What about Mary?

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The name of the Theotokos expresses the whole mystery of God's saving dispensation. —St. John of Damascus (655-750)

In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest. —Karl Barth (1886-1968)

There would not seem to be much chance of reconciling these two descriptions of Mary, the mother of Jesus. For John Damascene, a touchstone figure for Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians, calling Mary the *theotokos*, "God-bearer," or more provocatively, "Mother of God," is a thumbnail description of the entire saving work of Christ. The Council of Ephesus in 431 codified *theotokos* as Christian dogma, insisting that anyone who fails to affirm Mary as the Mother of God commits a heresy—that of denying that the one who gestated in Mary's womb is God. Such descriptions of Mary vindicated and encouraged popular Christian devotion to Mary, including the invocation of her aid in prayer, the praise of her in liturgy, and the depiction of and devotion to her in icons and statuary.

It is precisely such practices that Karl Barth railed against. For him, as for most heirs of the Reformation, such attention to Mary is an extrabiblical intrusion into Christian faith that deflects attention from Jesus. Devotion to Mary may well land its practitioners in idolatry, leading them to worship one who is not God, and who called herself merely a humble "servant of the Lord" (Luke 1:38).

Much of what being Protestant has historically meant has involved a protest against the Catholic devotion to Mary. Nevertheless, the Second Vatican Council declared in *Lumen Gentium* that Mary is a potential ecumenical bridge, a source of the future unity of all Christians. That suggestion might seem either ridiculous or insulting to Protestants. But recently there has been a flurry of publications by Protestants on Mary, works that suggest she could be an ecumenical bridge—or at least that the Protestant aversion to Marian devotion is eroding.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa, a biblical scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary, has led the charge with *Mary*: *Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (1995) and with a

collection of essays she coedited called *Blessed One*: *Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (2002). Meanwhile, Robert Jenson's monumental two-volume *Systematic Theology* (1997 and 1999) and another collection of coedited essays, *Mary*: *Mother of God* (2004), has given a certain pride of place to the Mother of God.

Church historians of all stripes have long granted that Marian teaching and devotion dates from the earliest days of the church. And they grant that devotion to Mary was not discarded even by the leading Reformation figures Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. The fruit of ecumenical labor on this topic can be seen in such balanced and helpful resources as *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of the Saints* (1999), a product of years of dialogue between French Catholics and Protestants that calls for both Catholic and Protestant "conversions" on the subject.

The most interesting new book on the *theotokos* in terms of its form is *Mary*: *A Catholic-Evangelical Debate*, by two graduates of the fundamentalist Bob Jones University, one now an evangelical Episcopalian and the other a Catholic convert and professional apologist (2003). Dwight Longenecker (the Catholic) and David Gustafson (a lawyer by trade) manage to defend their positions tenaciously while being gracious toward one another.

Many Protestants who have plunged into the thought and spiritual practice of the ancient church have found a Mary more appealing to them than she was to their forebears. Kathleen Norris, a Protestant participant in Benedictine monastic life, wrote the foreword to the most recent Gaventa book. She notes that she was not familiar enough with the Bible to know where the monks' nightly vespers prayer comes from, and only later learned that the stirring words of the Magnificat come straight from Mary's lips in the scriptures. It took Catholic monks to reintroduce Norris to one of the treasured practices of Protestant Christians—memorizing and singing scripture.

My own participation in such monastic worship has also sent me back to the scriptures to ponder Mary's place in them—more prominent than I had thought on the basis of her place in the churches that reared me. Yet those same monks whose chanting is so beautiful engage in a most un-Protestant practice: they turn and face a statue of the Virgin with her child on her lap. They sing, "Hail holy queen, mother all-merciful, our light, our sweetness, and our hope we hail you. To you we cry, poor banished children of Eve, to you we send our sighs, while mourning and weeping, in this lowly valley of tears. Turn then your eyes, most gracious advocate, oh turn your

eyes, so full of love and tenderness, upon us sinners."

The description of Mary as "our light, our sweetness, and our hope" seems to offer her praises scripturally reserved for Jesus. The song concludes, "and Jesus, the most blessed fruit of your virgin womb, show us, when this earthly exile is ended. Oh clement, oh loving, oh most sweet, virgin Mary." Jesus seems an afterthought in the song, just as his place in the statuary seems secondary—the lesser god on the lap of the greater. The prayer is a beautiful way to end a day of contemplative prayer, with candles flickering on Mary's bronzed face. But is it true ?

We might begin considering the place of Mary in devotion by noting some ways *not* to renew a discussion about her. We ought not speak as though all that matters about her is the virgin birth. This question, central in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early 20th century, treats Mary herself as a side issue, a mere conduit for the one she bore. A second way not to proceed is to use Mary to say anew that which Protestants already say. For example, when Luther treated Mary he tended to depict her as a model for justification by grace alone—that is, as further evidence for what he already believed. If we are to attend to Mary anew, the effort should yield something fresh, something neglected in our own churches and lives.

