



Introduction

“SO HOW’S MARY TODAY?”

I hope readers do not blanch at the somewhat irreverent title. It summarizes nicely the project to follow, the wider cultural context of its publication and my own personal journey over the last four years. I consider these here in reverse order.

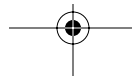
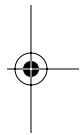
My Journey with Mary

In 2001 I published a column about Jesus’ sex in *Faith Today*, which reflected on Mary in God’s plan.¹ I contended that evangelical Protestant silence failed to reckon seriously with the biblical material. The first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel present her as powerful, fully in control of herself, her body and her sexuality. In her humble, yet confident, assent to God’s will, she conceived a child without a husband. Her response to Gabriel is the epitome of secure obedience, a goal toward which every believer ought to aspire. I concluded that evangelical Christians should say of Mary: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk 1:42).

Since the column’s publication, my preoccupation with Mary has grown. Two key events stick out. First, during a casual conversation a senior colleague confidently asserted that had he been at the Council of Ephesus (431), he would have supported the Nestorian party’s insistence on the Marian title “Christotokos.”² That a theologian trained at the evangelical movement’s best theological schools would expose his ignorance of the theological issue at stake, namely, the unity of Jesus’ person, suggested to me that the lack of Marian reflection in

¹Tim Perry, “Ask a Theologian,” *Faith Today*, November/December 2001, p. 46.

²For a full account of the Nestorian controversy and the Council of Ephesus, see Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 1:353-67.





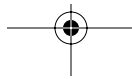
modern evangelical theology was more than imagined. In this instance it appeared to have led to an impoverished and possibly unorthodox Christology. Second, the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology's annual conference in June 2002 invited speakers from across the theological spectrum to write on the theme "Mary: The Mother of God." Timothy George's "The Blessed Virgin Mary in Evangelical Perspective" and Jaroslav Pelikan's "Most Generations Shall Call Me Blessed" underscored the relative silence of Protestant theology generally and evangelical theology particularly.³ I concluded that the perceived gap was real and needed to be filled.

Armed more with passion than knowledge, I pursued this elusive woman, hoping to introduce her to an audience unfamiliar with and suspicious of her apart from Advent and Christmas. My search led, eventually, to Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario, where I enjoyed the institution's hospitality as a sabbatical scholar for the 2004-2005 school year. In my opinion, no library in Canada could have served me better. Closeted in my studio, I read familiar biblical passages far more closely than ever before, followed by a reading of the fathers and the theologians of the Western tradition from the medieval era to the present. As I did, a humorous image captivated me. While we theologians debated perpetual virginity, immaculate conception, bodily assumption and other such matters, Mary sat above us, smiling and saying nothing, undisturbed and utterly mysterious.

A colleague at Saint Paul's would often ask me, "So how's Mary today?" At the start of my sabbatical, I would detail where my research had taken me since our last conversation, and this in turn would lead to substantive bibliographic discussions and theological debate that have made this book far better than it would otherwise have been. Toward the end of my sabbatical, however, when the question was asked, all I could answer was, "She's fine. I'm not so sure about me." I was exhausted.

However tiring, my journey has been fascinating, even entrancing at points. I have discovered much about Marian doctrine and devotion that I did not know before, grasped more deeply those aspects that I did know, and come to appreciate and understand—though not to embrace—a piety that for some Christians deepens devotion to Jesus. In a peculiarly Protestant way, I have come to share the attraction that Mary has continued to exert across numerous divides created by religion, confession, gender, culture, geography and history. But do I know

³Both essays were presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology held at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., and published in *Mary: Mother of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 100-122, 1-35.





Mary? Hardly. There is one more book on the market—my own—and she's even more mysterious to me now than before.

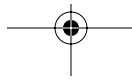
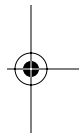
I have come to learn, gladly, that this is the point. Christians East and West, Roman Catholic and Protestant, are fascinated with Mary because we are fascinated with Jesus. She directs the faithful away from herself, always to her Son. This has proven to be the most profound (and intensely personal) discovery made throughout this project; I trust it is also one for readers who complete this book. At its intellectual and devotional best, thought and practice about Mary is not really about her. It is about Jesus. It is about understanding more deeply the mysterious reality that is the assumption of human nature by God the Son. It is about seeing—rather than merely conceptualizing—the gospel that he brought, a gospel in which God freely elects and humans freely receive. It is about emulating the life of a disciple wholly devoted to his service, even when the requirements and implications of such service are unknown or unclear.

