

# The Virgin Conception

## Mother of Miracle or Cognitive Dissonance?

*John Botha*

I am quite aware that this will not be everyone's cup of tea, as my aim was to give a glimpse into the world of science *and* Scripture as opposed to science *versus* Scripture.

My concern is that as believers we are not equipping people to fulfil the mandate of 1 Peter 3:15, "...but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect..."

If this floats your boat and you have questions, then by all means reach out — maybe we can help each other along our respective journeys of faith.

Please fasten your seat belts: today is going to be *fast*. You see, pretty much everything I will be saying today is a summary, but feel free to chat if you would like to know more because I can point you to *many* resources. Also, my long hand sermon notes will be on the web as a PDF, so if you are taking notes there is no need to write down what is on the screen or what I say — rather write down your own insights and thoughts. You can later go back and read my long hand notes.

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So, what is the title of today's sermon?

### The Virgin Conception

This is quite a topic — one which can quickly divide people into different camps, such as Virgin Conception vs. Virgin Birth vs. Immaculate Conception vs. ... it's quite a list, potentially even including what Protestants view as idolatry, but that is not what we are looking at today. Instead I will do my best in an extremely short time to give you a small overview of how incredible God's plan is regarding our salvation — looking at it with theology and science in harmony, which is why I subtitled it:

...  
Mother of Miracle  
or  
Cognitive Dissonance?

Yes, it's a play on words, and some of them are a bit unusual, so let's unpack them, but before we do that, can we agree on Who we understand God to be?:

#### God

The Creator and ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority.

That is about as short a definition as I could find. Although we are not now speaking about the mechanics of it, this definition states that *God* made *everything* — if anything exists that He didn't create, then He could not be God. That means that there is none other like God and therefore that He has no opposite.

Also, He *rules*, but not like a human ruler does — human rulers make decrees, but many people get away with not following them. Since God is *God*, there is no getting away from Him. There will be a reckoning at a time which *He* has appointed, and His Will *will* reign.

Lastly, He decides what is good and what is not; what is right and what is wrong.

By itself this would actually be a pretty bleak picture, because it says nothing about how we get to know any of these important things. That is why there is one more aspect: revelation. God reveals Himself to us in two different, complementary ways.

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General revelation : Creation  
Special revelation : The Bible

Important point: we are part of the general revelation, because we are part of creation — possibly the most complex part.

Now we can unpack the subtitle. The easy part would seem to be *Mother of Miracle*. Obviously we are here speaking of Mary, so that settles that, right? — actually, no; not even close, but we will come back to her after looking at the definition for cognitive dissonance and looking at things logically.

### Cognition

The psychological result of perception, reasoning, and learning

This is such a powerful definition. As we perceive things and we think about them, we learn and that becomes part of who we are.

### Dissonance

Lack of agreement or harmony between people or things

An example from music: a note sounded by itself is just that: one note. When two notes are sounded together, the result is either harmony (they sound good together) or dissonance (they sound bad together). When we put these concepts together we get:

### Cognitive dissonance

Holding contradictory beliefs

Behaving contrary to your beliefs

Notice how both points relate to beliefs. The first is only in the mind while the second spills over into what we do. While the first may not apply to everyone, the second one definitely applies to every one of us: how many of us can honestly say that we live up to every single aspect of what The Bible teaches from a moral perspective? In fact, God's Word says that our *righteousness* — our very, very best — is as filthy rags before Him. Unless, of course, you redefine concepts or words to mean what you want them to mean, much like George Orwell did in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. We know that language is vital to communicate our thoughts, but it's more than that: language enables us to think in the first place.

This quote from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* explains part of *Newspeak*, which is core to the novel:

"...words such as honour, justice, morality, internationalism, democracy, science, and religion had simply ceased to exist. A few blanket words covered them, and, in covering them, abolished them. All words grouping themselves round the concepts of liberty and equality, for instance, were contained in the single word crimethink. ... In Newspeak it was seldom possible to follow a heretical thought further than the perception that it was heretical: beyond that point the necessary words were nonexistent."

