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# The Virgin Birth

With primary reference to the treatment of the subject by Karl Barth in his 'Church Dogmatics', Vol. I, Part 2, Pp. 172-202. English edition, T. & T. Clark, 1956.

J. NELSON

In his second volume of Church Dogmatics (actually part two of volume one), now published, Karl Barth inevitably reverts (pp. 172-202) to the theme of the Virgin Birth when dealing with 'the Miracle of Christmas' as the climax to his study of the mystery of revelation in the Incarnation of the Word.

As always, he lifts the reader bodily into a world of vital theology, pregnant with prophetic insight and awe-inspiring understanding of the great issues of the Faith; but, as always, he also drives the reader to search in raging fury for pen and paper to stab out protest and denial, and insist on a more precise consideration of positions too roughly handled by this Socratic theological gadfly of our age.

In this volume, this is nowhere more compellingly so than in his discussion of the Virgin Birth.

Our starting point, however, is not one of protest, but a setting out of the clarifying assertion of Barth himself—

'The respect paid in the Church to this dogma cannot be sufficient reason in itself for us to adopt it as our own. In dogma as such we hear merely the voice of the Church and not revelation itself. If we make it our own and affirm it as the correct Church interpretation of revelation, this can be done only because we realize its necessity' (p. 174).

On that basis we can approach Barth's further relevant point on p. 176, in which he argues that the canonicity of the Birth Narratives in the Gospels is not material to the validity of the dogma of the Virgin Birth. The question of canonicity he dismisses as a literary issue, and the acceptance or rejection of the Virgin Birth he claims—

... does not stand or fall with the answer to these (literary) questions. It certainly was not their age and source-value that brought the narratives of the Virgin Birth into the text of the Gospels and out of this text into the creed. But a certain inward, essential rightness

and importance in their connexion with the person of Jesus Christ first admitted them to a share in the Gospel witness.'

It is curious to consider how this 'inward, essential rightness and importance' could be known, and the knowledge of it enter into dogma and the Church if the literary decision should be against canonicity. It is surely essential to the dogma, though not constitutive of it as dogma—i.e. as having fundamental theological significance—that the literary evidence should vindicate the canonicity of the Birth Narratives, not just in general, but where they—so slenderly—insist on the *virginity* of Mary in the bearing of Christ. The slenderness Barth fully admits—he can do no other—and since the literary question is still an open one, we are quite unable to adduce the doctrine as essential dogma from such an insubstantial and unsubstantiated literary source.

#### LITERARY EVIDENCE

The New Testament has, in fact, very little to say about Mary being a virgin, whether or no that little is canonical. This is too well known and too easily ascertained from a reading of a few verses of the first Gospel. Indeed it may well be that there was nothing more or different to it than a (quite legitimate) attempt to link up the Birth of Jesus with Isaiah's prophetic deliverance—

'Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14).

There is no attempt in St. Matthew 1 to make any specific point of her virgin state, nor to deduce any religious or spiritual significance from it. The stress in Isaiah and in the Gospel is on the total content of the prophetic vision—Immanuel, God is with us—and for the Hebrew prophet and for the Evangelist alike, God with us, God present with us, means inevitably God present for us, God present to redeem in free and gracious love. God is known and encountered only in grace, in judgment and mercy. In such a context, 'virgin' is incidental, indeed accidental, even if the Hebrew does mean more than a young woman. The obvious exegesis of the Isaiah passage is not affected by it. Her condition is not constitutive of the character of the divine Deliverer and his Kingdom. The Hebrew prophets, while dealing invariably with the concrete events of human life and history, are never fundamentally concerned with what we might call the accidents of geography and history, but, as in this context, with the spiritual and revelational, i.e. redeeming significance of God's intervention through his prophets, or, supremely, through his Messiah. It was the tragedy of Judaism in the time of Christ that it had lost the spiritual, i.e. redemptive, significance of the Messianic hope, and we should put ourselves in the camp of the legalistic religious leaders of Christ's time if we sought in Isaiah or, in due turn, in the Birth Narratives of the Gospels external

factors (as virginity in the mother of our Lord) as something decisive or critically significant for the awful, inward, essential spiritual reality of the coming of the Son of God in the form of man.

