

# THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

*“And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn”.*

(Luke 2: 7)

There is only one proper manner in which to remember and celebrate the birth of our Lord. Certainly, we may make a happy day out of it with family and friends. There is nothing wrong with a festive meal with fellowship and sharing. But this may not become a goal in itself, which obscures the true meaning of Christmas. We must let the Word of God and the true worship of God determine everything from beginning to end.

Having focused earlier on the first seven verses of Luke 2, I now want to devote more attention to verse seven by itself.

We know the story of Christ's birth so well, and yet every year it must strike us, on the one hand, how amazingly simple the description of Luke really is. Never before has anyone like Christ been born, and never will anyone like Him be born again; yet Luke describes it to us in such simple terms. But on the other hand, these simple terms are deeply stirring; you cannot escape the solemnity of the biblical account.

As to the biblical simplicity: usually the birth of great people is surrounded by fantastic legends. There are some apocryphal accounts of Christ's birth which are nothing more than elaborate embellishments – “tasteless and unedifying”, as one commentator aptly put it – of what the Bible tells us. Fact is mixed with fiction, and human imagination is added to divine revelation so that the truth is obscured.

The birth of Christ is to be proclaimed in truth and without embellishment. It must be done in simple and yet stirring terms, for so the Holy Spirit has revealed it. Perhaps we could summarize the message of Luke 2: 7 as follows: **the true history of the birth of Jesus Christ**, and note that it is both a simple history and a special one.

## A SIMPLE HISTORY

It is not easy to tell the story of a birth in a clear and yet a restrained manner, paying attention to necessary detail and still preserving dignity. We can easily say too much or not enough. Although most of us know well the process of birth, there are also little children and perhaps older people who have not experienced or witnessed such an event.

Now Luke could have made quite a story out of it. In a lengthy first chapter he has built up the tension. Now the moment of the birth of Christ has arrived, and that has been the focal point of everything. Should Luke not now go into great detail and in depth describe to us the birth of our great Lord and King?

There is indeed detail and depth, not in the sensationalistic manner of the world, but in the quiet manner of the Word. We read about the decree of Caesar Augustus that everyone was to go to his place of birth for proper enrolment, and that also Joseph and Mary, who was pregnant, undertook a journey to their town of origin, which was Bethlehem.

And there in Bethlehem the Lord Jesus is born. In verse 6 we read, “the time came for her to be delivered,” which simply means, she was “full term,” her due date had come. Christ's birth was not premature or delayed, but came after a regular, full term pregnancy. When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, the time had come for the child to be born.

Verse 7 tells us about the birth itself. It says: “she gave birth to her first-born son. . . .” That’s it. That’s all. It is indeed such a simple history. It does not say whether it was a very difficult or lengthy labour and delivery. We are not told how much the baby weighed at his birth and whether he was immediately healthy and strong, or not.

## A FIRST-BORN SON

We do read that Mary gave birth to her “first-born.” It was for Mary a first child, her first labour and delivery. It is generally agreed that the first time is often the most difficult, but the point is here not so much that it was a first delivery (the process) but that the child himself was her first-born (the result). It says nothing about the birth itself.

Now, giving birth is under the best of circumstances a difficult experience. In this case, for this young couple, having been displaced and cut off from their supportive and familiar surroundings in Nazareth of Galilee, being all alone, young and inexperienced, with no one to help, it must have been quite an ordeal!

Still, it is told in simple terms. “She gave birth to her first-born son.” “First-born” implies that she later had more children, and even though this first birthing process was unique for Joseph and Mary, unique in many ways – as we will see more clearly later – yet it was simple like those that would follow.

## THE SWADDLING CLOTHS

Now it was the custom in those days that right after a child was born it was washed, rubbed with some kind of body salt, and wrapped in cloths. It is clear that a new-born baby needs to be washed. It does not say whether Mary was able to use the body salt – perhaps she had none – but it does say that she wrapped him in “swaddling cloths.”

The verb “to swaddle” means simply to bind or to wrap. The idea was to wrap the child snugly in these cloths to keep it warm. In the famous hymn about the shepherds watching their flocks by night (which is Hymn 17 in the Book of Praise of the Canadian Reformed Churches) there was a line about the babe being “all meanly wrapped in swaddling cloths.” All meanly wrapped? As a child I thought, “How awful to wrap up this newly born child so tight that it almost suffocates.” Was He maltreated from the moment He was born? But in truth it is quite simple: he was properly clothed for protection and warmth. There was nothing strange about it: it happened to all new-born infants in Israel. One family may have had nicer and newer swaddling cloths than another, but Christ, just like all other babies in His time, was properly washed and clothed.

