

## **Introduction**

Several years ago, I browsed through a book that listed and discussed the 20 most significant historical events in their order of importance. The author of the book listed this event first, as the most significant – the invention of the printing press.

I agree that the invention of the printing press is one of the 20 most significant historical events – certainly in the top five. But I disagree that it's first. The one I would list first in fact didn't even make that authors top 20. What I'm referring to of course is the very event that we're celebrating this month – the birth of Jesus.

C.S. Lewis declared that the birth of Jesus is "**the Grand Miracle,**" the one that all the others "**prepare for, or exhibit, or result from.**" I agree. There are three aspects of it that make it that, each of which I'm going to identify and discuss today, and then their implication to us.

## **How Jesus Was Conceived**

The first of those aspects is how Jesus was conceived.

Look at verses 23 and 25 in that regard. They record that Mary was a virgin when He was born. I know how impossible that sounds, which is why so many people, even professing Christians, deny it. Acclaimed Bible commentator William Barclay, for instance, wrote: "**The virgin birth is a doctrine which presents us with many difficulties; and it is a doctrine which our church does not compel us to accept in the literal and physical sense.**" Barclay believed that Mary wasn't a virgin when Jesus was born. But he didn't know what he was talking about.

One can't much plainer than verses 23 and 25. Mary was a virgin when the angel spoke to Joseph here in chapter 1. She was still a virgin, in verse 25, when Jesus was born. I don't know to what church Barclay was referring but it certainly doesn't include ours. Ours does compel us to believe that Mary was a virgin when she birthed Jesus. It's a fundamental of the faith that no Bible believing person can rightly deny.

Now, the Virgin Birth implies what the essential miracle of Christmas is - the conception of Jesus. Verse 20 explains it this way, **“for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”** Every human being who ever lives is conceived in the same way. A microscopic particle of matter from a man’s body and a microscopic particle of matter from a woman’s body meet. But Jesus was conceived far differently – by the Holy Spirit intervening directly in Mary’s body. The Holy Spirit probably created an embryo in Mary’s womb without using a spermatozoon and an ovum. Jesus received nothing from His earthly parents in other words. He had genes but they weren’t Mary’s and Joseph’s.

That is a critical fact. It shows us that He was uncontaminated by the sin that always passes from parents to child. Simply put, He was born without the sinful nature with which all of us are born. That in turn enabled Him to live the perfect sinless life that He lived.

### **Who Jesus Was**

The second aspect of Jesus’ birth that makes it the grand miracle is who He was.

Paintings of the nativity scene often picture the baby Jesus crowned with a halo and bathed in light. But it wasn’t that way. The fact is that He looked and acted just as any newborn baby does. He cried, made noises, got hungry, and needed changed. Many of you remember how your children looked and acted when they were born. Well, Jesus looked and acted just as they did when He was born.

Yet, there was something extraordinarily special about Him – that no one could visibly see. When my sons, Moses and Aaron, were infants, my wife Jill routinely sang them a song, a line of which went like this:

**“You’re something special; you’re the only one of your kind.”** The second part of that line is false isn’t it? Every baby that has been and will be born is purely human and so is the same in kind as all the rest. Your children and mine aren’t the only one of their kind. But that first child of Mary and Joseph was. He was utterly unique.

Verse 23 reveals how He was. He was Immanuel, meaning **"God with us."** Jesus was the God-man, 100% God and 100% man, at the same time. Like all of the 100 billion babies born in history, He was completely and thoroughly human. But unlike all of those babies, He was also completely and thoroughly divine. He was God Himself come to the earth in the flesh and thus, the only one of His kind. We call that the incarnation and the incarnation is the Grand Miracle.

But it's the Grand Sacrifice as well. Think about the grandness of Jesus. Colossians 1:16-17 teaches us two things about Him. First, He conceived in His mind everything in the universe down to its smallest detail and then made it. Second, He is the glue of the universe that keeps each detail working the way it does. He's the all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere present Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

Robert Schuller was visiting a Mexican businessman at his home at Christmas time when they noticed a large worm, about ten inches long, in the man's pool. Schuller saw an opportunity to share the gospel and did. He told the man that the worm in the pool illustrated Christmas.

He said: **"Look at the worm. He doesn't have the foggiest notion where he is. He doesn't know that he's in Mexico, or even that he's on planet earth. And he's not aware that you and I are here and that we are looking down at him. The same thing is true of God and us. In the total scheme of things, we really don't know where we are in the universe. And we're not aware that there's a God who is looking down at us."**

**"Now, if we wanted to communicate with that worm, we would have to become a worm and descend into that pool and be there with Him. That's the only way we could relate to him and tell him what the truth is. That's the way it is with God and us. His intelligence and capacities are as superior to ours as ours are to the worm's. Therefore, the only way that He can relate to us and tell us what the truth is is to become a human being, descend into the world, and be here with us. And that's exactly what He did and**

**that's exactly what Christmas is all about."**

That illustrates well, I think, the sacrificial nature of the incarnation. It'd be like you or I becoming a worm to save worms. Reflect on the descent that would be for us in terms of consciousness and activity. Well, the incarnation was for Jesus an infinitely greater descent than that. The one who invented, created, and sustains atoms and molecules became atoms and molecules in order to save us. That descent was so dramatic it makes the incarnation as sacrificial as the crucifixion was. It cost Jesus as much to be born as it did to die – if not more.

