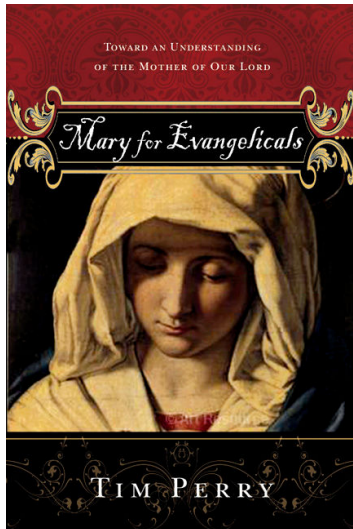




AN INTERVIEW WITH
TIM PERRY

AUTHOR OF
*MARY FOR
EVANGELICALS*



With his feet planted firmly in the evangelical tradition, Tim Perry began to think that there must be more to Mary than generally meets the evangelical eye.

Beginning with Scripture, Perry probes the texts and traces the lengthy development of Christian thinking and practice related to Mary. *Mary for Evangelicals* addresses the increasing evangelical interest in Mary and contributes to the current discussion of Mariology in evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogue.

WHY DO YOU THINK THERE IS SUCH A CURRENT FASCINATION WITH MARY?

First, we must consider the impact of what Timothy George has called the “ecumenism of the trenches.” Over the last thirty-five years or so, evangelicals and Catholics have slowly come to appreciate how much we share in terms of morality, particularly in the thorny ethical problems surrounding the beginning and end of life, the definition of marriage, and the constructive role faith can and should play in the public realm. I think this has led to the establishment of grass-roots friendships based on trust. To put the matter bluntly, theological disagreement takes on a whole new tone when you’re praying together in front of an abortion clinic. Key evangelical theologians and leaders like Timothy George, J. I. Packer and Chuck Colson have used that trust wisely to engage in theological dialogue with Catholic theologians and leaders. Once such theological ties were established, it was only a matter of time before Mary came up. Since the third generation of the Reformation, she has personified every major doctrinal dispute, whether *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia* or *solo Christo*.

Second, in the evangelical academy, growing numbers of (younger) theologians have begun to return *ad fontes*—to the sources, like the Reformers in the sixteenth century—and have found in the pre- and post-Nicene fathers theological resources that speak to their own day. This is certainly true in my own case. Of course, you can’t read the fathers without reading about Mary. In fact, and this is one of the points covered in *Mary for Evangelicals*, someone seriously reading the fathers is soon made aware that the medieval theologians of Western Europe did not invent Mariology, as is sometimes alleged. They expanded, clarified and deepened a structure well in place from the fifth century and even earlier.

Third, the remarkable papacy of John Paul II brought Mary to the global stage. Here was a man who was, as a Polish Catholic, passionately devoted to Mary in ways that North American evangelical Protestants would find difficult to accept. Think of the *M* on his papal shield, or his personal motto, “Totus Tuus,” which is an expression of devotion to Mary, for example. And here was a man who built bridges in all kinds of ways to evangelical Protestants. Who else but Karol Wojtyła would have (could have?) welcomed Billy Graham into Saint Anne’s, the largest Catholic Church in Kraków, to preach? John Paul was convinced that Mary ought not to be a symbol of division, but an opportunity for ecumenical dialogue, not only with orthodoxy, but also with the churches of the Reformation. Some of the current interest in Mary has to come down to the spreading of this vision.

Fourth, I think our culture’s general interest in spirituality—however that word is defined—contributes to this fascination also. Perhaps we could call this the Dan Brown factor, though it is clearly much older than *The Da Vinci Code*. It has encouraged believers and nonbelievers alike to dig into the historical sources of Christian faith. And while some of this has produced the “voodoo scholarship” that lies behind Brown’s novel, some of it has led to more serious explorations. And you can’t examine early Christianity and not see the interest in the Blessed Virgin Mary from at least the second century.

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TIM PERRY is an associate professor of theology at Providence College, Otterburne, Manitoba, Canada, and a columnist for *Faith Today* magazine. He is the author of *Radical Difference: A Defense of Hendrik Kraemer's Theology of Religions*.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO EXPLORE MARY SPECIFICALLY FOR EVANGELICALS?

Primarily because that is how I identify myself theologically. As an evangelical Protestant, I know on the one hand how suspicious we can be of Catholicism in general and Marian doctrine and devotion in particular. (And if I did not know before I began my project, I have been made well aware since. The Reformation may be five centuries past, but when it comes to conversations about Mary, it has sometimes felt to me like it happened yesterday.) On the other hand, I also know how deeply traditional our movement is when it comes to Jesus. Our traditionalism with respect to Jesus, further, is not simply theological. It is also devotional. We have a traditional Christology because we are convinced that in our experience of Jesus, we experience God.

I see a disjuncture there that needs to be addressed. If we are serious about keeping Christology, and more specifically, a high doctrine of incarnation, as one of the core beliefs of our movement, we need to think very carefully about Mary. Only she was the container of the uncontainable God, to use the language of orthodoxy. If we are serious about cultivating a piety that is centered on the present experience of the living Christ through the Holy Spirit, we need to think very carefully about Mary. Only she is presented in Luke and in John as the model disciple symbol of corporate faith. Evangelicals, for their own sake, can and should recover some of that language. Not to add to what we believe, but to deepen it.

If, in so doing, bridges are built to other Christian communities, that's a bonus!

WHY DO YOU SAY THAT AFTER WRITING THIS BOOK MARY IS EVEN MORE MYSTERIOUS TO YOU NOW THAN BEFORE?

I spent several hundred pages working through biblical material and the history of theological thought about this woman. And I feel as though I have yet to even scratch the surface. And the reason is straightforward. The mystery in which she is shrouded is the mystery of the incarnation. And that's a Mystery in the deepest sense of the word. It's not a puzzle to be solved or a complicated concept to be grasped. It's a Person to be worshiped. The Mystery's name is Jesus.

Mary remains mysterious for me because she refuses to remain the object of my study. She always leads me to Jesus in terms of doctrine; my work on Mary has deepened my understanding of the incarnation. And she leads me to Jesus in terms of devotion; as I have come to bless Mary—as Scripture says I should—I have come to find my love for Jesus strengthened, even reawakened. She steps aside in order that I might not dwell on her—whether in my head or in my heart—but on her Son.

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