

1998

More Coffee Shop Theology: Translating Doctrinal Jargon into Everyday Life

Frank M. Moore

Olivet Nazarene University, fmoore2@olivet.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/theo_books

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moore, Frank M., "More Coffee Shop Theology: Translating Doctrinal Jargon into Everyday Life" (1998). *Books and Manuscripts – Theology*. Book 6.

http://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/theo_books/6

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology at Digital Commons @ Olivet. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books and Manuscripts – Theology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Olivet. For more information, please contact kboyens@olivet.edu.



INTRODUCTION

MORE COFFEE SHOP THEOLOGY

I'm excited about the subject matter of this book. Theology consumes me as the central interest of my life; I live, breathe, and talk it every day. I'm excited because it's a brand-new day for theology. More than ever before, we Christians must know what we believe and why. The reason is simple but serious:

If our anchor isn't set in a solid rock theology, we'll be washed out to sea on the riptide of bogus beliefs.

We are bombarded with an information revolution. We access more information in less time than any generation in human history. Thousands of pages of information come to us on one computer compact disk. A keystroke or two on our computers gets us into the Internet, which provides access to information from around the world. Fax machines, electronic mail, cellular telephones, television, radio, magazines, satellite, cable, and other technologies make our world smaller and bring us closer together. As one of my friends compared it, "We're trying to drink out of a fire hydrant."

The information in this book goes beyond facts and figures; it's ethics, philosophy, and theology all packaged in innocent bite-size (or *byte-size*) portions.

What is all this information doing to us? One serious consequence is *rapidly changing cultural standards that encourage us to bargain away our beliefs*. We now have a cafeteria line of beliefs. Modern society cherishes pluralism more each day. This approach welcomes all systems of thought as equally true, regardless of how unscriptural they may be or how strange they may sound. It says that none is better or worse. Absolute truth evaporates like the morning dew in this environment. Everyone's ideas claim validity as possible answers to our most pressing questions.

Such so-called tolerance and acceptance create theological uncertainty, in which all answers are tentative, in which people will clap for any idea on a television talk show. Everything, especially sound doctrine based on Holy Scripture, is up for grabs these days. If you don't believe me, read the articles in recent newspapers or newsmagazines about the unprecedented success of outlandish cults. *The stranger their beliefs, the quicker people line up and pay good money to join*. Hollywood

stars trip over one another to be deceived. Where can we find truth these days?

One of the marks of Christianity, from the times of the Early Church until now, is its claim to God's truth. The Truth—not a truth. The Christian faith is not just a better idea equal to all other ideas. Christianity contends that God answers the most basic questions of human existence:

Who am I?

Where did I come from?

Why am I here?

What does my life mean?

Where am I going?

These questions finally relate to establishing an incredibly significant friendship with God. Christian believers through the ages have hungered to know Him better.

Never has this quest for God been as widespread as it is now. My grandparents lived a full life and died without ever having come in contact with individuals practicing another world religion. That is no longer true. We come in contact with followers of non-Christian religions every time we step outside, listen to the radio, watch a television program, or read the newspaper. Even if we stay home and never turn on the radio or television, faithful followers of these other religions will knock on our door, offering to instruct us in their ways. Their hospitality often rivals that of the welcome wagon.

Another reason Christians must more thoroughly understand their faith is because contemporary values do not hold the answers to our deepest questions. Science and technology have promised more than they have been able to deliver. We are giving up on those empty promises, because their answers don't work in life's trenches. Thus, as people continue their search for meaning and significance, they seem more willing to hear what the Christian faith offers.

So we have a two-part reason to understand our Christian faith more completely and accurately:

- (1) to satisfy our own hungry souls;
- (2) to be able to offer God's answers to friends whose questions about life and death push into their waking thoughts and sleepless nights.

C. S. Lewis made an insightful observation: "In the old days, where there was less education and discussion, perhaps it was possible to get on with a very few simple ideas about God. But it is not so now. Everyone reads, everyone hears things discussed. Consequently, if you do not listen to Theology, that will now mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones—bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas."¹ Thus, we seek to understand our faith as completely and accurately as we can.

