

THE DOCTRINE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH¹

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The person who is justified by grace, by faith in Christ, is the only one who really knows that he is a lost sinner, apart from Christ, but the person who has not received Christ's forgiveness and the verdict it entails upon his humanity is one who regards himself as able to justify himself. Similarly the person who has come to know the mystery of Christ as true God and true man is the only one who really knows that he himself is in ignorance, that by himself, by his own capacities, he cannot know, but the person who has not received Jesus Christ, who has avoided the mystery and therefore has not come to know it, is the one who thinks he can understand how God and man can come together. Both the sinner who is forgiven by Christ and the person who has come to see the face of God in the face of Christ know that they can never master or dominate the mystery of Christ in their hearts, but can only acknowledge it gladly with wonder and thankfulness, and seek to understand the mystery of Christ out of itself, that is, seek to let it declare itself to him, seek to let himself be told by the mystery what it is. He will acknowledge that this is a mystery that is not conceivable in our ordinary human thought – that it is a miracle. And if he knows something of this miracle he will know that even his knowing of it is a very wonderful thing, that is, an act of God. He knows the mystery by faith, in the power of the Spirit, but not by himself alone. It is a gift of God. That belongs to the very content of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Jesus and its significance for our knowing of Christ. To that we now turn.

The Biblical Witness

Matthew and Luke both bear witness to the Virgin Birth of Jesus, *i.e.* the only Gospels which speak of the human origin of Jesus, of his birth and of his childhood, give us definite accounts of the Virgin Birth. The genealogies of their accounts of Jesus differ and certainly present literary

¹ Note especially Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/2, sect. 15; and Douglas Edwards, *The Virgin Birth in History and Faith* (London, 1943).

problems, but the word *egennesen* is not necessarily biological. It is actually used of fathers in these same genealogies with the meaning 'begot' where no natural begetting is involved: that is good Jewish usage. Jesus is, according to Matthew, son of Joseph by an express direction of God assigning Jesus to Joseph the son of David. He is ingrafted into the house of David. Thus while Matthew and Luke both speak of the birth of Jesus of the Virgin Mary, they are also ready to speak of Jesus as the son of Joseph. That is no embarrassment to them – and so in both Gospels the genealogies end with Joseph, not Mary, although they do not assert that Jesus is the bodily son of Joseph (Matt. 1:13; Luke 3:23). Nevertheless, while Joseph is mentioned by Matthew and Luke, it is Mary who is mentioned prominently and persistently. Joseph is not significant. It is also worth noting that after Matthew and Luke have completed their accounts of the birth of Jesus, they do not mention the Virgin Birth again, and Luke who paid so much attention to it in his Gospel does not deem it appropriate to put it into the accounts of the early preaching in the Acts of the Apostles in the same way as the passion and resurrection.

Mark does not speak of the human birth and childhood of Jesus. In his Gospel the narrative of the ministry and passion follows the same line as that of Matthew and Luke in its silence about the Virgin Birth. But while Matthew and Luke are ready to speak of Jesus as the son of Joseph, Mark never does. He makes no reference at all to Joseph, but persistently mentions Mary, as in the incident at Nazareth recorded in Mark 6:3 (cf. Matt. 13:55, Luke 4:22). There is no mention of Joseph in Mark, although there is of the brethren of Jesus. The people in the synagogue ask: 'Is not this the carpenter's son?' In Matthew the question is: 'Is this not Joseph's son?' Matthew and Luke can speak in this way without misunderstanding because they have already pointed out that Jesus is not strictly the son of Joseph, but only the son of Mary. But Mark could not have spoken in this way without being misunderstood, or without a long digression to explain why he was not really Joseph's son. Yet Mark's expression on the lips of the people of Nazareth, 'Mary's son', is most un-Jewish. To call a man by naming his mother is extremely strange in Jewish speech. All the evidence points to an

intentional way of putting it, that is, to a deliberate avoidance of 'Joseph'.

We may note one other passage in Mark, 12:5-7, where Jesus says of the Messiah, 'David himself calls him Lord. Whence then is he his son?' How can Jesus be both Lord and Son of David, that is, how can a divine Christ be born of human stock? Matthew's 'What do you think of Christ? Whose son is he?' (22:42) is somewhat different. In both of these passages Mark's language fits in remarkably well with the Virgin Birth of Jesus, better than the language used by Matthew and Mark at the same points.

