


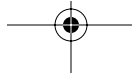


Foreword

ver twenty years ago I was honored to preach at the St. Patrick's Day celebration in the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Seattle. When I went home later in the year to Ireland, my mother asked me what I had been doing lately and I told her about the service. She looked at me in pain and said plaintively, "Billy, you didn't really do that now, did you?" At that moment, I knew I had crossed a line that thousands of evangelicals have crossed in the last generation. We had simply ceased to see Roman Catholicism as the theological enemy; we had entered into a whole new relationship in which neither side could ever be the same again.

We do not yet know the full story behind this extraordinary development. Of course, we can chart crucial causal factors that deserve mention. The collapse of Christianity in the West, the impact of the Ecumenical Movement, the consequences of Vatican II, the brilliance of Pope John Paul II, the cross-fertilization of scholarly collaboration, the quiet influence of personal friendships—these have systematically changed the landscape in which we now operate. Yet they are not the whole story, either humanly or spiritually speaking. It will take decades to unravel the work of the Holy Spirit in breaking down barriers and opening up new vistas in the Western church as a whole. Moreover, we know it will take decades to come to terms with the theological issues that will need to be revisited and reconceptualized on the other side of this informal ecumenical revolution.

In the work that has opened up before us, reflection on Mary is obviously a critical topic. Evangelicals are nervous about Mary; the old stereotype of Roman Catholics worshiping Mary is extremely difficult to dislodge from the imagination. Yet even before they get to the more substantial theological issues related to Mary, evangelicals recognize immediately that she is a pivotal agent in the Gospel narratives who cannot be ignored. This was recently brought home to me dramatically when one of my students noted how odd it was to preach about



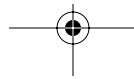


all the other leading figures in the Gospel materials (John the Baptist, the disciples, the rich young ruler, Herod and the like) and ignore Mary. Once this hit home, he began not only to preach about Mary but also to think seriously about the place of Mary in the Christian faith. He is now embarked on a study of the significance of Mary for Christian discipleship.

We might also rename the interest identified here as the significance of Mary for Christian piety. This is a natural place for evangelicals to begin; they will find it relatively easy to explore how the life of Mary speaks to their ongoing participation in salvation. They will naturally pursue this interest in terms of the texts that speak of Mary; so their first move will be to explore the full range of biblical texts. However, it is obvious that the theological work cannot stop there. On the one hand, there is a rich tradition of interpretation of the relevant texts that become pertinent if the full meaning of the text is to be mined. In the last generation, evangelicals have rightly turned to the whole history of exegesis as a source of insight. Thomas Oden's work on the exegesis and commentaries of the church fathers has proved to be especially important in this regard. Thus, the study of Mary in Scripture cannot in the end be confined to Scripture.

On the other hand, once the tradition of commentary is engaged, a whole network of theological issues quickly becomes visible. At one level, what is at issue is the place of the saints in the life of faith. Clearly Mary stands secure in any list of saints, so she opens a door that cannot be closed. How should we think of the saints? Should we be content with a minimalist vision that sees every believer as a saint? What do we do with those who exhibit conspicuous sanctity and thus become a unique source of inspiration? What is involved in the canonization of saints in Eastern Orthodoxy and in Roman Catholicism? How do we respond to claims about the intercession of the saints? What are the metaphysical and ontological assumptions at stake in the invocation of the saints? How are these assumptions to be articulated and defended? What vision of salvation undergirds the place of saints in faith and piety? What is the epistemological significance of the impact of saints (both negatively and positively)?

At another level, Mary becomes intrinsically important. When they think of the incarnation, many students initially think of Mary as a kind of vessel for the life of the Son. They reduce the issue to that of a "rent-a-womb" lease. However, this quickly dissolves once they begin to come to terms with a real incarnation in which the eternal Son of God assumes real human nature in the womb of Mary. At that point, the debate about Mary as *Theotokos* catches fire and the race is on to come to terms with the early christological debates. Questions about Mary quickly multiply thereafter. What light does she throw upon the nature of sin? What is the significance of her positive response to God in sorting through



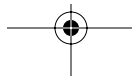


the tangled debate about grace and freedom? What is the import of Mary for such topics as sexual ethics, the gender of the ordained, the character of feminism and the nature of the church?

Tim Perry's contribution to the discussion about Mary is a great place for evangelicals to start in their exploration of Mary. His writing style is absolutely splendid. There is a wonderful economy and clarity of expression that is sustained from beginning to end. The whole flow of the narrative is very pleasing; and the transitions between units of thought and chapters work very well. I found myself both ready to move on and keen to see what was up ahead. The last section provides a very useful conceptual grid for thinking through the fundamental issues that need to be engaged in a theology of Mary.

Taken in the round, this is an outstanding piece of work. It sets out to provide an evangelical theology of Mary and succeeds admirably in this respect. I would expect this volume to become a landmark study of Mary from within the evangelical tradition. It should become the point of departure for future work on Mary within evangelicalism. Clearly such a text is badly needed, given the interest in Mary that has suddenly sprouted in the last fifty years. I can also see folk building on this work, say, on the significance of Mary for evangelism or spirituality.

This book will certainly be provocative to evangelicals; however, it is provocative in the right sort of way. It brings out how intimately Mary is tied to issues of Christology, and evangelicals are clearly on the side of orthodoxy here. It also implicitly sends the message that the debate has really taken off in the last generation and evangelicals can no longer stand on the sidelines. The book clearly sends a challenge to the Reformed version of evangelicalism in that it integrates the positive Marian commitments so well with that tradition, say, on predestination. The more telling provocation will be to those who have a leaner version of *sola scriptura*, and who thus are more ready to set Scripture against tradition rather than rely on tradition to interpret Scripture. In addition, I especially commend the way in which the argument draws on elements of the evangelical tradition, for instance, on the nature of intercession and on the place of the gifted intercessor. It will be very interesting to see how Anglican evangelicals in England will handle the book as a whole. I predict a certain reticence given the tensions with the Anglo-Catholics. However, this part of the work may open up further channels of conversation in Britain. Moving further afield, the book as a whole is certainly a model of what evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogue can be at its very best. Its primary contribution will lie in helping evangelicals get a grip on the relevant history and on the theological issues at stake. I will be very surprised if Roman Catholics do not welcome it for both its tone and content.





The big unanswered question here is what vision of the epistemology of theology is in play. In more conventional terms: is there any deep difference in the end between a Protestant and Roman Catholic position on Scripture? In this volume, both appear to involve an appeal to Scripture as primary and tradition as a secondary hermeneutical warrant; but they diverge on how the tradition is going to be identified. Another way to get at this is to note that many have charted a connection between Marian doctrine and the adoption of papal infallibility. It will be interesting to see whether or not Perry can avoid the move to adopt some vision of papal infallibility, once he fully internalizes the robust vision of Mary adopted here. It would, of course, have been a distraction for this question to be taken up and resolved in this volume. However, it is lurking below the surface, and it will need to become central in the future discussion that this book will rightly evoke.

William J. Abraham