Concerning this journey of faith, I intend to present an easy-to-un-

derstand and true-to-life use of theology. Please don't get out the Pepto-Bismol or Tylenol if I sometimes end an explanation by calling it a mystery. By "mystery" I simply mean that human minds cannot completely comprehend God's ways. *Our inability to fully understand does not leave us completely in the dark nor make God unknowable or unreasonable.* Therefore, when I acknowledge a mystery, it's not a cop-out, but a human limitation. Because God is infinite, our finite minds can never understand His wisdom. God is Creator; we are created. Big difference!

Knowing God better satisfies our hunger and creates more hunger. It satisfies us at a deep level because our hearts find rest in Him. At the same time, we hunger to know more. On the pages of this book I try to communicate Christianity's central truths with simplicity, clarity, and brevity.

As I write these words, I picture us discussing these issues over a cup of coffee at the café on Main Street in my little hometown. The older men of the community gathered there during my childhood to discuss weather, politics, and religion. They sat for hours and thrashed out solutions. Most of the problems of the world could have been solved in short order if world leaders would have visited that café and heeded those men's advice! *So read this work in the context of a friendly discussion at that little café.*

The topics, Bible references, quotes, and applications to life aim to inform and inspire your faith. The "Biblical Foundation" section of each chapter offers biblical references and includes basic truths that are all found in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. I worked hard to discuss the realities of faith in understandable language so anyone can apply them to life. I left all the big words in the fat books. This exercise of stating the miraculous work of God in plain speech has stimulated my own faith and excited me about its utter simplicity. We have an incredible message from God! I hope these discussions excite you as well.

Each of these short chapters presents a different aspect of our faith. However, the topics are interrelated like links of a chain, so I make connections between them from time to time. They all work together to form a whole picture. Note that the longest section of material discusses our salvation. That is because salvation is the main focus of Christianity and the chief message of Scripture. All doctrines feed into a better understanding of our salvation. Christlikeness, heaven, and fellowship with God are the ultimate goals.

I hope you enjoy reading through this journey as much as I did writing it. I don't intend for you to make your way through it in one setting. A better plan is to read a chapter each day in your devotional time. Read a chapter, and then think about its application to your life throughout the day. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you new insights. I believe we will become more Christlike as we walk through our faith daily down Main Street. So let's order a cup of coffee and a soft chocolate-chip cookie and get started.



JESUS CHRIST

The whole question of the virgin birth of Jesus need not afflict the average man. If Jesus is unique, unlike any other person, it is not illogical to believe that his birth was unique.

—William Lyon Phelps

CHAPTER I

JESUS' MYSTERIOUS ARRIVAL

THE VIRGIN CONCEPTION

Biblical Foundation

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14).

"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'" (Matt. 1:18-20).

Jesus never tried to defend His unique origin. No doubt as a child He heard the rumors as people discussed His arrival shortly after His parents' wedding. Such subjects interested people then as they do today. So why did He not address the issue? Probably because He could offer no reasonable explanation for Mary's virgin conception. The Bible states it as God's plan, and that's that.

The Truth Explained in Everyday Language

Our extended family gathers around the jigsaw puzzle table every Christmas holiday to assemble a new puzzle. It's a Christmas tradition. Brent and my mother-in-law find it challenging, relaxing, and fun. Everyone gathers and relaxes except me; I find puzzles frustrating and nerve-racking. The puzzle pieces supposedly fit together, forming a coherent picture—but I can't seem to make any of the pieces fit where they belong. I try to force pieces together, but they refuse to cooperate. Finally I leave the table and forget it.

Some find the Christian doctrine of the Virgin Birth just as frustrating. The Bible gives us a variety of factual statements surrounding the earthly arrival of Jesus Christ. We desperately attempt to make the statements reasonably fit together. When they don't fit as we would like, we can become frustrated and deny scriptural truth or give up on the entire matter. A better strategy studies biblical statements and accepts them at face value. Faith and an awareness of our limited human reason help. We must refuse to accept only reasonable answers.

The doctrine is historically known as the Virgin Birth. Actually, virgin *conception* more accurately represents it, since the conception and not the birth is under consideration. The prophet Isaiah announced several hundred years before Jesus' arrival that the Messiah would be conceived of a virgin (7:14). Gospel writers Matthew and Luke document the only accounts of the announcement and birth of Jesus; both present the virgin conception of Jesus (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38).

Matthew approaches the matter from Joseph's perspective, while Luke presents Mary's view. Only Mary and Joseph, the two key figures in the event, had firsthand knowledge. Both of them staked their reputations on a story without logical explanation. If they intended to lie, they should have created a more reasonable story than this one. You don't make up outlandish stories like this. In deciding between truth and reason, they chose truth, regardless of the consequences.

