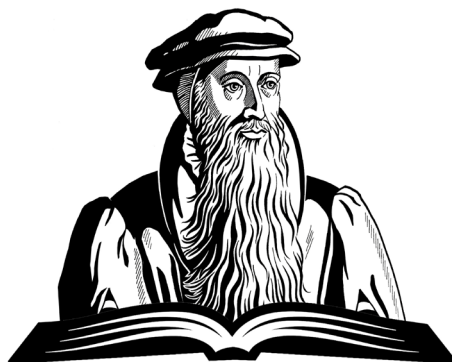

**VIDEO LECTURE MODULE:
THE APOSTLES' CREED**

LECTURE 4
**ARTICLE 3: THE CONCEPTION AND
VIRGIN BIRTH OF THE SAVIOR**

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

THE APOSTLES' CREED

13 LECTURES

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck

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THE APOSTLES' CREED

Rev. Cornelis Harinck

Transcript—Lecture 4

Article 3: The Conception and Virgin Birth of the Savior

Beloved listener, Article 3 of the Apostles' Creed reads: "who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." These words call us to consider the incomprehensible fact of the virgin birth of Jesus. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary. Such was the manner in which Jesus came into the world. How is this possible? A human being cannot possibly be born without the involvement of a man begetting a woman. Many, therefore, ridicule the virgin birth of Jesus. They claim that Christians have fabricated this fact to elevate the status of Jesus, and that Jesus was merely the son of Joseph, or even of a Roman soldier. Throughout the ages, the virgin birth of Jesus, for many, has been an obstacle to believing the message of the Christian church. Many preachers, therefore, deem it wise to remain silent about the virgin birth of Jesus, and to consider it to be merely a myth.

Nevertheless the Bible clearly states that Jesus was born of a virgin. The Apostles' Creed articulated this same truth: "who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." Scriptural proofs are abundant in support of this. When the angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to a son, her reaction was, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1:34). Mary had not known sexual intercourse. Her reaction was logical. How could a virgin give birth to a son? The angel then responded, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God"—Luke 1, verse 35. Matthew tells us that Joseph grieved deeply, when he suspected that Mary had become unfaithful to him. However, the angel sent to him by the Lord reassured him, saying, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto you Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 1:20). The clear and unambiguous witness of the Gospels is that Mary was with child without the involvement of a man. Scripture informs us that the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: "When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost"—Matthew 1, verse 18. In the light of the information the Bible gives, Jesus' virgin birth is indisputable. One can only deny this by denying the facts as recorded in the Gospels.

The Apostles' Creed confesses: "conceived by the Holy Ghost." Mary's conception is attributed to the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit, who has formed human life within Mary, is the same Holy Spirit who once moved upon the face of the waters at the original creation, ordering created matter into a beautiful creation that fully emerged at the end of six days. The Holy Spirit who enabled seed to germinate and rendered the earth fruitful, created human life within Mary. God would envelope Mary with a protective embrace that would consecrate her for a unique service. She would conceive without the involvement of a man, and give birth to a Son—a Son who would be called the Son of the Highest (Luke 1:32). In this manner, the eternal Son of God would become human. Isaiah's prophecy would be fulfilled in Mary: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

Who is Jesus? To whom did Mary give birth? Whom did she wrap in swaddling clothes and lay in a manger? The Bible gives the answer: God manifest in the flesh! "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh"—1 Timothy 3, verse 16. Mary's son, the child born in Bethlehem, is God, having assumed the human nature. Scripture teaches this, and the Christian confesses it.

The child of Bethlehem, as to his divine nature, is the only child that existed before having been conceived and born. Jesus could say, “Before Abraham was, I am”—John 8, verse 58. John begins his description, of all that Jesus said and did, with these impressive words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”—John 1, verse 1. Jesus is the eternal Word, who is eternally with God and who is God. This eternal, divine Word has become man through the instrumentality of the Virgin Mary.

