

The Virgin Birth

Introduction

The virgin birth is critical to our understanding of the hypostatic union of Christ. For, it teaches that God became man, the Word became flesh, as the Holy Spirit and Mary participated in the event. Hence, we find Christ as one person having two natures, a human and a divine. That this actually happened demonstrates that there is no contradiction in the idea that God can become man. God in His essence is certainly beyond human apprehension, and yet the incarnation/virgin birth demonstrates that He is not so transcendent as to be "wholly other" and hence utterly unknowable.

Furthermore, because the virgin birth is presented in Scripture and accepted by orthodoxy as a bona fide miracle, it becomes something of a "test case" of one's belief in supernaturalism. Those who deny the virgin birth thereby deny God's supernatural act of incarnation. Moreover, a denial of the virgin birth also is a repudiation of the clear teaching of Scripture.

Bill McRae notes,

"There are many who openly deny this doctrine. The attacks began early in the second century when, in the Talmud, the story was given that Jesus was actually the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier by the name of Pandira. This story, concocted by the Jews, was used by the pagan philosopher Celsus in his attack against Christianity. The French infidel Voltaire, the German evolutionist Haeckel and Tolstoi, a Russian writer, propagated the same story. Right down to our present age there are such great scholars as Emil Bruner, Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Nels Ferre, John Baillie and many others who openly deny the virgin birth.

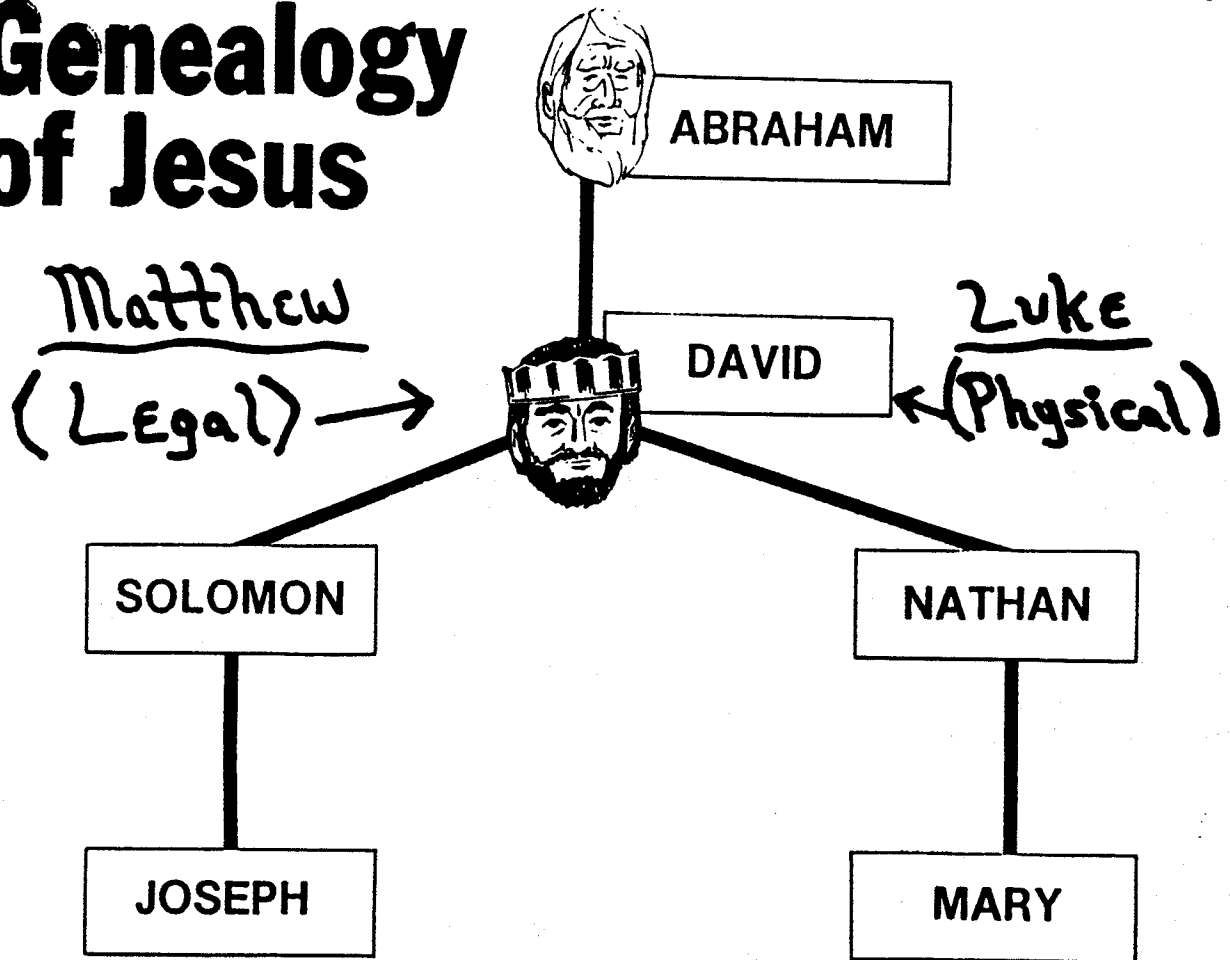
In a survey published in Christianity Today (Sept. 11, 1970), it was determined that the virgin birth is denied by 60% of the Methodists, 49% of the Presbyterians, 44% of the Episcopalians and 34% of the American Baptists and 19% of the American Lutherans. The fact is that, although many of us will bow before the manger and sing the Christmas carols, in Christendom today there is a wholesale selling out of the method of Christmas - the virgin birth."

