

The Virgin Mary in a Reformation Theology

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IT need hardly be said that the significance attributed to the Virgin Mary in Christian theology since New Testament times has found little expression in the post-Reformation Protestant tradition. In general, Protestant theologians have been prepared to leave any special recognition of Mary's place in Christian faith and devotion to the Roman Church. As a result, in the contemporary theological dialogue which has been initiated by the ecumenical movement, Protestantism finds itself not only less than faithful in its witness to early Christian theology, but also unable to offer any legitimate and convincing alternative to the unbalanced "Marianism" so widespread in contemporary Roman Catholicism. Perhaps it is time for Protestantism to consider the subject more seriously, and to formulate a position more substantial than the usual one of unconcern or unthinking disapproval. It is the purpose of this article to offer for consideration one serious Protestant attempt—that of the Reformation's great systematic theologian—to define the place that the Virgin Mary should occupy in the theology and life of the Church. No doubt modern biblical criticism has raised questions about the basic Marian texts that would not have occurred to Calvin, but my concern is not with the biblical issues as such. I merely want to ask, looking at the Reformed tradition from outside, whether its essential doctrinal principles necessarily impose on its adherents either the inhibited silence or the automatic rejection of a serious Mariology to which I have referred.

I

For the sake of a working classification, we may present Calvin's view of the Virgin Mary in terms (*a*) of her physical agency in the Incarnation, (*b*) of her moral agency as expressed in her *fiat*, and (*c*) of her relation to the life of the Church. In view of the centrality of the Incarnation in Calvin's thought, Mary's physical instrumentality in the Incarnation quite naturally receives a good deal of attention from him. Since for Calvin the reality of man's salvation depended entirely on the full reality of the Incarnation, he preached the absolute necessity of embracing the full doctrine of the Incarnation, and strongly denounced any who would imperil our salvation with something less.

In his teaching on the nature of the Incarnation and of our salvation, Calvin's first concern is to emphasize that the personal agent who effects our salvation is the eternal Son of God. In this context, Calvin sees Mary's role

as *virgin* mother as a safeguard of the truth that it is none other than the Son of God who became the Son of man. So, for example, in the *Genevan Catechism*, Calvin asks and answers:

What do you mean by these two phrases, conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary?

That he was formed in the womb of a virgin, of her substance, to be the true seed of David . . . ; and that this was effected by the miraculous and secret agency of the Spirit, without male intercourse.¹

Again, in his exposition of the Lucan account of Mary's overshadowing by the Holy Spirit, he says:

Christ must not be born of ordinary generation . . . that he may be the "Son of God". . . . This passage not only expresses a unity of person in Christ, but at the same time points out that, in clothing himself with human flesh, Christ is the Son of God. As the name, Son of God, belonged to the divine essence of Christ from the beginning, so now it is applied unitedly to both natures, because the secret and heavenly manner of generation has separated him from the ordinary rank of men.²

Calvin sees the title "Mother of our Lord" as assuring us that it is none other than the Son of God who acts in man's redemption. "The name of the Son of God is given to him who is born of a virgin, and the virgin herself is called the Mother of our Lord."³ "The name denotes a unity of person in the two natures of Christ."⁴ Calvin frequently refers to Mary's agency in terms equivalent to this title, so as to emphasize the truth that it is really the Son of God whom she conceived and to whom she gave birth. "The holy Virgin has conceived the Son of God," and "carried in her womb Christ the eternal wisdom of God."⁵ "Truly the fruit that she carried was the Son of God."⁶ Mary "would give birth to the unique Son of God," and is therefore "the mother of the Son of God."⁷ "The Son of the Virgin Mary is God; yea, the everlasting God."⁸

In one of his sermons, Calvin attributes an even more extensive significance to the title "Mother of our Lord." It witnesses to the reality of the two natures in hypostatic union and to our own inheritance in the Son's glory.

As for what Elizabeth says: "the mother of our Lord," it is to show us that the Son of God has to such an extent been united in two natures, that is to say, that he has so conjoined the human nature that he took of ours, with his divine

1. *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545), in J.K.S. Reid (ed.), *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XXII, Philadelphia, 1954), p. 97.

2. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, on Luke 1:34.

3. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, xiv, 4.

4. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, on Luke 1:43.

5. *Soixante cinq Sermons de Jean Calvin sur l'Harmonie des trois Evangelistes, S. Matthieu, S. Marc, et S. Luc* (Geneva, 1562), Sermon IX (p. 141f.); *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, on Luke 1:26f. Cf. also *Soixante cinq Sermons*, Sermon XXII (p. 398); XXXIII (p. 585).

6. *Ibid.*, IX (p. 146).

7. *Ibid.*, XIII (p. 210); X (p. 162); XXXIII (p. 586).

8. *The Mystery of Godliness* (Grand Rapids, 1950), p. 20.

essence, that is it but one person only. . . . If our Lord Jesus Christ had not taken a human body, or if he had possessed his divinity as separate, where would all our felicity be today? . . . [But] as he is God eternal, so also is he true man; and more so that he unites us in faith, in order that we may be made sons of God, and participants of his glory, of which he is truly heir in his human nature, and which also belongs to him by right inasmuch as he is eternal God with his Father.⁹

Calvin, then, regards the title "Mother of our Lord" and its equivalents as safeguarding the Christian witness both to the Divine Person of our Lord and to the reality of his human nature. Since man's salvation requires that the Redeemer be fully and truly human, Calvin asserts the full human reality of Mary's conception and childbearing. Christ's true humanity depends on Mary's true conception.

It is absolutely necessary to repair the disobedience of our first father Adam, and efface all our rebellions and iniquities, that he be made true man, and that he take the servant's state in order to subject himself to the Law. . . . But above all, . . . we must note where it is said that "the Virgin will conceive in her womb." Jesus Christ therefore has not been only a figure, or phantom of man, as some ancient heretics have tried to destroy his humanity to take away the whole basis of our faith. But he has been conceived. Now this conception implies that truly he was of the seed of David.

The word "conceive" is enough to set aside the dream of Marcion and Manichaeus: for it is easy to gather from it that Mary brought forth not an ethereal body or phantom, but the fruit which she had previously conceived in her womb.¹⁰

Again, the true nutrition involved in Mary's agency as mother is adduced by Calvin to uphold the true humanity of our Lord against the docetic views of Servetus and the Anabaptists, who held that the Virgin was but "the channel through which Christ flowed." Calvin argues:

I . . . ask whether they are not forced to admit that he was nourished to maturity in the Virgin's womb. Justly, therefore, we infer from the words of Matthew, that Christ inasmuch as he was begotten of Mary, was procreated of her seed.¹¹

If Mary did not contribute a real nutrition, there is no real Redeemer; to say that "his flesh came forth from the essence of God, and was converted into Deity, reduces the eternal hypostasis of the Lord to nothing, and robs us of the Son of David, who was the promised Redeemer."¹²

The virgin-conception effected by the operation of the Holy Spirit establishes for Calvin the sinlessness of Christ's human nature, to be the ground for the regeneration of man's corrupt nature. In his catechism Calvin states the reason for such a conception:

Because human seed is wholly corrupt, it was necessary and proper that the Holy Spirit should intervene in the generation of the Son of God, that he might not be affected by this contagion, but endued with the most perfect purity.¹³

9. *Soixante cinq Sermons*, IX (p. 155f.).

10. *Ibid.*, VII (p. 104); *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, on Luke 1:31.

11. *Institutes*, II, xiii, 3.

12. *Ibid.*, II, xiv, 8.

13. *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, p. 97.

And in a sermon he says:

The Virgin Mary has conceived, not in the common fashion, not according to the order of nature, but by the sacred and admirable power of God, who has wished to sanctify his unique Son from his origin and conception.¹⁴

Or again, in a commentary on the Lucan infancy narrative:

As it was necessary that he should be real man, in order that he might expiate our sins, and vanquish death and Satan in our flesh: so it was necessary in order to his cleansing of others, that he should be freed from every "spot and blemish." Though Christ was formed of the seed of Abraham, yet he contracted no defilement from a sinful nature; for the Spirit of God kept him pure from the very commencement: and this was done not merely that he might abound in personal holiness, but chiefly that he might sanctify his own people. The manner of conception, therefore, assures us that we have a Mediator "separate from sinners."¹⁵