### **Why Jesus Came**

There's a third and, for our purposes, final aspect of Jesus' birth that makes it the grand miracle. It's why He came.

This year, as always, Christian leaders and Christians themselves will lament the commercialization of Christmas and there's no doubt that it has been commercialized. But there's a bigger problem than that - the trivialization of Christmas. We talk about the reason for the season but most people in our culture don't have any idea what that is. They think it's people loving each other, giving to each other, or being at peace with each other. Those themes are commonplace in books, movies, ads, and conversations about Christmas, and they are good things. But we trivialize Christmas when we make any of them the reason for the season.

So what's the reason for the season? It's found in the word "**sins**" in verse 21. There's an irrational quality in our nature that compels us to do evil things. We're sinners in other words who sin because we are.

Robert Lifton wrote a book titled *The Nazi Doctors*. He interviewed many of these well-educated and culturally sophisticated physicians who experimented on and killed thousands of people. His most chilling discovery was the normalcy of their lives outside the concentration camps. They weren't monsters. They were ordinary people like we are who enjoyed music, picnicked, read, and loved their families.

His point was this. Under the right conditions, we're all capable

of doing what they did. One writer describes it well. It's the "**banality of evil**" – the triteness or commonness of evil. In our normal state, we routinely act selfishly or wickedly to meet our needs, to fulfill our desires, or to make others think well of us. We're sinners who sin.

That's the overriding problem in the world and the reason Jesus came was to solve it. Notice how the angel said it to Joseph in verse 21, "**He will save His people from their sins.**" His virgin birth led to His perfect life, substitutionary death, historical resurrection, and climactic ascension. Those works of His enable Him to save us.

To save us means two things. First, Jesus forgives the sins we've already committed. Second, He transforms us inwardly so that we don't routinely commit more sins. We become primarily righteous people instead of primarily sinful people. Sin, as a result, becomes exceptional and rightness and goodness normal in our behavioral lives.

I told my Sunday school class about the manager of a retail store being rude to me a few weeks ago. 20 years ago, I would have felt anger and been rude in return. But I didn't. I felt compassion for her instead and blessed her rather than tell her off.

That illustrates the reason for the season. Jesus came so that He might forgive us and transform us; that He might save us from our sins.

### **Grand Response**

Those then are three aspects of Jesus' birth. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, was God come in the flesh, and came to save us from our sins. Those three aspects make it the Grand Miracle. And this Grand Miracle, by its nature, demands from us a Grand Response.

Suppose what I've said about Jesus' birth is false. Suppose this baby in the manger was conceived as every baby is and was the same in kind, only human. If He were, He should be nothing to us.

Think of some admirable but dead historical figure you know – Abraham Lincoln for instance. How many of you arrange your everyday affairs around him? None of you do. You don't routinely think about

Him, talk about Him, take Him into account in the things you do, perceive and interpret things in relation to Him, or try to engage him. In practical terms, Abraham Lincoln is nothing to you.

It's the same with Jesus if what I've said about His birth is false. He's just another admirable but dead historical figure and it's logical He should be nothing to us. We'd be foolish in fact to arrange our affairs around Him.

But suppose what I've said about His birth is true. Suppose the baby in the manger was conceived differently, by the Holy Spirit, and was the only one of His kind – the God-man. If He were, it's logical He should be everything to us.

We make Him everything in a practical way. We arrange our everyday affairs around Him. That means that we routinely . . . . think about Him, talk about Him, take Him primarily into account in the things we do, perceive and interpret everything in relation to Him, and devotedly engage Him. If anything that gets in the way of that, we either discard it or change it so that it won't. No one else, dead or alive, and nothing else is worthy of arranging our affairs around. Jesus is.

Going back to the manager who was rude to me, I thought of Jesus as she was, perceived her as He does, and did what I knew He wanted me to do. I arranged that affair and I try to arrange all of my affairs around Him. Anything less is unworthy of Him and irrational.

## **Conclusion**

Listen in closing to what Mahatma Gandhi said about Jesus, "**I can accept Him as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born.**" Gandhi was absolutely wrong about Jesus. He and He alone was born a perfect person, the God-man. That is the Grand Miracle, which by its nature demands from us a Grand Response. So, if you haven't done it, do it today. Make and carry out the decision to arrange all of your everyday affairs around Jesus. You're a wise man, or woman, if you do.