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Incarnation: Fact or Theory?

*Late in time behold Him come,*

*Offspring of the Virgin's womb:*

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;*

*Hail the Incarnate Deity.*

With these words, at this time of the year, grateful groups of believers sing the Good News and praise God for the gift of His Son. But can we really believe that God has come in human form? Is it not incredible? Of course, we may be so familiar with the Christmas theme that we sing the words thoughtlessly. The inspiring music also distracts from the sense of the words. And it is a season of happiness. So our minds are dulled to the intellectual content of the hymn. But let us stop and think. Incarnate Deity! Is it possible that God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, should have come at a particular time in history to a particular spot in geography and dwelt in the flesh of an infant boy? Astounding!

Virgin Birth Unessential?

Under the impact of the scientific and philosophic difficulty of believing so stupendous a story, attempts have been made through the last fifty years to alleviate the situation by distinguishing between the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth. It is obvious that without the Incarnation, or at least without an incarnation of some sort, there could be no Christianity whatever. But the Virgin Birth is an unacceptable biological miracle, which fortunately is unessential. For such reason, it was claimed, the religious value of Christianity could be preserved and all scientific difficulties avoided by accepting the one and dropping the other. Candidates for ordination, therefore, professed belief in the Incarnation, but found themselves "unable to affirm" the Virgin Birth.

The motivation was scientific. From Galileo to Newton to the dawn of the twentieth century, inviolable mechanical law had extended its sway until no room was left in the universe for miracles. Today, however, the scientific situation is noticeably altered. The philosophy of mechanism is at least in retreat. Not only do some scientists talk unashamedly of indeterminacy (though it does not follow that a Christian ought to accept Heisenberg), but the laws of some

ordinary phenomena, such as light, are in a state of confusion. It can no longer be maintained that science arrived at fixed truth; its results are subject to constant revision. Therefore neither the science of 1900 nor the science of 1950 can be taken as the infallible criterion of the possibility of miracles. When the universe was considered to be a machine, tinkering with it implied a defect in the Divine tinkerer. Thus miracles were made impossible. But if the relation of God to the universe is not that of an inventor to a machine, but that of a Father providing for His children, we may cut short an incipient discussion of scientific law by simply asking, Is not God omnipotent and can He not manipulate His own creation?

Nevertheless, one may abstractly admit God's omnipotence and still doubt the Virgin Birth. Perhaps the miracle is not absolutely impossible; but yet, true miracles are at least rare, false miracles are less so, the whole matter is embarrassing, and fortunately the Virgin Birth is not essential. The Incarnation is what counts. Thus there still remains from nineteenth-century science a hangover of antipathy toward the Virgin Birth. Just after last Christmas, in *Time* (January 2, 1956, p. 34) there was reported an attack on the Virgin Birth, which *Time* itself considered sarcastic. Among the objections was mentioned the thesis that for John and Paul "the virgin birth was not dignified enough to mention." Ignoring the tone of the attack, one may seriously ask where the writer obtained his information that John or Paul did not think the Virgin Birth dignified. Has he some special insight into their motives? Note also that John does not mention Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, and Paul has nothing to say about the feeding of the five thousand and the triumphal entry. Does this silence mean that these events are not dignified enough to mention? Does it cast even the least doubt on their occurrence? Clearly this type of argument is invalid.

There are other authors, however, less sarcastic than the gentleman mentioned in *Time*, who also insist that the Virgin Birth is either untrue or unessential. Yet their arguments are no better. Rudolph Bultmann, for all his reputed scholarship, relies on the same argument from silence (*Theology of the New Testament*, Scribner, New York, 1951, pp. 50, 131), asserting further and without evidence that the early Church knew nothing about it. He also claims, showing no acquaintance with the detailed investigations of J. Gresham Machen (*The Virgin Birth of Christ*, Harper, New York, 1932), that later Christians appropriated virgin birth mythologies from Babylon and Egypt.

Or, if one should avoid a dogmatic denial of the Virgin Birth, John Mackintosh Shaw of Queen's College, Ontario (*Christian Doctrine*, Philosophical Library, 1954, p. 153n.) more modestly claims that the Virgin Birth is unessential. Yet those who make this claim fail to avoid ambiguous language.

Essential To What?

When it is said that the Virgin Birth is not essential, one must ask, essential to what? Is it meant that belief in the Virgin Birth is not essential to ordination? Or do some writers mean that this belief is not essential to personal salvation? With the thief on the cross in mind, the most orthodox Christian would have no hesitation in admitting that the Virgin Birth is unessential in this respect, though he might well suppose that candidates for ordination should meet higher requirements.

Professor Shaw, though he would probably remove belief in the Virgin Birth from the ordination requirements, has other matters in view; but what precisely they are, he does not quite succeed in making clear. He writes, "There is no basis in the Gospel records or in the New Testament generally for making this belief an essential or [a] necessary part of our Christian faith." Does this mean that it is not essential to our salvation? Emphasis on the word *our* could lead to such an interpretation. But the context rather suggests another, a third meaning, of the term "essential." Professor Shaw seems to mean that the Virgin Birth is not essential to the Christian faith; i.e. not essential to the system of Christian truth, not essential to God's plan of redemption. Since frequently such writers do not seem to have considered these three possible references of the word "essential," their language is confusing.

