

DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit and the Incarnation

Lesson 7

As one studies to understand the Holy Spirit's role in the incarnation, they immediately discover that they are over their head in a mystery that cannot be completely understood by mortal men. There is enough scriptural data to know that the Holy Spirit was involved in the incarnation and why, but not enough to satisfy all our curiosities. Abraham Kuyper has said, "Let us look into this matter only with deepest reverence, and not advance theories contrary to the Word of God. What God has been pleased to reveal we know; what His Word only hints we can know only in faint outlines; and what is advanced outside of the word is only the effort of a meddling spirit or unhallowed curiosity."¹ John Walvoord has said, "There are few supernatural acts of God which present a more inscrutable mystery than the birth of Christ."² In this lesson we will focus on the Holy Spirit's role in the incarnation of the Son of God. In this lesson we will focus on the miraculous one time act of the Holy Spirit in conceiving the Son of God in the virgin's womb. We will seek to understand why the Holy Spirit had to be involved in the birth of Christ.

I. DEFINITION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE IN THE INCARNATION

- A. Abraham Kuyper in *The Work of the Holy Spirit*: "It cannot be denied that in the preparing of the body of the Lord there is a peculiar work of the Holy Spirit. For the angel said to Mary: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." (**Luke 1:35**). And again: "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost" (**Matt. 1:20**). Both passages, apart from their proper meanings, evidently seek to produce the impression that the conception and birth of Jesus are extraordinary; that they did not occur after the will of man, but result from an operation of the Holy Spirit."³
- B. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*: The texts of Matthew and Luke are both clear on the teaching of the virgin birth. **Matthew 1:18** emphasizes Mary was pregnant before she and Joseph lived together; moreover, the same verse indicates her pregnancy was due to the Holy Spirit. **Matthew 1:22–23** stresses that the birth of Christ was in fulfillment of the prophecy of the virgin birth in **Isaiah 7:14**. **Matthew 1:25** emphasizes that Mary remained a virgin until the birth of Christ. **Luke 1:34** states that Mary had not had contact with a man, while in **Luke 1:35** the angel explains to Mary that her pregnancy was due to the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.⁴

¹Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, pg. 87.

²John Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, pg. 83.

³Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, pg. 86.

⁴Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997, c1989), 222.

- C. *Apostles' Creed*: I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. . .”

II. THOUGHTS TO PONDER, PARADOXES, AND DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

- A. Person of Christ existed from all eternity. Yet in a moment of time God the Son, laid aside the independent exercise of His divine attributes, humbled himself, and by the power of the Holy Spirit entered into the virgin's womb, being clothed in humanity, to grow in Mary's womb, be born, live, die, resurrected from the dead, and united again to the Father forever to exist, from that time forth, as the incarnate Son of God! Jesus will always have a human body.
- B. How can Jesus be fully human, born of Mary, be a descendant of David and Adam, but not have a sin nature? Mary's body supplied the means for Jesus to be formed in her womb. We know today that the mother's blood flows through her baby. So how did Jesus escape having a sin nature when Mary, His mother, was a sinner?
- C. Thomas Watson in *A Body of Divinity* commenting on the need for the incarnation in saving fallen sinners said, “It was not fit for any to satisfy God's justice but a man; however none could do it but God; therefore, Christ being both God and man, is the fittest person to undertake the work of redemption. . . Had Christ been born after the ordinary course of nature he would have been defiled, since all that springs out of Adam's loins have a tincture of sin, but that ‘Christ's substance might remain pure and immaculate,’ he was born of a virgin.”⁵
- D. Because Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit we might conclude that the Holy Spirit must be the Father of Jesus. This seems to be a reasonable deduction, but John Gill argues that it can't be true for these reasons:
1. It would require that there be two Fathers in the Trinity, but there is but one as indicated in texts like **Mt. 28:19** and **I Jn. 5:7**. The Father of Christ is distinguished from the Holy Spirit in many places and therefore cannot be the same (**Jn. 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; Eph. 1:17; 3:14, 16**).
 2. The Spirit is called “The Spirit of His Son” in **Gal. 4:6** which would be incorrect and should read “The Son of His Spirit” if the Holy Spirit was Jesus' Father, but He is not.

