

The Creed Part 4 – Who Was Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

We will open with a quick review highlighting what we have learned so far. The Apostles did not write the Apostles Creed. The Creed, older than the Nicene Creed, was crafted to define the identity of Christianity amidst the diverse religions and superstitions of the first century. The Creed, rooted in the practice of baptism, is a declaration of our faith, regardless of our individual beliefs. It has three main parts, each referring to a person of the Trinity, and holds permanent value for the church in our allegiance to the essence of the gospel. This brings us to today's topic; "Who Was Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary." **Let's pray, Holy Spirit, You are God, and we come this morning to praise you because you are holy. Help us see you more clearly and recognize your movement in our lives. Help us to walk in you, the Spirit of God, who guides us in our faith journey. Father, thank you for sending your Spirit to comfort us in our weaknesses. Guide us into all truth and remind us of your ways. In this, we pray, Amen.**

So, who is this Holy Spirit, and why does the Holy Spirit matter to the Christian life? As an honest assumption, I think that most people today, when hearing the words in the Creed, "Who was conceived of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit," could interpret these words in light of modern biology. In order to advance human life, it takes the union of two cells, one from the father and one from the mother. Yet, on the basis of biological understanding, the interpretation of the Creed is meant to say that Jesus is half human and half divine. However, the ancient knowledge of conception and birth was not purely biological. People believed that conception and birth were the result of a holy seed being planted in the womb, much like when a farmer plants a grain of wheat being sown in the ground. This metaphorical understanding is crucial to comprehending the role of the Holy Spirit in the birth of Jesus. It's a reminder of the divine presence in our lives and its significance in the Christian faith.

Quite common in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament, the theme of barren women, the result of God's action, performed a special task when a child was needed to continue the line of patriarchs. We all know the well-known story of Abraham and Sarah and the birth of their son Isaac. When Sarah could not conceive, Abraham and Sarah tried to take matters into their own hands with Sarah's servant Hagar, yet God would have none of this, for it was God who chose them to fulfill His promise to Abraham as the "father of many nations." Out pops the

unexpected son, Isaac. Then comes Rebekah, chosen to be Isaac's wife, who is also barren, so what happens? Isaac prays to the Lord, and Rebekah conceives Jacob.

Then comes the story of Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, and his wives and concubines. You knew this was coming. Jacob marries Leah and Rachel, and the latter is the wife of his heart, but she cannot conceive until "God remembered Rachel and God noticed her and opened her womb" (Gen. 30:22). What happens? You guessed it! An unexpected but welcome pregnancy of Joseph, who would later save his family in a time of famine and find them a place in Egypt. Biblical history informs us that Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are not the only children of previously barren women, for in the history of Israel, we see other figures born from barren women, such as Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist.

In the history of Israel, if a couple failed to reproduce, the fault was placed on the woman and considered a serious flaw and even a curse. That is why we read about the many Old Testament stories of rivalries among wives and concubines, each trying to outdo the others in fertility and often the barren woman feeling inadequate. I could easily continue, yet it is Mary who becomes the culmination of the theme of the barren woman who conceived by divine intervention, bearing a child with a specific purpose in God's plans. The virgin birth is not to explain Jesus' biological origin but rather to make it plain that just as in past times, God raised leaders for Israel out of barren women, this time not only exceptional but the Son of the Most-High, whose kingdom will have no end. Thus, against later views in early Christianity that challenged not so much the birth of Jesus and his humanity but rather the theme of Mary's virginity, placing Jesus as a spiritual being who seemed to be human but was not. The Creed affirms that the birth of Jesus is unique, authentic, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary.

Now that we have that settled, what does it mean to believe in the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that represented Christ in the flesh? A spirit so imaginary as if a phantom ghost, yet so unique, making Him Lord of all and, in reality, making him like one of us. Well, according to the gospel of John – "we are not alone."

As we read from the Gospel of John this morning, imagine the feelings of the disciples who heard and witnessed Jesus's deeds and then saw him alive after his death, only to see him depart once more. The disciples enjoyed being with Jesus. He takes them to a mountain and says

goodbye. As he is about to leave, Jesus tells them that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, an Advocate who will be with them forever. They would be in Jesus, and Jesus in them, and they would even see Jesus! When we declare that we believe in the Holy Spirit, this believing “in” is parallel to our belief in God the Father and Jesus. To say we believe in the Holy Spirit says something about our faith and the Spirit. “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, and we pray that all unity may one day be restored. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” The apostle Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 12:3, “No one can say Jesus is our Lord except by the Holy Spirit.”