Our line of argument is not, of course, that the Virgin Birth is to be rejected out of hand, but simply that it does not claim to be, and cannot be, dogma. It is not theologically necessary, however true it may be as history—though, indeed, even as history, it would still seem to be an open question.

Also, it should be noted, in the case of every other New Testament assertion of any importance, historical or theological, concerning Jesus Christ, there is no such uncertain documentary evidence, and no such lack of integration into the very essence of the narrative or teaching involved. We may read all that is told us of the Birth of Jesus Christ without at any point feeling that what little mention there is of Mary's virgin state is of final significance historically or theologically. We might indeed say with all due reverence that it would be most unlike God to make such thin and uncertain evidence fundamental to correctly understood faith—i.e. dogma.

#### THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

And so setting aside the literary, external problem we turn to the fundamental question—Wherein does the 'inward essential rightness and importance' of the Virgin Birth lie? On Barth's general showing, it must be within the realm of revelation, regardless of what the human reason outside revelation and the realm of grace might consider possible, and as an inherent element in the revealed truth of God incarnate, God become man in Jesus Christ, as a clarification of one element in the reality of *Vere Deus et vere homo*. But does it? If so, in what way?

In the following paragraphs the attempt will be made to show that, setting aside with Barth the literary question of canonicity, the theological necessity for the Virgin Birth cannot be established on adequate grounds: rather, indeed, that if it is considered as having THEOLOGICAL significance and relevance, it is intractable, misleading, and dangerous, leading in the end to an inadequate and therefore heretical Christology by softening and belittling the *Vere homo* to the extent of dismissing the seriousness of that quite essential completing of the *Vere Deus*.

#### THE VIRGIN BIRTH AS SIGN, ANALOGY, AND PARALLEL

(a) According to Barth, one element in the 'inward, essential rightness and importance' of the Virgin Birth lies in its significance as a sign, bearing witness to, attesting the reality of the Incarnation. But in what way does it do so?

Bread and wine are recognizably food and drink, and as we take them in the Sacrament show forth as most vivid and

indubitable signs of our feeding upon Christ. The breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine show forth the bruising and breaking of the flesh of Christ, and the shedding of his life blood—for the blood is the life. We are helped to realize his self-sacrifice in self-giving to death itself.

So the water used in Baptism inescapably signifies cleansing—an outward material sign conveying a clear picture, and so pointing to the appropriate and inevitable inward counterpart. But Virgin Birth does not come in this way as a 'natural' sign. What it would 'naturally' show forth, as we shall presently see, would be heresy, if it were used in this way as a 'sign', or as indicating in any essential way the character of the Incarnation.

(b) The inappropriateness of VIRGIN Birth is further seen in Barth's elaboration of his conception of it as a sign, in terms of analogy.

He says—

'A sign must, of course, signify. To do so it must have in itself something of the kind of thing it signifies; it must be in analogy with it noetically, and ontically. In this respect the miracle of Christmas is in analogy with what it signifies, the mystery of Christmas' (p. 182).

But this being in analogy is what precisely the Virgin Birth is not. Barth says of VIRGIN Birth what must be said equally of a birth through one or two human parents. The sign is birth of a HUMAN mother (with or without a human father), so that Immanuel comes fully human, utterly one with us in our nature—and as utterly one with God in his Nature. To speak of VIRGIN Birth at this point is a distraction, a pointing away from the terrible fulness of the humanity of Immanuel, God with us, to a hint that something at least was less human, or differently human so that the impact of the blow that God became man may be cushioned. Indeed, as here, Barth is all the way through putting forward considerations which are precisely arguments against the VIRGIN character of the Birth, and in favour of no abnormality here, so that the awful fulness of the humanity may be truly seen without the distraction and amelioration of such a condition.

