

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine Christology. In our previous sessions on this topic we have shown why Jesus Christ had to be both God and man in order to save us and we provided biblical support for the fact that Jesus Christ is fully God. We ended our previous session by beginning to examine the biblical teaching that Jesus is also fully man. Dr. Spencer, how do you want to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: By reminding ourselves of our ultimate standard for truth, in other words, our ultimate authority. If you are a true Christian, then the Bible is your ultimate standard for truth, your ultimate authority. We cannot reject something the Bible clearly teaches just because we don't understand it. This principle is never more important than when we discuss doctrines like the Trinity or the dual nature of Christ.

Marc Roby: Well, those are definitely two doctrines that go way beyond our ability to understand.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, they go way beyond it, yes. But we must not conclude from our inability to *fully* comprehend them that we can't comprehend them *correctly*. God is able to communicate true knowledge to us even about things we can't fully grasp. Our knowledge will not be complete, but it can be true.

Marc Roby: And, of course, no reasonable person would expect that a creature could fully understand its Creator!

Dr. Spencer: No, of course not.

Marc Roby: But you make an important point that our knowledge can be true and correct independent of the fact that it is incomplete. The same thing is true even in our understanding of the physical world around us. The fact that we don't know everything certainly doesn't imply that what we do know is necessarily false.

Dr. Spencer: No, of course not. And the issue of authority is critical because there have been improper objections to the dual nature of Christ from the very beginning. The Jews at the time of Jesus had an extremely difficult time with the idea that God could become incarnate. They quite properly had an extremely high view of God, as should we. He is the transcendent Creator, totally separate from his creation. But it is wrong to conclude from that fact that he could not become incarnate.

Marc Roby: And, as we pointed out in our last Session in discussing the passage in Philippians 2:5-11, the apostle Paul clearly assumed that his readers understood that the man Jesus Christ was fully God.

Dr. Spencer: And he made that assumption because Jesus had convincingly demonstrated his divinity in a number of different ways. The people clearly understood the implications of his actions. For example, in Chapter 10 of John's gospel, we read about the people coming to Jesus and saying, in Verse 24, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us

plainly.”¹ And Jesus went on to remind them of the miracles he had performed and ended by saying, in Verse 30, that “I and the Father are one.”

Marc Roby: Yes, and at which point the people picked up stones and prepared to stone him to death.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s right. And Jesus then asked them, in Verse 32, “I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” And the people responded, in Verse 33, by saying, “We are not stoning you for any of these, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

Marc Roby: That does show clearly that they understood his claim to be God, and so the many people who became convinced and actually placed their faith in him certainly knew that he is God. As doubting Thomas confessed in John 20:28 when he finally believed, “My Lord and my God!”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s right. The believers at that time knew that Jesus was God. But there were some people who doubted his humanity. Some said that he only *appeared* to be like a man, but wasn’t really a man.

Marc Roby: Which was a heresy that appeared very early on, called *Docetism*, which comes from the Greek word *δοκέω* (*dokeō*), meaning “to seem”.

Dr. Spencer: And this heresy came about in part because of their properly high view of God as I noted before and in part because of pagan philosophies of the time that taught that matter is inherently evil and the spirit is good. Therefore, since they thought that matter is evil, they couldn’t accept the idea that God would truly become man.²

Marc Roby: Yet another example of men rejecting God’s revelation because it doesn’t make sense to them.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And we noted last time that the apostle John dealt with this heresy in his first letter. In 1 John 4:2 we read, “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God”. And John goes on in Verse 3 to tell us that this heresy is serious. It is, in fact, deadly. Let me read Verses 2 and 3 together; “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus

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² E.g., see Docetism in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 2, pg. 151; or John M. Frame, *The History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, P&R Publishing, 2015, pp 89-90

is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”

Marc Roby: That *is* serious error! To deny the full humanity of Christ, that he has come in the flesh as John put it, is the spirit of the antichrist.

Dr. Spencer: Which is why I want to spend more time on the doctrine of the humanity of Jesus Christ. In the following treatment, I’m going to draw heavily on the material in Chapter 26 of Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.³

Marc Roby: Okay. Where would you like to begin?

Dr. Spencer: Well, to use a cliché, let’s begin at the beginning. But not the beginning of Jesus’ deity of course, because there is no beginning to God, he necessarily exists eternally and unconditionally. But let’s begin at the beginning of his incarnation, which is the virgin birth.

Marc Roby: Now the idea of a virgin giving birth is something that many modern people, even some professing Christians, find seriously objectionable.

Dr. Spencer: That is certainly true, but the virgin birth of Christ is an essential doctrine of biblical Christianity. And it shouldn’t be a problem for anyone who believes the first four words of the Bible.

Marc Roby: Which are, “In the beginning God ...”.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. If someone doesn’t believe that, then he or she has no legitimate claim to being a Christian, or even any kind of theist. But if you do believe that, namely that God exists, a God who created this entire universe, then why on earth is it a problem to believe that he could cause a virgin to conceive a child?

Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point. And the apostle Paul used similar logic in arguing for the resurrection of Christ before King Agrippa. In Acts 26:8 he asked this rhetorical question, “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” His point obviously being that since God exists – a God who can create all things – then it shouldn’t be a problem for him to raise the dead.

Dr. Spencer: Nor should it be a problem for him to cause a virgin to conceive and give birth to a son. And that is exactly what the Bible tells us. In Matthew 1:18 we read; “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”

Now, although we are not provided with a detailed explanation, this verse couldn’t be clearer. Before Joseph and Mary came together as husband and wife, she conceived a child “through the Holy Spirit.” This is not implying some vulgar act like you find in ancient myths, it is speaking

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994

of a miraculous conception without a human father by the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the third person of the Trinity.

Marc Roby: And, of course, Joseph initially assumed that the child had been conceived in the ordinary way, and he knew it wasn't his, which was a serious problem. So we read in Verses 19-21, "Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'"

Dr. Spencer: Now modern readers can be confused by the statement that Joseph "had in mind to divorce her quietly." We are told that they had not yet come together as husband and wife, but they were pledged to be married. Now, in the culture of the time that pledge was itself a binding commitment and would need to be broken in a formal way, which is what the NIV here renders as divorce. In any event, the angel told Joseph that "what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit", which again describes this miraculous conception. And he goes on to give the child a name. He tells Joseph, "you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Marc Roby: We should point out that the Greek word Ἰησοῦς (Iēsous) is a transliteration of the Hebrew word Joshua, which means "Jehovah is salvation".

Dr. Spencer: That's an important point. And Matthew then ties this back to the Old Testament prophecy. In Verse 22 he writes that "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us.'" Matthew is referring to the famous prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 where the prophet tells King Ahaz about a coming child who will deliver his people and says, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

Marc Roby: So this passage in Matthew explicitly tells us in no uncertain terms that Jesus Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary, that he was to be named Jesus because he would save his people from their sins, and that his birth was the fulfillment of the prophecy given by Isaiah about 700 years before that a child named "God with us" would be born to a virgin and would deliver his people.

Dr. Spencer: That is all true and all very important. The birth is also the fulfillment of the prophecy given by God himself in the Garden of Eden immediately after the fall. In pronouncing his judgment against the serpent, God said, as we read in Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Notice that it says it is the offspring of the woman who will crush the serpent's head, not the offspring of the man.

Marc Roby: Yes, that's an interesting point. And we clearly see God's sovereign control over all of human history. He knew before he ever created the world that man would fall, and he had the solution in mind from all eternity. But he revealed it to his people a little bit a time.

Dr. Spencer: And Grudem points out that the virgin birth of Christ is theologically significant for three reasons. First, it establishes that salvation comes from the Lord. Grudem wrote that "The virgin birth of Christ is an unmistakable reminder that salvation can never come through human effort, but must be the work of God himself."⁴

Marc Roby: That also makes me think of the passage from Isaiah 45 that we looked at last week where God declares that he alone is God and he alone is the Savior. In Isaiah 45:21 we read, "Declare what is to be, present it— let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's very true. Jesus Christ is God, Jehovah, the only Savior. And the second reason the virgin birth is theologically significant is that it made possible the uniting of full deity and full humanity in the person Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: I think that statement needs an explanation.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. Grudem discusses other possible ways we could imagine God becoming incarnate and points out, without in any way meaning to limit God, that this way had the advantage of Jesus having a human mother, which makes his humanity evident to us, but having been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, which makes his deity evident.

Marc Roby: Yes, that makes sense. You said Grudem gave three reasons the virgin birth is theologically significant, so what is the third?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the third reason is that it makes possible Jesus' true humanity and yet his being sinless.

Marc Roby: That again requires some explanation.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it does. We discussed the doctrine of original sin back in Session 106. It states that because Adam was the God-appointed representative of the human race, when he sinned, we all fell with him. His sin resulted in his having a sinful nature, which is at enmity with God, and that nature is passed on from parents to children on through the generations. We inherit a sinful nature from Adam through our parents. That is the doctrine of original sin.

But because Jesus Christ was not conceived in the normal way, Grudem writes that "this helps us to understand why the legal guilt and moral corruption that belongs to all other human beings did not belong to Christ."⁵

⁴ Ibid, pg. 530

⁵ Ibid

Marc Roby: Of course, we don't understand fully how the sinful nature is passed on, so we also don't understand fully how Christ was kept from inheriting a sinful nature from his mother.

Dr. Spencer: No, we don't know the details. And Grudem again in no way intends to limit God's freedom. He is simply pointing out that by doing it this way God made it easier for us to understand. He provides some biblical support for this position also by examining the response Mary received when she asked the angel how it could be that she would conceive a child as a virgin. In Luke 1:35 we read that "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.'" Now, I have quoted the English Standard Version here rather than our usual New International Version because it agrees with what Grudem argues is the correct translation of the Greek. Specifically, it says "therefore the child to be born will be called holy", which implies a causal connection between the fact that the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit and the fact that the child is to be holy, that is, without sin.

Marc Roby: That's very interesting. And I look forward to looking into the humanity of Christ further next time, but this is good place to finish for today. So let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we'd love to hear from you.