God miraculously conceived Jesus in Mary's body. She had no sexual activity either with man or God. While sexual activity between human and divine beings commonly occurred in ancient mythology, it has no place in this account. Mary carried her first child to full term as any other mother. She birthed Him in a natural way. Some Christians believe in a miraculous delivery without use of the birth canal, but the Bible nowhere teaches this. These Christians also believe that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. The Bible teaches otherwise, stating that Jesus had both brothers and sisters who were no doubt conceived naturally (Matt. 13:55-56; Mark 6:3).

Some critics of the Matthew and Luke accounts argue that none of the other Gospel writers knew about the virgin conception—that they

would have written about it had they known. Not necessarily. Mark wrote an abbreviated account of the life and ministry of Jesus and did not have room to include a birth account. John's Gospel addressed theological issues, not personal matters in Christ's life. The other New Testament books focused on specific practical or theological questions as they arose in the Early Church. None of them offered details about Jesus' personal life. The absence in other books of a discussion of Jesus' conception does not imply an error in Matthew and Luke. The fact may have been so accepted in that day that biblical writers saw no reason to restate it.

A couple of references in Mark and John may hint that some believed Jesus was illegitimate. People in that day no doubt calculated the time between Mary and Joseph's marriage and Jesus' birth as readily as they do today. They knew the time was too short. Thus, there may be an implied insult when the Jews defended themselves to Jesus by reminding Him that *they* were not illegitimate, as He had been accused of being (John 8:41). Commonly in biblical times, a young man was identified as the son of his father. Yet in Mark 6:3, the hometown crowds referred to Jesus as "Mary's son." Perhaps His earthly father was dead, or perhaps they believed that Jesus was illegitimate and had no legal father.

The Early Church never doubted the virgin conception of Jesus.

Jesus Christ came to earth as a man but remained the Son of God, the Second Member of the Trinity. In order to demonstrate His uniqueness, God chose an unusual method for His conception. In other words, He did not come to earth in the natural way. Some people attempt to connect this doctrine to the doctrine of original sin and say Jesus had no original sin because Mary had no sexual intercourse. From this they deduce that sex creates sinfulness, that sexual intercourse is sinful, or that the male genes contain original sin. This has given many people a very negative impression of sexual activity between husbands and wives. Never. God ordained sexual expression as a high and holy physical and spiritual bond between husbands and wives. Jesus' virgin conception casts no shadows upon God's plan for sex in marriage.

The Early Church never doubted the virgin conception of Jesus. It became an accepted fact of early Christian tradition. The Apostles' Creed, one of the early statements of Christian faith, includes an affirmation of the virgin conception. Only in modern times have Christians doubted this important doctrine.

The chief doubt centers on conflict with reason. It isn't natural, so some people refuse to accept it. However, since God rules sovereignly over everything in heaven and earth, He can do anything He wants to do. Since He is all-powerful, He can work any type of miracle He wants. Our understanding in no way binds Him in accomplishing His purposes. As Grandma always said, "All things are possible with God." He chose to send His Son to earth through a virgin, and that's a fact.

Using the Truth to Enrich Your Life

What connection does this doctrine have to life? An important one indeed. For more than a century now, this doctrine has been used as a test case to see if Christians can accept the miracle-working power of God, the divine nature of Christ, and the miraculous nature of our salvation. If they cannot accept this doctrine, then chances are they won't accept the other divine elements of our faith either.

**If I can accept my salvation
as a miracle of God's grace,
then I must also believe
He can work gracious miracles
in other ways as well.**

God sometimes works through natural processes, but He sometimes performs miracles. He sometimes makes things simple and easy for us to understand, but He sometimes asks us to lay our reason aside and let Him blow our circuits. If I can accept my salvation as a miracle of God's grace, then I must also believe He can work gracious miracles in other ways as well. I cannot understand it, but I don't doubt the truth of God's Word when it reveals His plan.

Fast Takes

1. God sent His Son to earth through a virgin conception.
2. The virgin conception is a clearly established fact of Scripture and church history.
3. Acceptance of the fact of the virgin conception takes faith and an awareness of limited human reason.

Prayer

Thank You, Father, for the miracle of Christ's conception. Help me trust Your incomprehensible plan of salvation.