#### What Is the Criterion?

Whether one or all of the three meanings are intended, a careful thinker would like to know the criterion by which one distinguishes the essential from the unessential. Both Professor Shaw and the gentleman in *Time* seem to depend mainly on the silence of the New Testament outside of Matthew and Luke. Now, if there are only eighteen verses on the Virgin Birth, as Professor Shaw indicates, is eighteen too small a number to make a doctrine essential – essential to ordination – essential to Christian truth – essential to God's plan? At least in the last meaning, could not one hold that Joash's escape from Athalia's massacre, recounted in two verses of II Kings and two verses of II Chronicles, was essential to God's plan? How then decide what is essential to ordination?

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Professor Shaw – and all the more so, Emil Brunner – selects the verse "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" as essential. In fact, Brunner seems at times to regard this as the only place in the whole Bible where God has spoken; but how can the selection of this one verse be consistent with the rejection of eighteen others? Now, of course, Professor Shaw, and even Brunner himself at other times, may not be so extreme; but Shaw gives us nothing except his own asseverations and personal preferences as a basis for his conclusion. And when he further says, "there is no warrant... in the historic creeds of the Church for tying up belief in the fact of the Incarnation necessarily in indissolubly with assent to a

certain theory of the method of the fact,” one wonders whether he has forgotten the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, not to mention the Westminster Confession.

## Theory Versus Fact

This last quotation refers to the Incarnation as a fact and to the Virgin Birth as a theory. The source of this distinction between theory and fact, or at least a widely publicized example of it, is the so-called Auburn Affirmation. This document, published in 1924, declares that the inerrancy of the Scripture has neither biblical nor confessional foundation, impairs the authority of the Scripture and weakens the testimony of the Church. In addition, while stating that the Incarnation is a fact, the Affirmation describes the Virgin Birth as a theory. Other doctrines also are represented as theories rather than as facts. These theories are not the only permissible theories, and “all who hold to these facts and doctrines, whatever theories they may employ to explain them, are worthy of all confidence and fellowship.”

## Two Decades Of Debate

Throughout the past twenty years the issues thus posed have stimulated theological literature and debate.

Consider the article written by A. H. Baldinger in *The United Presbyterian* of January 31, 1955. Dr. Baldinger is impressed by the Affirmationists’ statement printed in bold type, “We all hold most earnestly to these great facts and doctrines...” Unwilling through the goodness of his heart to put any sinister interpretation on these words, Dr. Baldinger is satisfied with this declaration. And so might any careless reader, distracted by the bold type, be satisfied. The document gives the appearance of accepting the matters under discussion. But when the wording is more closely examined, it will be seen that the antecedent reference has been altered. “These facts and doctrines” are not the doctrines in debate. Instead of the infallibility of Scripture, there has been substituted an undefined reference to inspiration; and the Virgin Birth has been replaced with the Incarnation. This may be an acceptance of the Incarnation as a fact and a doctrine, but there is complete indifference to the Virgin Birth, or any “theory” that may be used to explain this “fact.”

An understanding of this situation demands an answer to the question, What is a fact? Is a fact something true and a theory something false? This cannot quite be the meaning; the document can hardly intend to say that all theories are false. What then does it mean? Does it use “fact” in the sense of an historical event and “theory” in the sense of a general or an abstract principle? This understanding would not lend coherence to the view, since obviously the Virgin Birth is not

a general principle. If, of the two, one must be designated a fact and the other a theory, would not the better linguistic usage make the Incarnation a theory to explain the fact of the Virgin Birth rather than [sic] the Virgin Birth a theory to explain the fact of the Incarnation?

### What Is The Alternative?

Further, if the opponents of the Virgin Birth wish to call it one of several permissible theories, would they care to specify what the other theories are? Presumably some would suggest that Joseph was the natural father of Jesus; but this is precisely what both Joseph and Mary deny. Could Joseph and Mary have invented such a lie? To avoid this suggestion, it would no doubt be necessary to regard Matthew and Luke as untrustworthy; more of this in a moment. There is also the theory that Mary gave herself to some Roman soldier. This shocking notion apparently satisfies the specifications of the document, for it states that ministers are “worthy of all confidence and fellowship,” “whatever theories they may employ to explain” these facts and doctrines. In this way the position is defended that belief in the Virgin Birth is not essential to ordination.

### Incarnation Also Incredible?

Now, what if Matthew and Luke are untrustworthy? Suppose they just improvised the story of Jesus' birth, shepherds, angels and eastern Magi. Such was the view of Bruno Bauer. But if this is the case, what reason has anyone for believing in the Incarnation while rejecting the Virgin Birth? In both Gospels the two are inseparable parts of one account. Why then should one strand of the account be thought trustworthy and the other not? Why call the Incarnation a fact and the Virgin Birth a [scarcely] permissible theory? They are both from the same source. Would it be more difficult for a historian like Luke to ascertain the fact of the Virgin Birth than the theory of the Incarnation? On the assumption that the Virgin Birth was an actual event, it seems to present far less difficulty to the historian. Or, is it the assumption, not to be brought into question in this scientific age, that the Virgin Birth could not possibly have occurred? But the Incarnation is just as miraculous, just as scientifically impossible, as the Virgin Birth. Indeed, what with all sorts of biological surprises, a virgin birth seems even less impossible than the incarnation of Deity in human flesh. Has God actually become man? Incredible!

But both doctrines come from the same source. And it is the only source. If Paul and John are silent, at least every New Testament writer who mentions Jesus' infancy at all insists on the Virgin Birth. Why then should a Christian believe the greater miracle and stumble at the lesser? The infidel who rejects both is at least consistent. The orthodox Christian who accepts both is

consistent. But what can be said of the logic of one who tries to hold to and Incarnation without the Virgin Birth?

*Late in time behold Him come,  
Offspring of the Virgin's womb:  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
Hail the Incarnate Deity.*

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