In this light we can appreciate that the newer version of Hymn 17 – as we now have it – reads: “. . . Not as a King arrayed, but *humbly wrapped* in swaddling cloths. . . .” Indeed, humbly, for “meanly” means commonly, in humility, without riches.

It says that Mary did all this. She gave birth, she wrapped, and she laid the child in the manger. She is on her own. We do not read that any other women came

to help her. Of course, she will have received the loving help of Joseph. But most men are quite at a loss when it comes to labour, delivery, and post-natal care, certainly the first time around. Mary had to do the main portion of the work of post-natal care herself, despite her weakness and fatigue.

Many children have been born under difficult and poor circumstances. So it was with our Lord Jesus Christ. In simple terms, his was the normal birth of a healthy child, but one who was born in extreme poverty and under difficult circumstances. We can take it literally when the apostle Paul says that Christ who was rich (in heaven) became poor (on earth) in order that He might make us rich in him (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Back to our main point, then: it is a simple history. Until now, we have discovered nothing significant, nothing out of the ordinary. Luke tells it all in a restrained manner, with tasteful discretion, and yet in such a way that we know all we need to know about what happened that day.

Christ, our Saviour, came in the natural way of labour and delivery; He was born of woman, like all people, and His birth was very common. It is true, Christ came in a different sense than all others – for He alone is the eternal Son of God – but He came in a natural way, for He truly is son of man!

In no way may this be obscured or embellished. It has been told as it really happened. These are the facts as we must know them for our salvation. Christ did not come into the world in any spectacular way with a grand entry, but in the normal way of pregnancy and birth. In this manner He became truly one of us, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone! And so He could begin in our flesh to overcome sin.

## **A SPECIAL HISTORY**

It is indeed a simple story. But yet it is a special story. For this child, who was born that day in Bethlehem, is nevertheless the Son of God, the Saviour of the world. And indeed, it must be said of Him that He suffered from the *beginning* of his life to the end. We see this element come to the fore in the second part of verse 7.

For Luke adds something here that is indeed different: “[Mary] laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” This lying in a manger may be considered significant also in view of what the angel says to the shepherds: this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths – thus a new-born infant – and *lying in a manger*.

The manner in which Jesus is born may not be different from that of other births, but the place where He is laid is of great significance; it constitutes a sign!

## **THE NATIVITY SCENE**

You have perhaps seen reproductions of the “nativity scene,” and no matter how these scenes differ from each other, they all have this in common: the place looks so

cosy and warm. A quaint little stall, a nice wooden crib with clean straw, a baby with healthy, rosy cheeks, proud parents and smiling shepherds, even interested animals looking on with a sheepish grin. Not a bad atmosphere at all, really, in which to be fostered as an infant.

I do not want to poke fun at these scenes, but I do have to point out that they hardly reflect the reality of Christmas. We do not know exactly where Jesus was born in Bethlehem – and the commentators differ greatly on what is the proper explanation of the words in which the event is described – but from our text a few important matters do become quite clear.

It says that there was “no room for them in the inn.” What we have to understand by the word “inn” was explained in the previous chapter. The word used for “inn” meant, as we saw: a place to let down, tie down the animals and lie down yourself. It was a rest-area, as we sometimes have them at the roadside. The area was generally divided into two sections: one for the people, around a fire, an open hearth, and one for the animals in a type of cave. And the word used for “manger” means indeed “feeding trough.” “Manger” is derived from a verb (think of the French “manger”) which means “to eat”. This, as we saw, was for the shepherds a clear sign of identification. For you do not normally find babies in a manger. In a manger you find slop, not sucklings. Shepherds knew all about animal feeding areas, how dirty they were. Every barn or stable, let alone those in a public area, is filled with bacteria and filth. The shepherds also knew where these mangers were. They didn’t have to go checking all sorts of places, asking whether a baby was born, for there was only one place to look: the public rest area. And that was indeed where they found the infant: it was exactly as the angel had told them.