What is the significance of all this? Mark makes no explicit reference to the Virgin Birth, but then neither do Matthew and Luke from the same point in their narrative where Mark begins. But far from providing evidence against the Virgin Birth by silence, Mark's language definitely leans the other way, toward a witness to the Virgin Birth, and in stronger ways than Matthew or Luke at those points. There are, I feel, distinct allusions to Jesus' supernatural birth.

John has a passage, not often enough recognised, where explicit mention is made of the Virgin Birth of Jesus: 'But to as many as believed him he gave the right to become sons of God, even to those who believed on his name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (1:12-13). If 'who were born' is plural, there is a difficult connection in the Greek, but even so there is clearly an extended reference to the Virgin Birth: 'born not of *bloods*, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of an *husband*, but of God'. The word wrongly translated in AV as 'man' here is not *anthropou*, but *andros* (cf. REB: 'born not of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father, but of God').

What about the manuscript evidence? All the main MSS give the plural reading except the Verona Old Latin which gives the singular (and is significantly of Ephesian origin). These are all fifth-century MSS. But there is considerable patristic evidence going back to the second and third centuries: Tertullian, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, the *Epistle of the Apostles*, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria – that is, all the early patristic evidence has John 1:13 in the singular. Nowhere to my knowledge is there evidence at that date for the plural (see below for the Valentinians). Evidence for the singular is also given by Ambrose and Augustine, and

ambiguously by Leo the Great (who uses the plural as well as the singular), and by many other codices. It is worth noting that most of these sources have at least a connection with the Ephesian text.

Tertullian, however, gives explicit comments upon the text of John at this point (*On the Flesh of Christ*, 19, 24). He remarks that the Valentinians had corrupted their text making the singular into a plural (they did not like the idea of the Virgin Birth), whereas all the other texts were in the singular. That is a most impressive weight of evidence for the singular reading, all twice as old as the oldest of our main codices. According to Harnack² the singular is the true text, a judgment which is being increasingly followed by scholars, and which seems to be undoubtedly demanded. If the text is to be read in the singular then we have here quite explicit reference to the Virgin Birth of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. It must be in line with this too that the Johannine 'only begotten Son' is to be understood, as well as the reference in John 3:37 to being 'born from above', which has primary objective reference to Christ himself. This was certainly the way in which Irenaeus understood it.³

Now let us take in 1 John 5:18: 'We know that whosoever has been born of God does not sin, but he that was born of God keeps him.' Here John uses the perfect tense of the Christian, but the one spoken of as he who was born of God in the aorist tense is certainly Christ himself, the one whom the Fourth Gospel called 'the only begotten (*monogenes*)' of the Father. It is upon Christ's unique birth once for all that our birth depends, and it is in his birth that we are given to share. That again strengthens our understanding of the relation of John 3 (the only begotten who is born from above and descends from above) to John 1 (the only begotten, 'who was born not of bloods, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of an husband, but of God').

John 1:13 is significant for the Johannine doctrine of baptism. Christ's birth was the unique event, our birth in Christ is a participation in his birth, the result or derivative of

² *Date of the Acts and of the Synoptic Gospels* (London, 1911), p. 148.

³ See my essay 'Ein vernachlässigter Gesichtspunkt der Tauflehre' in *Evangelische Theologie* 10-11 (1956), pp. 433-57, 481-92.

his. That is the very heart of Christian baptism. In Christian baptism we are born from above because in baptism we are incorporated into the One who was born of the Spirit from above, whose birth was marked by miracle as the new start for humankind. St Paul says: when Christ died, I died, and when Christ rose again, I rose again. St John also says: when Christ was born of the Spirit, I was born of the Spirit. Baptism thus reposes upon the Virgin Birth of Christ as well as upon his death and resurrection. That is precisely the way in which it is expounded by Irenaeus who uses John 1:13 in the singular, when he gives us the earliest doctrinal understanding of infant baptism. This relation of our baptism to the baptism of Christ, our new birth to Christ's birth from above, was indeed the conviction of all the great Fathers in the first five centuries, even when the text in John 1:13 began to become plural (sometimes with a singular verb, and sometimes with a singular subject and a plural verb!). Thus even Augustine and Leo the Great (where we find John 1:13 cited in both plural and singular forms) nevertheless continue to expound baptism as our sharing in Christ's Virgin Birth and constantly cite this very passage in support.⁴