Calvin points out that the virgin-conception assures us of Christ's sinless nature, not because it involved the absence of intercourse, but because it was effected by the Holy Spirit:

We do not hold Christ to be free from all taint merely because he was born of a woman unconnected with a man, but because he was sanctified by the Spirit, so that the generation was pure and spotless, such as it would have been before man's fall.¹⁶

Perpetual virginity, ascribed to Mary in traditional Christian piety, though hardly a central feature of her role in the Incarnation, is conservatively treated by Calvin. The lack of any Scriptural reference seems to impose a certain reserve on his teaching. So, for example, in strongly opposing the inferences drawn by Helvidius from Matt. 1:25, he writes:

Let us rest satisfied with this, that no just and well-grounded inference can be drawn from these words of the Evangelist, as to what took place after the birth of Christ. He is called "first born"; but it is for the sole purpose of informing us that he was born of a pure virgin.¹⁷

Later, however, he refers in the pulpit to those who do take the words "first born" to mean that "the Virgin Mary had other children than the Son of God" as fanatics under diabolical possession,¹⁸ and in his commentaries, each time the New Testament refers to Christ's "brethren," Calvin points out that the word is to be taken in the sense of "relatives" or "cousins."

II

When he came to deal with the Annunciation and with Mary's response, Calvin had perforce to be more cautious. With good reason he reacted vigorously against the popular Marian devotions of the late middle ages,

14. *Soixante cinq Sermons*, XXII (p. 398).

15. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, on Luke 1:35.

16. *Institutes*, II, xiii, 4.

17. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, on Matt. 1:25.

18. *Soixante cinq Sermons*, XXII (p. 400f.).

which could fearlessly confuse creature and Creator—Calvin singled out particularly the petition to Mary, “Ask the Father; command the Son”—and which tended to relegate Christ to the position of a severe judge while substituting his mother as the merciful mediator. Calvin sought to uphold the primacy of God’s action in salvation, to restate more boldly man’s total incapacity to initiate his salvation, and to place our salvation, and Mary’s, firmly in the kindness of God who assumed man’s nature that he might be man’s one Redeemer and Mediator.

Thus when Calvin considers the blessedness of Mary, proclaimed by the angel and resounding from the lips of mankind through Elizabeth, he points out that this blessedness was only a result of the divine kindness; God, in choosing to honour the Virgin by making her the mother of the Redeemer, was not rewarding her for any personal merit that could have given her a prior claim upon God.

God has found no reason in her person, to show himself so liberal in exalting her to such a degree of honour, except insomuch as she was low and contemptible. . . . She was but as someone hidden in the dust, to whom God has held out his hand, and chosen to raise.

It is not necessary to look at what she merits, as she herself admonishes us when she says that God has had regard for nothing but her poverty, and that it has been by pure grace that he has chosen her.¹⁹

Hence all Mary’s “happiness, righteousness, and life flow from the undeserved love of God; her virtues and all her excellence are nothing more than divine kindness.”²⁰

Calvin insists that Mary’s response to the Annunciation in no way compromises God’s initiative in man’s salvation. Since God had chosen Mary for her role before the beginning of time, there is no possibility of her having made the initial move by offering to be the mother, and so of our salvation’s seeming to depend equally on the movement of the creature and on that of the Creator. Thus, when the holy Virgin proclaims herself the handmaid of the Lord, it does not mean that she comes to him, and gives herself into his service “by her own motion,” but rather that she confesses “she has been chosen by him, even before she was born, even before the creation of the world, and that she has been reserved as his.”²¹

But while God alone initiates salvation and gratuitously chooses Mary to be the mother of the Saviour, Calvin allows that Mary must make a true or moral response. Her response involves her, in an analogical sense, in a co-operation with God that bears not only on her own salvation, but on that of all mankind. While she could not have prevented God from redeeming man in some other way, her free response allowed the salvation God offered her and all mankind to come into the world in the particular way it did.

Calvin brings out the reality of Mary’s response in his comments on the

19. *Ibid.*, X (p. 165); VI (p. 89); cf. IX (p. 141).

20. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, on Luke 1:28.