Key Text: Three crucial texts (possibly four) address the issue of the Virgin Birth:

- 1) Is. 7:14 ff (cf. also 9:6-7, 11:1 ff)
  - 2) Matt. 1:18-25
  - 3) Luke 1:26-38
  - \* 4) Gen. 3:15
- \*\*Note possible allusions also in Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:6

These text and their interrelatedness is shown in the following diagram. Matthew examines the birth from Joseph's perspective (and also provides a legal genealogy in 1:1-17). Luke looks at the event from Mary's perspective (and provides a natural genealogy in 3:23-38).

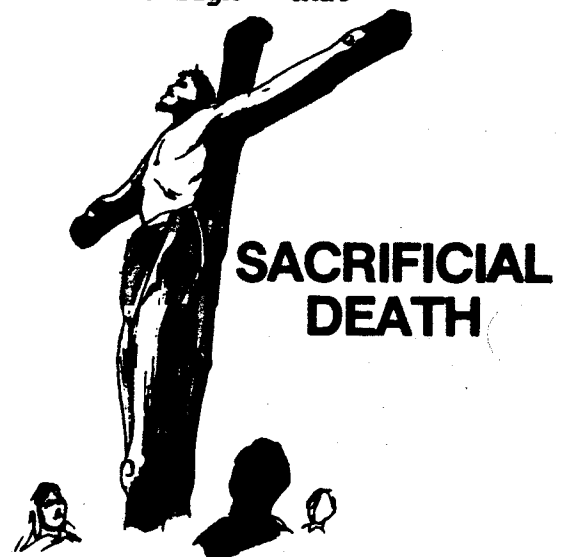
# Genealogy of Jesus



Both Gospel accounts further emphasize certain aspects of Joseph and Mary which indicate their innocence, righteousness and purity.

A) Matthew teaches us:

- 1) Joseph was in no way involved in the conception of Jesus (v. 25).
- 2) He did have normal marital relations with her afterwards (v. 25).
- 3) He was responsible for the naming of the child (v. 25).
- 4) All of this was a fulfillment of the Virgin Birth prophecy of Is. 7:14 (vv. 22-23). The name Immanuel ("God with us") is also significant at this point, serving even as an allusion to the hypostatic union.
- 5) The essential import of the virgin conception is as "a sign" that God is going to again act (cf. Is. 7:14).



# Supernatural, Virginal Conception and Birth of Christ

*pre-existent  
person*

**Matthew  
1:16-25**

*theanthropic  
person*

**Luke  
1:26-38**

Isaiah 7:14

\_\_\_\_\_ Joseph \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Mary \_\_\_\_\_

Betrothed and  
excluded (εξ ἧς), 1:18  
Virginal conception  
(ἐν Holy Spirit), 1:18,20  
His righteousness, 1:19  
παρθένοσ  
and Immanuel, 1:23  
Virginal birth, 1:25

Betrothal relationship,  
1:27, 2:5  
Virginal conception,  
1:35  
Her righteousness, 1:34  
παρθενοσ, 1:27  
Supernaturalness  
re-emphasized, 1:37-41

B) Luke emphasizes for us:

- 1) That Mary is a virgin (*parthenos*). Matthew also has this emphasis.
- 2) That the entire complex of events was a surprise (1:29-30).
- 3) The divine agency of the Holy Spirit. This point is again not ignored in Matthew, but is given greater attention in Luke (1:35). Lanier Burns notes at this point:

In v. 35, Luke shows that the Spirit was to be the divine agent in the virginal conception.