St Paul has much the same teaching. His thought runs thus. Christ is the last Adam. Adam owed his origin to a creative act of God, and he was the type of Christ (Rom. 5:14). Christ as the new Adam comes likewise from God. His likeness to Adam was not in sin, but in coming into existence. The first Adam was not born of human parentage, not humanly generated. He came into existence at the hands of God – and the LXX here uses *genesthai* (Gen. 2:7; cf. Luke who speaks of Adam as the son of God, Luke 3:38, and Matthew who speaks of the *genesis* of Jesus Christ, Matt. 1:18). The normal word for human birth in the New Testament, *gennan*, is not used of Adam, and Paul never uses it of Christ. Paul never says that Jesus was generated, only that he came into existence like Adam. But whereas the first

⁴ The singular reading of John 1:13-14 has been argued at length by Peter Hofrichter, *Nicht aus Blut, sondern monogen aus Gott geboren. Textkritische, dogmengeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchungen zu Joh 1, 13-14 (Forschung zur Bibel 31; Würzburg, 1978)*, and *Im Anfang war der "Johannesprolog". Das urchristliche Logosbekenntnis... (Biblische Untersuchungen 17; Regensburg, 1986)*.

Adam came into existence from the earth, was earthly, this last Adam came into existence from heaven (1 Cor. 15:47) – sent from God he came into existence of woman, but as a heavenly man. That does not mean that Jesus descended in his humanity from heaven, or that his humanity was pre-existent. But what could be more explicit in speech about the Virgin Birth? Christ came down from heaven, the new Adam. That falls into line with the Pauline doctrine of the descent and ascent of Christ.

In Galatians 4, three times Paul uses the verb *gennan* of human generation (23, 24, 29), but when in that very context he speaks of Jesus he avoids *gennan* and uses *genesthai*. In other words, in reference to Jesus' birth he refuses to use the only word the New Testament employs of human generation. Every time Paul speaks of human birth he uses *gennan*, but not once when he speaks of Jesus. Every time Paul wants to refer to the earthly origin of Jesus he uses *genesthai* (Rom. 1:3, Phil. 2:7, Gal. 4:4). This is the strongest disavowal of birth by ordinary human generation in regard to Jesus: 'God sent his Son, made *genomenon* of a woman, made *genomenon* under the law that we might receive the adoption of sons', with reference back to Galatians 3:27, 'for as many as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ,' etc. This is to say, it is because Christ came into existence under the law that he can redeem those who are under the law. Those who are baptised into Christ and put on Christ are given the Spirit of Christ and like him cry 'Abba, Father'. To be incorporated by baptism into Christ is to partake of his Spirit of Sonship, which he is able to bestow on men and women because of his coming into existence of a woman, as a real man. Paul can also say, then, like John: when Christ was born I was born a son of God, for in baptism I partake of Christ and his Spirit of Sonship.

Thus St Paul's theology is not only consonant with the Virgin Birth of Christ, but, like John's theology, implies it, in his doctrine of sonship and baptism. But Paul's allusions to the Virgin Birth are as strong as Mark's, and are quite explicit of Jesus' heavenly origin. The new Adam comes from heaven. That is precisely the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. In St John and St Paul it is evident that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is woven into the very texture of their theology, which shows its inner importance: but that is just what we would

expect. For us to know Jesus Christ truly means that our way of knowing him corresponds to his way of coming into being. That is important, for only if we see the inner truth of the Virgin Birth in the texture of saving doctrine and its proper place in the doctrine of Christ, can we understand the biblical evidence and evaluate it properly. That will be the deciding factor.

