

## A Tale of Two Conceptions

*Psalm 51:5; Luke 1:30-35 (texts); Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 14*

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To most evangelicals, “Virgin Mary” or “Mary, Mother of God” are easily dismissed as Catholic ideas. But the title, “Mother of God,” is both early and a mistranslation. It was used of Mary as early as the mid-3rd century, and the Greek term used, *Theotokos*, is literally, “God-Bearer” or “Birth Giver of God,” not “Mother of God.”

The controversy over the title *Theotokos* began when Nestorius, bishop of the church in Constantinople, tried to resolve two major problems. First, how could Jesus Christ be sinless, if he was a man born of a woman who was part of the fallen human race? Second, if Jesus Christ was divine, how is it possible that he could die if God cannot die? To solve these dilemmas, Nestorius said that Mary only gave birth to the incarnate Christ, not the eternal divine *Logos*, for how could the eternal God have a beginning? So he preferred to call Mary *Christotokos*, “Christ-Bearer” or “Birth Giver of Christ,” instead of *Theotokos*. “God-Bearer.” In 431 A.D., the Council of Ephesus (the same Ephesus in Acts 19 and Revelation 2:1-7), condemned Nestorianism as a heresy. The council affirmed the title of Mary as *Theotokos*, “God-Bearer.”

But in time, the term “Mother of God” was used more and more, over against “God-Bearer,” and has become a title of veneration or worship of Mary. Many Catholics understand “Mother of God” as a title not only of respect, but also of Mary's authority and role in the church. And one of the unbiblical Roman doctrines is Mary's “Immaculate Conception” or sinlessness declared in 1854. But if Mary was sinless, why would she sing, “*my spirit rejoices in God my savior*”? (Luk 1:47)

Our two texts today reveal two kinds of human conception. One is spoken of by King David in Psalm 51:5, where he says that even at his conception in his mother's womb, he was already corrupted by man's sinful nature. The other is in Luke 1, where the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that he will conceive a holy, sinless child by the Holy Spirit. Our Catechism readings point to this contrast between **man's sinfulness** and **Christ's sinlessness** as the only God-Man perfectly qualified to be “our Mediator, and with His innocence and perfect holiness covers, in the sight of God, my sin.”

### Conceived by Sinful Flesh

David knows himself as a sinful person from the time of his birth, even from his conception in his mother's womb. But there are two errors that must be pointed out concerning David's words, “*I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*”

First, some people might think that David is saying that the physical act between a husband and wife that produces conception is sinful. No, that is not what he is saying. Even from creation, God has ordained the “one-flesh” relationship between husband and wife. The inspired Word in the Song of Songs describe this beautiful relationship. The idea that the act of conception is sinful is a gnostic idea—that the physical is evil, and only the spiritual is good. The Bible often speaks about our body and soul together being redeemed and restored by God in Christ. Paul even says, against Gnostic ideas, that our dead bodies will be resurrected and restored to incorruptibility (1 Cor 15:42-44).

And this leads to the second error about conception. Conception is mysterious, but yet wonderful. A baby developing from conception to the full term is beyond our understanding. No human intelligence and super-high technology can re-create this process. It is a work that God the Holy Spirit alone is able to do. King David again bursts into praise for God as he meditates on this mystery in Psalm 139:13-14:

*For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

As Christians, we are to grieve about abortion, from conception to full-term. God is the one who wondrously knits the human body in the womb from conception to birth. We are to oppose any form of abortion at any stage, because God looks at it as first-degree murder!

As the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 6 says, man was created very good, even in perfect holiness, righteousness and knowledge of God, in the image of God (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). But when Adam fell into sin in the Garden of Eden through the devil's deception, sin came into the world. Therefore, all creation, including all human beings, were plunged into sin and corruption because of Adam's sin (Rom 5:12).

This is why even Old Testament writers already saw this state of the human being, “What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?” (Job 15:14) Paul quotes David in Psalm 14:1-3 when he says in Romans 3:10-12, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God... no one does good, not even one.” So Paul says that man is “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph 2:3). No one is able to make himself good and right before God. Sinful man does what the devil wants him to do (John 8:44), and are therefore slaves of sin (Rom 6:15-20).

Since this is the helpless and hopeless state of a human being ever since his conception, how is he going to get out of this state? This is Job's other question: *"How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure?"* (Job 25:4) The answer to these questions come from God himself, because man is unable and unwilling to save himself from slavery to sin and death.

## **Conceived by the Holy Spirit**

The Second Person of the Triune God was the Son of God from eternity. This eternal Son of God had to take upon himself the very nature of man to save Adam and all his descendants from the curse of sin and death. So he was born in a lowly manger as Jesus.