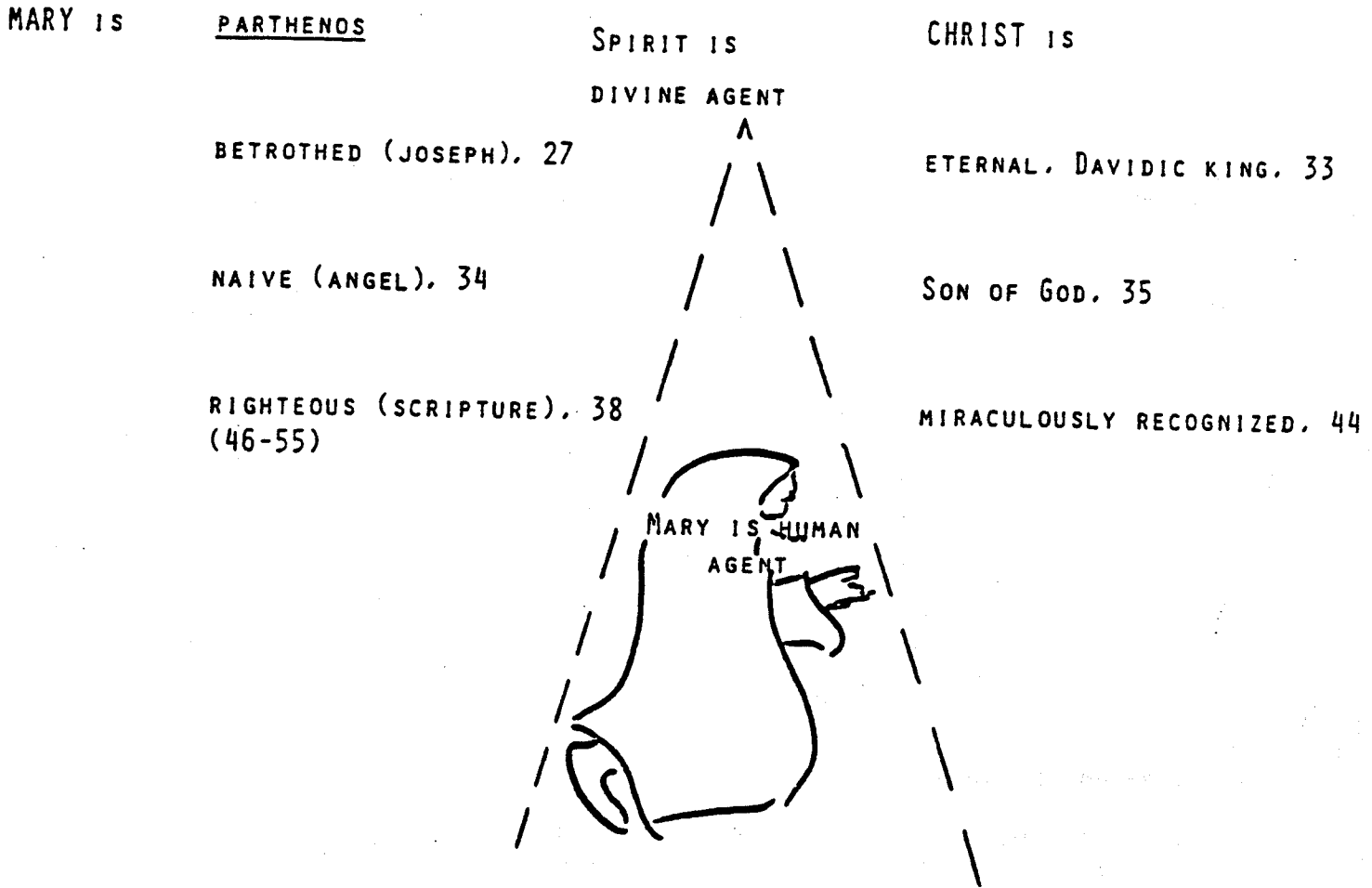
This is aided in v. 31 by the meaning of, "You will conceive in your womb," which has the idea of "taking upon oneself."

In v. 35, when the angel says that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you," this is parallel to the phrase, "the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

This "overshadowing," *episkiazo*, means "covering" in the sense of casting a shadow over, such as an eclipse.

The emphasis here is not on the method of virginal conception — though that is not completely out of view — but rather on the divine generation of Messiah.

THE EMPHASES OF LUKE 1:35-37



Finally, Luke makes several theological points.

- 1) Most important for Luke is the supernatural nature of Jesus' conception and coming.
  - A) v. 33 emphasizes Jesus' eternal reign in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.
  - B) v. 37 emphasizes the impossibility of the virgin birth apart from a divine miracle.
  - C) vv. 43-44 emphasize the miracle of recognition by Elizabeth and John.
  - D) Luke further emphasizes Jesus as Son of God which gives Him both identity and a title.
  
- 2) Luke further makes the point that Mary's submissive example illustrates the fact that God favors the righteous (cf. Joseph). The point of Luke 1:38 and 48 is that the fruitful person is the one who submits himself to God and to the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

It is now appropriate to turn our attention to the prophecy of Is. 7:14, and in doing so we will note the various theories of interpretation set forth.

Interpretation Theories of the Virgin Conception/  
Virgin Birth Prophecy of Isaiah 7:14

I. Non Evangelical

1) Mythological -

2) Non-Messianic -

3) Neo-orthodox -

II. Evangelical

1) Direct Messianic -

2) Indirect Messianic -

Observations

An Evangelical view of the Virgin Conception/Birth is necessary for those who affirm the trustworthiness and historical nature of the biblical accounts.

