

A Tale of Two Conceptions

Psalm 51:5; Luke 1:30-35 (texts); Job 15:14; 25:4-6; 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. One of the unbiblical Roman doctrines is Mary's “Immaculate Conception” or sinlessness declared in 1854.

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.

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 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. But when Adam fell into sin in the Garden of Eden through the devil's deception, sin came into the world. All creation, including all human beings, were plunged into sin and corruption, “*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*” (Rom 5:12).

This is why Old Testament writers already saw this state of the human being, “*What is man, that he can 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. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; 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.

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)

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

Last week, we learned that 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.

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. 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). And this is where the Son of God came into the picture. How then will he be the perfect substitutionary sacrifice when he is eternal God? The eternal plan of redemption was for him to take the flesh and blood of a human being. And this he did by being born of the virgin Mary.

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 answer, 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.

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 the second Adam also has to die and be raised from death in order that those who believe may also have eternal life, *"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive"* (1 Cor 15:21-22). And this obedient sacrifice by the Second Adam is how God saves us from sin, *"For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous"* (Rom 5:19).

Dear brothers and sisters: When Christ came down from heaven as an infant born of a woman, a true and righteous man, his mission was to save you from sin. Salvation from sin and God's wrath is your greatest comfort in Jesus born as the holy Son of David.

But our comfort in his holy conception is also that he is 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 and hunger. He also agonized as he faced physical and spiritual abandonment by his Father. He 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. Because he is *"gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Mat 11:29). This is your only comfort in life and in death.