

# There's Something About Mary

## Part 2: Church Tradition & Spirituality

Luke 1:39-56  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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"I know this has been a lot of information, and if you're like me, I bet your brain hurts." That was the closing sentence of my sermon last Sunday, Part 1 in this sermon series on Mary, the mother of Jesus. So I want to congratulate and thank you for being such a patient congregation as you respectfully sat through that sermon. In the words used by a former pastor here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, who once told the Presbytery itself their meetings as "mind numbing and soul sucking," I know that's how it felt for some of you as I trod through 1500 years of early Christianity and later Roman Catholic understandings of Mary, the field of theological study known as Mariology.

Their understanding of the role of Mary in the story of faith, which developed over time, includes the dogma and doctrines I mentioned last week, such as:

- The perpetual Virginity of Mary
- Mary as the "second Eve"
- The Mother of God
- The Assumption of Mary
- The Immaculate Conception
- The Queen of Heaven
- The Co-Redemptrix
- The Mediatrix

In order to have a better understanding of the role of Mary in our own Protestant and Reformed traditions, it was necessary to take even a quick look at what others have understood, and currently understand about her. It was also important last week to explore **how often we Protestants misunderstand the actual Roman Catholic teachings and practices concerning Mary.**

So how did the early reformers of the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe 500 years ago react and respond to all this? As you know, there was an unprecedented attack on the Roman Catholic Church, including seeing much of its Mariology as sacrilegious and superstitious. But here's the biggest surprise of them all. **Both Martin Luther and our own John Calvin continued to adhere to the beliefs of the perpetual virginity of Mary, and her title as "Mother of God." Their primary concern and issue was seeing the veneration of Mary – the honor, respect, adoration and devotion to her – as competition to the divine role of Jesus Christ.** The reformers interpreted Roman Catholic devotion to Mary as worship of Mary, which Catholics deny. And they judged any physical image of Mary as idolatry and breaking the Ten Commandments concerning not making graven images. That's why the initial Protestant movement tragically included the destruction of a vast amount of magnificent religious art – including

stained glass windows, and statues and paintings of Mary in churches in northern Europe and England.

The Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura*, scripture alone, led to the tossing out of a great deal of church tradition that grew within Catholicism over the centuries. And much of that is understandable from a Protestant perspective. For instance, many of us continue to wonder **how you can take the Mary of scripture, a poor, vulnerable, peasant teenage girl living in Roman-occupied Nazareth, and turn her into the embodiment of feminine obedience and purity, and elevate her to the position of the Queen of Heaven, even the Mother of God.** A good portion of Christianity today, even among many Roman Catholics, now see the particular understanding of Mary as a perpetual virgin *and* the perfect mother, as representing an impossible and unrealistic ideal for women. But in the perpetual knee-jerk reaction of throwing the mother out with the bath water, there is much that can and should be reclaimed, especially by those of us with progressive and feminist theological perspectives.

Let's stay with John Calvin for just a moment longer, however. The specific doctrine Calvin spoke out against most was the Roman Catholic Church's praise of Mary as the Queen of Heaven, considering it blasphemous. Calvin wrote, "I cannot consider such language as good, proper, or suitable... [It] can only serve to harden the ignorant in their superstitions."

In an effort of achieving greater and more inclusive understanding, however, it needs to be stated that Catholics *do* indeed differ from most traditional, especially evangelical Protestant teachings that accept the Scripture as the *only* source of God's revelation. Catholics have a strong belief in the truth of Scripture, but they also believe in church tradition as a way in which God continues to reveal truth to us. Tradition in Roman Catholicism can include beliefs, customs, prayers, and worship, the teaching of popes, bishops, theologians and Church councils. It is their process of continually reflecting on the way in which the Word of God encounters their own experience as a community of faith.

When stated like that, it seems obvious that Protestantism itself has evolved since its earliest anti-church tradition days to a somewhat similar position. Do we not also believe the Sacred Presence of God can be revealed in and through all of creation, not just in and through the Bible? And in addition, revealed in the way we reflect upon how the scriptures encounter our own experience here and now as a community of faith? And yet it's true, our differing theologies have led us into differing beliefs and practices.

**Moving, now, into the important realm of spirituality – the ways in which we connect with God, and God connects with us – there are some good examples of those differences concerning Mary.** Here, for example, is a prayer from the Roman Catholic tradition reflecting much of their particular perspective of Mary.

*Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, Our life, our sweetness and our hope.  
To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve,  
To thee do we send up our sighs, Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.  
Turn then, most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us,  
And after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary! Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God,  
That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.  
Amen.*

This prayer confirms the role of Mary in Catholicism acting as an intercessor between humans and God. Protestants believe, however, we don't need an intercessor – like Mary or any other saint – in order to emphasize, add to, or even to lift our prayers before God's Presence. So instead, we might pray a similar prayer something like this:

God of love and grace,  
 we pray for your mercy as we struggle in the circumstances of our lives.  
 Turn toward us in our need,  
 and lead us to live life according to the ways and teachings of Jesus,  
 worthy of being his faithful disciples.  
 Thank you for hearing our prayer.  
 Amen

**From a spiritual perspective, I see these two different prayers, which admittedly use quite different language, as very similar in purpose. Yes, as Protestants we have taken Mary, the mother of Jesus, basically out of the equation when it comes to our devotional life.** And again, by devotion I mean that which draws us closer to experiencing the Sacred Presence of God in our midst. Many of us here do that in and through nature or music, for example. Do we consider that idolatry? No. In a like manner, a majority of Roman Catholics similarly experience their devotion to Mary as drawing them closer to God. **So who are we to judge?**

More and more Protestants are beginning to wonder if we **are missing something that might be gained from focusing a bit more on an understanding of Mary?** Mary's story, says Beverly Gaventa, a New Testament scholar at Princeton University and the coeditor of the book *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, "is a wonderful example of divine grace that Protestants have neglected. It was seen as Catholic territory, but now the lines between denominations are dropping."

Not everyone feels the same way, however. The Mary revival especially troubles some evangelical Christians, who claim that Mary devotion continues to detract from a more proper focus on Christ alone. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, declares, "Those who argue that Mary offers us a more compassionate understanding of God than is revealed in Jesus Christ alone insult both the person and work of Christ and accept the worst excesses of Catholic piety." I'm wondering, however, is Jesus himself – or God, for that matter – really insulted? Or, is it simply a matter of those who believe differently from Catholicism, and believe they alone are right, who are the ones who are insulted?

**Has not Protestantism become, in many regards, about as tradition-based as Roman Catholicism had become before the Protestant Reformation? That's why many progressives believe we have already entered into the early stages of a new reformation, one as potentially disrupting to traditional and orthodox theology and practices as the one 500 years ago.**

Yet, we still have more work to do in understanding Mary in a way that speaks to where many of us find ourselves today. Instead of ignoring her, or seeing her in a way that relegates her (and by extension to women in general) to a role of submissive obedience, or lifting her up as an impossibly unrealistic ideal to emulate, **we can move to an understanding of Mary as a model of calling us to cry out for social justice.** That is

what we find in the Gospel of Luke when he puts on the lips of Mary her response to her relative Elizabeth's calling her "blessed among women". It's known as the Song of Mary, or using the Latin, the Magnificat.

That will be the focus of next week's sermon, Part 3, and it will be especially highlighted the week after that as we experience the Chancel Choir's performance of John Rutter's *Magnificat*.

Hopefully, this week's sermon hasn't been quite as "mind numbing and soul sucking" as last week.

Amen.