The ancient theologians would express it as follows: He remained who he was, and became what he was not. He remained who he was, namely, God of God and Light of light. Albeit that he was born of a woman, was laid in a manger, crawled in the Garden of Gethsemane as a worm and no man, was crucified, died and was buried—in so doing, he did not relinquish his Godhead. He remained the eternal Son of God. What, then, did he do? He veiled his deity. He humbled himself and became God’s Servant. In Philippians 2, it is said, “Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6–7). He concealed his divinity behind his humanity, and although he permitted himself to be mocked, captured, and crucified, he remained God—the eternal Son of the eternal God. He became what he was not, namely, flesh and blood of the Virgin Mary. He became a man, having soul and body, who was capable of suffering and dying. And how did he become a man? In the Apostles’ Creed, the Christian confesses that he was “conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.”

Jesus’ human nature was not created in the same manner as Adam’s human nature. He received his human nature as we all receive it, namely, by birth. Jesus was born as the fruit of Mary’s womb. He was really and truly man, having both soul and body. He was acquainted with fatigue and pain, with joy and sorrow, with fear and anxiety, and with suffering and dying. Scripture declares that he became like unto us in all things: “Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren”—Hebrews 2, verse 17. He became one of us, “Emmanuel, . . . God with us” (Matthew 1:23). Scripture points out that Jesus became man. Thus, he was not a man, but he became man in the fullness of time. John writes, “The Word became flesh”—John 1, verse 14. Paul writes, “But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law”—Galatians 4, verse 4. Both of these passages speak of becoming, and of being made. Indeed, he became what he was not—he became man, a genuine man, with a human body and a rational soul.

Although Jesus became like unto us in all things, there was one exception—he did not become like unto us concerning sin. The apostle says of Jesus, “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin”—2 Corinthians 5, verse 21. Jesus knew no original sin, and no actual sins. How could this be? How could Jesus indeed be man, born of a woman, and yet be without sin? Our ancient Apostles’ Creed says that he was “conceived by the Holy Ghost.”

He, who brought forth the child Jesus was no earthly father, and thus, not a fallen man who passes on original sin to his descendants. The child Jesus was not infected with sin. The Holy Spirit brought about the birth of Jesus. Although Jesus had no earthly father, he did have an earthly mother. Mary was indeed involved in this conception, but rather than a man, it was the Holy Spirit, who achieved conception in her womb. And therefore Jesus was without sin. The sinless conception of Jesus is a holy mystery underscoring the supernatural nature of the Christian faith.

God is the author of all natural processes and laws. Children are born in consequence of the physical union of the husband and his wife. Nevertheless, God is not bound to this. Whenever God engages himself in a manner that cannot be reconciled with the laws of nature, we refer to it as a miracle. A miracle cannot be explained, or else it would no longer be a miracle. This particularly applies to the virgin birth of Jesus. God performed a supernatural miracle, albeit by engaging the Virgin Mary. Jesus, therefore, has a true human nature, being flesh and blood of the Virgin Mary, while at the same time not being contaminated with original sin. Jesus is “that holy thing which shall be born of thee” (Luke 1:35).

Jesus is God’s Son, born of the Virgin Mary, and conceived by the Holy Ghost. He is God and man. He is Emmanuel. He is a true God-man, One who is all that God is, and at the same time, all that man is. Christ was not half a God and half a man—he was perfectly God and perfectly man. The angel Gabriel said to Mary, “They shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is,

God with us” (Matthew 1:23). To say that Jesus is both God and man does not mean that we either have two individuals or two persons, but in Jesus, two natures are united in one person. He is the God-man then, qualifying him to be the Mediator between God and man, and thus to be the Savior.

Why did God’s Son have to become man, in order to be the Redeemer of his people? Could he not from heaven have fulfilled the promise of Paradise, to crush the head of the devil? Was it necessary for him to leave heaven, to be born of a woman, and thus to become man? We must answer this question, by another question: “Who has sinned?” Man has sinned, and therefore, man must also bear the punishment of sin. The human nature has sinned, and therefore, sin must be punished in the human nature. The Son of God had to assume the nature of his people, to enable him to be their substitute. The apostle speaks of this, saying, “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage”—Hebrews 2, verses 14. Jesus came on a mission. In order to carry out his mission of salvation, the Son of God needed to be clothed with humanity.