- A) inerrancy demands it
- B) Gospel writers tend not to amplify upon theological significance, but upon its facticity
- C) Luke as historian/physician has made a careful study (Lk. 1:1-4); this would have prevented him from a gullible response to an account of the virgin conception
- D) The presence of James (1/2 brother) and Mary (mother) in the early church would have forbidden the development of legendary material concerning Jesus birth.

What about the rest of N.T.?

Mark - Has no occasion or reason to mention it. Servant emp. begins with the ministry of John the Baptist.

John - Interest in pre-existence/deity. No interest in birth but incarnation.

Paul - Hints at it in Rom. 1:3, Gal. 4:4, Phil 2:6; close association with Luke would imply his knowledge and acceptance of the account.

Theological Significance of Virgin Birth

- 1) God's deliverance has come and it calls to mind a sign (Is. 7:14) of God's great O.T. promises
- 2) Significance for Bible - can we trust Scripture at this point? Yes.
- 3) It affirms Jesus' humanity - he was really born, really one of us (Ignatius and Apostle's Creed)
- 4) It affirms his deity - it is a supernatural event (Machen, Barth)
- 5) It affirms his sinlessness by theological deduction not scriptural affirmation, which is vital to our salvation
- 6) It is a picture of regenerating grace. The initiative and power for birth is of God and parallels regeneration which is an act of God, not an act of human effort.

What about those who reject Virgin birth?

God's people are inconsistent; but problems or rejection here opens the door for distortion of Christology, which is the touchstone of Christian faith.

Early one morning, a resident of a little community near Hodgenville, Kentucky, was returning from a trip to Elizabethtown some miles away. This was a long journey in those days.

He met a neighbor who was anxious to know what was happening in the outside world. The traveler told him of events in Washington, of wars in Europe, and of other happenings he had heard about as he traveled.

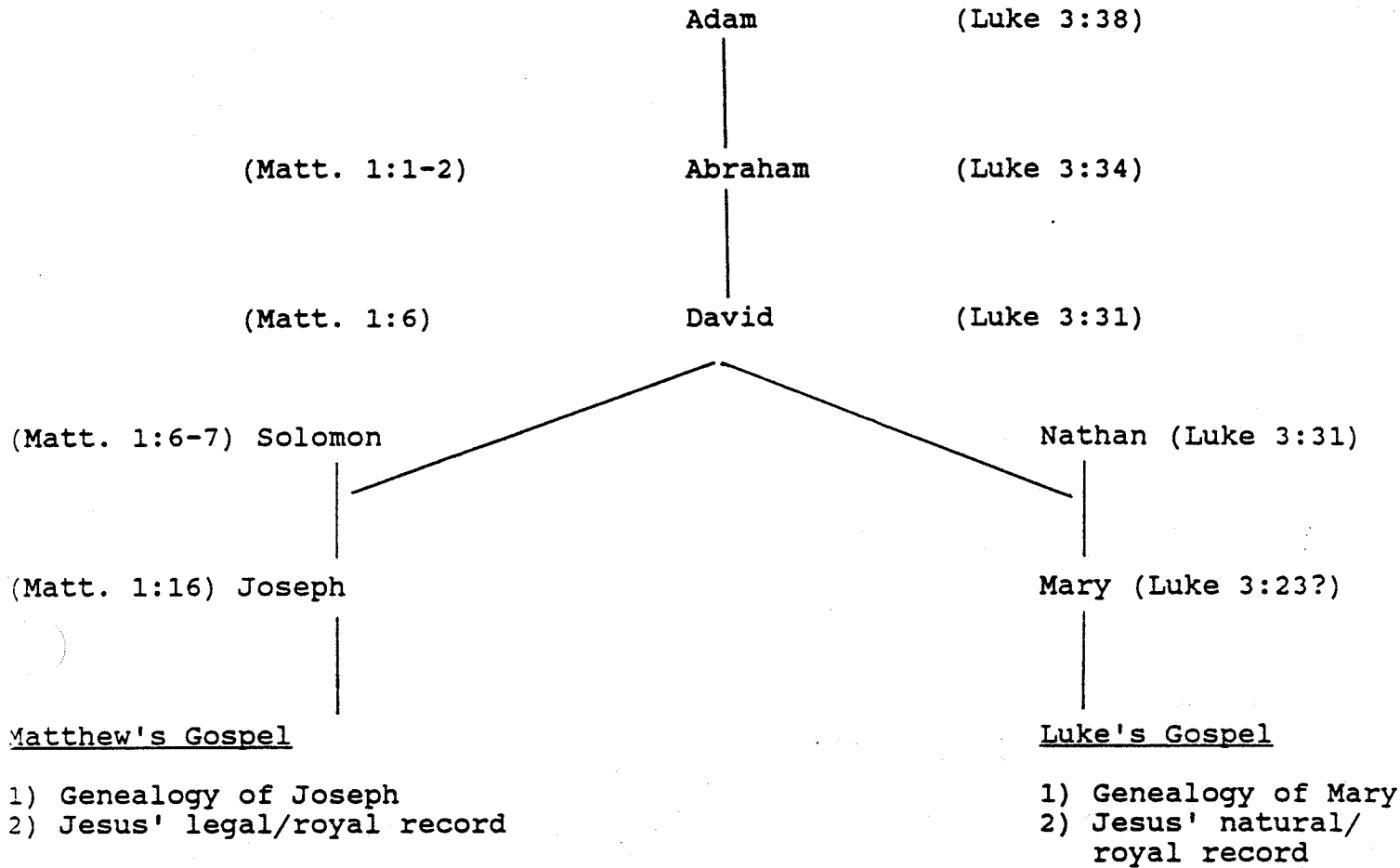
"But what happened here in Hodgenville while I was away?" he asked of his friend.