So we need to be very careful when we decide to bend The Bible to our point of view. Remember our definition of God? His Will *will* reign supreme, otherwise He is not God.

Are you experiencing some cognitive dissonance right now?

Many people challenge our faith in God by saying things like “If God is so powerful, why doesn’t He fix everything? In fact, why is it broken in the first place?” Then they go on about things like disease, death, and other horrible aspects of what is around us which clearly are very far from ideal. They might close with the challenge: “The reason no-one has ever been able to prove that He exists is because He doesn’t!”

Can We (Dis)Prove God?

I want to deal with that last one quickly, because it is one of the cornerstones of what follows. [This is one of those “Hold on to your hats!” moments. Engage with me if you have questions.]

...  
God is *God*

If you come up with objections (or when, perhaps because of cognitive dissonance), then refer to our agreement on God: He is The Creator and ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority; He reveals Himself through creation (of which we are part) and through The Bible — and then what follows from that.

God loves us and wants us to love Him

This is clear throughout Scripture; the key is the next statement:

Love cannot be forced

This is key because love has to be freely given, which means that the possibility for it to be withheld must be there. If God were to force us to love Him then by definition it would not be love. Robots cannot love — any affection they display is programmed behaviour, as there is no choice, no free will. While free will enables us to love, it also creates the possibility for sin to occur: going against God’s Will, choosing to go against His commands. Again, refer to our definition of God’s nature.

Now for the important bit:

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.”

If God were to prove His existence unequivocally — in other words, in such a way that you simply could not do anything other than believe — then you would be *forced* to believe. There would be no love.

One more *fundamental* from me:

Unless it is clearly not to be taken literally (for example a parable), then I see no reason not to believe God’s Word as it is written. Remember Jesus saying “It is written...”?

We are now going to go firmly into cognitive dissonance land for some people, so I need to make something very clear: I believe we can all agree that our schooling (all of it, including university) is not religiously neutral, and neither is most of our mass media. In fact, much of it seems to be actively opposed to Christianity, with a lingering attitude of “Just as church and state are separated, so are Christianity and logic.” I have seen many arguments along the lines of “You cannot *seriously* believe that!

That's just unscientific!" The unspoken accusation is that you are an idiot: "Spend some time thinking, then join the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when you've put your prejudices behind you."

Remember Hebrews 11:6? God designed it like this on purpose: facts simply *are*; they do not prove anything by themselves. What they are used for is in trying to prove or disprove beliefs. Time passed at the same rate everywhere until Einstein discovered that it doesn't. There were no such things as sea currents until they were discovered in the mid 1800s. Canyons with hundreds of strata took millions of years to form until Mount St. Helen's erupted and formed one in a few hours.

Here are a few carefully chosen ones:

- Jesus was conceived supernaturally; Mary was a virgin at His conception.
- God created everything in six days; ancient Hebrew had lots of ways to indicate long ages, but the phrases like "evening and morning" and "the second day" are used.
- If death came about because of Adam and Eve sinning, then nothing died before then.
- Oh, and of course Adam and Eve. (National Geographic has a video on YouTube called *Scientific Adam and Eve*. It's just 2:19 long, but it is remarkable the logical hoops they jump through to try and escape the obvious.)
- Then there is the global flood.
- There are angels... and demons. Jesus was quite clear about them, so... do you believe Him? *All* of Him, not just the meek & mild bits.
- We are not merely physical beings, but have a spiritual aspect as well.
- We all spoke the same language until Babel.
- Hardly ever is a mutation beneficial, and we have high mutation rates — leading overwhelmingly to genetic entropy. We are getting worse, not better.

These are just a few points that will probably create cognitive dissonance in the minds of many of us. I hope that your relationship with God is strong, and that you will follow His leading to resources which will help you to separate the wheat from the chaff. Also that you will come to an understanding of how to think, for that is not generally taught us at school or even university, where so much is about telling them what they told you; of remembering statements and applying a formula.

