

Sunday School Lesson

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The Virgin Birth and its prophecy do not add to this statement of faith, which is itself authenticated by the Holy Spirit. (See Matthew 16:17.)

When We Disagree

It is apparent that conservatives and liberals have many differences, of which only a few are suggested here. But many of these differences are about the means, not the ends. Both would agree on the divinity of Jesus Christ, though they would disagree over how his divinity is known.

The conservative would maintain that the liberal has no right or authority to say what he will or will not believe about the Bible. Once a person adopts such an attitude (they say), the Bible can be twisted to deliver whatever message he (the liberal reader) wants.

The liberal would say that though neither his father nor his wife may be infallible, he trusts them anyway. He has a similar attitude toward the Bible regarding its infallibility. The captain of an ocean liner or an airplane may not be infallible, but he can still bring his passengers in safety to their destination.

Differences in belief have caused many great tragedies in the history of the church. In the name of Christ, Christians have used unchristian measures, even persecution and the threat of death, to try to force their beliefs on other persons. It is difficult to believe that such "Christians" have really under-

stood Christ's teachings.

The crusades, for instance, were supposed to have been organized for the Christian purpose of taking the Holy Land from the infidels. When Jerusalem was captured, these holy knights killed every man, woman, and child in the city.

In southern France in the Middle Ages, the church mercilessly tried to stamp out by death thousands of Christians who wanted to follow teachings different from those of the Roman church. During the years of the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants fought bloody wars in defense of their religious beliefs.

The last war fought for religion was the Thirty Years' War, which ended in 1648. Only after thousands had been killed and much of central Europe destroyed by thirty years of war did people agree not to fight again over religion.

Though today national armies do not fight religious battles, we see many persons who call everyone who does not agree with them the "enemy." These dividing elements are found as much inside the church as in the general culture. Many churches split over building programs or the attitudes the church should have on social issues. How tragic to see the people of God divided! Especially at the Christmas season we should grow in charity toward those who differ with us.

The Meaning of The Virgin Birth

To return to the teaching of the Scripture passage for this lesson. We may more surely

discover its meaning for us if we can think of reasons why the writer of the Gospel included this account of the birth of Jesus in his Gospel. (Mark must have had reason not to include it in his Gospel.) What did he want others to understand about the birth and life of this man?

The doctrine of the Virgin Birth helps us understand the uniqueness of Christ. According to this symbol, he was born as no other human being has been born. The beginning of his life was a new beginning and was not merely the continuation of the process of human reproduction. The unusual conception and birth have been for the church an effective way to proclaim his remarkable place in our lives.

The Initiative of God

God acts. Man responds. This is the sequence of divine grace and human freedom. The sequence cannot be reversed. Grace can call forth faith, but faith cannot call down grace. God moves first. Man may move in response. But the initiative is always God's.

No merely human striving can force God's hand: His grace is freely given, but it is never earned. What man contributes to his own salvation is always secondary. The initial action is God's. The responsive action is man's. We are saved by grace, not by faith. God himself initiates the relationship within which man finds salvation.

One way to speak about the initiative of divine grace is to speak about the Virgin Birth. The Virgin Birth tells of God's initiative in salvation by telling

of God's initiative with Mary. Jesus Christ, the unique one through whom God offers salvation, is not the product of merely human energies and powers. The Savior does not come into the world through the agency of a man, but rather by the Holy Spirit. God himself initiates the life of the one who is to become the Savior. In this way he demonstrates that salvation is of God, not of man.

The Humanity of Our Lord

When the church tells the story of the Virgin Birth, it stresses the humanity of Jesus as well as his divinity. Divine action ("conceived by the Holy Spirit") and human response ("born of the Virgin Mary") are here joined. The Savior who is born is himself both divine and human.

What does it mean to say that

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