(c) His use of the parallel of the Resurrection (p. 182) takes Barth's argument no further forward. The parallel is surely not between Resurrection and VIRGIN Birth at all. It is between fully human birth on the one hand, and fully human death on the other—death all too real in the agony of Calvary—then the Resurrection comes as God's glorious sign, most obvious sign, that Jesus Christ simply is not in the tomb, and the significance of that is completed in the Resurrection appearances. Christ has triumphed over death and hell. There is the whole triumph of Christ risen in his glory and about to ascend to the Father, about to create and dwell within his Church in the Power and Presence of the Holy Spirit. Sin and death are trampled underfoot, and God's victory in the totality of the Incarnation is now completed

and manifested and made to enter into the lives of the disciples. From start to finish, there is the fulness of Incarnation, of Vere Deus become also without qualification or amelioration vere homo, from Birth to Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, and no peculiarity or less fully human factor (such as a virgin mother) at Birth or at any other point can strengthen the reality of the Divinity, but if used at all can only suggest an abnormality in, and therefore a belittling of the humanity.

#### PRESUPPOSITIONS EXAMINED

This clears the way for a noting of some general considerations which may be conveniently listed under four heads.

(1) Sex is essentially and uniquely evil.

Given the fact that God the Son, was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of Mary, it is very helpful to Greek—and thence to Roman Catholic—preconceptions and presuppositions that Mary should be also virgin. This arises from the insufficiently recognized obsession of the Greek and, in turn, the Roman Catholic mind with the deeply rooted assumption that sex and the sex act are essentially and peculiarly evil, and that therefore an impossible smirch falls on the Son of God if He was born of authentic human intercourse. Here, to our relief, we find that Barth is with us—or we with Barth! He says—

‘Here we cannot consider the quite un-biblical view that sexual life as such is to be regarded as an evil to be removed, so that the active sign is to be sought in the fact that this removal is here presumed to have taken place’ (p. 190).

and later, on the same page—

‘Thus the exclusion of this sinful sexual life does not mean the exclusion of sin in the sense of PECCATUM ORIGINALE, and so this exclusion is still as unsuitable as ever to be the sign of the penetration and new beginning in the existence of Jesus Christ, to be the sign of His sinlessness.’

This is well said, for Christian dogma says that TOTAL human nature is fallen, and if, as Barth claims (p. 194), the New Testament does not speak of the redemption of the sex act, it is not because the sex act is peculiarly evil, but because it is part of the totality of human sinfulness, and not at all in some unique way especially so. It may be capable of bearing a greater burden of sin only in the strict sense that the greater the divine gift, and the more fully human anything is, the more capable it is of deeper perversion—just as religion, man’s professed relationship to God, which *ipso facto* should be the highest and best, is capable of a greater perversion, capable of being set over against the sovereign grace of God as something of man’s own, and of man’s own

righteousness, beyond anything else in the field of human rebellion. It is a truism that Jesus Christ was never moved to anger except by the self-righteousness of the officially religious; and, of course, the deepest relationships of love may be set as a barrier against God, e.g. in the family. Hence Christ's sobering demand to 'hate' father, mother, and all whom by his Grace we have learned to love. The love of husband and wife may come into the same category. That deepest of all loves with all its physical implications is as fully in need of redemption as all else within us; but to admit—indeed insist on—that, is very different from accepting the totally pagan disgust at it all, born of a profound and completely non-Christian perversion of male-female relations, and of a complete misunderstanding of the nature and function of woman. Those of us who have lived in Muslim lands can well appreciate the battle the early Church had to fight to rise to a Christian conception of woman and her relationship to man. Augustine's 'Confessions' on the individual scale, and monasticism and the celibacy of the clergy on a community scale are glaring examples of the unsuccessful attempt down the long centuries to deal with the issue. There are those who would even claim that St. Paul wobbled on it.

Surely the Christian view is that in every human birth there is the wonder of God's creative act, and if this comes in the setting of real human love and self-giving between husband and wife, then we can only stand in awe before a totality of loving and mysterious human experience under the shadow of God's creative Hand. So the child born of a human father and a human mother is not the unfortunate and somewhat disgraceful by-product of human sinfulness, but comes out of the wondrous mystery of God's sovereign creative act through his own pre-arranged method of crowning the union of a man and a woman in love and self-giving, with a child of their own.