⁵Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pgs. 192-93.

3. If the incarnation was the cause of Jesus' divine Sonship, then there was no God the Father of Christ in the Old Testament. Yet the Scriptures indicate that God existed as the Father before the incarnation (**Psa. 2:7; Eph. 1:3-4; Heb. 1:1-2**).
 4. If Christ was the Son of God in respect of his human nature only, then the phrase used to describe Jesus as "a descendant of David, according to the flesh" (**Rom. 1:3**) would be irrelevant. For when someone is born of man, it is said he is his son. But the phrase "according to the flesh" is very relevant, in relation to Jesus, because it shows that Jesus, though a Son before, became, at the incarnation, "according to the flesh."⁶
 5. The incarnation did not make Jesus the Son of God, but manifested him as the already existing Son of God (**Gal. 4:4; I Jn. 1:1-2; 3:8**).
 6. The Holy Spirit could not be Jesus' father as the Old Testament clearly speaks of Jesus as "The Son" in many contexts (**Psa. 2:7, 12; 89:26-27; Prov. 30:4; Dan. 3:25**).
 7. If Jesus became the Son of God at His conception then He is like men who are called the sons of God (**Lk. 3:38; Acts 17:28**) and angels who are called the sons of God (**Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7**) and it lowers Jesus to the status of a mere created being. Yet the Scriptures indicate that Jesus is far better than angels (**Heb. 1:5-14**).⁷
- E. John Owen in his work *The Holy Spirit*, discussing the Holy Spirit and the incarnation said, "This act of the Spirit was a creating act; not indeed like the first creating act, which produced the matter of all things out of nothing; but like those subsequent acts of creation, whereby out of matter already prepared, things were made what they were not before, and which they had no active disposition to, nor concurrence in. So man was formed of the dust of the earth, and woman of a rib taken from man. Thus in forming the body of Christ; though it was effected by an act of infinite creating power, yet it was made of the substance of the blessed virgin." Owen goes on to give four reasons for why this was necessary:
- 1) So the promise could be fulfilled spoken to Satan in the garden, "the woman's seed would crush the serpent's head." Jesus had to be made of woman.
 - 2) Jesus had to be of the descendants of Abraham and David to fulfill promises made to them.
 - 3) Jesus had to be of the genealogies recorded in Matthew and Luke.
 - 4) Jesus had to have a perfect human nature in order to make atonement for our sins.⁸

⁶See also Jn. 1:14; Rom. 5:1; 9:5; II Cor. 5:16.

⁷John Gill, *A Body of Divinity*, pgs. 150-151.

⁸John Owen, *The Holy Spirit*, 91-92.

III. THE INCARNATION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT'S PART IN IT

A. Jesus, Necessarily Fully Human

1. **Gen. 3:15** And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and *her seed*; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.”
2. **Isa. 11:1** Then *a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.*
3. **Gal. 4:4-5** But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, *born of a woman*, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.
4. **Heb. 2:17** Therefore, *He had to be made like His brethren in all things*, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology*: “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. Our salvation only comes about through the supernatural work of God, and that was evident at the very beginning of Jesus’ life, when “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5).” (pg. 530)

B. Jesus, Necessarily Fully Divine

1. **Isa. 7:14** “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and *she will call His name Immanuel.*
2. **Isa. 9:6** For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And *His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*
3. **Mic. 5:2** “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. *His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.*”
4. **Lk. 1:30-32, 35** 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 name Him Jesus. 32 “He will be great and will be called *the Son of the Most High*; . . . the Holy Child shall be called *the Son of God.*⁹

