



Volume 6 Issue 1

West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

Immanuel

Immanuel is one of Christ’s most precious names. It is a combination of two Hebrew words that together mean “God with us.” The gospel of Matthew explains that Christ received this name in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

For many people, the name Immanuel has a nice ring to it that suggests comfort and hope in times of trouble. Yet there is a lot more substance and significance to this name. The encouragement Christians can take from this name is no mere vague impression or passing emotion. The truth conveyed by this name has both a glorious beauty and a wide range of blessings attached to it.

THE BEAUTY OF IMMANUEL

The Bible uses the name Immanuel mostly in connection with the incarnation of Christ. The first time we hear this name is when Isaiah prophesied the virgin birth of Christ: *“Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”* (Isaiah 7:14).

Isaiah spoke these words to Ahaz, king of Judah, who was being threatened by surrounding nations. When you read the context you find that, sadly, Ahaz had no interest in God being with him. Despite that, Isaiah told him a person named *“God with us”* would come. In the fullness of time, Christ would become incarnate in order to bring God’s presence to us. He would be born of a virgin, thus escaping the corruption of David’s line while remaining David’s son.

Christ is an incarnate Savior. That’s the beauty of Immanuel. He didn’t come as an angel or some spirit manifesting itself from time to time. He took to Himself bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. No other religion can give such comfort and hope.

THE BLESSINGS OF IMMANUEL

Because the Son of God took to Himself our nature, there are a myriad of blessings represented in His name Immanuel:

1. He is God-with-us to reconcile sinners to God. Man is born alienated from God, and God can have no fellowship with him because of sin. But Immanuel came to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). He gave His life as an offering for sin so that sinners can be brought back into fellowship with God (1 John 1:3). On the cross He could promise the repentant thief that he would be with Him in paradise (Luke 23:43), that is to say, in fellowship with God.



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Immanuel - Cont'd

2. He is God-with-us to guide, empower, and expand His church. Having ascended into heaven, Christ is now no longer with believers physically here on earth. Yet as the Heidelberg Catechism expresses so beautifully, “with respect to His Godhead, majesty, grace and Spirit, He is at no time absent from us” (Q&A 47). At the close of the gospel of Matthew, Immanuel promised His church, “Behold, I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

3. He is God-with-us to comfort His people. Think of Psalm 46, which so beautifully describes the encouraging presence of God in the midst of very chaotic circumstances. He is “a very present help in trouble” (v. 1). Christians need not fear, even when the earth shakes and kingdoms rage. God’s presence with His people is constant: “The Lord of hosts is with us” (vv. 7, 11). Believer, God is near you, to help and protect you.

4. He is God-with-us to bring His people to glory. We read in Revelation 21:3 of the new heavens and the new earth, where “God himself shall be with them.” In glory, the presence of God with His people will be perfect and uninterrupted. Revelation 22:4 tells us that they shall even see His face.

Do you believe this record God has given of Immanuel? Do you see how low Christ stooped to be God-with-sinners? Do you experience the blessings of God-with-us? These can only be ours through a new birth from above. His birth calls us to ask: Have I been born again? If so, He is your Immanuel. ~ **Dr. Gerald M. Bilkes /Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan**

Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

For many people, the question of whether a virgin can give birth is in the same category as questions about whether pigs can fly or time can be reversed or the sun can be stopped from shining. But in each of these circumstances, we must remember that all it takes for these supernatural events to be possible is for a supernatural God to exist. C.S. Lewis reminds us of this great truth in his book *Miracles*. In fact, he goes beyond it and argues that once we allow for a theistic worldview—one in which a supernatural God exists and is involved in the natural order of things—then supernatural events are not simply possible, they are to be expected. And if supernatural events are to be expected, then things like a virgin giving birth or the sun being stopped from shining are the kinds of things that we ought to expect to happen.

But, admittedly, it is one thing to expect events to happen that are like a virgin giving birth and another thing altogether to expect a virgin actually to give birth. Were it not for the clear teaching of the Word of God at this point, we would not be able to say anything more than simply that it is possible that something like a virgin giving birth could happen, given a theistic worldview. The Bible, however, specifically claims that a virgin did in fact give birth. Not only so, but it makes this prediction about a virgin giving birth more than seven hundred years before it actually came to pass. The prediction is then fulfilled in time and space in the life of the Virgin Mary, as recorded in the Gospels. Therefore, in order to know for sure whether we ought to expect a virgin to give birth, we need to examine this prediction, as it is recorded for us in Isaiah 7:14, along with its fulfillment in Matthew 1 and Luke 1.