The most important contribution of these recent reflections is to give fresh attention to the incarnation. The Council of Ephesus insisted that what Christians hold true about God is that God is not unwilling to get involved in the flesh and blood of human life. The Christian God is enwombed. To say otherwise is to introduce some sort of split in the Son himself, to suggest that the man Jesus is born of Mary and the divinity is not (perhaps the divinity is added later or not at all). To call Mary *theotokos* is to safeguard the fleshiness of God, and so the entire saving work of God in Christ.

As the Catholic theologian Lawrence Cunningham puts it, there is an "almost outrageous particularity" about saying that God's presence in the world is localized in the womb of an unmarried teenage girl from Nazareth. Anyone can claim God as "almighty" or "omnipotent" or "omniscient" or whatever philosophical word we wish to append to him. To claim that God is enfleshed, that God has a birth and death date, that God is Jewish, is the scandal of particularity to which Christian faith is committed. Claims about Mary are ways to keep from smoothing out the scandal. As Luther said, "Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God." She also taught him the songs, stories and practices of the Jewish people

whose messiah he would later claim to be. Similarly, Charles Wesley (as Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright points out) praised God as one “who gave all things to be, what a wonder to see, him born of his creature and nursed on her knee.” In Mary the church ties a string around its finger to remember the particularity of its claims about God. (John Henry Newman argued more than a century ago that the churches that had maintained strong doctrines on Mary are those that had not abandoned strong christological ones.)

Not surprisingly, this string has led Christians to focus intense scrutiny on Mary in her own right. The early church assumed that to bear a sinless child she had to be sinless as well, and Roman Catholics codified this as dogma in the 19th century in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—the claim that by a special work of God, Mary was spared any stain of original sin.

Protestants argue instead that it is Mary’s ordinariness that keeps the incarnation scandalous, not her sinlessness. That God is born in the midst of a quite average life is the claim Mary safeguards.

A focus on Mary also gives us a fresh approach to scripture. A standard Protestant objection to Catholic Mariology is that she is not as important in scripture as she has become in ecclesial traditions. To a degree this is true. No one can argue for her immaculate conception, her assumption into heaven, or her coronation as heaven’s queen directly from scripture. Yet argument over those points has clouded other scriptural claims about Mary. What she lacks in quantity of appearance in scripture she makes up for in quality. Luke’s telling of the gospel begins with her, and her *fiat* (“let it be” in Latin) to Gabriel’s announcement of God’s incarnational intent opens the way for a new eruption of grace into the world. She is present at and indeed an instigator of Jesus’ first miracle at Cana in Galilee (John 2: 1-11). She and other women are present at the cross, when the male disciples flee. Depending on how one reads the resurrection narratives, she is present there too (Mark 15:40; 47).

It is striking that Mary is in the upper room at Pentecost—the only woman present there who is named—to receive the outpouring of God’s Spirit at the birth of the church (Acts 1:14). When Paul makes his one oblique mention of Jesus’ mother it is to point to her as a sign that he was indeed born, and so was genuinely human (Gal. 4:4). To cite a more contested passage, her image in Revelation 12:17 as a woman clothed with the sun with a crown of stars in the agony of giving birth to a son who will rule the nations is, at the very least, impressive. Mary’s appearances in scripture

are indeed limited, but they are tied to crucial moments in salvation history, without which there would be no church.

Scripture presents Mary as an important agent in her own right, not just as the mother of her son. If her Magnificat is any indication, she is an extraordinary reader of the Bible, lyrically weaving together Jewish scripture into a new song that is perhaps the most frequently sung canticle in church history. We are twice told that she “treasures” the words entrusted to her by angels and shepherds and that she “ponders these things” in her heart (Luke 2:19, 51). Aged Simeon promises her that her child’s destiny to be for the “falling and rising of many in Israel” will cause a “sword to pierce” her own soul too—suggesting that Mary’s importance continues in the saga of salvation long after her child’s birth (Luke 2:34-35).

Mary’s interaction with her son on the cross is striking, since one of his final acts is devoted to naming John as her new son, and her as John’s mother. In this and other scenes she is depicted as an image of the church, the mother of believers, and one to whose care Jesus is devoted to his dying breath. Scripture presents a vision of Mary as one whose importance is not limited to the Annunciation and to Christmas, but extends into the life of the church.

At the same time, scripture also portrays Mary as misunderstanding her son on several occasions. A precocious Jesus seems exasperated with her failure to understand that he would rather be in his father’s house than traveling home from Jerusalem with his parents (Luke 2:49). Jesus speaks to Mary harshly at Cana before granting her wish (John 2:4). Later, Mary and fellow family members come to collect Jesus when a crowd accuses him of being crazy in Mark 3:21 and 31-35. Jesus redirects a passerby’s blessing on Mary to all those who do the will of God (Luke 11:27-28).