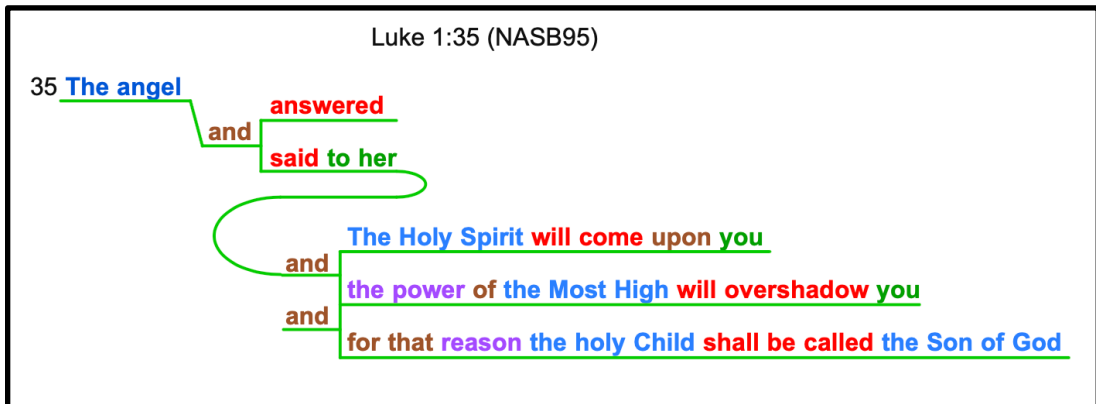
⁹John Gill notes that the text does not indicate that the Holy Spirit’s involvement in the incarnation caused Jesus to be the Son of God, for He already was the Son of God, existing from eternity. The text says “he shall be called the Son of God” letting us know that in the future, after Jesus’ birth, the proper title “Son of God” would be used of him. This would be in fulfillment of Isa. 7:17, 9:6; Mic. 5:2, and other Old Testament texts that predict the deity of the Messiah. (*A Body of Divinity*, pg. 150)

C. **Jesus, Necessarily Without Sin**

1. **Isa. 53:9** His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because *He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.* (quoted in **I Pet. 2:22**)
2. **Heb. 4:15** For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but *One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.*
3. **I Peter 1:19** but with precious blood, as of *a lamb unblemished and spotless,* the blood of Christ.
4. **I John 3:5** You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and *in Him there is no sin.*

D. **Jesus, Necessarily Conceived by the Holy Spirit**

1. **Matt. 1:18-20** Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together *she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.* 19 And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. 20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the *Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.*”
2. **Luke 1:35**



10

¹⁰It is possible to translate this verse in several ways. “Holy one” can be seen as an adjective modifying “the child” as the subject. The NASB reads, “the holy child shall be called the Son of God.” The NIV similarly has “the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God,” where “the one to be born” is the subject. However the ESV sees “holy one” as the subject and “the child to be born” as describing the subject, translating the verse “the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.”

IV. ERRORS CONCERNING THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE INCARNATION

- A. Error – Jesus was sinless because his mother Mary was also sinless. Mary experienced the “immaculate conception” so that Jesus could be born without a sin nature. (Note, in order for Mary to be sinless, her parents would also have to be sinless, thus perpetuating the error.)
- B. Error – The Holy Spirit is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- C. Error – Jesus, because He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and was fully divine, didn’t have a human spirit and soul.
- D. Error – Jesus was conceived with a sinful nature but was sanctified by the Spirit after His birth.

V. APPLICATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT’S PART IN THE INCARNATION

- A. We learn from the Holy Spirit and the incarnation that God is able to keep His promises even if the promise is impossible for humans to fulfill.
- B. We also learn from the Holy Spirit and the incarnation that salvation is all of God, not men. It is beyond the ability of man to conceive of or achieve a virgin birth. The Holy Spirit had to intervene so that Christ could be fully human and yet not have an earthly father. He had to escape the sin nature of Adam passed down to all his physical descendants (**Rom. 5:12**).
- C. Because Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit, He was “the holy Child,” the Son of the Most High, and the Son of God. Being God, He could not sin, though He was tempted in all things as we are, and to a greater degree than we could ever be tempted. Thus the miraculous conception of Christ allows Jesus to be our sympathetic High Priest.
- D. The Holy Spirit’s work in the incarnation allowed Jesus to be holy and unaffected by sin from the instance of his conception. Having no sin nature, Jesus was not inclined to various sins that plague the rest of mankind. Thus Jesus is our perfect example, having all the attributes, needs, and desires of the human race of Adam before the fall, yet never sinning.
- E. We can look forward to being like Jesus. Just as Jesus was free from sin in this life, so we too will be free from sin in heaven. We will become in heaven what Jesus was on earth and will also be glorified and sinless as Jesus now is in heaven.