And to think that this child, lying in that manger, is indeed Christ, the Lord, the awaited Messiah, the Son of David! Here is where the history becomes special and different from any other birthday story. Here the extreme poverty becomes a humiliation, an emptying, which will lead to the final humiliation on the cross of Golgotha.

I think now of Hymn 19 in *The Book of Praise*, “For though God’s equal, though eternal King, He did not to His rightful glory cling. . . Himself He *emptied* that He us might save. . . .”

The Son of God comes out of the glory of heaven into the Bethlehem slop; He comes from a heavenly throne to a feeding trough, because now already He begins to bear the wrath of God for our sins. That is the special history of Christmas! And if this is His beginning, what will His end be? He will go from manger to tomb, from rock bed to rock bed, enduring even the agony of hell, for our sake, because of our sins.

## **LACK OF HOSPITALITY?**

Often, in connection with this verse, a verse from John 1 is quoted, “He came to His own home and His own people knew Him not.” And frequently you can read as commentary: how awful, the King was born and no one knew!

But the people in Bethlehem could not know initially that in this way and in that place a Saviour was born to them. The Lord God used the shepherds for that purpose later: they made known to Bethlehem and surrounding area the birth of the Messiah. What John refers to when He writes “His own people knew Him not” is that the people *when told*, refused to acknowledge Him as their Saviour! The expression, “They knew Him not” does not mean: we didn’t know about Him, but it means: we knew, yet we said, No! We don’t want such a Saviour. And that rejection has to do with the fact that they never knew their own misery, never acknowledged the depth of their own sin. No one did identify the poverty of the babe in the manger with the extreme misery of his own sin.

Meanwhile, the process of emptying Himself has begun. And He will have to go all the way, drinking the cup to the last drop.

We see here something of the great, inexplicable love of God that He gave His only-begotten Son, who from the beginning had to bear the eternal wrath of God. We see here something of the immeasurable love of Christ who, though He was Father’s everlasting Son, did not despise the virgin’s womb. We see here something of the great love of the Holy Spirit, who alone does guide us to understand and to know Him, receive and acknowledge Him, as our Saviour. I think here of the old hymn, “Te Deum” (Hymn 2 in the *Book of Praise*), the Hallelujah of the New Testament church.

## SHOPPING MALL YULETIDE

The world, too, knows that the “Christmas story” is simple, yet special. Many would agree if you told them that the history of Christ’s birth is one of stirring simplicity and special depth. They would say: yes, it strikes a tender chord with us, too. It strikes a chord, but it does not lead to an eternal song, for the world has made this feast into a celebration of human kindness and good cheer in bad days. People do not want to know the truth about Christ or about themselves. Therefore Christmas makes no real difference in their lives.

The trouble with most shopping mall and yuletide “nativity scenes” is that they focus the attention on one aspect and do not give the living history. The trouble with most people is that they never really get beyond the shopping mall and mistletoe mentality. But is not the trouble with *us*, Reformed people, that we do not let the reality of Christ’s earthly ministry encourage and motivate us to a newer and better service?

Slowly but steadily, we are taking over the Christmas style celebration of the world around us. Our manner of celebrating Christmas is already much more integrated with our society than was that of our parents. And it is being said: it’s only a matter of style, not content! What’s wrong with a festive atmosphere? With some lights, some boughs, a Christmas tree? That’s only atmosphere, indeed. But be careful that the main issue is not lost among us, that the true story is known, the real meaning of Christmas not obscured!

The main issue is our dedication and commitment to the Lord, who went from the manger to the throne; it is our seeking first the kingdom of heaven and the righteousness of God in Christ. Here is where the devil wants to wean us away from the truth of God's Word. He tries to do it in his own special, deceptive way, by giving lots of atmosphere, but no room to breathe spiritually; by providing lots of trees, but not the tree of life, and lots of lights, but not the Light of the World.

For the devil likes to make Christmas into a carnival. He is the great pretender, the great deceiver, who takes away the Word and gives "atmosphere" instead. The devil takes this special story and vulgarizes it, makes it romantic and endearing, a story of human kindness and of men of goodwill. He commercializes it, neutralizes it, paganizes it, packages it and then says: here you have it, Merry Christmas!

We may never separate style from content, for the one is reflected in the other. Keep combining simplicity with depth. Especially on Christmas Day. Then it will remain for us and our children indeed a very special history, which leads us to sing of the victory of Christ over death and satan's power infernal. And the true history will motivate us to greater service.