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Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin? - Cont'd

Isaiah 7:14 clearly states that at some point in the future an unnamed “*virgin*” would give birth to a son, and she would call his name “*Immanuel*.” This passage, however, has been disputed by some scholars who have argued that the Hebrew word *almah*, which is translated as “*virgin*” in the English Standard Version of the Bible, ought really to be translated as “*young woman*” instead. They further argue that if “*virgin*” had been Isaiah’s intention, he would have used the Hebrew word *bethulah* in the place of *almah*, because, they claim, *bethulah* specifically refers to a virgin, whereas *almah* does not. There are several things that we need to say in response to this.

First, it is not at all clear that these two Hebrew words (*almah* and *bethulah*) mean what these scholars think they do. For one thing, the meanings of both words seem to be dependent upon the context in which they occur. The word *bethulah*, for instance, occurs approximately fifty times in the Old Testament, and in only about twenty-one of these occurrences does the word appear to mean “*virgin*.” The remaining twenty-nine are more uncertain; they could be referring to a virgin or to a young woman. One of these occurrences, moreover, in Genesis 24:16, suggests that *bethulah* is actually a more general word that requires additional information from the context before it can be translated “*virgin*.” Here, in this verse, Rebekah is referred to as a certain kind of *bethulah*—one “*whom no man had known*.” If *bethulah* really does always and only mean “*virgin*,” then the addition of the clarifying phrase, “*whom no man had known*,” would be unnecessary and redundant. The fact that it is included suggests that the word *bethulah* does not mean “*virgin*” all by itself but does so only when the context demands it. And a similar thing can be said in reference to the word *almah*. It occurs about nine times in the Old Testament, and in at least three of these occurrences, the context helps us determine that the word is obviously referring to a virgin and not just to a young woman. The point is that *bethulah* does not always and only mean “*virgin*” and *almah* does not always and only mean “*young woman*.” The context is vital in determining the precise meaning in each case.

For another thing, it is certain that the word *almah* is never used to refer to a married woman. This is true even in those occasions when the context does not allow us to say with certainty that *almah* must refer to a virgin. Martin Luther was so confident about this point that he actually offered 100 Gulden—which, from what I can tell, would be something like \$45,000 today—to anyone who could prove that *almah* was used in reference to a married woman anywhere in the Old Testament. And neither Luther, nor anyone else since then, has ever had to pay up. That is because the word always refers to an unmarried woman who is of marriageable age.

Old Testament Judaism was not a culture that was known for its promiscuity, at least not among its young women. Jewish law required the death penalty to be administered to any unmarried young woman of marriageable age who was found not to be a virgin (Deuteronomy 22:13–21). That means that in Isaiah’s day, the expectation among all the people would have been that an unmarried young woman of marriageable age would necessarily be a virgin.

Second, the context of Isaiah 7:14 indicates that the best translation for *almah* must be “*virgin*” and not simply “*young woman of marriageable age*.” God is providing a sign for unbelieving King Ahaz. And it is hard to see how a “*young woman of marriageable age*” who conceives and bears a son would qualify as a sign from God. By definition, a sign must be something extraordinary. Otherwise, how does one know that it actually is a sign? A young woman bearing a child out of wedlock certainly would be notorious, but it would hardly be extraordinary in a way that would be worthy of God. He is not only perfectly righteous and holy, but He requires His own people to be holy precisely because He is Himself holy (Leviticus 19:2).



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Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin? - Cont'd

The whole point of Isaiah 7 seems to be that God's sign would be an extraordinary (not notorious) child who would be brought into the world by way of an extraordinary (not notorious) birth. He would be human and divine—human, because He would be born of a woman, and *divine*, because He would be “*God with us*.” He could not, therefore, come into the world in the same way that every other child does. His birth had to have been special. His birth had to be a virgin birth. If it wasn't, then the resulting child could only be human. He could not be Immanuel, God with us.

Third, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, confirms that *almah* is best interpreted as “*virgin*” in Isaiah 7:14. It translates this verse by using the Greek word *parthenos*, which more explicitly denotes a virgin, rather than *neanis*, which more generally means a young woman. Moreover, the gospel accounts in Matthew 1 and Luke 1 both use the Greek word *parthenos* of Mary and do so in a context that explicitly portrays her as a virgin. In Matthew 1:18, for instance, we read that Mary becomes pregnant “*before [she and Joseph] came together*.” That is why Joseph resolved to break off their engagement. He knew that he was not the father of the child she was carrying (v. 19). No doubt he would have gone through with his plans to put Mary away were it not for the “*angel of the Lord*” appearing to him in a dream and telling him that the child within Mary's womb was not from a man but “*from the Holy Spirit*” (v. 20). Matthew then goes on to quote Isaiah 7:14 and to say, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that its prophecy is fulfilled in the virgin birth of Jesus. That is just what we would expect, given everything we have seen about Isaiah 7:14.

