

Affirming the Essentials of Our Faith

A Study of the Apostles Creed

All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

Q – How many natures does Jesus have?

- There are two natures of Jesus – one divine, one human.

Q – Did Jesus lose divine attributes to become human, or did He add human attributes to the divine?

- Jesus (God the Son, the Divine) *became* flesh. He added flesh (humanity) to Himself.
- The two natures of Christ existed at the same time – not divine sometimes, and human other times, but divinity-humanity all the time.
- Jesus has a very complex personality!

Incarnation – (from Latin *incarnatus*, meaning “taking on flesh”). A term referring to the earthly embodiment (mostly human) of a divine being. For Christians, this means the *Second Person of God* (God the Son, Jesus Christ) becoming human.

Other religions have had some view of an incarnation. The Hindus believe in the incarnation of Vishnu (the Supreme god in Hinduism), of whom some Buddhists consider Buddha to be the human form. The Egyptians viewed the pharaoh as an incarnation of the god Ra (the Sun god), and several other ancient peoples believed that their kings were divine.

Matthew, Luke and John present the birth (incarnation) of Christ, but Mark does not. John begins his account of the gospel with Jesus’ preexistence in heaven (the Word with God; John 1:1) and shortly thereafter affirms that the Word became “flesh” (v. 14).

Q – What’s the difference between an incarnation and a theophany?

“The Angel of the Covenant in the Old Testament is undoubtedly the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and He appeared more than once to various people in the form of a man. That is what we call a *theophany*. Now theophany is entirely different from incarnation. Theophany means that an angelic or a divine person *appears* in this form for the time being, but the doctrine of the incarnation asserts that the Lord Jesus Christ has taken on human nature itself – not its appearance but **real human nature**.” – D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Q – Why is it perhaps difficult for some to believe in the virgin birth of Jesus?

- They do not believe in miracles!
- What are some responses to this?
 - The Bible says so!
 - Jesus is more than just human, though not *less than* human!
 - Salvation is fundamentally God’s work – it did not come as a result of human means, not even the birth of the Savior!

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The Bible says the Son of God **entered** and **exited** this world by acts of supernatural power. His entry was by virgin birth and His exit was by resurrection-plus-ascension. If we deny the virgin birth because it was a miracle, we should also deny Jesus' bodily resurrection. It is unreasonable to accept one and not the other. It is also inconsistent to believe in an **all-powerful God** and not believe in miracles (the virgin birth, the resurrection, or any of the others mentioned in Scripture), unless you are a Deist.

“Nothing is more natural than the supernatural! God is the only “natural” thing there is.” – article on Internet

Q – Was Jesus just as human as we are? Was He more human?

- All of us are broken. Our human nature, that which God created, has been spoiled by sin.
- Jesus may have been more human than we are.

It's a **mystery!** – We can't explain it, but we believe it. It is not the same as a contradiction. You do not need to know how God became man in order to know Him! The incarnation was a supreme, mind-blowing miracle – God became a man! Love prompted it, and we should not scale it down, but wonder and adore and love and exalt “Jesus Christ.”

Think of it as God adding humanity to Himself, not a human adding divinity to himself. With God, nothing is impossible – except to sin, of course.

The incarnation (virgin birth) tells us several things:

1. The Second Person of the Trinity became flesh, *not* God became man!

John 1:14 ¹⁴ And **the Word** became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Q – What might be a problem with saying God became man (flesh)?

- Did the Father and the Holy Spirit become flesh!
- We want our belief statements to be as accurate and specific as possible!

2. The incarnation (and the resurrection-ascension) confirms Jesus, though not less than human, was more than human. His earthly life, though **fully human**, was also divine. He, the co-creator, was in His own world – as a **visitor**. He came from God, and went back to God.

The early church Fathers appealed to the virgin birth as proof, not that Jesus was truly divine as distinct from being merely human, but that he was **truly human** as distinct from merely looking human as ghosts and angels might do. This may have been to counter some early heresies:

Docetism – Christ's incarnation was only a matter of *appearance* (Greek. *dokéō* “seem”). Thus his suffering, death, and resurrection were aspects of the human Jesus' life in which the divine Christ did not participate (that nature having withdrawn prior to these events).

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John 1:14 And the Word **became flesh** and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

1 John 4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ **has come in the flesh** is from God...

Humanitarianism – Jesus was just a good man, He was not God.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the **Word was God**.

Colossians 2:9 For in him the **whole fullness** of deity dwells bodily,

Some who believe that Jesus was more human than God, or that He really wasn't "born" God, will suggest that Jesus received His divinity during His baptism, when the Holy Spirit rested on Him. John tells us Jesus was God "in the beginning" and all creation owes its existence to Him!

3. The incarnation indicates Jesus' **freedom from sin**. Virgin-born, he did not inherit Adam's **original sin**, the disease we all have as a result of our first ancestors. Jesus' manhood was untainted, and his acts, attitudes, motives, and desires were consequently faultless. Being sinless, he could not be held by death once his sacrifice was done.

Romans 5:12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.

