67, *We Believe*).

I recall my New Testament theology professor's teaching us the Greek prepositions used in Jesus' words to the disciples about the Holy Spirit, the Helper, in John 14-16. The preposition we translate "in" can also be translated "into." Jesus promised he would not leave us as orphans. And he would not only come to be alongside us as our Helper, to be with us, but would come into us, to be "inside" us. He is our strength within, to enable us but also to live his life in us and to live as us.

God conceived the gift and conceived him by the Holy Spirit within Mary. But for us to know meaning and power of salvation, he must conceive the gift in our receptive hearts. God would come down to you and make himself known to you, and lead you to himself. And then he will begin to make your life anew.

The Holy Spirit is the power of creation, as we see in Genesis 1:2. And here we see that the Holy Spirit is the agent of the New Creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). And he who gave life to the conceived baby Jesus is the one who gives us new life when we believe. The Apostle Paul compared the Holy Spirit's power to save as the "incomparably great power" that is "like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him (Ephesians 1:19f). The life-changing miracle we need is to allow the crucified and risen Savior to live his life in us and as us.

Now and until the end of the age

Jesus was generated within my heart many years ago. Verse 18 says, "This is how the birth of Jesus came about." Your testimony is "This is how the birth

of Jesus came about in my life.” And it happened “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4). In history, the conception and birth of Jesus came about at just the right time,” 2000 years ago. During the Pax Romana it was the right time. The world was unified politically and militarily. Roads made possible the travel of missionaries. There was a common, unifying Greek language.

Jesus comes to us at the right time and also his salvation is till the end of this age (Matthew 28:20) and for all eternity. We believe in the miraculous first coming of Christ but also we look forward to his Second Coming, which means the consummation of our salvation and the fulfillment of all of our hopes. What we have and what we have now is but a mere “sample” of what we shall be (1 John 3:1ff). Salvation is a dynamic term that covers God’s immediate rescue, his ongoing sustaining and transforming power, and his total transformation of us into the likeness of his Son.

Now it is possibly the time for your life to change. The miracle of the conception of Christ can take place in your life. It’s a gift that will change your life. And there is no better time than right now. A changed life would be a miracle that would benefit you and a lot of people around you. Joseph had to submit or rebel right then when the angel visited him. Mary was already pregnant! God interrupted his life, and he didn’t have the option of inaction. Salvation is a crisis, and the Holy Spirit comes and calls “today”!

Conclusion:

The virgin conception and birth of Jesus are about a true miracle, one that should be celebrated even in midsummer and not just in December. Christians can and should celebrate festivals like Christmas and Easter as opportunities to focus and turn the attention of others toward the truth of Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection as Savior of all who believe. But as followers of Jesus, our celebration isn’t limited to one or two seasons a year. Every Lord’s Day is Resurrection Sunday and also every day of our lives we should celebrate the truth that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, was miraculously born to be our unique Savior and to become the perfect sacrifice for our sins. And we don’t have to wait till December to know the joy of receiving a gift, and the birth of Jesus is the greatest gift of all, one that changes our lives. Now exactly 7 months after the past Christmas and 5 months before next one, we can celebrate the miracle of Jesus’ conception and birth.

Some gifts make lasting contributions, and others, like a child’s toy, are soon broken or forgotten. Christmas Day at my in-laws house was always a chaotically joyful time of exchanging gifts, many of which were senseless, useless and yet always great fun. There were so many boxes and packages lying around that on one occasion, at least, Nancy’s mother discovered weeks later a gift that had been lost under a pile of wrapping paper, and was left unopened. As I recall, it was set aside to be given the next Christmas. Most gifts simply add some enjoyment or perhaps provide a necessity or possibly make life easier for us. But some gifts have been known to change lives. I

know people whose lives have been changed by a gift of a set of golf clubs. Their leisure time is never again the same.

Sometimes I think of the gift of the big black Bible my grandmother gave me, some years before my public profession of faith (as I open a wrapped box containing a Bible). That Bible looked like my hero preacher/pastor father's black pulpit Bible. As a young boy I would place that Bible on a "make believe" pulpit, a pedestal in my bedroom, and would pound on it and pretend to preach, even before I came to a full understanding of salvation. In a way, through that gift, God was calling me and shaping my life. Gifts can change lives. To borrow the words of Graham Greene in his novel, *The Power and the Glory* (1990), "There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in."

If you open your heart and life to Jesus Christ, he will come in and live his life in you and as you. He will transform and liberate you to be what you were created to be. His power and his gifts will flow into your life. And, as you realize that God so loved you that he gave his only Son for you (John 3:16), you have only to receive his gift. It's a gift that is free but not cheap. It cost God his Son and it will cost you your old way of life.

And this gift of the miracle of Christ's conception in your heart really does begin with God's initiative. In John's prologue to his gospel, he writes that we became God's children and were "born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:13). Today you can allow Jesus Christ to be conceived in your heart, and he will change your life and abide with you forever.

The birth of Christ within you will forever change you, your values, priorities, relationships and destiny. I pray that today you will allow for the possibility of this miracle through the conception and birth of the Savior. Then you will say with all of your heart, "I believe in Jesus, conceived by the Spirit and born of the virgin Mary."

Questions for personal reflection and/or group study:

1. In light of our text, how does the unique birth of Jesus (by a human mother, who conceived as a virgin by the Holy Spirit) underscore both his humanity and his deity?
2. Why is it important that we believe that Jesus was conceived and born of a virgin? Do you agree with the statement, "We don't believe in the deity of Jesus Christ because of the virgin conception, but rather we believe in the virgin conception because of the deity of Christ?" Why or why not?

3. Why do you think Mary, in her humble circumstances, was chosen to give birth to the Savior? Why didn't God chose a woman of high status and social or religious prominence?
4. In what way is the conception of Jesus within the womb of Mary a model for his birth, through the Holy Spirit, within the heart of the believer?
5. Are you regularly aware of the presence of Jesus in your life? In what way is his presence affecting and/or changing your life?
6. How will this Scripture text (Matthew 1:18-25) affect your understanding of the meaning of your salvation?
7. Can you say that Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, has been conceived and born within you? What difference is he making in your life today?

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