Similarly, in Luke 1:27, Mary is twice called a “*virgin*” (*parthenos*) and is told by the angel Gabriel that, while still in that state, she will give birth to a son who “*will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High*” (vv. 31–32). Understandably, Mary questions Gabriel and asks how this will be since, as she herself says, she has never been with a man (v. 34). Gabriel answers by telling her that no man will be involved in the process. It will be an extraordinary birth: “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*.” And the Spirit's power will produce an extraordinary child: “*the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God*” (v. 35).

For all of these reasons, we can be confident that a virgin really did give birth. Not only is this the kind of thing that is to be expected given the fact that a supernatural God exists, but this is the very thing that we should expect in itself, given the fact that the Bible tells us so. Isaiah 7:14 predicts that a “*virgin*” - and not just a “*young woman*” - would give birth to a son who would be both divine and human, and the Gospels record the fulfillment of that prediction in the life of Mary and Jesus. The glory of Christmas is that the expectation of Isaiah 7:14 has become a reality. The virgin really did give birth to a son. He was called Immanuel, for He really was God with us. And He was given the name Jesus, because He really did save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). That is why we sing, “*Joy to the world! The Lord has come*.” ~ **Dr. Guy M. Richard / Executive Director and Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Atlanta.**



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How Not To Pray: Two Correctives from Christ

This article is an excerpt from Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr's book, *The Prayer that Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord's Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution*.

As a Christian, do you want to learn how to pray more faithfully? Do you need to learn more about prayer? One of the greatest gifts Christ gives us is instruction in prayer. Interestingly, it was the disciples who asked Jesus to teach them. Luke 11:1 tells us that the disciples came to Jesus and made a clear request: *"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."* It is also incredibly interesting that when Jesus honored the disciples' request, he first taught them how not to pray.

Sometimes, before we can really understand how to do something important, we have to understand how not to do it.

Before You Pray: *A Few Things Jesus Wants You to Remember*

Do Not Pray Like the Hypocrites

The *first* thing Jesus tells us as we prepare to pray is *"do not be like the hypocrites."* Jesus condemns all forms of hypocrisy but here he is speaking of a very specific, public hypocrisy. As we have seen, this display of hypocrisy is one that seeks personal attention for piety. Jesus explains the interior motive of these types of hypocrites: *"they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."*

Of course, historically, Jesus is referring to the ostentatious prayers of the Pharisees, but we need to see this as a temptation for ourselves as well. You and I can easily succumb to the temptation to engage in hypocritical prayer that is about God in its formal address, but far from him in terms of the posture of our heart.

Jesus not only spells out what he does not want his disciples to do, but also what they are supposed to do: *"But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."* Having a private prayer room can of course be a very useful tool for personal devotion to God. Yet Jesus' teaching here does not suggest that the primary issue is architecture. The idea in this passage is seclusion. The real issue is not so much where you pray, but praying in secret so as not to parade your piety in front of others.

When we pray in isolation, we pray because we are seeking communion with God. In that isolation we find that true prayer is going to happen because we are not posing or posturing. The result of praying like this is a reward from the Father in heaven. The Father who knows what is done in secret will reward those who pray in secret.

Do Not Pray to Impress

The *first* corrective Jesus offers is that we should not pray to impress people. The *second* corrective Jesus offers is that we should not pray to impress God: *"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."*



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How Not To Pray: Two Correctives from Christ - Cont'd

God is not looking for long words, long prayers, and mindless repetition. We do not impress God with how great our prayers are. Jesus warns not only against the Pharisaical, hypocritical prayers; he also warns against the prayers of the pagan Gentiles who thought that they would be heard for their many words. They piled up meaningless phrases in meaningless repetition...

We find something similar in 1 Kings 18 at the battle of the gods on Mt. Carmel. The Pagan priests were furiously repetitive in their prayers and labored to get the attention of their gods, so much so that they even lacerated their bodies to attract their gods' interest in their activity. Elijah used this as an opportunity to give a little theology of prayer. Due to Baal's utter lack of response, Elijah mocked Baal's priests by saying, "*Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.*" Then Elijah demonstrated that God is not impressed by our many words. His prayer was simple: "*O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.*"

Matthew 6:8 is one of the most important verses in order to understand the Lord's Prayer: "*Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*" If we come to understand that our Father knows our needs before we ask him, then far from leading us away from prayer, our prayer lives will be utterly transformed. We will see a sovereign God who is ready and able to answer our prayers, and who directs all things for our good and his glory. A solid biblical theology of God informs how we understand what we are doing when we come before his throne of grace with our requests and needs. ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*

Nicodemus, the Friendly Pharisee

The gospel of John doesn't attract much attention during the Christmas season. Instead, we are usually drawn to the birth narratives found in the accounts of Luke and Matthew. However, John captures the essence of Christmas beautifully in the opening prologue to his gospel account: "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14).