This does not mean Mary was sinless, but only that Jesus' conception was divine and not human, and thus He did not inherit the human disease of sin!

4. The incarnation means that Jesus **derived** His human nature from His mother, the Virgin Mary. He was not a new creation, nor did He bring His human nature with Him. He received it from her. Therefore, as Scripture often emphasizes, Jesus is truly the seed of Abraham and the seed of David.

Because of the incarnation:

- We can know God – anyone who has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 14:9).
- God and humanity have been united – God Himself crosses the chasm created by sin.
- Jesus is the High Priest of mankind – He represents us and mediates us before God.
- Redemption is available – The death of Christ (God the Son in the flesh!) was the only sufficient payment for our sin.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

Matthew's account presents the birth of Jesus from Joseph's perspective.

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Matthew 1:18–23 ¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for **that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.** ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for *he will save his people from their sins.*” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

Luke presents the birth of Jesus from Mary’s perspective.

Luke 1:26–37 ²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”... ³⁰ And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵ And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ *For nothing will be impossible with God.*”

Q – What issue does Gabriel seem to anticipate regarding Jesus’ virgin birth?

- Disbelief!
- Nothing is impossible with God. If there is a creator God, then why is it hard to believe He could/would cause a virgin woman to give birth to a child?

Q – What was the Holy Spirit’s role in the conception of Jesus? What was the Father’s role?

- The Holy Spirit conceives the Son.

Matthew 1:20–21 ²⁰ ...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for **that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.** ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for *he will save his people from their sins.*”

- The Father sends the Son.

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John 5:22–23 ²² The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the **Father who sent him**.

A Virgin or Young Woman Conceives?

Q – Does Scripture really say that it was a virgin that conceived?

Almah – means virgin, young woman, a woman of marriageable age, or newly married.

Parthenos – a female person beyond puberty but not yet married and a virgin (though in some contexts virginity is not a focal component of meaning) – translates to *virgin* or *young woman*. A *parthenos* is always a virgin, though! (Matt. 1:23; Luke 1:27)

Q – What could be the exegetical problem with interpreting the word *almah*?

- The word *almah* may mean just a young woman and not necessarily a virgin.

Old Testament:

Isaiah 7:14 ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the **virgin** (*almah*) shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

New Testament:

Matthew 1:23 ²³ “Behold, the virgin (*parthenos*) shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

Luke 1:26–27 ²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin (*parthenos*) betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary.

Note: Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14 using the Greek word (*parthenos*) which means virgin!

- Septuagint (Greek version of Old Testament)

The Greek version of Isaiah 7:14 uses *parthenos* to translate virgin. So, in the Hebrew (*almah*) could mean virgin or young woman, but the Greek translation renders it *virgin*.

Catholic and Protestant Views

Q – What are the differences between the Protestant view of the virgin birth and the Catholic view of the virgin birth?

- Catholics believe in the Immaculate Conception: Mary, the Mother of God, was sinless in order to give birth to Jesus.

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- Catholics also believe Mary (Mother of God) is also the true mother of all the living, the new Eve, who cooperates in the “birth” of new Christians.
- Protestants traditionally believe Mary, though highly favored by God, was still a fallen human being with a sin nature just like the rest of mankind.

The **Immaculate Conception** means “God freely chose Mary from all eternity to be the Mother of his Son. In order to carry out her mission she herself was *conceived immaculate*. This means that, thanks to the grace of God and in anticipation of the merits of Jesus Christ, Mary was preserved from original sin from the first instant of her conception.” – Catholic Catechism

Traditional Catholic doctrine states “Mary was kept free from every personal sin her whole life long. She is the one who is **full of grace, the all holy**.” – Catholic Catechism

Luke 1:28 (KJV) And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, *thou that art* highly favoured, the Lord *is* with thee: blessed *art* thou among women.

Q – Is there anything wrong with the Catholic position?

- All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23, Psalm 14)
- If Mary could be born sinless, why could Jesus not simply be born sinless, regardless of the virgin birth?
- Mary acknowledges her sin and need for a Savior:

Luke 1:46–47 ⁴⁶ And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God **my Savior**,

Perpetual Virgin

The Catholic Church teaches that Mary remained a virgin her entire life.

Q – Was Mary always a virgin?

- Jesus had siblings (Matt. 13:55, Luke 8:19-21, Mark 6:3, John 2:12, John 7:3-10, Acts 1:14, Galatian 1:19)
- Joseph did not “know” Mary **until** Jesus was born:

Matthew 1:24–25 ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not **until she had given birth to a son**. And he called his name Jesus.

“‘Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary’ in the Creed witnesses to the reality of the Incarnation, not the glory of Jesus’ mother: the Roman Catholic Church, however, has sponsored the unhappy development of Mariology (Mary-doctrine) among theologians and Mariolatry (Mary-worship) among the faithful. Mariology, which sees Mary as co-redeemer, rests on the nonbiblical teaching that Mary, like Jesus, was born without sin (the immaculate conception) and entered resurrection glory straight after death (the assumption).” – J.I. Packer