Nevertheless, Mary is far more than an eyewitness to key kerygmatic events and a crucial early theologian and church leader. She is “a space for the spaceless one,” to quote an Orthodox prayer. Her womb was the physical site of the enfleshment of God. This leads Robert Jenson to a conclusion that may sting Protestant sensibilities—we ought to ask Mary to pray for us.

Jenson argues that death does not sever the bonds of the body of Christ—as even most Protestant eucharistic prayers makes clear. To ask for a departed saint’s prayer, then, is not in principle different from asking another Christian for her

prayers. We hold that the saints are not simply gone but are ever alive to God, and so we ought also consider them to be available as intercessors, and powerful ones at that.

This is precisely the point at which Protestant theologians get most nervous. Such a request of prayer from Mary smacks of an effort to gain divine favor by some route other than Christ—the height of idolatry. To prop the door open here even an inch threatens to bring back the medieval system of veneration of scores of saints in an effort to earn the favor of a distant and foreboding Jesus. Hence we slam the door shut. To honor Christ, the saints must be excluded.

Yet this needn't be so. Jenson insists that "the saints are not our way to Christ; he is our way to them." Each saint's particular graces can be seen as reflections of the grace of Christ, whose greatness grows in our eyes as we attend to the saints' individual stories. The strengthening of the bonds of the body of Christ, stretching as they do across the divide between earthly life and death, should bring tribute to Christ rather than discredit.

Attention to Mary has been embraced by some theologians as part of a feminist strategy of overcoming patriarchy. They point out that the Protestant rejection of Mary has meant losing the powerful woman who gave birth to Christianity in the beginning. As Reformed theologian Christopher Morse notes, at the "most important event of all history the mighty male is excluded!" Simeon the New Theologian argued in the 11th century that God had already made a child from no parents (Adam) and had made one from a male with no female (Eve). God often makes children from two parents, male and female (the rest of us). One thing only remained for God to do—to make a child from a female alone. Hence it was fitting for God to work through a woman, Mary, without aid of a man. Perhaps God's enfleshment in human history via a woman alone should be seen as a resource for feminism, if used carefully.

On the other hand, some theologians regard an emphasis on Mary's submission, self-effacement and purity as a potential step backward for women. And there is always the danger of treating Mary as a "blank screen, a perfect canvas for our projections," according to the historian Shari Thurer.

If there is a common theme that resonates in Protestant attempts to recoup something lost in the rejection of Mary, it is the description of her as the archetypical

Christian, the mother of believers. “We too are ‘virgins’ who are incapable of bearing God,” until God deigns to be born in our ordinariness as in Mary’s, argues Presbyterian theologian Cynthia Rigby.

Sarah Coakley articulates a particular kind of mariological feminism by defending *kenosis*, self-emptying, against feminist objections. With mystical theologians throughout the history of the church, Coakley argues that self-emptying does not mean submission or loss of self; it means growing into the fullness of creation, becoming as radiantly full of the divine presence as was Mary at the ninth month of her pregnancy.

So what can we conclude? May a Protestant sing praise of Mary at compline, and “hail” her as a “holy queen”? Yes, we can participate in Marian liturgy that reflects her crucial role in scripture, that protects christological confession, and that directs our attention to Christ in new ways. Such a yes will necessarily entail a no to practices that ignore the rich texture of scripture’s portrayal of her, that attend to her instead of her son, and that offer back doors for patriarchy’s return. In this area, as in others, Protestants have often thrown out the baby with the bathwater.

A friend of mine, speaking of the Catholic move to prune excessive Marian doctrine and practice after Vatican II by moving her statue to the side, observed that Protestants moved her out the door altogether. We can return Mary to the pew beside us, in the communion of saints, in our highest dogmatic confessions—the apple of our eye as the first to believe in God’s new work in Christ. Not to do so is to lose something at the heart of things. As Reformed theologian Willie Jennings says, “Salvation begins with Mary’s yes.”

If that’s true, Protestants can talk about her at other times of the year than at Christmas and perhaps Mother’s Day. Lutheran theologian David Yeago suggests observing the other mariological feasts of the ancient church, such as the Annunciation on March 25 (nine months before Christmas) and her saint day on August 15. He also suggests we sing the Magnificat as often as possible.

Perhaps we might even say a Hail Mary or two. Luther objected only to the second half of the Hail Mary, not to the first. To pray “Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus” is merely to cite scripture, he thought. To say “Holy Mary, full of grace, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our deaths” seemed to him to express an extrascriptural accretion. But perhaps asking Mary for her prayers is not in itself un-Protestant. To do so may

even guard christological dogma and defend against patriarchy. Who knows? Mary might just be key to the future of ecumenism after all.