21. *Soixante cinq Sermons*, X (p. 169).

angelic salutation. The Mary to whom the angel appeared was already such a careful observer of the works of God, that she at once perceived that the angel bore God's authority; she received the salutation with an "attentive mind," considering its object and meaning, for "it instantly occurred to her that the angel had not been sent for a trifling purpose." Further, the angel adapted his message to the prophecies which were "well known and esteemed by the godly," so as to affect "more powerfully the mind of the Virgin." Mary, now persuaded in her mind of the kindness of God, was led "to admit in the fullest manner, that she had received a message as to raising up anew the throne of David."

These are weighty expressions, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord": for she gives and devotes herself unreservedly to God, that he may freely dispose of her according to his pleasure. . . . She is convinced of the power of God, follows cheerfully where he calls, trusts also in his promise, and not only expects it, but eagerly desires its accomplishment.²²

Calvin goes on to say:

Mary was "blessed," because embracing in her heart the promise of God, she conceived and brought forth a Saviour to herself and to the whole world. . . . God offers his benefits indiscriminately to all, and faith opens its bosom to receive them; while unbelief allows them to pass away, so as not to reach us. If there had been any unbelief in Mary, that could not prevent God from accomplishing his work in any other way which he might choose. But she is called "blessed," because she received by faith the blessing offered to her, and opened up the way to God for its accomplishment; while unbelief, on the other hand, shuts the gate, and restrains his hand from working, that they who refuse the praise due to its power may not feel its saving effect.

III

While Calvin, then, insists that Mary is at one with us in a total dependence upon God for the unmerited gift of salvation, he at the same time claims for her, thanks to God's choice of her and to her acceptance of her role, a unique position as first within the Church. The divine kindness in salvation, manifested to the Church, is shown to the Church first in the person of Mary.

Let us understand that God in the person of her has wished to show us his infinite goodness, in that he has willed that his unique Son take our flesh and our nature, in order to be our brother and our flesh: and that by this means we are able to obtain the heritage of life. Besides let us learn to give such authority to the Virgin Mary as belongs: for otherwise we are not able to be assured of our salvation. It is not necessary to look for what she merits, as she herself admonishes us, in saying that God has regarded only her complete poverty, and that it has been by pure grace that he has chosen her. It suffices us that God wished to make use of her in this respect.²³

Again, the Church's response of faith in God and of confidence in his promises is made by the Church first in the person of Mary: "Embracing

22. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, on Luke 1:29-45.

23. *Soixante cinq Sermons*, VI (p. 88f.); cf. p. 91f.

in her heart the promises of God, she conceived and brought forth a Saviour to herself and to the whole world." Calvin points out that, as Abraham was the father of the faithful, so Mary in her *fiat* now shows to the Church the faith that must be added to God's kindness towards us:

We see . . . the instruction which is given to us by the Virgin Mary, who will be a good mistress on condition that we profit in her school as we should, that we ask it be done to us according to the word of God. . . . The Virgin Mary is to us here a mirror of the faith we must supply to our God.²⁴

And the Church, if God's saving work is to be accomplished amongst us, must make the response of its prototype.

Let us examine well the power for our edification. Let us do as the Virgin Mary, and say, Lord, that it may be done to me according to thy word, that there may be an inseparable bond between the word of God and his power, . . . and after that, that we know that it will have its effect, that it contains nothing that God may not accomplish, and that he may carry it out as seems good to him.²⁵

Further, Mary's *fiat* illustrates for Calvin a principle of primary importance for his concept of the Church's ministry.

[Mary] gives authority to the word which is announced to her by the messenger of God, not regarding him who speaks but him who has sent him. Inasmuch as Gabriel was authorized by God, and carried the message to the Virgin, she knew it was necessary that she receive his word. And this is a very useful instruction to us. For God does not descend from the sky in a visible fashion today, to assure us of his will; likewise he will not send the angels; but he uses the means that he has established in his Church, which is to raise up men who may be there as in his person, and who speak by him. . . . It is necessary to arrive at this principle, that although those who have the office and charge of teaching be similar to us, and that they be men subject to every infirmity, nevertheless that must diminish nothing from the authority of the word that they carry. . . .²⁶

Calvin goes on to say that there are fanatics who, failing to understand this principle which Mary recognized, have attempted to overthrow the ministry of the Church and to rely on direct instruction from God.

