

A Question of Legitimacy, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. A4071223
Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25
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How inconvenient for Joseph that Mary had been “found to be with child.”¹ It was against the law for a woman to have relations other than with the man to whom she was engaged. You know what happens to women in the Middle East today who have illicit relationships. They are cast out of their families and often killed. It was the same back in Mary and Joseph’s day. The law said that Mary should have been stoned to death.

The account says Joseph was “a righteous man.”² Do we have any righteous men today? Do we have any men who would not be furious if their girlfriend got pregnant by some other means? Surely they would break off the relationship. Joseph, being righteous, planned to dismiss Mary quietly. She and the baby would have to fend for themselves, but at least she would not be stoned to death .

We need more righteous men today: men who will remain faithful to their partners; men who will responsibly parent the lives they bring into this world; men who will provide stable and compassionate homes where love can flourish.

How inconvenient for us that translators of the Hebrew prophets into the Greek Septuagint chose to translate Isaiah’s word *almah* for young woman into the Greek word *parthenos*, meaning virgin, creating a troublesome doctrine. If Isaiah had used the Hebrew *betulah*, we would have had no question that he was looking forward to a virgin giving birth to a promise from God. He didn’t. He used *almah* which was a general word meaning young woman. But, if a church promulgates a doctrine of original sin, then it needs a doctrine of a virgin birth to redeem it.

How do you legitimize Jesus’ birth otherwise? In human terms, Jesus was illegitimate. His mother was pregnant and Joseph was not the father. But, this causes us to ask the question, what makes something legitimate or illegitimate?

Legitimate is defined as being in compliance with the law.³ Legitimacy in human terms is often enforced by power, wealth, and political connectedness. The legitimate thing for Joseph to do was to divorce Mary quietly.

With God, however, things are different. Since that first Christmas, everything is different. That first Christmas was all about change. It was God’s coming to live with humanity and showing us a different way of living: God’s way. With that first Christmas, legitimacy is defined in a new way. There is human legitimacy and there is God’s legitimacy.

A teacher of mine in seminary told the story of a woman who was depressed and was determined to end her life. She put her token into the subway turnstile and waited for the next train. She was going to jump in front of it and end her life. She repeated to herself, “I am an illegitimate child. I am an illegitimate child.”

Then she thought to herself, wait a minute. I’m not a child. I’m a grown woman. So, she repeated to herself, “I am illegitimate. I am illegitimate.”

Then she thought to herself, wait a minute. I didn’t cause my own birth. It was my birth

¹Matthew 1:18

²Matthew 1:19

³American Heritage Dictionary

mother and birth father who acted. They are the ones who were acted illegitimately. So, she was left only with the phrase, “I am!” With God, we simply are.

Joseph’s struggle was itself an indicator of the new way of living in God’s legitimacy. Righteous Joseph was struggling between striving to obey the law, and being faithful and good. We struggle today when what we’ve been taught conflicts with what we know is right and good. Legal pharisees will always frame issues in clear black and white while righteous and faithful people will often see issues in shades of gray. Legal pharisees judge harshly. They cast young pregnant women out of families and stone them. Righteous Joseph offers us an example of faithfulness tempered and shaped by mercy.⁴

Joseph stuck by Mary. He supported her and helped to welcome the baby Jesus into the world. He must have taught a youthful Jesus about justice for the poor and compassion for the powerless. He taught his son about forgiveness and turning the other cheek. See, the story of the birth of Jesus is not about humans, it is about God. It is not a story about legalities and human legitimacy.

God wants to be in relationship with humans. That’s why God gave us Jesus. As Paul said, “in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.”⁵ In Christ, God gives us legitimacy. In Christmas, God ushers in a new age where peace, healing, and reconciliation become reality. Christmas teaches us about God’s saving grace, God’s tender mercy and God’s healing love. Christmas is the story of a young woman and an old man saying “yes” to God. Mary willingly carried, gave birth to, and nurtured Jesus. Joseph willingly stuck by Mary and provided Jesus a home.

Christmas gives us an opportunity to say “yes” to God. We can nurture the spirit of Jesus within us. We can let God’s new reality of peace, healing, and reconciliation have life within our words and actions.

Matthew reflect’s Isaiah’s words: “they shall name him Emmanuel: God is with us.” Christmas is our opportunity to say, “Yes! God is with us.”

⁴Kate Huey, i.UCC Community: Weekly Seeds for December 23, 2007

⁵2 Corinthians 5:19