"Nothing, really. Oh, I believe that Mrs. Lincoln did give birth to a baby boy last night. I think they named him Abraham. But nothing important ever happens around here."

Nothing important? If he had only known.

One night in Bethlehem, only a few simple people knew that in this little village there had transpired the greatest event in the history of the world.

GENEALOGY OF JESUS



SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST AND THEIR THEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE

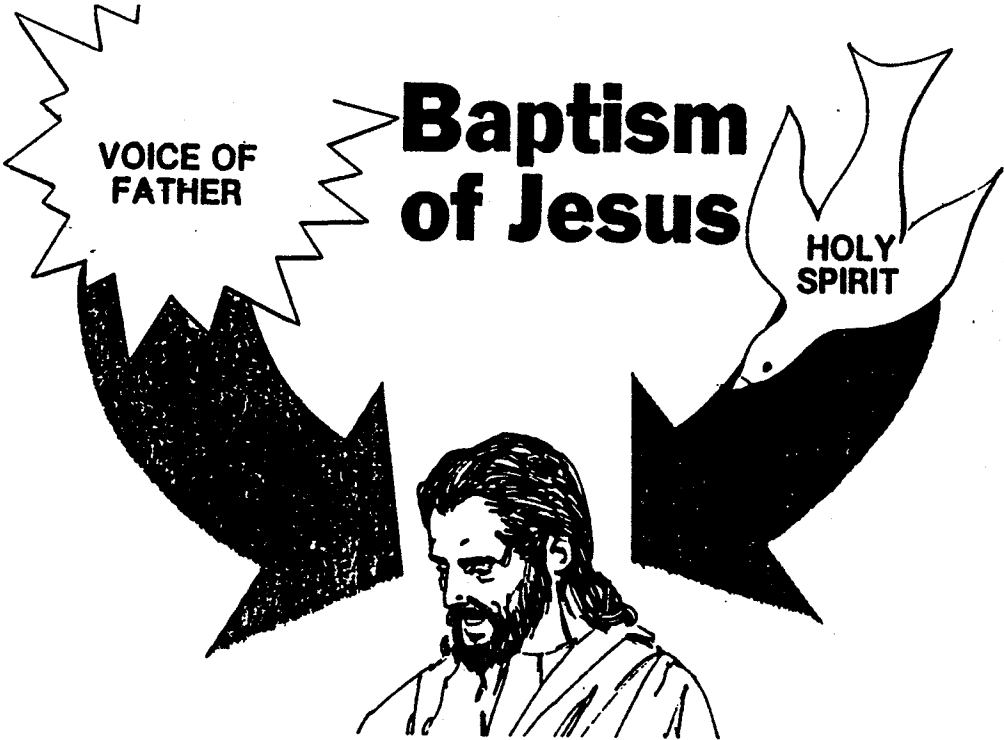
Karl Barth has said, "Now it is no accident that for us the Virgin birth is paralled by the miracle of which the Easter witness speaks, the miracle of the empty tomb. These two miracles belong together. They constitute, as it were, a single sign ..." There is much to commend in Barth's statement, and therefore in our study of Christology we devote an individual lecture to each. There are also, however, other crucial events in the life of Christ that demand our attention and mediation. We shall note four of these.

I. The Baptism

This event is recorded in all three synoptics and is also alluded to in John (Matt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:31-34). Taking Matthew's gospel, a number of theological purposes can be gleaned from this historical moment in the life of our Saviour:

- 1) Inaguration of His public ministry vv. 13-14
- 2) Submission of His Life to the Father v. 15
- 3) Identification of Himself with sinful men vv. 15-17
- 4) Adoration of the Father v. 17
- 5) Sanctification of the Spirit v. 16
- 6) Revelation of the Triune God vv. 16-17
- 7) Illustration and Definition of His Messianic Mission 3:17

Verse 17 is especially crucial to our last observation, for the Father's declaration is a combination of Ps. 2:7 and Is. 42:1. Psalm 2 is Messianic. Isaiah 42 is the first of the Servant Songs. Thus in the declaration of the Father, the course of ministry for our Lord is set: He is indeed Messiah, but HIS MESSIAHSHIP WILL BE BY SUFFERING SERVICE. It is no accident that the spirit which has anointed Him (filled in Luke) immediately leads (Matt.), drives (Mark) Him into the wilderness to be tempted. His willingness to be this kind of Messiah is to be immediately put to the test.