Mary and North American Evangelical Protestantism

Another happy discovery made along the way was that my own interest in Mary was coming to be shared by North American Protestant theologians. Over the ten years or so, a trickle of Marian interest has steadily turned into a stream and shows signs of continued increase for some time. Over the last two years, this fascination has generated cover stories in *Christianity Today*, *Christian Century*, and even *Time*.⁴ I leave it to the sociologists of religion to seek out and explain the causes of this growth. I wish to highlight one: what Timothy George calls an “ecumenism of the trenches.”

Against an increasingly hostile, intolerant and powerful secularism, Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants in North America have found themselves thrown together, allies in the fight for the lives of those whom the culture regards as disposable. In front of abortion clinics, courthouses, legislative assemblies, and even in jail cells and at adoption centers and hospices, many of us made a radical discovery: we are one in Christ. Our unity is a gift of God already given; our disunity reflects the all-too-human ability to abuse, ignore and deny that which God has already done. In this case, the Father has elected one people, saved them through the work of one Lord and united them by one Holy Spirit. Ecumenism is not about negotiating a series of treaties among divided

⁴Timothy George, “The Blessed Evangelical Mary,” *Christianity Today*, December 2003, online at <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/012/1.34.html>> (accessed April 20, 2005); Jason Byassee, “What About Mary?” *Christian Century*, December 14, 2004, pp. 28-33; and David Van Biema, “Hail, Mary,” *Time*, March 21, 2005, pp. 48-55.





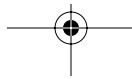
churches, but about those churches learning to accept what God has accomplished and discerning together what unity-in-the-truth means and implies.

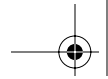
Unity-in-the-truth in the light of our disunity means that serious disagreements persist over just what is the truth, and as a result visible unity is at present and for the foreseeable future impossible. Two decades of increased cooperation on issues of social justice can neither undo nor should they gloss over the Protestant Reformation. Mutual suspicion and recrimination may be subsiding, but doctrinal differences—serious, church-dividing ones—remain, especially for those of us who are convinced that truth is unity's basis and goal. Mary has from the Reformation's second generation been a lightning rod for debating the nature of salvation, hermeneutics and the mediation of grace from God to God's people, to name but three of the more serious issues.

But unity-in-the-truth as a gift of God already accomplished in the cross and resurrection and poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit also means that what unites—namely, the triune God—is infinitely greater than what divides. Taking this to heart, growing numbers of traditionally minded Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians in North America have set about to articulate as clearly and as charitably as possible where we can agree and where we cannot. This has led to many fruitful semiformal and informal conversations that in turn have led not only to greater mutual understanding and appreciation, but also to a deeper perception of just how intractable some of these difficulties, humanly speaking, are. Still, conversations are ongoing, and God has been known to work miracles. I hope that this book helps to contribute to these conversations and at least does not provide the Holy Spirit with another human impediment to be removed if the visible unity for which our Lord prayed is to become a reality.

Having said all that, I recognize that what I have written will not resonate with many in the global evangelical Christian family. My perception of the way things actually are arises from and is directed to my North American context. I recognize that brothers and sisters in contexts where Catholics and Protestants are rivals will perceive matters differently. To be blunt: in North America, Mary is not nearly as controversial, polemical and even intimidating as she is in, say, Northern Ireland, Latin America and some parts of Asia. I hope that, had I written from one of those situations, I would have written substantially the same book; I recognize, however, that I would have said some things (very) differently.

I also acknowledge that I run the risk of being accused of being out of touch with the concerns of evangelical Christians in those kinds of situations. Granting that in at least some cases these accusations will be legitimate, I invite these as yet unknown critics to read, to reflect and to consider whether there is anything applicable in what follows before they dismiss it entirely.