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Now that I've stirred things up a bit, let's look at the virgin conception. I wanted to show some of the cohesiveness of it all, and to do that means a lot of hand waving, otherwise we'd be here all day. If you would like to know more, chat to me.

In order to be a true substitutionary sacrifice for us, Jesus had to be like us, and He needed to be without sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it very well: "If Jesus Christ is not true God, how could He help us? If He is not true man, how could He help us?"

After Adam and Eve, the only way a human comes into the world is through birth, so the only way that Jesus could be human would be through birth. Thus a woman *had* to be involved. This leaves only one

option: a man *could not* be involved in His conception, as we are told that through Adam — through the seed of the man — we inherit sin and its consequences. So we see that the virgin conception is necessary condition for salvation but not sufficient. Being necessary means that without it, there is no salvation; not being sufficient means that it is not enough by itself for salvation. Think of fuel for a car: without it the car won't drive (so it's necessary) , but it is not enough by itself (it needs more than just fuel to drive).

One of the most interesting fields in science is genetics, and with our modern knowledge, we can say that for Jesus to be a human, He would have to share our genetic make-up. Jumping back to Genesis 3:15 we see what Bible scholars call the first Messianic prophesy, which is extremely strangely worded (therefore on purpose): the seed of the woman as opposed to the seed of the man. Also, the genealogical records show that Mary (the only blood line for Jesus) was a direct descendant of David, as had been prophesied. In the case of Joseph, it was a legal right, as he was also a descendant of David.

That is not the genetic point though. That is far deeper.

There are a number of spectacular differences between the genetic make-up of men and women. The obvious one is that all men have the XY chromosomal pairing, while all women only XX. Thus when a baby forms and gets half its genetic code from the mother and half from the father, it is the father's code which determines if the baby will be female or male. That's high school biology class level, but think about this [warning: potential cognitive dissonance ahead!]: there were eight people on the ark, four men and four women. Three of the men were sons of the fourth, so their genetic material was very limited compared to the women.

Anyway, the only way that Jesus could have been a man is if Mary miraculously obtained male genetic material, and this fits in with how Scripture describes it. Once the conception occurred, the other steps were as usual. The only difference being that the genetic material from the Y chromosome was perfect, without the damage that Adam's genetic material had.

As to the *seed* of the woman, it is a complex study in biology which I won't pretend to understand, but the conclusion is that this was the only way that a perfect sacrifice was possible.

Another point is that if Jesus was not immortal, then He just died earlier than He would have otherwise. If Jesus was immortal but Adam wasn't, then Jesus was not truly man and his death wouldn't have been a substitutionary sacrifice for Adam's descendants. Thus Jesus embodied what Adam had lost, in order to save his line: us.

This has been a whirlwind, I know. I want to encourage you to ask questions, and to spend time working on your cognitive dissonances. Just be aware that the conclusions you come to for the same set of facts will differ if you change your world view; that which you take as given. Work from the perspective that God's Word is supreme, and we are to love Him in return. Remember Hebrews 11:6 about believing He exists and searching earnestly for Him. God is not going to impose Himself on you; you need to invite Him in.

This has been very theoretical, and I want to end with something artistic and reading a song lyric to you. Then we will have a performance of a dance to the song, which is called

# I Have This Hope

*Mike Donehey, Jason Ingram, Jeff Owen (Tenth Avenue North)*

As I walk this great unknown  
Questions come and questions go  
Was there purpose for the pain  
Did I cry these tears in vain  
I don't wanna live in fear  
I wanna trust that You are near  
Trust Your grace can be seen  
In both triumph and tragedy

I have this hope  
In the depth of my soul  
In the flood or the fire  
You're with me and You won't let go

But sometimes my faith feels thin  
Like the night will never end  
Will You catch every tear  
Or will You just leave me here

So whatever happens, I will not be afraid  
'Cause You are closer than this breath that I take  
You calm the storm when I hear You call my name  
I still believe that one day I'll see Your face

In the flood or the fire  
You are with me and You won't let go  
In the flood or the fire  
You are with me and You won't let go