

Jesus, Born of a Virgin

Matthew 1:18-25

George Barna leads a research team called The Barna Group.

They recently conducted a survey of over 1,000 people 18 years of age and older from a cross section of American life. They took six stories from the Bible, three from the New Testament and three from the Old Testament. The six stories they selected were:

- The virgin birth of Jesus
- Jesus turning the water into wine
- Jesus feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish
- The story of Noah and the Ark and the flood of the earth
- The story of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and
- The story of Samson and his incredible strength

They asked their survey participants if they believed these biblical stories to be factual or not. Three out of four adults (75%) said that they believe Jesus Christ was born to a virgin, Mary, as described in the gospel narratives. Of the six Bible stories

examined in the survey, this story was the most widely accepted. Some people groups in which a majority rejected every other Bible story broke that pattern in relation to the virgin birth.

What were Barna's conclusions? Barna wrote, "... Few Americans are offended by public displays that remind people of the meaning of Christmas and the importance of the celebration."

It reminds me of the seeming lack of character that sometimes exists in the halls of Congress in Washington, DC today. This past week I received an e-mail from a friend who is a retired Navy Captain and who writes a weekly column for his community newspaper. Let me take a moment to read portions:

"Bravo for Congressman Steve King!

Last week, this Iowa legislator introduced House Resolution 847, officially recognizing Christmas. When I first heard this as a news report, I thought, "What's the big deal?" The House of

Representatives overwhelmingly voted in favor of the resolution recognizing the importance of Christmas, 372-9 with 10 voting “Present” and 40 Members of the House choosing not to vote at all.

Again, I thought, “So what?” Well, as I read more about this story, I discovered that the House Members who voted against the resolution recognizing Christmas as an important celebration for Christians, had no problem a few months ago voting to recognize the importance of the month of Ramadan for Muslims. Earlier this year there was another resolution simply to acknowledge Hinduism and Islam as great religions of the world. These resolutions were voted on at the time of their religion’s major celebrations. I have no problem with this, nor do I think Americans across the nation would have any objection. Ours is a nation that embraces all peoples and beliefs. It is one of our strengths.”

Congress voted to recognize Ramadan for the Muslims and to acknowledge Hinduism and Islam as great religions of the world yet 59 out of 435 members of the United States House of Representatives chose not to support a Resolution officially recognizing Christmas. George Barna's research is shown to be statistically accurate to +/- 3.2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Any statistician will tell you that is solid and sound research methodology. This indicates that the overwhelming majority of the American public not only supports Christmas but believes in the factual veracity of the virgin birth of Jesus!

Well, let's look at the Word of God and let it speak for itself. Our text is Matthew 1:18-25 (Read). Okay, what are the facts?

Vs 18 tells us that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. My first question is to ask what it means to be pledged? This refers back to an ancient tradition of engagement referred to as a

betrothal. In this custom, when a man and a woman were engaged, or pledged or betrothed to one another, they were considered legally and lawfully as if they were as husband and wife.

However, they were only engaged. This betrothal would often take place a year or more before their wedding date. During this time, the couple would have no physical contact and certainly would not have any sexual union. It was a formal agreement between the couple and their families that this couple would give themselves in marriage to one another. They were promising, even obligating themselves, to one another and to a future marriage.

But Vs 18 goes on to specifically say that before Joseph and Mary came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. They were engaged, betrothed, promised to one another.

But they were not yet married. And because they were not yet married they had not had sexual intercourse with one another.

Mary was a virgin. And in one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith, the Holy Spirit came over Mary and she became

pregnant. A virgin, yet expecting a child. Now that will mess with a young woman's reputation!

Vs 19 indicates that Joseph understand the scandal that was unfolding. He loved Mary and did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. So instead, Joseph began to think about how he could quietly and privately divorce Mary. Joseph wasn't uncaring or unbelieving. This was all he knew and he was trying to be faithful and at the same time gracious to Mary.

An angel, Gabriel, had appeared to Mary telling her that she would give birth to the Son of God. The story is found in Luke 1:26-38 (Read). But until now, Joseph had been left in the dark and did not understand what was happening. Until Vs 20 (back in Matthew 1) an unnamed angel appears to him while he is sleeping. Hear what the angel spoke to Joseph: "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to

give him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins”.

A quick note – the name Jesus is taken from the name Joshua and literally means “the Lord saves”. Jesus was given a name and all of the people of His day who heard the name new its meaning. He was called Jesus – the Lord saves!

The angel that came to speak to Joseph concluded by quoting from the prophet Isaiah: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel – which means, ‘God with us’.”

By the way, did you know that for the last few weeks our children in Kidz Zone have been studying the Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus?! When you see Julie Walker or Julie Vermeer or Amy Tenhulzen and their team please be sure to thank

them for the faithfulness as they invest in the hearts of our children.

Our story concludes with Vs 24-25. Joseph wakes up from his dream. He did exactly what the angel had instructed him to do. He took Mary home to be his wife. But the Bible says that “he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.” And by union the Bible is saying that they did not have sexual intercourse until after the birth of Jesus.

Wow – what a romantic story! Everybody goes ... “ahhhh, isn’t that sweet?!” But let’s consider what we just read. Mary is engaged, promised, betrothed ... and pregnant. This is a shameful scandal for a young woman in her day and age. Joseph has a choice. He can either take the honorable way out – and even do so graciously, and quietly divorce Mary. Or he can choose to share the shame and scandal and take Mary as his wife. You see, we know the end of the story. But Joseph and Mary were living it out

real time. History proved them to be righteous – right before God. But in the eyes of their society and neighbors they were looked upon with shame and scorn and derision. When Joseph decided to be obedient and take Mary as his wife as the angel had instructed he knew he was choosing to share in the shame and scandal that Mary felt.

And what about Jesus? As He grew He was shadowed by the whispers and innuendo that he was an illegitimate child. He was conceived before Joseph and Mary were legally married and before they were supposed to consummate their marriage. It was a shadow that Jesus carried through life.

In Isaiah 53:2-3 the Bible says “... He (Jesus) had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we would desire. He was rejected and despised by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hid their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.”

The heart of the Deer Flat family is to be like Jesus. But we must look beyond the romantic understanding of Christmas and the birth of Jesus. He was conceived before His parents were married and looked upon as an illegitimate child. He suffered ridicule and persecution all of His life. Jesus wasn't born with a silver spoon in His mouth. He didn't live a life of ease and luxury. He endured the cross that He might take the sin of the world. Do you want to be like Jesus?

I pray and hope that our answer is yes. I pray and hope that our answer is to choose Jesus and to be more like Him with each day of our lives. You see the Bible also says in Romans 8:16-17 that if we want to share in the glory of Jesus then we must also share in the sufferings of Jesus. But when we choose Jesus we choose life and freedom and joy and peace. Jesus said that He came that we might have life – eternal life. When life on this earth comes to an end and these earthly bodies die, we continue to live with Jesus.

But to live with Jesus for all of eternity, we must choose Jesus now.

What this world needs are a few more people who will unashamedly choose Jesus. I believe that 2008 will be one of the greatest years in the life of the Deer Flat church. And not because of you or me, but because of Jesus; because we choose to be like Jesus. And if we want to one day share in His glory, we also need to be willing to share in His suffering. No pain .. no gain.

This is Christmas. Will you choose Jesus? Not the romantic Jesus, but the real life Jesus. Let's together choose to love Jesus so much that we will be joyfully obedient even to the point of sharing in His suffering that we might become more like Him.