The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth: Preliminary Observations

In a profound sense the incarnation begins with Israel as it is brought into covenantal union with the Word of God. It is only in Jesus Christ, however, that the Word or Son really becomes flesh, but in becoming flesh of our flesh he entered into our Adamic existence as a man made of a woman, made under the law. Within that continuity of Adamic existence he is nevertheless true man, and true Son of God in union with the Father. In his truth and obedience Jesus Christ breaks through the continuity of Adamic existence and opens up a new continuity in a new Adam, in a new humanity. As such Jesus Christ is the first-born of the new creation, the head of the new race in perfect union with God. He was therefore both in continuity and in discontinuity with our fallen humanity. For the first time he is true humanity in the midst of our inhumanity. In and through him, therefore, humanity which has been dehumanised through sin, finds its true being and true human nature in union with God. In Jesus fallen dehumanised humanity becomes humanised and sanctified. Jesus Christ is not only the mediator between God and humanity, but as such he opens up a new way from the old humanity into the new. It is in that light that we must approach a doctrinal account of the Virgin Birth.

The Virgin Birth must not be understood as a theory explaining how the Son of God became human. It is rather an indication of what happened within humanity when the Son of God became human. That becoming man was a transcendent act in the freedom of divine grace involving a miraculous creative act within our human existence, but in the nature of the case, that is apprehensible by us only at its extreme edges where the creative act in its overlap with the creation we already know is an event with two sides to it, an outward visible act in nature and another invisible supernatural act:

'born of the Virgin Mary and conceived by the Holy Spirit'. In understanding any act in nature we have to ask two questions, 'What is it?' and 'How is it?' These two questions belong together. But here in answer to the question 'What?' we are confronted with an answer which has no natural 'How?' attached to it, but rather a 'How?' that transcends the natural event altogether. That transcendent 'How?' is described as an act of the Spirit, as a creative act from above which breaks into our humanity and into our nature. It assumes form and process within our humanity, and therefore its 'What?' can be spoken of, but its 'How?' recedes into the divine nature of the Son of God and is beyond our observation and understanding.

In other words, in the Virgin Birth the incarnation has taken a meaningful form which tells us that here in the midst of our nature and humanity God is recreating our humanity, God is at work in an act of pure grace. It is an act within our humanity and its creaturely continuity, for he who is no creature became creature, he came breaking freely into our creaturely continuity and partook of it though he was not a product of it. Therefore the Virgin Birth cannot be understood biologically. If you ask biological questions of the Virgin Birth you will only get biological answers, and to ask biological questions only is to presuppose from the start that there is nothing more here than normal biological process. Biological questions are all questions about the what and the how within the observable processes of nature. But even apart from the fact that here we are confronted with a 'How?' which is beyond biological process, what about the other questions we must ask: 'Why?' and 'Whence?' To these questions we can only answer that here God acts as Creator. God begins with himself alone as Creator working this time not out of nothing but within our human existence. Of that act in which God begins with himself alone, the Virgin Birth is the outward sign, that here in the midst of our humanity which is true and normal humanity God is creatively at work in a new way – the sign, in fact, that he who is born of Mary is the Creator himself.

The Virgin Birth cannot be understood in abstraction from the whole mystery of Christ, from the union of divine and human nature in the one Person of Jesus Christ. The Virgin Birth is the outward sign, the signitive form in humanity

which the creative entry of the Son of God takes, when he assumes our human nature into union with his divine nature. The sign points to the mystery of Christ and bears witness to it, but the sign is not itself the reality. The reality is the hypostatic union of true God and true humanity. But if the Virgin Birth is a true and appropriate sign, the outward sign and the inward reality belong together as form and content of the incarnation. The outward sign has in it something of which it signifies; it is the analogical form of the thing signified. Thus the Virgin Birth must correspond as sign to the nature of what it signifies, it must correspond to the nature of the mystery of Christ. Thus the mystery of the birth and the mystery of the Person of Christ cannot be separated, and the mystery of the birth has to be understood in the light of the mystery of his Person, the sign in the light of the thing signified, not the thing signified in the light of the sign. And yet, although we cannot understand the mystery of Christ out of his birth, the mystery of his birth does have much to tell us about the way that the mystery of his Person has taken in its insertion into our fallen human existence at the beginning of the earthly life of Jesus.

