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# Creed #4. Conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary

**Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 22 February**

Hebrews 2:14-18 • John 1:14



Let's pray, Lord Jesus, as we again come to your word, may the truth in it be our guiding light. Help us to navigate rightly though the speculations, assumptions, and temptations do life, Amen.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit born of the Virgin Mary.

As you look at that sentence it states two things.

- Conceived by the Holy Spirit.
- Born of the Virgin Mary.

Which would you say is the most important and necessary in regards to the circumstances of Jesus birth? That Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit must surely be the most important detail. ■

Not that born of the Virgin Mary is unimportant. It's just that the virginity of Mary is important because it validates the fact that no human father was involved.

Now it might seem a bit unseemly to say this, and it's not the case. But once it was shown, and known, that Mary was pregnant, and was at the stage of becoming pregnant, still a virgin, would it have made any difference if Mary and Joseph had, now that they were married, engaged in marital relations before Jesus was born?

I can't see why it would. And they didn't. But it would have been harder to say there was no man involved in the conception of Jesus. So in the interests of keeping it clear cut, and less open to challenge, it's hands off till after delivery.

So keep the thought of "conceived by the HS" as primary. And the virginity of Mary as a secondary and validating detail. That might help when we look at some of the teaching around Mary the mother of Jesus in a few moments.

Ok. To the gospels affirmation that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The key thing I think with Jesus not having an earthly father is that means Jesus is able to identify fully with sinful humanity, being as we are, all the while maintaining his full divinity.

In other words for Jesus to be fully God and fully man.

Now we might wonder as to the "how" of conceived by the Holy Spirit? Well certainly nothing like the pagan myths and stories where the gods actually had sexual relations with humans.

Let's leave the "how" and look at the "why".

We looked at "how" and "why" as we were trying to steer through the challenge of reconciling science and scripture, as we looked at the first sentence of the creed. God creator of heaven and earth.

One of the things we discovered was that science and scripture are not enemies but friends.

- Firstly, because science is only possible in a ordered universe. Not in a chaotic one where time and chance eventually lead to life.
- Secondly, because science and scripture have different goals. Science is great at answering the "how" questions. And scripture is great at answering the "why" questions.

How did God create the universe by his word out of nothing? The only one who can answer that question adequately is God.

Better to ask the “why” question. Why did God create the universe? The bible tells us. Because God who is a perfectly loving community in his own being, Father Son and Holy Spirit, wanted further opportunity for that love to be experienced.

So let's concentrate on the “why” of “conceived by the Holy Spirit” because:

- It helps us better understand Jesus as both fully God and fully man.
- It helps us better understand God's s grace and intervention in a way that maintains God's holiness given that Jesus remained sinless. But there is a genuine identification with sinful humanity, because Jesus experienced temptations just as we do.

In fact Jesus experienced temptations to a far greater extent than we ever will for at least two reasons.

Firstly, Jesus was tempted by the tempter himself. 40 days in the wilderness was the first test Jesus faced, and it was there that he learned to trust in God and Gods word.

Secondly, because Jesus never gave into temptation.

If I offer you a chocolate and you are sorely tempted, what happens if you take and eat the chocolate? The temptation might be replaced with guilt if chocolates are a problem for whatever reason. But, as you give into the temptation the temptation goes. So it's only when you don't give in to temptation that you more fully understand it's power.

Ok about the Virgin birth. What does the bible say about Mary the mother of Jesus apart from her being highly favoured, blessed and obedient?

- She was a virgin when Jesus was conceived.
- Mary and Joseph did not have sexual relations until after the birth of Jesus. Matt 1: 24-25 “Joseph took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had born a son.”

Now if marital relations is talking about a physical relationship, which is the most usual understanding of that term. It would infer that Mary and Joseph did have marital relations after Jesus was born. That would explain the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

That said, let's just look a little at the idea of the perpetual virginity of Mary which is a key doctrine in the Roman Catholic Church.

Even some of the key reformers who broke away from the Catholic Church continued to hold to that teaching.

- John Calvin.
- Martin Luther the instigator of the protestant reformation.
- Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the book of common prayer.
- John Westly, the founder of the Methodist church.

And let me also say at this point that when I was born 10 weeks prem in 1957, I was not expected to live and was given the last rites by the parish priest. My Catholic godmother also spent much time on her knees at the local parish lighting candles on my behalf.

Further, my primary school days were spent at a Catholic Covent school, and that was formative for me in a positive way.

Further, in my teenage years my mum was a part of a charismatic prayer group ,mostly make up Catholic women, so I reckon there was a bit of prayer being channelled in my direction.