Again, Calvin sees Mary as the Church's continuing prototype in the way of human response to the promises of God, in the sacramental life of the Church. Thus, for instance, he says on the Holy Communion:

See how we must now practise this sentence. That it be done to us according to the word: that is to say, inasmuch as our Saviour Jesus Christ is given to us, that we receive him. And how? We do not understand the way; . . . but it suffices to us that God has given us his word. . . . Our Lord Jesus Christ gives as pledge of his body and of his blood a piece of bread and a drop of wine. . . . We need not regard the bread . . . nor the wine; but let the word be above everything. . . . When we have the word which our Lord Jesus pronounces, "Behold my body which is given for you; behold my blood which is shed for

24. *Ibid.*, VIII (p. 136).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 133ff.

the remission of sins"; it is necessary that from our side we obey, saying: Be it so Lord. Just as you have said, let it be done.²⁷

Finally, what honour, if any, is the Church to pay to the Virgin Mary in recognition of the unique service for which God chose her? Calvin points out that there are two common faults: the one which refuses to honour those whom God has blessed, the other which gives excessive honour to such and converts them into idols. He makes it quite plain that God's choice of Mary as mother of the Redeemer, and the integral relationship of our redemption to Mary's role, require that a deliberate recognition be given to Mary by the Church. Thus he writes:

She is justly called blessed, on whom God bestowed the remarkable honour of bringing into the world his own Son, through whom she had been spiritually renewed. And at this day, the blessedness brought to us by Christ cannot be the subject of our praise, without reminding us, at the same time, of the distinguished honour which God was pleased to bestow on Mary, in making her the mother of his only begotten Son.²⁸

Again, Calvin says in a sermon:

We know she must be continued to be called blessed as she said herself; . . . knowing that God has chosen her to a service so honourable and excellent, that is, to be the mother of our Saviour and Redeemer.²⁹

But while the Church must continue to recall and proclaim Mary's singular blessedness, it must not forget that Mary is one of the Church, and that she owes her blessedness to its one God and Saviour. Hence we properly praise Mary when we both recognize her unique role and follow the example of her *Magnificat*.

See again how well the Virgin Mary attributes everything to the pure goodness of God, because he had done her an honour so great and excellent, that she should be the mother of his unique Son, and that she should carry in her womb the Saviour of the world. Now . . . we see how she appraises herself, which we must note well in order that we may agree with her, if we wish to render her the praises that she approves and accepts. . . . So let us now learn to praise the holy Virgin. And how? Let us concur with the Holy Spirit (*i.e.*, as he moved Mary in the *Magnificat* to recognize her singular blessedness, but to glorify God for it); and then there will be genuine praises. . . . We will esteem her as she must be esteemed, in esteeming her as the Holy Spirit teaches us; but it is also necessary that with the praise there be the imitation. . . . When we understand that the Virgin Mary is set up as an example, and confess with her that we are nothing, that we are worth nothing, and that we owe all to the pure goodness of our God, see how we will be disciples of the Virgin Mary and will show that we have well retained her doctrine. And what honour are we able to do her greater than that?³⁰

It is evident from this brief survey that Calvin considered the role of the Virgin Mary to be of something more than peripheral interest to the theology

27. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

28. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, on Luke 1:42.

29. *Soixante cinq Sermons*, XXXIX (p. 694).

30. *Ibid.*, X (pp. 169ff.).

and life of the Church; he saw her motherhood as integral to the Incarnation of the Son of God, and appealed to that motherhood both to defend the integrity and to bring out the full significance of the Incarnation; in Mary he saw exemplified principles which bear directly on the whole life of the Church, and he was concerned that the Church should not fail to give proper recognition to her singular role. Calvin's treatment of Mary as a responsible human agent through whom and, in a sense, together with whom, God worked to accomplish man's salvation, has implications (not developed by Calvin himself) which bear directly on any ecumenical discussion of the sacraments and ministry. The fact that Calvin, while still reacting strongly against the Marian deviations of the communion which he had renounced, did not hesitate to give such attention to Mary's role in his writing and his preaching, lends weight to the suggestion that this theme might profitably claim more serious consideration than it ordinarily receives in contemporary Protestantism.