

The Virgin Mary (2).

Without compromising the core principles of the Reformation - grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone - can we honour and still understand the role of the blessed Virgin Mary in the history of redemption? To phrase the question in another way: Why does the Reformed tradition show little or no interest in the virgin Mary? Are we afraid to praise and esteem the virgin Mary, lest we be accused of sympathising with the church of Rome? Yet when we recite the Apostles' Creed in church services, Mary's name is mentioned. We confess that the virgin birth is a foundational truth of Christianity. We accept as Gospel truth Article 18 of The Belgic Confession, which states... "The Son took the 'form of a servant' and was made in the 'likeness of man' truly assuming a real human nature, with all its weaknesses, except for sin; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of Holy Spirit without male participation" (Cf. Heidelberg Cat. L.D. 14, q.a. 35). In his 1930 major treatise on the virgin birth of Christ, J. Gresham Machen, founding president of Westminster Theological Seminary, wrote: "Let it never be forgotten that the virgin birth is an integral part of the New Testament witness about Christ, and that that witness is strongest when it is taken as it stands...The blessed story of the miracle in the virgin's womb is intrinsic to the good news of the Gospel. Only one Jesus is presented in the Word of God; and that Jesus did not come in the world by ordinary generation, but was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the Holy Ghost."

But perhaps we are more like the 16th century Scottish Reformer John Knox, whose deep anti-Mary-ism is shown by an incident that happened in his early life as a Protestant. Having been delivered from "the puddle of papistry," as he called it, he was captured by the French and endured for nineteen months the brutality and confinement as a galley slave. A Scottish commentator said about Knox's horrendous suffering, "Chained to a floating hell, he began his apprenticeship as an apostle of the liberty of the children of God." It seems that he was allowed to write at times. On one occasion, he tells us, the Catholic chaplain of Knox's ship held up a beautifully painted wooden statue of the virgin Mary and encouraged Knox and the other prisoners to genuflect and show proper reference. When the statue was forcibly placed in Knox's hand for him to kiss it, he grabbed it and immediately threw it overboard into the sea. "Let our Lady now save herself," he said. "She is light enough; let her learn to swim!" Never again, Knox adds, was he forced to "idolatry" by kissing and bowing to the image of the virgin Mary.

The Reformers' Reject the Veneration of the virgin Mary

The severe criticism of the Reformers was not due to the attention paid to the Mary by the church of Rome. It was due to the extravagant devotional practices and distortions, which led to scandal and revulsion crying out for the need of reform. Late medieval abuses in the faith life of the church of Rome appeared to the Protestant reformers to concentrate too much on Mary thus detracting from

the Saviour's redemption of humanity. One example of abuse was the belief that the virgin Mary's milk was food for the soul. Sometime in the 12th century St. Bernard de Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercian order, claimed that he had an extraordinary vision in which he saw the Mother of God nourishing his own sinful soul with loving milk. Since Mary's milk was Christ's food, her milk becomes in this sense one of the aspects of Christ's humanity. Since Christ was a baby like all babies, He too was in need of His mother for nourishment. Both Mary as the nourisher and Mary as the life-giver to all humankind was seen, therefore, as nourishing the sinful soul with her loving milk. Mary's milk was considered, together with her tears, among the most precious blessings of Christianity. Marina Warner, in her exhaustive book on the virgin Mary, *Alone of All Her Sex*, provides a list of cities that possessed relics of Mary's milk. In Bethlehem, tourists can still visit the Milk Grotto, where Mary spilled a few drops while she was nursing, and where, to promote lactation, cakes of the milky soil can be bought. Desiderius Erasmus, the eminent 16th century Dutch humanist, made fun of the many sites in which Mary's milk was venerated, attended, he said, by custodians "holding out a begging-board like those used in Germany by toll-collectors on bridges." John Calvin also raged against this surfeit of milk: "There is no town so small, nor convent...so mean that it does not display some of the virgin's milk...There is so much that if the holy virgin had been a cow...all her life she would have been hard put to it to yield such great quantity."

Another example of spiritual abuse was the belief in the ongoing intercessory prayer of Mary and the saints. At times it had become scandalous in the Middle Ages, through a deadly mixture of superstition, heresy, and commercialization. Consequently, it was singled out as a special object of criticism in the confessions of the Protestant Reformation. The Geneva Confession of 1536, citing the Lord's Prayer as the divinely given model of how to pray, asserts, in opposition to Roman Catholic doctrine and practice: "We reject the intercession of the saints as superstition invented by men contrary to Scripture, for the reason that it proceeds from mistrust of the sufficiency of the intercession of Jesus Christ."