I even found my way back into regular church attendance in the mid 1980s through a somewhat charismatic catholic chapel that met in chancery square.

I say those things because I don't want to be disrespectful or disparaging, even though I am going to challenge some Catholic teaching around Mary the mother of Jesus. And while there might be some points of theological difference between Catholics and Anglicans we hold most things in common. Does that sound fair?

Ok. Now as I understand it Mary being a perpetual virgin has to do with purity and holiness. You can see where that might lead. A less than positive attitude towards sexual intimacy.

So the big question how do we reconcile Mary never having sexual relations with her husband and Jesus having brothers and sisters. 4 brothers are named.

By saying that the brothers and sisters were not the result of Joseph and Marys marriage. There must have been a previous marriage. Or they are not brothers and sisters in the strict sense of the word.

It is even held in some teaching that Jesus did not travel down the birth canal and Mary retained the physical sign of virginity. Jesus had a kind of supernatural caesarean section.

Such beliefs can lead to other “extra biblical” beliefs like the “immaculate conception”. That is that Mary was conceived without original sin. The “perpetual virginity” of Mary, and the immaculate conception are two of the 4 Catholic doctrines around Mary.

As far as the “immaculate conception” and Mary being born without original sin, I’m not really sure what difference that might make unless Mary remained sinless until the incarnation, the time the Son became flesh.

Perpetual virginity. Immaculate conception. Other things follow. As we used to pray, “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death amen.”

Does that prayer line up with the gospel teaching that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is our intercessor, our intermediary, our priest forever according to the order of Malchizedek?

At Jesus death on the cross the curtain blocking the way to the holy of holies in the temple was torn from top to bottom symbolising we now had unhampered access to God through Christ. The curtain was not replaced by other intermediaries.

We pray “to” and “through” Jesus. And if we don’t know how to pray, or the exact words to use the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, will intercede for us. So teaches the Apostle Paul in Roman’s ch 8.

Is there any thought in anything I’m saying that would weaken our necessity to pray for others? I hope not. I pray for every one of my children every day of my life along with various other things.

The point though, is that I pray to, and through the Lord Jesus. My prayers are directed towards the holy Trinity. I do not pray to or through a human being, no matter how faithful or exalted they might be in scripture.

Why is stressing this point important?

It has implications on our understanding of grace. God saves sinners and we are all equal at the foot of the cross.

And through the work of the cross we are declared Saints. That’s how the apostle Paul addresses believers he is writing to throughout the gospel. As saints.

We don't have to be holy for God to work extraordinary things in our lives. None of the heroes of the faith were plastered saints. That's the point. It's not what we do it's what God does and what Jesus did on our behalf. That's the gospel.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The incarnation shows that God is not ashamed to share our humanity even to the point of physicality. If God is not ashamed of our flesh so why should we be.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit. It's a part how God rescues us. All the while maintaining the holiness of God and having a union with humanity is real and concrete.

Jesus, the Word made flesh. Again the why question is the most important one. Pastorally, what does this all mean?

Our reading in Hebrews 2:14-18 reminds us that Jesus taking on flesh made possible the victory over sin and death. Atonement and God's ongoing power or assistance are ours in Christ. Further, in Hebrews 4.

HEB 4: 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

We don't need any other than Jesus and his work on the cross, to be at one with the Father, and be given the grace and power to help us through this life.

To finish: the circumstances of Jesus birth leaves us with lots of questions but it does make us more aware of several things:

That salvation is a supernatural event. It is about that work that work that God does on our behalf and it is a work that goes beyond the means and mind of man.

That Jesus is unique. Unique in birth. Unique in death and resurrection. The Son of God. The saviour. There is none other. And none other is needed. We have a full and sufficient salvation in and through Jesus.

What other pastoral encouragement can we take from the circumstances of Jesus birth?

It shows us that God can bring life where we might think life impossible.

Three of the four patriarchs of the faith, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all had wives who were unable to have children. Elizabeth, Mary's cousin was also unable to have children. But life came when people thought it impossible.

The difference in Mary, the mother of Jesus case, was God brought life where life should be impossible in a unique way, because no human father was involved.

Let's widen the application a bit.

Life where life should be impossible.

Hope where hope should be impossible.

Joy where joy should be impossible.

Peace where peace should be impossible.

Lastly, Transformation where transformation should be impossible. At least the level of transformation that is spoken of in the gospels.

We can take hope that the God who made the Word become flesh and dwell among us is the same God who makes us new creations through the life death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and the sending and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Our hope is in God and God alone. God is full and sufficient in regards our salvation. We need no other.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. Amen.