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Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Christmas Shibboleth by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 1:18-25

One of my all time favorite television programs was *The West Wing*, a fictional drama of a modern day White House. It's off the air now and I miss it. The show was well written, had several actors who grew up in Dayton, and best of all it depicted a president by the name of Bartlett that was quite appealing.

I recall an episode with a religious component. A cargo container arrives on the West Coast with a human cargo of illegal Chinese immigrants. While detained by the INS, the refugees claim they are persecuted Christians. This promises to be a political problem for President Bartlett. The law requires the refugees be returned to China. The Christian Right promises a political scene if they **are** returned. President Bartlett decides that he will meet with a representative of the refugees to ascertain whether they really are Christians or whether they are using the Christian banner as a convenient ploy. The president tells his trusted aid, Toby, that he will see if the Chinese representative knows the correct shibboleth.

What if you were put in a life threatening position where you had to prove that you were a Christian by your "shibboleth," what would it be? Wait a second, do you even know what a shibboleth is? On the *West Wing* only the president and the Chinese Christian representative know. (This president knows everything.)

In the dictionary the word *shibboleth* is defined as "a custom, principle, or belief distinguishing a

particular class or group of people.” In layman’s terms it is “the secret handshake. The actual word refers to a story in the 12th chapter of the Book of Judges. In the story the Gileadites held the fords of the Jordan River against the Ephraimites. The Ephraimites had to cross the Jordan to get home, so they’d approach the Gileadite sentries and when challenged if they were an Ephraimite, they’d say, “No, I’m no Ephraimite.” “All right,” the Gileadites would reply, “prove it and say the word Shibboleth.” And the Ephraimites, with their incurable southern accents, would say, “Sibboleth.” So the record says that 42,000 Ephraimites were slain at the fords of the Jordan because they could not frame their mouths to pronounce the word correctly.

In the guerrilla warfare that has divided American Protestants since the late 1800s and continues today, the Virgin Birth has been the shibboleth of the Christmas story. Say “I believe in the Virgin Birth,” and according to conservative Christians, you’re okay. Refuse to say it, and you’re done for. You may not be slain at the fords of the Jordan, but you will be called a modernist, a liberal, or an unbeliever. Some folks will be sure that you’re no Christian. They will preach sermons against you in which they will warn people not to listen to you and assure them you are bound straight for hell.

Now, that long and continuing history comes to mind as I approach, with some fear and trembling, this phrase in the Apostles’ Creed, “. . .born of the Virgin Mary.”

The first thing I want to say is that it’s the wrong shibboleth. I can agree with the intent of the fundamentalists and the evangelicals. They are concerned for the deity of Christ. Jesus Christ is more than a great human teacher, more than a splendid human example, more than a noble human martyr. His life among us was at the same time God’s life among us. While this truth of Jesus’ divinity may offend some people, we must affirm it if we are to be Christian. But “born of the Virgin Mary” is the wrong shibboleth for that purpose.

The Apostles’ Creed contains much stronger and clearer affirmations of the deity of Christ than the words “born of the Virgin Mary.” The deity of Christ is more strongly affirmed in the words, “conceived by the Holy Spirit.” It is even more strongly affirmed in “he is seated at the right hand of the Father.” And the strongest, most basic affirmation is the one that opens the second article: “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord.” The words “born of the Virgin Mary” could be entirely omitted from the Creed, and the deity of Christ would still be affirmed with great strength.

To make the Virgin Birth the shibboleth of Christ’s deity is not only to misunderstand the Creed but to misunderstand scripture as well. The stories of the Virgin Birth in Matthew and Luke are clearly part of scripture, a beautiful and moving part. But, scripture does not depend on those stories to establish the deity of Christ. The great affirmations of the deity of Christ are found in the letters of Paul and in the Gospel of John and in the epistle to the Hebrews – and in none of those do you find the story of the Virgin Birth. The stories of the Virgin Birth could be entirely omitted from scripture and the deity of Christ would still be affirmed with great strength.

To quiz someone about his or her belief in the Virgin Birth – to hold that up as the shibboleth, the great test of orthodoxy – may reveal something about someone’s attitude toward biological miracles or toward biblical criticism, but it would not reveal very much regarding his or her attitude toward the deity of Christ. It is the wrong shibboleth.

“Born of the Virgin Mary” - do you believe that? I’ll wager that if we were to count all our opinions in this room – the “yeses” and the “noes” and the “I’m not sures” the results would be inconclusive. Clearly, this is a doctrine where Christians of good conscience disagree. All the many arguments pro and con

from scripture, translation idiosyncrasies, doctrinal statements and theology are beyond the scope of this sermon, if we want to get out of here before Christmas. (Perhaps it would make a good Advent study some year in Adult Education.) I would, however, like to leave you with something besides my opinion that the Virgin Birth is the wrong “shibboleth” and that the entire gospel does not stand or fall on the Virgin Birth.

First, we need **not** be concerned with the idea of the possibility. If God can make the world *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, then surely God can create a human without the benefit of a male. As Luke himself put it in his version of the birth narrative: “For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37) It is impossible to speak of impossibilities when the action in question is the action of God. Jesus being born of a virgin is not beyond God’s power.

Second, I believe you can be a Christian without affirming the Virgin Birth. Even Billy Graham agrees with that. While Graham does believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, he says, “I do not find anywhere in the New Testament that this particular belief is necessary for personal salvation.” I hope that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is not a barrier to belief for any of you. I hope this doctrine is not keeping you from Christian commitment or causing you to doubt the incarnation. Personally, I would not put it past God to arrange a Virgin Birth if he wanted to, but I doubt he did.

Finally, it is always good to remember that when we look at any biblical story we should ask the question that Jews would ask. That question is **not** “Did this actually happen?” Instead, Jews would ask, “What does this teach?” This story teaches us that God was especially operative in the birth of Jesus—that our Lord’s incarnation was a holy and mysterious event, brought about solely by free divine grace, surpassing any human possibilities. The virginal conception was understood from the very beginning as a statement about God and about Jesus, and only secondarily about Mary. Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit supporting our claim of full divinity and he was born of a woman supporting our claim of full humanity.

Friends, we need not be tied to any one interpretation of this story. If we choose to take it literally, we may certainly do so. Indeed, if we feel we are led to do so, we must do so. On the other hand, if we feel the historical evidence is insecure and inconclusive, if we wonder why so great an interpreter of the Christian faith as the Apostle Paul never mentions the story, if we feel the literal interpretation threatens the fullness and completeness of the incarnation and humanness of Jesus, then we are quite free to hold that, through the providence of God, the spirit used the ordinary events in an ordinary home for the glory of God, and that the clue to the story is the special operation of the Holy Spirit through a human agent in the birth of Jesus.

One thing is clear. This is the wrong “shibboleth.” There is no reason to set this story in the forefront of the Christian faith and doctrine. *If* it forms no part in the message of the evangelists Mark and John or of the great thinker Paul, then we don’t need to make it a foundation stone in the edifice of Christian belief. In this story let each of us both thoughtfully and prayerfully choose our own interpretation, and let us regard with sympathy and understanding those who choose another way of finding God’s truth in it.

Now, back to *The West Wing*, when the Chinese Christian representative meets President Bartlett in the Oval Office, without prompting he says something like, “The shibboleth is that God was showing his love for the world in sending to us his son, Jesus Christ. Our task is to love one another.” President Bartlett recognizes the Chinese refugee for the genuine Christian that he is and their group is given amnesty.