The Virgin Birth cannot be understood in abstraction from the triumphant consummation of Christ's life in his resurrection, for it is there that the mystery of his Person is revealed. In fact the birth of Jesus of the Virgin Mary and the resurrection of Jesus from the virgin tomb (wherein no human being had ever been laid) are the twin signs which mark out the mystery of Christ, testifying to the continuity and the discontinuity between Jesus Christ and our fallen humanity. Just because the incarnation is not only a once and for all act of assumption of our flesh, but the continuous personal union of divine and human nature in the one Person of the incarnate Son which he carried through our estranged estate under bondage into the freedom and triumph of the resurrection, it is in the resurrection that we see the real meaning of the Virgin Birth, while the Virgin Birth has much to tell us about the resurrection. These are then the twin signs testifying to the miraculous life of the Son of God within our humanity, the one at the beginning and the other at the consummation of the earthly life of Jesus. Both these acts are sovereign creative acts of God's grace in and upon and out of our fallen humanity, and in the full sense they are one continuous act

that includes the whole historical life and work of the incarnate Son. Both these miraculous signs tell us that here within our fallen existence God has acted creatively and redemptively in such continuity with us that we may share in it, but in such discontinuity with our fallen humanity that we may all through sharing in it be liberated from our bondage and decay and corruption and sin to a new life in a new humanity. The birth of Jesus tells us that God acts in Jesus Christ in such a way that the birth does not fall under human power, under the arbitrary forces of human history, or under the causal determinisms of this world, but that in his birth God the Son freely, sovereignly and redemptively enters into them from without. The resurrection tells us that the life and Person of Jesus are not held under the tyrant forces of this world, that though he was born of woman and made under the law, Jesus Christ was not dominated and mastered by our fallen flesh and its judgment, but is triumphant over it all, in achieving his redeeming purpose of reconciling our humanity to fellowship with God.

We can look at it another way. The Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ points to the mystery of God's self-revelation, that God reveals himself within our fallen life, that in his revelation or self-unveiling God veils himself in our humanity. At the birth of Jesus the mystery of Christ as true God and true Man is inserted into our existence and is necessarily veiled, veiled because inserted into 'the flesh of sin', as St Paul called it (Rom. 8:3). The resurrection of Christ points to the fact that God unveils himself, reveals himself within human life. Here the mystery of God is resurrected out of our flesh of sin, out of our death and corruption and is unveiled in its glory as true God and true Man in perfect union. The empty tomb points to the revelation of the secret of Christ and as such is the authentication of the Virgin Birth; it is the unveiling of what was veiled, the resurrection out of our mortality of what was inserted into it and recreated within it. But such a resurrection of true Man and true God points back to the Virgin Birth of Jesus as a union of true God and true Man. The humiliation of Jesus began at Bethlehem and reached its climax on the cross, just before his glorification in resurrection. The new life began at Bethlehem and reached its unveiling in the resurrection. Thus the mystery of the Virgin Birth is the basis of the mystery of

the resurrection. By the mystery of the resurrection the mystery of the Virgin Birth becomes effective and understandable. Here we have a closed circle; to deny the Virgin Birth involves a denial of the resurrection, and vice versa.

The Positive Message of the Virgin Birth

The Virgin Birth tells us that Jesus was really and genuinely the son of a human mother, that he was born as other human beings are, of woman, and yet in a unique way which corresponds to his unique Person as the Son of the eternal God who has entered into our humanity. That Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit means that the Son of God took his earthly origin in the womb of Mary through a special act of the Holy Spirit in accordance with his nature as the Son of God become human. It means that the secret and origin of Jesus lie wholly in God and in his sovereign will and grace alone; it means that the life of Jesus from its very beginning within our human existence was one which was consonant upon the entry of the Son of God into our creaturely flesh in a creative way. Thus the incarnation of the Son in our humanity has its source in the hidden act of God, but it also assumes a form in the entry of the Son into our humanity which is appropriate to and is required by the nature of the incarnate Son as Creator as well as creature. The birth of Jesus of the Virgin Mary through the creative operation of the Spirit corresponds to the whole secret of his Person and life and work, for it reveals in the most remarkable manner the way which the saving grace of God takes with our fallen humanity, as God the Creator and Redeemer actually with us in our estranged human existence, and as God bringing out of our flesh and sinful existence a new humanity that is holy and perfect. Let us now elucidate this in a number of paragraphs.