The Church will have much to answer for on the Day of Judgment for her inadequate teaching on this matter, and on the whole range of possibilities and problems that arise from the relations at all levels which are conceivable between men and women. She has taken refuge in asceticism or puritanism or silence, when she should have been teaching positively and creatively about supreme and central things of God's ordaining. She has forgotten that—

'Abusus non tollit usum,'

that perversion does not damn what is perverted. She has allowed a vague confusion regarding the doctrine of original sin to cast its shadow over the whole realm of sex relations and even marriage itself, and has faltered woefully in her understanding of the greatest of all divinely given human relationships—that of husband, wife, child.

(2) Non-virgin Birth means a timing and a conditioning of the Incarnation by human will.

One further reason why the thought of Mary's virginity is a comforting one for many is the instinctive feeling (not a theologically inescapable conviction) that if Jesus Christ was born of Mary AND Joseph, then at the very least the timing and conditioning of the Incarnation were controlled by their human wills in so far as they willed to come together in marriage, and in the begetting of the Child. This would seem to limit God's freedom, and imply that the will and desire of these two human beings controlled in some measure the dating and conditioning of the Incarnation.

At this point we must again join issue with Barth. He argues (p. 191) that while the 'sinful life of sex' is excluded here in the Birth of Christ, what is significant is not that, but that by the exclusion of Joseph God acted freely in becoming man, the one human being involved—Mary—being purely passive, so that wilful, arrogant human initiative is excluded; so God acts sovereignly, and Christ is born sinlessly. He writes—

'The mystery of revelation and reconciliation consists in the fact that in His freedom, mercy and omnipotence, God became man, and as such acts upon man. By this action of God sin is excluded and nullified. And to this particular action of God the *NATUS EX VIRGINE* points. It is the sign that the sinful life of sex is excluded as the origin of the human existence of Jesus Christ. In that God in His revelation and reconciliation is the Lord and makes room for Himself among us, man and his sin are limited and judged. God is also Lord over His sinful creature. God is also free over its original sin, the sin that is altogether bound up with its existence and antecedent to every evil thought, word, and deed. And God—but God only—is free to restore this freedom to His creature. This freedom will always be the freedom of His own action upon His creature, and so the negation of a freedom of this creature's own. Since it lives by His grace, it is judged in its own will and accomplishment. If the *NATUS EX VIRGINE* with its exclusion of the sinful life of sex points to this gracious judgment of God, it really signifies the exclusion of sin in the sense of *PECCATUM ORIGINALE*. That it does actually point to this gracious judgment of God, we realize when we consider that in the birth without previous sexual union of man and woman (of which Scripture speaks), man is involved in the form of Mary, but involved only in the form of the *VIRGO MARIA*, i.e. only in the form of non-willing, non-achieving, non-creative, non-sovereign man, only in the form of man who can merely receive,



merely be ready, merely let something be done to and with himself' (p. 191).

This is illuminating and useful in clarifying the meaning of original sin; but while we inevitably accept that original sin is excluded in the Birth of Christ, in what conceivable way can this be imagined as arising from or in the device of excluding a human father? Is original sin present only in the father, or by the father? Or are we back again at the conception that sex is basically and uniquely evil? Is the father inevitably active and the mother 'non-willing, non-achieving, non-creative, non-sovereign' in every human birth? These negatives may validly be applied to Mary whether or no Joseph was involved in the begetting of Christ. They may be a fitting commentary on her—

'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word' (St. Luke 1:38).

but that is quite unrelated to her virgin or non-virgin state. It is surely of Grace, regardless of her state.

Barth later asserts what is in effect a correction of his misleading argument here. He writes—

'We certainly have to say that the wife has also a share in this determination of man. For she, too, is man' (p. 193).

This is quite basic and fundamental, and if maintained throughout by Barth—and by all theologians down the ages—would have avoided untold confusion. Husband and wife, man and woman equally in the theological sense are MAN. That drives us back on a deeper understanding of God's freedom and sovereignty in every human birth, regardless of the human wills and act involved. God's sovereign freedom is present in every human birth, and is absolute. Are we to imagine that any human child can be born under any conceivable circumstances without the over-ruling and creative might of God being involved from start to finish? God has not abdicated the throne of Creation. A clear grasp of the doctrines of creation and predestination is nowhere more necessary than here. No Christian dare look upon himself as an accidental arrival in God's universe, whatever the conditions of his birth. God willed that this very person should be born, and no sin, however blatant and defiant in the 'creation' of a human life, e.g. outside marriage, can lord it over the divine freedom and 'create' where God alone creates, creates despite the sin, and where the child born of his free and sovereign Will enters upon the field of his destiny under God's good Hand.