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John did not feel the need to elaborate further on the incarnation. Instead, his gospel moves rapidly to the launch of Christ's ministry at His baptism (John 1:29). John's focus is the relentless march to Calvary and the fulfillment of the promise delivered in His birth, that "*in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men*" (John 1:4).

And while it's appropriate to celebrate the grace and mercy on display as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe took on flesh to become the sacrifice for His people, we must not make the mistake of isolating our view of Christ to His infancy. The glory and power of Christ's incarnation isn't captured in the nativity scene alone. To fully appreciate the baby in the manger, we need to look ahead to His finished work at the cross.

With that in mind, we want to spend some time considering a pivotal episode from early in John's gospel. In a clandestine conversation with a powerful Pharisee, Christ Himself explains why He was born and why He had to die—in essence, He gives the gospel to Nicodemus before the promise of the incarnation was even fulfilled.



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Nicodemus, the Friendly Pharisee - Cont'd

And for those of us living on this side of the cross, there is perhaps no fuller way to celebrate the baby in the manger than to consider what His life was meant to accomplish.

An Unusually Friendly Pharisee

The account of Nicodemus in John 3 stands out as the only significant example of an extended friendly dialogue between Jesus and a Pharisee. In fact, it stands out as the longest personal conversation Jesus had with any religious leader in all the gospel accounts.

What makes this meeting so unusual is Nicodemus's response to Jesus. Jesus was no less blunt with him than He was with any Pharisee. But Nicodemus evidently came to Jesus truly wishing to learn, rather than with the typical pharisaical agenda of self-aggrandizement at Jesus' expense. And the result was a markedly different sort of exchange.

While the conversation with Nicodemus begins in John 3, we find the context for their discussion in the closing verses of chapter 2. John writes:

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. (John 2:23–25)

It had been a busy week of public ministry for Jesus. It is the first time on record that He performed numerous miracles, and He did them publicly. Interestingly, John's account of that week doesn't focus on the miracles at all. In fact, John mentions them only once in passing, without even saying what kind of miracles they were: "*Many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing*" (John 2:23). Presumably the signs John speaks of were healings and demonic deliverances, because such miracles became a staple of Jesus' public ministry (Mark 1:34). But John does not pause to describe them here.

His main point in mentioning these initial miracles was to record that Jesus gained both fame and followers that week, and yet Jesus remained somewhat reserved—even aloof—toward His many would-be disciples.

John is saying that many people responded to Jesus with a kind of enthusiasm that fell short of wholehearted faith, so He didn't completely trust them, either. In other words, they said they believed Him, but He didn't believe them. He had no faith in their faith.

Nicodemus seems to have approached Jesus shortly after the first temple cleansing (John 2:13-22)—perhaps later that same week, during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is clear from the gospel narrative that Nicodemus's interest in Christ was genuine. Still, it fell short of authentic saving faith—and Jesus made that clear in his first words to Nicodemus.



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Nicodemus, the Friendly Pharisee - Cont'd

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”

Here is a practical lesson from this account: a positive response to Jesus should never be taken as proof of authentic trust in Him. There is a shallow, fickle brand of “belief” that is not saving faith at all. From the first public miracle He performed until this very day, there have always been people who “accept Christ” without truly loving Him, without submitting to His authority, and without abandoning their self-confidence and trust in their own good works. That is precisely what John describes at the end of John 2, and that becomes his transition into the Nicodemus narrative. Nicodemus was (at this point) one of those almost-believers to whom Jesus did not automatically commit Himself. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**



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Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner - January 2019

Birthdays

*Marcie S. (9)
Cheyenne W. (17)
Muriel R. (24)
Stephen H. (26)*

Anniversary

None to Report

Adopting Christ’s Attitude

“Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross!” (Philippians 2:4–8, NIV).

Here the attribute of glory is ascribed to all three members of the Trinity. This glory is then confirmed as a glory that is eternal. It is not something added to or acquired by Jesus at some point in His earthly life and ministry. He held this glory at the beginning and will possess it for eternity:

“Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9–11, NIV).

Though the form of servanthood covered Jesus and His life was marked by a willing humiliation, nevertheless there were moments in His ministry where the glory of His deity burst through. It was these moments that provoked John to write, *“And we beheld His glory” (John 1:14).* ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**



West Suffolk Baptist Church Leadership

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