The Views of Martin Luther and John Calvin

The Reformers resisted the deification and veneration of a human being. Luther gave up Marian intercession when he could not find explicit scriptural warrant for it in the Bible. Yet we need to remember that one of the most important images for Luther is the one of the servant mother Mary, who in humility proclaims God's love and affirmation of His people. He believed that the virgin Mary conceived Christ in her mind by faith before she conceived Him bodily in the womb. He wrote: "Because Mary the Virgin conceived and gave birth to Christ, therefore Christ was a real, bodily visible human being, and not only a spiritual reality-yet she conceived him and bore him spiritually. How so? Thus: she believed the word of the angel, that she was to become pregnant and give birth. With that very faith in the angel's word, she conceived and gave birth

to Christ in her heart spiritually, at the same time that she conceived and gave birth to him in a bodily way."

Calvin also highly esteemed the virgin Mary. He refers to her as "the treasurer of grace," the one who kept faith as a deposit. Through her, Calvin says, we have received this precious gift from God. This is how Calvin commends a proper reverence for Mary while warning against the excessive devotion of Catholic piety: "She deserves to be called blessed, for God has accorded her a singular distinction, to prepare his Son for the world, in which she was spiritually reborn. To this day, we cannot enjoy the blessing brought us in Christ without thinking at the same time of that which God gave us as adornment and honor to Mary, in willing her to be the mother of his only-begotten Son."

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)

In the tradition of Calvin, the influential Dutch Reformed [CRC] theologian Herman Bavinck, strongly opposed the veneration of the virgin Mary. However, he still saw the preparation and fulfilment of the incarnation in the election and favour shown to Mary as the Mother of Jesus. Because of the virgin Mary's vital role in the incarnation, she is blessed among women; she received an honour which was given to no other creature. She is highly honoured with undeserved grace, above all peoples and angels. And Bavinck comments that whoever denies it does not take seriously the incarnation of God.

Karl Barth (1886-1968)

The Swiss theologians Karl Barth, who developed the so-called neo-orthodox theology that had a real impact on western theology of the 20th century, called the Mariology of the church of Rome its "central doctrine."

He said that its complex Mariology contrasts sharply with the virtual absence of Mary in Protestant evangelical thought. The gulf seemed to Barth so wide that he wrote: "In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest."

The Virgin Mary: the First Pentecostal

In our time, some Pentecostals have given the virgin Mary a vital role in their theology. An article on the virgin Mary in the Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements (pp.584f.) describes her as "the first Pentecostal." The author says that she is closely associated with the Holy Spirit, for Luke specifically mentions that she and other women were present in the Upper Room with the apostles prior to the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Feast of Pentecost. The author also argues that the coming of the Spirit at the time of Jesus's conception was a foreshadowing of the coming of the Spirit upon the entire

community on Pentecost. "Thus Mary is regarded as one of the first to receive the 'baptism in the Spirit' even prior to Pentecost."

But how could Mary be the "first Pentecostal?" The Bible is silent about this description of her. Abraham Kuyper comments on Acts 1: 14 that we find in this text that the Apostles are named first, then the other women, and finally the mother of Christ. The Apostles, neither on Pentecost nor any other day, ever mentioned Mary's name in preaching Christ. Neither in the Acts nor in the Epistles of the Apostles is any kind of honour ascribed to her. Her opinion is not asked for upon any occasion. She disappeared from the Scriptures inconspicuously.

The Virgin Mary in the New Testament

The sober witness of Scripture versus the exuberance of the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary is a remarkable contrast. The actual amount of direct information found about Mary in the Bible is very small. She is mentioned in all four gospels and alluded to by Paul (Gal.4: 4). Outside the dialogue with the angel and "the Magnificat," Mary utters a grand total of twenty-two words in recorded Scripture. She was a chaste, godly woman. She was a virgin at the time of the angel's visitation (Matt.1:18; :Luke 1:26-27) But the Bible in no way presents the idea that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life (Matt.12:46; John 2:12; 7:5). She was also steeped in Scripture. She also saw herself in need of salvation and a Saviour (Luke 1:47-50). She was uniquely involved in the life of the Lord, present at important times in His private and public life. She appears in the Gospels as a woman who is highly esteemed, acts like a normal mother, is spiritually more responsive than others but needs to grow as a woman of faith. Mary is never exalted, never venerated, never in any way, shape, or form placed in a position where she could possibly obscure the Christian's single-minded devotion to her Son (Mark 3:31-35).