Why did the Son of God have to do this? Because, as we have already learned from previous Heidelberg Catechism lessons, God is a holy and righteous God who cannot allow sin to go unpunished (HC Q&A 10). Man has to suffer God's judgment for his rebellion against God. So, in his infinite grace and mercy, God's plan for redeeming his people from sin involved a perfect sacrifice for sin. We see this even in the Old Testament sacrifices of animals without spot or blemish (Exo 12:5; 1 Cor 5:7).

But there is no human being without sin. *"All have sinned and come short of the glory of God"* (Rom 3:23). Even one sin in thought, word or deed makes us sinners disqualified from saving ourselves and in desperate need of salvation (Jas 2:10). And this is where the Son of God came into the picture. How will he be the perfect substitutionary sacrifice when he is eternal God? The eternal plan of redemption was for him to assume the flesh and blood of a human being. And this he did by being born of the virgin Mary.

The angel announced to Mary, *"you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."* His name is Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21). He is called "great" because he is also the "great" God (Deu 10:17; Neh 1:5) and Lord (Psa 48:1). He is also "mighty" (Deu 4:37; 7:21) and "awesome" (4:14). Jesus is the "great Light" (Matt 4:16), the "great high priest" (Heb 4:14), the "great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13:20).

He is also "the Son of the Most High." The "Most High" always refers to God (Gen 14:22; Psa 7:17; 9:2; ). Stephen the first martyr refers to God as "the Most High" (Acts 7:48). Even the evil spirits know Jesus as *"the Son of the Most High God"* (Mark 5:7). And who is this Son?

From the beginning of time, in the Garden of Eden, God has promised that the Seed of the woman Eve will be the one to destroy the devil who tempted them to sin (Gen

3:15). He is the Seed of Abraham who will inherit God's promises to Abraham: a multitude of children and an eternal dwelling place. He is the Child of the twelve tribes of Israel, whom at his birth, the devil will seek to destroy (Rev 12:13-17), which Herod tried to do. He is the Son whom God has promised to set up as the eternal heir of the throne of his father David, *"and of his kingdom there will be no end"* (Luke 1:33).

According to angel's announcement to Mary, *"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"* (Luke 1:35). This is why in our creeds, we affirm that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, not through Mary's sexual relationship with Joseph.

Though we were not children of God, God sent forth his Son to be *"born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law."* So in believing and trusting in him as Savior, *"we might receive adoption as sons,"* and become God's children (Gal 4:4-5).

And how did this Son accomplish our salvation and adoption as God's children? He was born to be like all mankind in all things, body and soul, except for sin, *"like his brothers in every respect"* (Heb 2:17). Since Mary also had a sinful human nature, how can the Son of God with a human nature be not tainted by sin? For God, nothing is impossible, so that God the Holy Spirit himself conceived the Son of God in sinful Mary's womb. This is a mystery that no one can comprehend, not even the Roman Catholic teaching of the Immaculate Conception of the virgin Mary. But not only is he a sinless human being; he is also the legal heir of King David's throne because Mary herself is a descendant of David (Luk 1:33).

The Holy Spirit's role in the birth of Jesus is that he will "overshadow" Mary. The Greek word for "overshadow" is the same word used in Exodus 40:35 used for the cloud that had "settled" on the tabernacle. God used his "glory-cloud" to show Israel that he was present with them in the tabernacle. The Holy Spirit often reveals himself as a cloud hovering over something, as when the Spirit of the Lord *"was hovering over the face of the waters"* in creation (Gen 1:2). And when the Spirit "hovered" over the empty and formless earth, the earth was filled with land and its animals, sea and its fish, and air with its birds. Even man was given life and breath by the Spirit of God (Gen 2:7).

Therefore, through the Spirit, God created the infant Jesus in Mary's womb, whom the eternal Son of God would assume to be a true human being.

**D**ear friends: As a human being, Jesus partook not only our weaknesses, but even more so, he shared our mortality. The body that he was born with on that first Christmas night is capable of dying, since dying was part of his mission when he came

down from heaven. This is because death came through Adam, and Jesus the second Adam also has to die and be raised from the dead in order that those who believe may also have eternal life (1 Cor 15:21-22). And this obedient sacrifice by the Second Adam is how God saves us from sin (Rom 5:19).

This Christmas, and always, be mindful that our comfort is this: in his holy conception, he became one of us. He is our Great High Priest who is *"[able] to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb 4:15). He also suffered physical afflictions. He was also tempted by the devil. He also suffered want, hunger and thirst. He also agonized as he faced physical and spiritual abandonment by his Father. He also suffered ridicule and persecution.

Whatever trials and sufferings you face in this life, Jesus also did. Not only does he sympathize with you. He also intercedes for you before the Father's throne in heaven. You have confidence that he brings your prayers and supplications in your times of need to our heavenly Father. By his grace, Jesus was born 2,000 years ago to give you all these benefits.