That Jesus was born from the womb of the Virgin Mary means that he was a genuine human being, that his humanity was not Docetic. The witness of the Scripture is that Jesus was really born of Mary, born through all the embryonic processes of the womb as other human beings. And yet while the flesh of Jesus was the same as our flesh, he was born not as others are of the will of the flesh, or of a human will, or of the will of an earthly father. In the history of the Church the Virgin Birth was first denied by Cerinthus, the heretic and gnostic

who held a Docetic view of the humanity of Christ – and the doctrine was inserted into the Creed in order to combat Docetism. That is very clear from the way in which it is used by Ignatius, for example. But the Virgin Birth equally excludes Ebionitism, that is, the idea that the Son of God united himself with one who was already a human being, or that a human being, either as an embryo or as already born, was at some point adopted to be the Son of God. The Virgin Birth also excludes the idea that God and humanity are coequal partners – that is why the Virgin Birth repudiates all synergism. What took place in the birth of Jesus is an act under the sovereign will of God, in which God alone is Lord and master, so that the birth was grounded in the will of God alone. But that does not mean that the birth of Jesus was an act of God without humanity. On the contrary, humanity is the predicate, not the subject, not the lord of the event.

The birth of Jesus was a real advent, an act of God's grace, a coming into humanity and as such it carries with it a disqualification of human capabilities and powers as rendering possible a human approach to God. The Virgin Birth is the doctrine that the statement that the Son of God became man is irreversible. It is a coming into the realm of human powers and capabilities, and real advent to man, into humanity's existence with all his rational powers, capabilities, decisions and processes, but it is an advent that is grounded in God himself and not in human powers, capabilities, and processes. And so the birth of the Virgin Mary carries with it a real disqualification of human powers as capable of producing Jesus. Christ Jesus is not in any sense, even in a co-operative sense, a product of human activity – the initiative, and the sovereignty of the act are entirely in God's hands. To put that otherwise: Jesus is in no sense the product of the causal-historical process of this world. God entered into humanity and assumed flesh and took it to be one with himself in the Person of Jesus Christ – as such it was a real entry of eternity into time. Can eternity enter into time in any other way except in a unique way, analogous both to eternity and to time? Does not the fact that eternity acts here mean that the birth of Jesus is a supernatural event, one that is grounded in the eternal, and unconditioned by anything outside of it such as a human father? That it is essentially a matter of pure unconditional grace?

The Virgin Birth of Jesus means not that this was an entirely new act of creation on the part of God, but rather a recreation within our human existence, a recreation that involves our human existence again in the creative action of God. The Virgin Birth is thus a creating in Mary by the Creator Spirit. It is as Creator himself, not as Mary's partner, that Jesus is born of her. This creation then was not a *creatio ex nihilo*, but a *creatio ex Virgine*, presupposing the first creation and beginning the new creation. That is a large part of the doctrine of the incarnation: that Christ really comes to us, to our human flesh and assumes it out of our fallen condition in order to redeem and sanctify it. It is of the utmost importance to assert therefore the reality of the humanity of Jesus, and the solidarity of his humanity with our humanity, and that is done very clearly by the Virgin Birth, although it does it in such a way as to show clearly too that this is an event that breaks into our human processes and is not the product of them.

The Virgin Birth represents a break in the sinful autonomy of humanity. That does not imply any stigma on marriage or our natural birth, but on the contrary a sanctification of our humanity and of the way in which we come into the world. We cannot but acknowledge that all our human life is involved in sin, and that our very existence is involved in original sin – but the birth of Jesus was a birth of the holy Son of God into that condition which, far from acquiescing in that sin, resists it, and sanctifies that which sin had defiled and corrupted, uniting it again to the purity of God. The Virgin Birth does not mean that Mary was herself immaculately conceived and on that ground could be immaculately a mother, but it does mean that out of Mary a sinner, by the pure act of God Jesus is born, the holy Son of God, and that his very birth sanctifies Mary, for it is through her Son that she is redeemed and given to share in the purity and holiness of God. Pure act of God, however, means that sinful human autonomy, the sinful act of human assertion in self-will, is set aside and excluded. In his own sovereignty and autonomy humanity is not free for God or for his Word; the act of man as father, the *kyrios*, the head, epitomises humanity's autonomy and sovereignty. It is this very sovereignty and assertion that is set aside here where God acts alone in such a way as to set aside the assertion of human will. That is the significant thing about the fact that in