So we may take it in our stride that two human wills may have been involved, and that their human love may have been crowned with the Birth of a Child who, in the inscrutable Purpose of God, and in the fulfilment of his sovereign and gracious Will, was God the Son incarnate.

### (3) Man comprises soul and body.

Inherent in the popular craving to cling to the story of the Virgin Birth is the desire to tidy things up along the line of the false Greek division of the human person into soul and body. When it is said that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary, there is not only in the shocked mind of the Muslim (for whom this is the cardinal Christian blasphemy), but also in the naive unreflecting mind of many ordinary Christians, the idea that the Holy Spirit in some sense begat Jesus Christ and Mary bore Him, meaning that the Holy Spirit animated, gave a divine Spirit (the Son) to the human body of the child Jesus at his Birth. This, of course, is not only impossible Christology. It is flat heresy. It does not at all maintain the two natures, the full divinity, Vere Deus, and the full humanity, vere homo, united in a divine mystery. It is the popular 'psychological' solution to the problem of the 'joining' of the two natures held so unjustifiably, and so frequently without correction, by many pietist sects and by the man in the pew—to take it no higher! Negatively, it is born of the fear that if a human father had been involved, there would have been such a human completeness in Christ that there would have been no room for the 'divine element' in one who is already fully and completely man, as are other men generated of a human father and mother. If we may for once lapse into theological jargon, it is the Alexandrian fear of Antiochene Christology. To think of Joseph as the human father is a scandal to this assumption, for it makes Christ fully human, and leaves as a baffling mystery without clue or hint of a 'rational solution' the Vere Deus. Indeed it would completely invalidate the dogma of the divinity of Christ, on this view. A human father and a human mother could produce only a fully human son, and leave absolutely no room for the Vere Deus—as though the Incarnation, the reality of the divinity, could be tied to the human factors in birth, and not depend entirely upon the sovereign free Will of God, who may choose or not choose normality on the human side as He pleases, and bring to that the divine Mystery of Incarnation in the fulness of his truly human and truly divine Word made flesh.

The inescapable dogma of the Incarnation is not connected with the virgin or non-virgin state of Mary. The dogma is that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of a specific woman, Mary, her importance being not that she was or was not virgin, but that she was fully human, truly man—and He was Vere Deus and vere homo.

Recent notorious claims in the popular press regarding reputed virgin births would rob the dogma of its peculiar value if it were simply a dogma of Mary's virginity; but of course the true dogma of the Incarnation is quite untouched by such a trifle. What is at stake is that born of a real woman, a real human being, or equally of real human beings, He who was by nature divine

came from the depths of the Godhead to share our manhood in the fulness of his humanity, and redeem us in his great cosmic act.

The mystery of the Incarnation, the miracle of Christmas, is that of a truly human mother—virgin or not—God came to us. Regardless of the two alternatives on the human side, from Mary alone, or from Mary and Joseph, this mystery, this miracle of Incarnation stands, and depends utterly and completely on the divine initiative, the sovereign free act of God, choosing his method as He pleases, and whether a human father was involved or not is not a matter of constitutive necessity but of free divine choice.

Belief in the Virgin Birth can therefore be held only on the ground that the New Testament accurately records that God has chosen so to act—freely. The caveat must be entered immediately that this does not mean that God added the divine element to Mary's contribution of the human element, but that God the Son became incarnate not in a human body, but in the fulness of a human being, the Son of Mary. His humanity was as totally human as every other man's, since He was man, just as his divinity was as totally divine as God's, since He was God.

Barth himself, we may interpolate, does not, of course, fall into the elementary error—only too widespread—discussed above. He safeguards (p. 197) that God the Spirit is the One who conceives not the 'divine Person' added to the human body (Mary's contribution), but who came in the divine Son through Mary into the fully human nature of Christ.