God’s justice demands that man, having sinned, must pay the penalty of sin. The renowned church father, Athanasius, speaks, in his book, *Incarnatione Verbi* (Incarnation of the Word), about the demand of God’s being. God’s holy being demands truth and justice. God is just, and therefore, he will not punish another creature for man’s sin. Consequently, the Redeemer had to be man, so that he could vicariously bear the punishment for the sins of his people. Thus, he also had to be a sinless man. The Mediator could not merely be a man; he also had to be free of sin. The Heidelberg Catechism says plainly that “one, who is himself a sinner, cannot satisfy for others” (Lord’s Day 6). A bankrupt man cannot help another bankrupt man. The judicial sentence of Scripture is, “None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him”—Psalm 49, verse 8. The Redeemer must, therefore, indeed, be man, but not a sinner. He must not only be free from any sinful deed, but also free from the pollution of original sin. As the atoning sacrifice in the temple had to be without blemish, so the Redeemer had to be sinless. Of every man who descends from Adam, it must be said, “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one”—Job 14, verse 4. Regarding Jesus, we read, however, that he is “that holy thing which shall be born of thee” (Luke 1:35). His conception was not by a father with a corrupt nature, but he was conceived by the Holy Ghost (Matthew 1:20). Hebrews 7, verse 26 says of Jesus, that he is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.” This qualifies him to be the Surety to render payment on behalf of sinners.

Jesus’ incarnation through the instrumentality of Mary yields much comfort. Not only did this qualify Jesus to take our place as Surety and Mediator, to pay the debt incurred by sin, but he could also be a compassionate high priest. Hebrews 2, verse 17 says, “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God.” The epistle of the Hebrews informs us that God did not appoint holy angels to assume the office of high priest, but rather, weak, sinful, and fallen men: “For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God”—Hebrews 5, verse 1. God did not choose holy angels, but fallen men to be priests and high priest in the temple. What moved the Lord to do so? The high priest had to be someone who would understand and have compassion with the weak, sinful, guilty, grieving, contrite, and troubled Israelite, who would come to the temple to seek comfort, forgiveness, and peace. It had to be a high priest “who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity”—Hebrews 5, verse 2.

Such a high priest is Jesus! By way of his incarnation, he has become like unto us in all things. We will not encounter anything in life that Jesus also did not encounter. Whatever the strife and temptations of a believer may be, Jesus will have endured it as well. Jesus’ footsteps are to be found everywhere. He has been engaged in the same warfare, has experienced the same suffering, has endured the same shame, and has died the same death. Having been tempted in all things, he is acquainted with all temptations, and understands them. He has experience of it all. Therefore he can have compassion with his tried followers in all their temptations, suffering, and dying. Because of his incarnation, he can be the compassionate high priest for all who take refuge in him, with their sins, misery, temptations, and afflictions. It makes Jesus near and dear to them in all their afflictions. It makes the believer to say, “I will fear no evil: for thou art with me” (Psalm 23:4).

And Jesus gained the victory. He has overcome the enemy, for in all his temptations and sufferings, he remained without sin. The apostle says that Jesus “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin”—Hebrews 4, verse 15. We often sin in our temptations and afflictions, and are never free from guilt and defilement. But Jesus remained sinless. He obeyed his Father, “and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”—Philippians 2, verse 8. The first Adam fell in the temptation, but Jesus, the second Adam, remained faithful and obedient to his Father. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus has indeed been tempted like as we are, but without sin. He remained in all this, the obedient Son of his Father. Therefore, he can sustain us in all our infirmities and temptations. The children of God may now boast in all their crosses and tribulations, and say with the Apostle Paul, “Nay, in all things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us”—Romans 8, verse 37. Such is the rich comfort to be extracted from the incarnation of God’s Son. For the believing Christian, the true humanity of Jesus does not diminish his glory and beauty. Instead, it makes him all the more glorious and precious. The incarnation makes Jesus an ultimate, sufficient Savior, for Jesus is not only very man, but also very God.