Points of Application

- 1) Submission to God, as exemplified in Jesus, brings true spiritual greatness.
- 2) Submission to God, as exemplified in Jesus, brings God's pleasure.

II. The Temptation

This encounter is recorded in the synoptics, with Matthew and Luke giving the most extensive account (Matt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk. 4:1-13). The comments of Ralph Earle in the NIV Study Bible are helpful at this point:

This testing of Jesus (the Greek verb translated "tempted" can also be rendered "tested"), which was divinely intended, has as its primary background Dt. 8:1-5, from which Jesus also quotes in his first reply to the devil (see v. 4). There Moses recalls how the Lord led the Israelites in the desert 40 years "to humble you and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands." Here at the beginning of his ministry Jesus is subjected to a similar test and shows himself to be the true Israelite who lives "on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." And whereas Adam and Eve failed the great test and plunged the whole race into sin (Gen. 3), Jesus was faithful and thus demonstrated his qualification to become the Savior of all who receive him. It was, moreover, important that Jesus be tested/tempted as Israel and we are, so that he could become our "merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb. 2:17) and thus be "able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:15; see Heb. 4:15-16). Finally, as the one who remained faithful in temptation he became the model for all believers when they are tempted.

# Temptation of Jesus

GENESIS 3:6	LUKE 4:1-13	1 JOHN 2:16
TREE GOOD FOR FOOD	TURN STONES TO BREAD	LUST OF THE FLESH
PLEASANT TO THE EYES	KINGDOMS OF THE WORLD	LUST OF THE EYES
DESIRED TO MAKE ONE WISE	CAST YOURSELF DOWN	PRIDE OF LIFE

**Jesus "was in all points tempted like as we are yet without sin."  
Hebrews 4:15**

Satan's attempt is to persuade Jesus to avoid the road of a suffering servant Messiah which His Father has planned (cf. Matt. 3:17). Temptations to under-confidence, other-confidence, and over-confidence are met with rebukes from the Word of God (all three coming from Deuteronomy). Thus Christ demonstrates both His qualifications to be Messiah as well as His sinlessness, a reality affirmed numerous times in scripture (Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22).

\* Could Jesus Have Sinned In His Incarnate State?

The issue of the "impeccability" (Lat. *non potuit peccare*, "not able to sin") or "peccability" (Lat. *potuit non peccare* "able not to sin") of Christ has been debated by evangelicals for centuries. Two facts must be affirmed regardless of one's position:

- 1) Christ was genuinely tempted
- 2) Christ did not sin

Paul Enns provides a nice summary of both perspectives, though his advocacy of Impeccability is quite obvious:

PECCABILITY

The question in the debate is whether or not Christ *could* have sinned. Generally (not always), Calvinists believe that Christ could not have sinned, whereas Arminians generally believe that Christ could have sinned but did not.

Those who hold to the peccability of Christ do so on the basis of Hebrews 4:15: He "has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." If the temptation was genuine then Christ had to be able to sin, otherwise the temptation was not a genuine temptation. Charles Hodge, a Reformed theologian, is perhaps the best representative of this view. He states:

If He was a true man He must have been capable of sinning. That He did not sin under the greatest provocation; that when He was reviled He blessed; when He suffered He threatened not; that He was dumb, as a sheep before its shearers, is held up to us as an example. Temptation implies the possibility of sin. If from the constitution of his person it was impossible for Christ to sin, then his temptation was unreal and without effect, and He cannot sympathize with his people.

The supposed strength of this view is that it alone identifies Christ with humanity in His temptations—they were real temptations. The weaknesses of this view are that it does not sufficiently consider Christ in His Person as God as well as man. Additionally, the word *temptation* (Gk. *peirazo*) is also used of God as well as man (Acts 15:10; 1 Cor. 10:9; Heb. 3:9) and the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:9). It is unlikely that anyone would say the Father or the Holy Spirit could have sinned. The conclusion is that temptation does not demand the ability to sin. The people genuinely tempted God the Father and

the Holy Spirit, but there was no likelihood of those Persons of the Trinity sinning.

IMPECCABILITY

Those who hold to impeccability suggest Christ's temptation by Satan was genuine, but it was impossible for Christ to sin. Several observations should be noted.