For those of us who are concerned about Islam, this is an issue of unique seriousness.

In the Qur'ān, Sura 72, the Djinn are reputed to have listened to Muhammad and said,

'Verily, we have heard a marvellous discourse ;  
It guideth to the truth ; wherefore we believed in it,  
and we will not henceforth join any being with our  
Lord ;  
And He,—may the majesty of our Lord be exalted!—  
hath taken no spouse neither hath He any offspring.  
But the foolish among us hath spoken of God that which  
is unjust.'

And again in Sura 6 we hear—

'Sole maker of the Heavens and of the Earth! how, when  
He hath no consort, should He have a son ?'

And again in Sura 112—

'Say: He is God alone:  
God the eternal!  
He begetteth not, and He is not begotten ;  
And there is none like unto Him.'

In sundry other places the same theme is reiterated with unceasing force.

Now Barth says (p. 200)—

‘The assertion *conceptus de Spiritu sancto* must now be protected from an imminent misunderstanding. It does not state that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Holy Spirit according to His human existence. On the contrary, it states as emphatically as possible—and this is the miracle it asserts—that Jesus Christ had no father according to His human existence. Because in this miracle the Holy Spirit takes the place of the male, this by no means implies that He does what the male does. Because Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, it does not, therefore, mean—or can mean only in an improper sense—that He is begotten by the Holy Spirit. The idea is completely excluded that anything like a marriage took place between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.’

This is precisely what must be said—with the glaring exception of the impossible and inconceivable assertion that ‘. . . In this miracle the Holy Spirit takes the place of the male.’ This is precisely what He does NOT do. The admission of such a clause to the argument shows the confusion that can be introduced even into the thinking of a great theologian when he starts from the false premise that the virginity rather than the humanity of Mary (regardless of the issue of virginity) is the significant element in the background to the *vere homo* of the Redeemer. It was this very confusion that vitiated the thought of the Eastern Church, and led Muhammad to his shocked denial of the divinity of Christ. It has been traditional to argue that he misunderstood the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, but the humbling and damning truth is that he seems to have understood only too well the heretical tenets of the Churches or sects of his time in the Eastern empire and neighbouring regions.

Are we to go back to the same tenets, or leave the door open to them by a like confusion between virginity and humanity? Are we to say that ‘In this miracle the Holy Spirit takes the place of the male’? Whether or no Joseph is excluded, Mary was fully human, and the Birth was fully human, and the Holy Spirit acted in free divine sovereignty in a way which is in no conceivable sense a replacement of that of the male. On the contrary, it is entirely ‘*sui generis*’, uniquely and completely ‘*sui generis*’, God sending his Son freely and graciously in the inexplicable mystery of the Incarnation, to be born fully divine and fully human of Mary.

It is hardly surprising in view of this age-old persistent confusion regarding the significance of virginity and humanity in the Church that the universal Muslim conviction is that the Trinity

is for the Christian the three 'persons' (=individuals)—God, Mary, and Jesus.

No-one should be permitted to set up as a dogmatic theologian, and in particular should not be allowed to utter or write a word on the Trinity and the Incarnation until he has lived for an appreciable period in a Muslim country.

(4) What is abnormal is more conceivable.

In denying a normal human begetting of the Babe of Bethlehem so far as human parentage is concerned, there is a barely realized but very deep-seated and potent feeling in the minds of many that in an ABNORMAL (i.e. virgin) birth, it is a little more understandable that an abnormal or supra-normal child could be born, and that from this miraculous event (miraculous in being of a mother only), it requires a shorter jump to envisage the Holy Spirit of God as being active to bring about the conception of the eternal Son in the context of human flesh and blood.

Against such an assumption, no protest can be too strong. The basis of the protest can be found in Barth's own words (p. 172—and indeed, the whole context on pp. 172-173)—

'God's revelation in its objective reality is the incarnation of His Word, in that He, the one true eternal God, is at the same time true Man like us.'