the birth of Jesus, humanity in the person of Joseph is set aside – he has no say in this matter – he exercises no act of self-will or of the flesh or of blood in order to bring about this act of God.

In the Virgin Birth we are given at the very beginning of Christ's life a revelatory sign which tells us what the divine act of grace is. Grace takes a form in the birth of Jesus which we may take as a norm for all our understanding of grace. Here God takes the initiative and approaches Mary through the Word of his angelic messenger – the Word proclaimed to Mary is the Word of election and grace: she is chosen and told of God's choice. She has nothing to do in this matter except under the operation of the Spirit. What Mary does is simply to receive the Word, to believe, which she does not in her own strength, but in the strength given her by the Lord, and she is blessed because of that, not because of her virginity. John of Damascus remarked that Mary conceived through the ear: she heard the Word and the Word spoken by the Spirit in her ear begot himself in her and through her, and so the Word which Mary heard and received and obeyed became flesh of her flesh. That is the normative pattern for the believer in his attitude toward the Word announced to him in the gospel, which tells him of the divine act of grace and decision taken already on his behalf in Christ. Mary's attitude is beautifully expressed in the words: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.' It is an act of glad and thankful and humble submission and surrender to the will of God. And within her there takes place the incomprehensible act of God, the birth of the Son of God in human form.

By that we are guided to think and are given to understand something of our own salvation and recreation. In the annunciation of the Word, Christ himself the Word now made flesh, we surrender to him in like manner and there takes place in us the birth of Jesus, or rather we are given to share in his birth and to share in the new creation in him. That is the Christian message – the Christmas message. It is not of our self-will or of our free-will that we are saved and born anew from above. 'To as many as believed him he gave the power to become sons of God.' Here there is a 'become' dependent on the 'become' of 'the Word became flesh', grounded in it and derivative from it. What happened once for all in utter

uniqueness in Jesus Christ, happens in every instance of rebirth into Christ, when Christ enters into our hearts and recreates us. Just as he was born from above of the Holy Spirit, so we are born from above of the Holy Spirit through sharing in his birth. Just as in the birth of Jesus there was no foregoing action on the part of our human co-operation, such as the co-operation between a human father and a human mother, as there is no human *a priori*, so in our knowledge of God there is no *a priori*, no human presupposition, no Pelagian or synergistic activity.

Our salvation is from first to last salvation by grace – even our faith is not of ourselves for it is a gift of God – a salvation of human beings among and within humanity, but a salvation grounded on the immediate act of God himself, and not of both God and humanity. We are saved by faith, but faith is the empty vessel (as Calvin called it) that receives Christ, faith the empty womb through which Christ comes to dwell in our hearts. Faith as our reception of Christ, our capacity for Christ is itself a gift of grace. It is not a creation out of nothing, however, but a creation out of humanity in the sphere of his human choices and decisions, his human capacities and possibilities; it is out of man's full humanity but a creation – and therefore faith is something that is far beyond all human possibilities and capacities. It is grounded beyond itself in the act of God. In faith humanity is opened up from above and given to receive what he himself is incapable of receiving in himself. Faith is not therefore the product of our human capacities or insights or abilities.

The relation between faith and Christ received by faith is the Holy Spirit: 'conceived of the Holy Spirit'. Just as Jesus was conceived by the Spirit, so we cannot say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit. It is by the operation of the Holy Spirit that we receive the Word of God which is ingrafted into our souls, and, as it were, we conceive the Truth in our hearts and minds. We do not bring Christ in by our own power, by our own decision or choice, nor do we make Christ real to ourselves or in ourselves. How could we do that? That is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. Our part in being addressed by the Word is to hear the gracious decision that God has already taken, that God has set his love and favour upon us, although we do not in the least deserve it, and have done nothing and can do nothing to bring it about, but when

he works in us what he has been pleased to do, it is ours to work it out in obedient living and faith.