The statement I am about to make might seem odd, but don’t laugh. Let us think together about the voices we hear in our heads or somewhere deep within our hearts and the forces that influence our lives, for good or bad. Maybe we hear a rewind of old tapes of voices playing in us saying that we are worthless, maybe voices of hurtfulness, depression, bitterness, resentment, or there is no reason to keep living. On the other hand, there are voices, actual human voices, that we hear in life, and some of these voices influence us in positive ways. Then, there are human voices that harden our hearts and are influential in making people do things they should never do. The voices from social media are influential in many ways, both good and bad. For a moment, let’s return to the importance of the Holy Spirit as an encouragement to seek the Spirit’s work in our lives to become more than we are to act selflessly in our care for others, to be more like the people God intended.

Perhaps you have experienced the Holy Spirit but may not have known it. I often feel a nudge, a thought to call someone to speak or pay attention, and yes, at times, I have ignored these feelings. In my time of writing today’s message, I remember a time when I felt the nudge to contact someone whose health was in jeopardy, but instead, I waited until the next day to visit. When I woke up the next morning, I learned the person had departed from this earthly life. I think I was supposed to be there, but I did not take the nudge seriously. More often than not, when I do pay attention, I find myself in the right place and time. A simple text message has an impact. There are moments when I feel the presence of God in my life in the form of warmth and peace. There are moments when someone will say, “I feel your message was just for me today.” It’s not me, but the Holy Spirit at work, taking my feeble attempt at a sermon and using it to

speak to God's people. Most, if not all, are experiences through the work of the Holy Spirit, the living breath of God.

In a moment of testimony and reflection of my faith, I can look back over my life and see the moments when the Holy Spirit worked through God long before I decided to place absolute trust in God. What I have learned is that when we finally decide to trust in Christ, it is the Spirit that works in us to reconcile us to God, and from that moment forward, we are meant to be transformed inside and out. What I have also learned is that there is far too much emphasis placed on the intellectual side of faith, which fails to help people experience that when a community of believers draws upon the power of the Holy Spirit, great things will happen all for the glory of God.

Faith is not a human work, nor something we decide on our own. The Holy Spirit is God and never ours to predict and will easily surprise us, sometimes blowing as a gentle breeze or sometimes with thunder and hail. When we declare belief in the Holy Spirit, we believe in God the Father and Jesus. Ultimately, our faith rests and lives in the Spirit, and the Creed affirms that the birth of Jesus is unique and that it is real. It confirms that the one who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary was as human and as unique as his birth indicates.

As I near closing, I mentioned the voices we often hear; what voices do you listen to? Which of these voices leads you to become more of the person God intends you to be? Which voices influence you in negative ways or act as a barrier to God's will for your life? We recognize the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity, the one who sits alongside God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son of God. The Spirit convicts us of our sins and steers us away from temptation and toward repentance. He is a source of wisdom and revelation, as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 2:10-11, which teaches us: "These are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit." The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. The Spirit helps us when we feel inadequate and when we need strength and grace. "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Spirit searches our hearts. From the moment we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are made new through the Holy. It's like getting a new pair of eyeglasses to improve our sight.

Listen carefully, friends, for the Spirit usually whispers rather than shouts. The Spirit is already at work in your life in some form or shape. The Spirit will not force himself upon you.

You can resist the Spirit or welcome and invite the Spirit to work in you. Invite the Holy Spirit to work in you. Pray each morning for his power to use you. The Spirit longs to speak to you, so try to listen carefully. Let's pray

Holy Spirit, the living breath of God. Come and fill us wholly and completely. Form and shape us into the person you want us to be. Please lead us in doing what you want us to do. Empower us and use us; speak to us and through us. Produce your fruit in us in love, peace, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Please help us to listen to your voice above all other voices that clamor for our attention. Come, Holy Spirit, we need you. In Jesus' name. Amen.