This mystery, he says, is a Novum which—

'... becomes the object of our knowledge by its own power and not by ours... we can understand the possibility of it solely from the side of its object, i.e. we can regard it not as ours, but as one coming to us, imparted to us, gifted to us. In this bit of knowing we are not the masters but the mastered.'

(Then on p. 173)—

'But even in the very act of knowing this reality and of listening to the Christmas message, we have to describe the meeting of God and world, of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ—and not only their meeting but their becoming one—as inconceivable... If in knowledge of the incarnation of the word, in knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ we are speaking of something really other, if the object of Christology, "very God and very Man", is objectively real for us, then all that we can arrive at by our experience and our thought is the realization that they are delimited, determined, and dominated here by something wholly outside or above us. Knowledge in this case means acknowledgment. And the utterance or expression of this knowledge is termed confession. Only in acknowledgment or confession can we say that Jesus Christ is very God and very Man... In the very act of acknowledgment and

confession we must always acknowledge and confess together both the distance of the world from God and the distance of God from the world, both the majesty of God and the misery of man. It is the antithesis between these that turns their unity in Christ into a mystery. Thus we must ever acknowledge and confess the inconceivability of this unity.'

All this is quite fundamental.

So that, emphatically, Incarnation is not made easier to envisage by the abnormality of the human begetting. To think it easier is to depend on error and self-deception.

So the mystery of Christmas is undoubtedly indicated by reference to the miracle of Christmas which is—

' . . . the conception of Jesus Christ by the Holy Ghost or His birth of the Virgin Mary.'

Born of God and born of woman, Vere Deus, vere homo ; because born of God and of human parentage ; but this in no way indicates the necessity of abnormality or differentness in the human parentage by the device of excluding a human father and somehow imagining on no conceivable grounds that this will make God in man a more acceptable dogma.

It is a short step from such conceptions to a setting of Mary apart from other human beings, an exalting of her in a cult which in a supposed safeguarding of the divinity of the incarnate Lord must push back the cradle of holiness through immaculate conception to the previous generation—which logically must lead to the positing of immaculate conception in the generation before that, as indeed is the trend in one branch of the contemporary Church, and then equally logically back through generation after generation with no possibility of stopping short of Adam and Eve—which is surely the *reductio ad absurdum* of all views that make Virgin Birth dogma.

Although this approach cannot readily be given a patristic or classical heretical label, it is none the less a serious aberration, to say the very least of it, leading to a thinning of the inconceivability of Incarnation by softening the stark fulness of the humanity.

The answer to the problem of the inconceivability of Incarnation is certainly not to blur the reality of the fulness of the humanity by imagining that abnormality on the human side makes God incarnate more conceivable.

## CONCLUSION

For these reasons Virgin Birth would best be avoided as a sign, or as indicating in any other fundamental way the essential character of the Incarnation.

So that theologically the question of the Virgin Birth remains

open, and according to our acceptance of the New Testament critical evidence as to the primitive authenticity and validity of the statements in the few relevant New Testament verses, or their lack of these, we decide that God did or did not of his own free sovereign Will choose to send Christ born of a virgin or of one no longer virgin, but in either case He was born fully human of human parentage, whether one parent was involved or two, and fully divine, since He was God coming amongst us, *conceptus de Spiritu sancto*—He was indeed *vere homo* and *Vere Deus*—and all was done as the free, almighty Act of God's most glorious and sovereign Grace.

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### *Bible Translation*

*The Bible Society is publishing a fresh translation of the Greek New Testament into English, especially for the use of those who are translating the Greek into vernaculars. It is to be published book by book. St. Mark is already appearing: St. Matthew and St. John are soon to follow. It is the work both of Greek New Testament scholars (led by Prof. G. D. Kilpatrick) and of a group of people with knowledge of different vernaculars. 'The purpose is to convey in accurate and unambiguous language the meaning of the original for nationals engaged in the translation of the New Testament in different parts of the world. It is realized that very often such translators have not a firsthand acquaintance with New Testament Greek. Existing translations into English were done having in view those who have an English cultural background, and while they may serve admirably for the modern English reader, they contain idioms and expressions which do not invariably carry across to those who do not share that background'.*

*'The Bible Translator'*