The New Testament is the story about Jesus, the Saviour and the Light of the world. The account of Simeon meeting the infant Jesus and Mary and Joseph in the temple illustrates this truth. Simeon blessed them, and told Mary about what was in store for her. A sword will pierce her soul (Luke 2:35). The fulfilment of this prophecy was during the crucifixion. It was there that Mary would see her Son die on the cross an agonizing death. The Gospels don't exclude Mary from the history of redemption, but the attention is not drawn away from Jesus, because all what Mary did and said was a witness to the mystery of the incarnation.

The Magnificat

We cannot remove Mary from the context of the Gospel. The miracle of salvation - the coming of the Son of God - does not happen apart from Mary, but via the annunciation and also via her response, her readiness to be the servant of the

Lord. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Mary is also in the spotlight because of her faith, her joy and praise. When she visits Elizabeth, the latter speaks of the privilege that the mother of the Lord comes to her (Luke 1:43) and calls her "blessed...among women"(Luke 1:42). And Mary responds with the Magnificat. The Magnificat is Mary's spontaneous hymn of praise of God taken directly from Scripture (Luke 1: 46-55). This hymn closes with the words: " He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even has he said to our fathers." These words are an allusion to Genesis 22: 17-18. After Abraham offered to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God's request, God promised Abraham "...through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed..." If there is any doubt about Mary's acquaintance with the Old Testament, that should be dispelled by a study of the Magnificat. It catches not only the spirit but also the vocabulary of Hannah's prayer at the dedication of Samuel (1 Sam.2:1-11). The parallels are obvious as each of these women, though in very different circumstances, celebrated God's gift of a son.

For Martin Luther the Magnificat had a vital place in the church's liturgy. Luther wrote about the Magnificat, "it would be good if it were sung twice" in church services. Centuries later the American Lutheran theologians David S. Yeago wrote: "The Magnificat is the church's song because it is the song of the specific Jewish woman Mary, whom God's election and promise have set in the midst of the church as the prototype of the church's faith and prophecy - and therefore as the archsinger of the praise of God's mercy in Christ." Yeago suggests that we should sing the Magnificat at home, and sing it at Evening Prayer in the congregation. Luther also urged us to pray the Magnificat. He wrote: "If you want to pray for all on earth, take the Our Father. Here [in the Magnificat] you have the general thanksgiving for all things, also for your own affairs." For Luther, Mary embodied a humble servant of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ. For him Mary affirms a theology of grace that reveals our unrighteousness yet God's affirmation of His people under the cross.

The New Testament testifies that the choice of Mary to become the mother of the Son of God was an act of God's mercy. The angel's annunciation is not a proposal, but a word of sovereign grace revealed to Mary. Her response of faith to the word of grace, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" is not to achieve merit. Mary's faith is the gift of God's grace (cf. Eph.2:8,9) She is the object of God's gracious predestination, and this divine choice is the source of both her blessedness and her fertility. So when we praise and esteem Mary, it is God whom we praise for His gracious favour shown to her.

Conclusion

I suggest that we should not be afraid to praise and esteem the virgin Mary. I believe that as Reformed Christians we need to recover a truly Biblical appreciation of Mary. Mary does not figure in the story of salvation only through

the bare fact of her pregnancy; becoming the mother of the Son of God makes her "blessed among women." Without compromising the heritage of the Reformation we can understand and honour the virgin Mary in ways which are Scripturally based. Everything depends how we talk and write about her. But one thing we may never do. We may not think of the mother of the Son of God in isolation from her Son, an object of devotion by herself. We must refuse to think of Mary as the example of the cooperation of man with grace. How can Mary cooperate with Jesus while she herself needs salvation? She is neither our co-redemptrix nor our intercessor. The New Testament proclaims that Christ is the only mediator. The two opposites in redemptive history are not Eve and Mary, but Adam and Christ. When the apostles preached, they proclaimed that there is only one name under heaven given to men by, which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). The apostle Paul clearly states: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Tim. 2:5) Consequently, with the Reformers we must continue to insist that the heart of the Gospel is not only the Scriptures alone, and by faith alone, nor through our merit but there is another key phrase as well: Christ alone.

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