

The problem with Mary: A Latin American view

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The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not actually introduced to Roman Catholic people in Latin America because only Marian doctrines are taught to them. That is the main reason that the Protestant church is so liberating to former Catholics—the gospel of Jesus Christ brings freedom from the mistaken idea that we can come to God only through “la Virgen.”

Doctrinal statements in Roman Catholicism talk clearly about the veneration (*doulia*) of Mary, not the worship (or adoration, *latreia*) of Mary. In any kind of academic theological arena, Catholic theologians will emphasize the word “veneration” rather than “adoration.”

Yet the practical theology in the life of Catholicism in Latin America promotes the adoration of Mary. It promotes not only adoration of her as a person but the adoration of the doctrines of Mary (for example, that of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which is enforced by devotion to la Virgen de la Inmaculada Concepción in Mexico), even to the point of claiming the supremacy of Mary over Jesus Christ. For example, “la Virgen de Guadalupe” is spoken of as the Holy Mother and Patron of Mexico and Latin America.

For these reasons Methodists and other mainstream denominations in Latin America tend to restrict the veneration of Mary. We recognize her as the special instrument that God chose to bring his Son among us, we recognize her as the mother of Jesus—but not as the mother of God. We also say that she had other children besides Jesus. We acknowledge that she married Joseph and both were the parents of Jesus on this earth.

By definition a Latin American Protestant church takes its principles from the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:3-4 clearly sets up a rule of conduct regarding idolatry. It is not only icons of Mary that are not accepted. Even an icon of Jesus would look improper in the life of a Methodist church. There is no architect or church designer

who would include a stained glass window with some kind of iconography on it—it would seem totally improper for Protestants in Latin America.

Protestants in Latin America see themselves as challenging the oppressive system that Mary “la Virgen” represents. Mary and the saints are often the patrons of a specific town or city. The Roman Catholic Church provides festivities year round to celebrate Mary or the saints with the intention of raising funds for the parish. This system has developed to such a degree that the festivities on behalf of the saint generate the main income of the Catholic Church. Our policy against icons is a way of resisting the Catholicism that seems to want to placate people with bread and circuses.

Methodists in Mexico are a minority among the minorities. There are about 40,000 Methodists in a country where only 3 percent of the population is considered Protestant. Therefore our views are in many ways part of our survival kit in the face of the overwhelming Catholic majority.

There is a place for Mary in the life of the Protestant church, but it is as an equal to all the other characters described in the Gospels (Peter, John, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, etc.). Mary will be part of the life of the church until the day that the church ends its ministry on this earth. However, Mary is like you and me, just another good believer who believed in the only Son of God as Savior.