The Redeemer not only had to be a holy and righteous man, but he also had to be stronger than all men. He needed to be God. The work he had to accomplish, and the battle he had to fight was too strenuous for either a sinless man or a mighty and holy angel. Jesus had to take upon himself all the sins of his elect, and undergo what they were deserving of, to death due to their sins. He had to be subjected to the curse of the law, for a broken law pronounces a curse upon the transgressor. He had to bear the punishment that was due upon sin, for God cannot let sin go unpunished. He had to endure the wrath of God, for sin provokes the just and holy God to wrath. He had to die, for “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). He had to endure being forsaken of God, for the consequence of sin is being cast into a hell of banishment from God. He had to bruise the head of the old serpent, the devil, and to conquer death. How could he have endured and prevailed in all of this if, in addition to being very man, he had not been very God? Jesus would have succumbed under this heavy burden, although he was a righteous man, had he simultaneously not been true God. Jesus had to conquer enemies that only God is able to conquer. He had to conquer the devil, death, the grave, and hell. An ordinary man could not have achieved this. Only a divine Redeemer could prevail, as the prophet Jeremiah says, “Their Redeemer is strong; the LORD of hosts is his name”—Jeremiah 50, verse 34. Had Jesus not truly been very God, he would have succumbed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross. He would never have been able to exclaim, “It is finished” (John 19:30). Jesus’ divinity sustained him, and thus, he was enabled to succeed in his redemptive work.

We hear the Messiah saying, in Isaiah 63, verse 5, “And I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; and my fury, it upheld me.” Jesus had to be God in order to assign infinite value to his obedience, his death, and the shedding of his blood. God is infinite, and therefore, sin committed against God, demands infinite satisfaction. Only One who is God is capable to offer the one sacrifice which achieves infinite satisfaction.

Furthermore, Jesus had to bring a sacrifice that would be sufficient not merely for a few. His sacrifice would have to be sufficient for a multitude that no man can number, and only a divine Redeemer is able to achieve this. Jesus must also be God, to make us partakers of his righteousness. He must be able to apply what he has merited, and make sinners partakers of his benefits. Persecutors like the Apostle Paul would have to be transformed into preachers. The heart of Lydia would have to be opened. The Christians in Corinth would have to be resurrected from spiritual death. And God’s Kingdom would have to be established among the nations. The work of redemption demanded a divine Redeemer, for Jesus would be a powerless Redeemer apart from his Godhead.

Jesus must also be qualified to judge the living and the dead. Only a person who is God, and possesses omnipotence, and is omniscient is able to do this. Jesus had to be worthy to receive divine honor, and thus, worthy to be worshiped as God, without which, the one doing so being guilty of idolatry. Indeed, everything stands or falls with the confession that Jesus our Redeemer is both God and man, united in the person of the eternal Son of God. Only such a person could be the “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”—1 Timothy 2, verse 5. He alone, who was

God and man in one person, was capable of being the Savior of fallen man.

His humanity enables him to take the place of sinful men. His divinity enables him to bear the weight of their sins, and to satisfy God's justice. None but this high priest could heal the sin-inflicted breach between God and man. Peter testified of Jesus, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved"—Acts 4, verse 12. We cannot be our own saviour. All our righteousnesses are but filthy rags. Only God can reconcile us with God. God's church has been redeemed by God!

Being both God and man, Jesus is the qualified and all-sufficient Savior. "For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens"—Hebrews 7, verse 26. His divinity gives an eternal value to the sacrifice he offered. His blood speaks of better things than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:24). It cleanses from all sin. As God and man, the Redeemer is qualified to save to the uttermost: "Wherefore he is able also to save to the uttermost that come to God by him"—Hebrews 7, verse 25. Jesus has the power and the ability to save without limit. He can save the worst of sinners. He can break the strongest bonds of sin and Satan. Jesus only—the Christ born in Bethlehem, who is both God and man, can be our Redeemer. Only the Holy One, the sinless Jesus, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was made sin for us, can, by his holiness and by his innocence, be our covering before a holy God.

However, Jesus is not only the all-sufficient and suitable Savior, but we very much need such a Savior. The question for us is whether we feel that need. Have you already been confronted with the fact that we cannot stand before a holy and just God, and therefore need Jesus' atoning blood? Is the question of your troubled heart, "Who shall cover my sins in the presence of a holy and just God?" Is this your sole great need? Well then, the message of God's Son being born of the Virgin Mary will be to you "good tidings of great joy, . . . for unto you is born . . . a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord"—Luke 2, verse 11. A very qualified and willing Savior is preached unto you. Make, therefore, haste and flee to him, who can and will save to the uttermost all who come to God by him. And for your soul's sake, do not forget what the apostle says, all that come to God by him, for the sinners he saves are only those that come to him.