We cannot offer any independent demonstration of the Virgin Birth – that is to say, we cannot offer any demonstration of it in ways that are not appropriate to the nature of the Virgin Birth. We cannot demonstrate it by appealing to anything outside of it, to any external evidence, to any criterion or norm beyond it. That cannot be done with regard to any Christian doctrine. In the very nature of the case the only demonstration is a demonstration of the Spirit, for the demonstration of the truth must be analogical to the nature of the truth itself. The same is true of the resurrection, the twin miraculous event with which the Virgin Birth is so closely bound. The resurrection by its very nature as real event breaking into the framework of our historical constructions in the fallen world is not demonstrable by the canons of credibility which we bring to it in the course of our normal scientific historiography. We are concerned with evidence offered by historical witnesses, but that evidence is taken together with the fact of the resurrection as creative event, for the two are inseparable as historical and bodily sign and the reality of which it is the meaningful sign. So with the Virgin Birth of Jesus. It has to be investigated in terms of the nature of the One who is born, and of the nature of the activity of the One who is born, that is of the activity of the Spirit, and only in a way that corresponds to that nature can an appropriate demonstration be offered. If the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is true, then that can be demonstrated only by the Spirit, through what St Paul called 'the demonstration of the Spirit' (1 Cor. 2:4). Under the action of the Holy Spirit, and within the demonstration of the Holy Spirit, all we can do is to expound the doctrine in its own light, to set forth its intrinsic significance in Christ, and to set forth its integration with the whole doctrine of Christ, and with all the doctrines which cohere round Christology and as the core of dogmatics. It is as we let the doctrine shine in its own light, in its own true significance, in the coherence of the whole truth of the gospel, that by the demonstration of the Spirit its authentication as truth is acknowledged.

Here, then, we see the Virgin Birth as an act of God grounded in himself alone, and in an act of grace which becomes as such the archetype of all other acts of grace. We

cannot treat it lightly or give it a place of only minor importance in our dogmatic theology. It is precisely by setting forth its importance, its archetypal importance in and for other doctrines that its truth comes home to us. The Virgin Birth thus becomes more than a sign – it is a determinative act of God. That does not mean that we think of Christ as the Son of God because he was born of a Virgin: it was because he was the Son of God and was very God that he was born of a Virgin in this world. But here we cannot separate the sign from the reality, or the sign from the act, or the sign from the Word. Here the Word comes into the world as deed, the thing signified is embodied in the sign – so that the very form of Christ's birth, the sign of the Virgin Birth, proclaims Christ in the very mode of his entry into our world, and proclaims that this is the mode of his entry into all who believe in him. The Virgin Birth is thus the form and fashion which the true humanity of the Son of God once for all took in our sinful world for our salvation, and therefore is the form and fashion of his continuous coming to us within the same world.

It is just because of this close and inseparable association of sign and thing signified in the Virgin Birth that we can show in the history of theology its necessity for true faith in Christ. Can we conceive the resurrection of Jesus apart from the empty tomb? Can we hold the incarnation as the union of true God and true humanity apart from the Virgin Birth? Certainly the history of theology shows that where the outward sign or form of either the resurrection or the Virgin Birth has been repudiated or allegedly 'demythologised', the inner content has inevitably gone with it. Thus the Virgin Birth as an article of credal faith has played a very important role in the history of the Church in rebutting Docetism and Ebionitism, Eutychianism, Sabellianism and Nestorianism, but here too we have a powerful force keeping the Church to the basic doctrine of salvation and justification by the grace of God alone. It proclaims that in Christ there is created in our humanity the possibility of salvation which does not arise from humanity, a possibility which is yet anchored on the side of God. In Christ who is true man and true God we have the one mediator and reconciler in whom God and humanity are not simply brought near each other, but in whom God and humanity become one for all eternity. It is in him that we are

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given to share as members of his body, and in him we frail human beings are thus enfolded in the life of God.