Outline of Study

This brings us, finally, to a summary of what is to come. I have followed a simple method rooted in my own theological and ecclesial convictions: Scripture, tradition and reason. Following the Protestant Reformers, I take as axiomatic that Holy Scripture is divinely inspired and is therefore the necessary, sufficient, clear and authoritative guide for theological construction.⁵

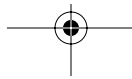
I therefore begin with the Mary in the New Testament. Paul presents Jesus' mother as an anonymous guarantor of his Jewish humanity (chap. 1). Mark names Mary but is ambiguous about her character; she may well be one of Jesus' opponents (chap. 2). On the surface Matthew's Mary is not so much a character as a device to display Joseph's virtue; nevertheless his treatment of Mary's scandalous pregnancy moves her out from the shadows of anonymity (chap. 3). Mary is three dimensional only in Luke, where she is a prophet, mother and disciple (chap. 4). In this threefold portrayal, I discern a move toward a symbolic representation of the corporate faithful that comes to the fore in the Johannine literature (chap. 5). Whether at the wedding banquet or the cross, Mary symbolizes the corporate faithful's response to Jesus; in its canonical context Revelation provides the most symbolically charged portrayal of Mary: Heavenly Queen.

Of course, the Reformation's call to *sola scriptura* neither means nor implies that Scripture may be interpreted rightly by anyone, being guided solely by reason and/or the Holy Spirit. Rather, contemporary interpretation of Scripture must be tested against two secondary sources, the first being tradition.⁶ Scripture is not to be interpreted randomly or arbitrarily, but within the context of the historical continuity of the Christian church—what C. S. Lewis calls “mere Christianity.”

When it comes to Mary, unfortunately, the label *tradition* casts a wide net, for no woman has been the subject of more (and more sustained) thought over the last millennium and a half. I have found it necessary, therefore, to truncate my discussion more than I would have liked. A survey of depictions of Mary in early Christian art has been bypassed entirely, and Marian piety is mentioned only when and where it was a stimulus to doctrinal development. My focus is

⁵On this point I wholly agree with the definition of inspiration offered by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994), 3.2.106: “To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written and no more.”

⁶For a recent articulation of the relationship between Scripture and tradition by evangelical and Roman Catholic theologians that clearly delineates points of agreement and disagreement, see Evangelicals and Catholics Together, “Your Word Is Truth,” *First Things*, August/September 2002, pp. 38-43.





doctrinal. Even this account, however, is far from exhaustive. Eastern theologians after John of Damascus are not mentioned at all, and I have hit upon only the most significant Western ones. I have been forced by the limitations of space, time and personal competence to paint with a broad brush. Nevertheless, I hope that the portrait of development presented in part two is fundamentally sound.

Chapters six and seven exposit the church fathers. As the heritage of the undivided church and a point of contact that unites diverse members of the Christian family, the fathers provide a real, secondary guide and authority. I hope to show in these two chapters that Mariology was largely in place by the end of the patristic era. The developments of the medieval era (chap. 8) merely clarify, expand and intensify the doctrine that is already present. The Reformation and its aftermath drive chapter nine. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, similar concerns led to diametrically opposed strategies: silence and exaltation. Chapter ten concludes part two by bringing twentieth-century documents into consideration. I argue that a confluence of factors has brought Mary to the forefront of ecumenical (and especially Catholic-evangelical) dialogue.

Finally a persuasive interpretation of the data must be offered. This is the task undertaken in part three. In chapter eleven, I examine the possibility, ground and starting point of a Mariology that grants pride of place to Scripture and legitimate, but less significant, weight to tradition, concluding that a christologically grounded Mariology that begins with Mary's motherhood is not only possible but also a necessary dogmatic enterprise. Chapter twelve then offers a prequel of sorts, discussing Mary's place vis-à-vis the doctrine of election, while chapter thirteen builds on chapter twelve, discussing Mary's relationship to the church. In each chapter, traditional Protestant objections will be squarely faced. Thus, chapter eleven deals with Mary's perpetual virginity while chapter twelve addresses immaculate conception, mediation and coredemption, and chapter thirteen takes up her bodily assumption, heavenly reign and intercession.