*Observations.* The purpose of the temptation was not to see if Christ could sin, but to show that He could not sin. The temptation came at a critical time: the beginning of Christ's public ministry. The temptation was designed to show the nation what a unique Savior she had: the impeccable Son of God. It is also noteworthy that it was not Satan who initiated the temptation but the Holy Spirit (Matt. 4:1). If Christ could have sinned, then the Holy Spirit solicited Christ to sin, but that is something God does not do (James 1:13).

Christ's peccability could relate only to His human nature; His divine nature was impeccable. Although Christ had two natures, He was nonetheless one Person and could not divorce Himself of His deity. Wherever He went, the divine nature was present. If the two natures could be separated then it could be said that He could sin in His humanity, but because the human and divine natures cannot be separated from the Person of Christ, and since the divine nature cannot sin, it must be affirmed that Christ could not have sinned.

*Evidence.* The evidence for the impeccability of Christ is set forth by Shedd and others in the following way.

- 1) The immutability of Christ (Heb. 13:8). Christ is unchangeable and therefore could not sin. If Christ could have sinned while on earth, then He could sin now because of His immutability. If He could have sinned on earth, what assurance is there that He will not sin now?
- 2) The omnipotence of Christ (Matt. 28:18). Christ was omnipotent and therefore could not sin. Weakness is implied where sin is possible, yet there was no weakness of any kind in Christ. How could He be omnipotent and still be able to sin?
- 3) The omniscience of Christ (John 2:25). Christ was omniscient and therefore could not sin. Sin depends on ignorance in order that the sinner may be deceived, but Christ could not be deceived because He knows all things, including the hypothetical (Matt. 11:21). If Christ could have sinned then He really did not know what would happen if He would sin.
- 4) The deity of Christ. Christ is not only man but also God. If He were only a man then He could have sinned, but God cannot sin and in a union of the two natures, the human nature submits to the divine nature (otherwise the finite is stronger than the infinite). United in the one Person of Christ are the two natures, humanity and deity; because Christ is also deity He could not sin.
- 5) The nature of temptation (James 1:14-15). The temptation that came to Christ was *from without*. However, for sin to take place, there must be an *inner* response to the outward temptation. Since Jesus did not possess a sin nature, there was nothing within Him to

respond to the temptation. People sin because there is an inner response to the outer temptation.

- 6) The will of Christ. In moral decisions, Christ could have only one will: to do the will of His Father; in moral decisions the human will was subservient to the divine will. If Christ could have sinned then His human will would have been stronger than the divine will.
- 7) The authority of Christ (John 10:18). In His deity, Christ had complete authority over His humanity. For example, no one could take the life of Christ except He would lay it down willingly (John 10:18). If Christ had authority over life and death, He certainly had authority over sin; if He could withhold death at will, He could also withhold sin at will.

III. The Transfiguration

This is also recorded in the synoptics (Matt. 17:1-8; Mk. 9:2-13; Lk. 9:28-36), with an additional reference in 2 Pet. 1:16-18). Theological significances include:

- 1) The disciples receive a foretaste of his future coming and kingdom.
- 2) A revelation of the glory (deity) of the Son of God.
- 3) A confirmation of Peter's Confession in 16:13-20.
- 4) Encouragement in light of His passion prediction (16:21-23) and the task to which disciples are called (16:24-28).
- 5) A declaration of the Son's unique revelation from the Father to the world, and His superiority to and fulfillment of the Law (Moses) and Prophets (Elijah).
- 6) A reaffirmation of the Father's love for and approval of the Son as He prepares to go to the cross.

IV. The Ascension

This climatic ending to our Lord's earthly ministry is recorded only by Luke in his two volumes (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11). Paul Enns notes four significances of the ascension:

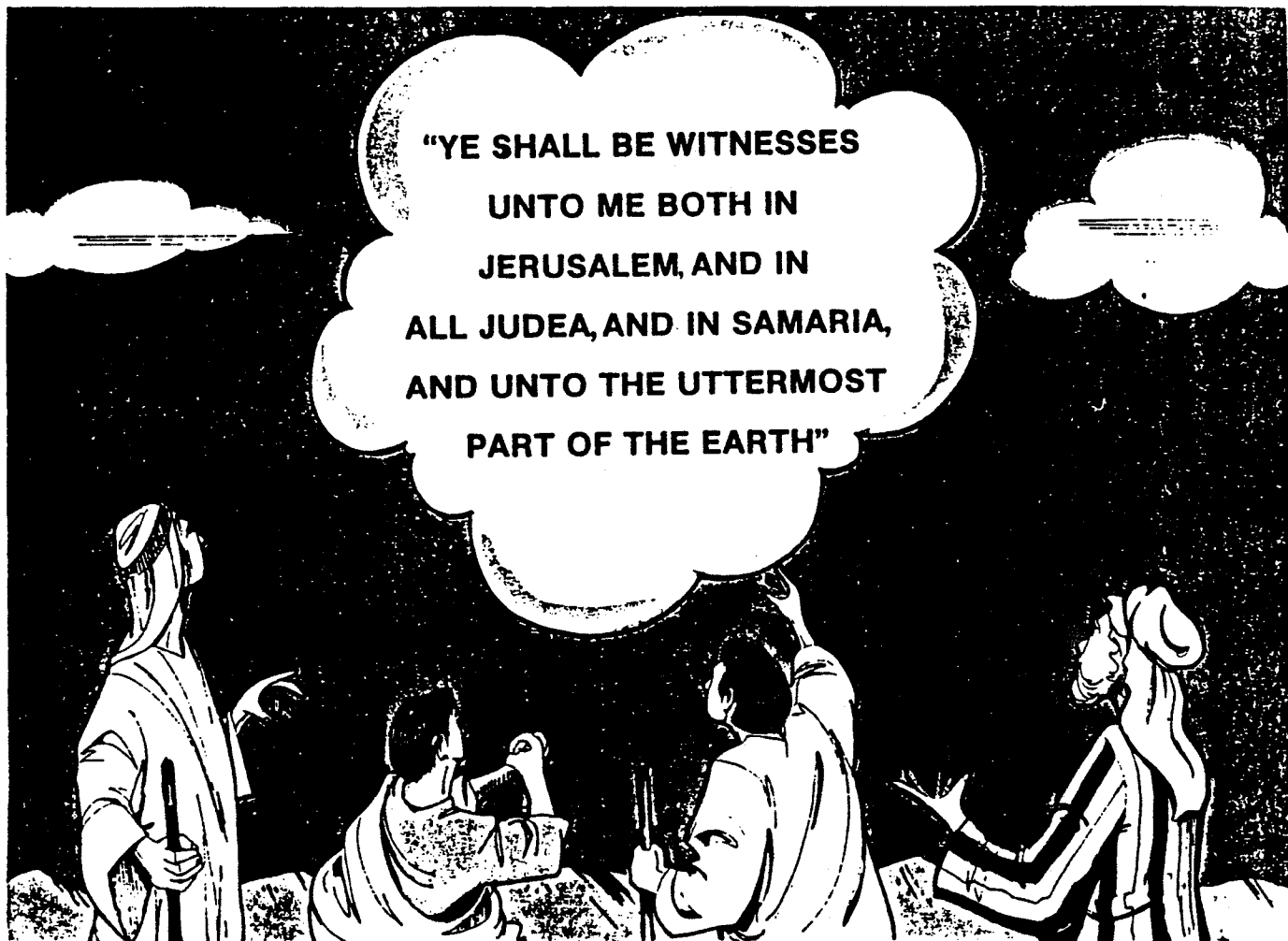
- 1) It ended the earthly ministry of Christ. It marked the end of the period of self-limitation during the days of His sojourn on earth.
- 2) It ended the period of His humiliation. His glory was no longer veiled following the ascension (John 17:5; Acts 9:3, 5). Christ is now exalted and enthroned in heaven.
- 3) It marks the first entrance of resurrected humanity into heaven and the beginning of a new work in heaven (Heb. 4:14-16; 6:20). A representative of the human race in a resurrected, glorified body is the Christian's intercessor.
- 4) It made the descent of the Holy Spirit possible (John 16:7). It was necessary for Christ to ascend to heaven in order that He could send the Holy Spirit.

Curtis Vaughn adds to these by noting:

- 5) It is necessary corollary of the resurrection. That is, it is the abiding proof that the resurrection of Jesus was more than a temporary resuscitation. To accept the bodily resurrection but deny the ascension, one must affirm either that Christ is still an inhabitant of earth or that he later died again.
- 6) It conveyed to the disciples the realization that the appearances, which had occurred at intervals over a period of forty days, were at an end. Thus it relieved their tension, put their minds at ease, so that, with the arrival of each new day, they did not wonder whether their Lord would again reveal Himself.
- 7) It suggested that Jesus was no longer to be perceived by physical sensation but by spiritual insight.

To this we would add one final importance:

- 8) It provided the occasion for the commissioning for witness and the promise of the Spirit (Acts 1:1-8).



# THE "THREE-IN-ONE"

Matthew 3:13-17 gives us the first New Testament reference to the "Three-in-One" — the Trinity.

1

The Spirit manifested Himself like a dove

2

The Father gave an audible evaluation of the Son

3

The Son was the object of the Father's love and the Spirit's ministry

SYMBOLISM	SCRIPTURE	SIGNIFICANCE
Mountain	Matthew 17:1	Millennial Government
Peter, James, and John	Verse 1	Unglorified Jewish Millennial Saints
Christ	Verse 2	Glorified Millennial King
Moses	Verse 3	Glorified O.T. Saints
Elijah	Verse 3	Raptured Church Saints
John the Baptist	Verse 13	Martyred Tribulation Saints
Multitude	Verse 14	Unglorified Gentile Millennial Saints