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“The Virgin Mary in a Reformation Theology”: A Reply

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IN the October, 1960, number of this journal James A. Shuel presents an article suggesting that Protestantism is less than faithful to its theological tradition and to its current responsibility in ecumenical discussion when it shows little or no interest in what he calls “a serious Mariology.” Such a doctrine he claims to find in the writings of Calvin. Now certainly there was no man truer to “early Christian theology” than John Calvin. Nor is it any other than this same reformer who claimed that he would not have hesitated to cross ten oceans in the interest of the unity of the Churches. It is surely novel, however, if not inaccurate, to envisage Calvin as one who considered it essential to the interests of truth or unity that the Virgin Mary should occupy “a place” in the theology and life of the Church. Indeed, the interested reader of Mr. Shuel’s advice who goes back to Calvin finds, in fact, that the so-called “place” which Calvin defines for Mary has nothing whatever to do with Mariology of a supposedly “serious” kind which he seeks to attribute to him. Where, as a matter of interest, did Calvin stand in this regard? Let us re-examine some of Mr. Shuel’s claims within the context of the working classifications which he sets up.

I

(i) Our author suggests, with respect to her physical agency in the incarnation, that “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” (p. 275f.). That Calvin defended the humanity of Christ by reference to his mother’s role no one would claim to deny. However, not one of the eighteen references supplied in this section supports the equation which Mr. Shuel would like to make and does imply, namely that the virgin birth is equivalent to divine conception, hence that it is the virginity of Mary which “safeguards” the divinity of Christ. The salient feature about all of these texts in their entirety is the remarkable reticence of Calvin in speaking of the virginity of Mary when he is talking about the unique role of the Holy Spirit. The “heavenly and secret” manner of Christ’s generation reflects nothing and relies upon nothing but the working of God alone. So far is Calvin from seeing “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” (p. 276), that in the *Institutes*, Bk. I, Ch. 13, where he sets out his proof for

the divinity of Christ, Calvin does not so much as mention Christ's birth or his mother. It is to go misleadingly beyond the evidence, in fact, to imply that Calvin considered "Mother of our Lord" as in any manner constituting a "title." Rather than reading with our author (p. 276), in the *Institutes* II, xiv, 4: "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" let us read from the 1560 French edition of the *Institutes*: ". . . we see how the Scripture sings to us loud and clear that he who is to be born of the virgin Mary will be named Son of God (Lk. 1:32), and that this virgin is the mother of our Lord."¹ Anything titular here clearly belongs to Jesus and not to his mother. Is it not misleading that, in this same connection, Mr. Shuel should offer us the brief quotation, "The name denotes a unity of person in the two natures of Christ" (p. 276), when, in fact, the Latin text reads, "In her calling Mary the mother of her Lord there is an indication of the unity of person in the two natures of Christ . . ."² The difference in nuance is clear. If the references cited by Shuel and the writings from which they come prove anything, it is that the divinity of Christ is assured and safeguarded by nothing other than the action of God Himself. In this regard, where Mr. Shuel shows a notable eagerness to associate virginity with "holiness," Mary's integrity with Christ's divinity—as on p. 277, "the virgin-conception effected by the operation of the Holy Spirit"—Calvin himself demonstrates a very careful reserve. For example, Mr. Shuel's own quotation which speaks of the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the interests of the purity of Christ contains no mention of the Virgin. A further statement in the early editions of the *Institutes* emphasizes this same caution of Calvin. It begins: "We confess therefore that he was born of the Virgin, in order to be recognized as the real son of Abraham and of David, as had been promised by the Law and the Prophets." Humanity is the point here, not divinity. When it comes to divinity Calvin goes on:

. . . In tracing back the lineage of Jesus Christ as far as David and Abraham, we have greater assurance that our Redeemer is he who had been so long before foretold of God. It is therefore said that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, because it was in no way fitting that he who was sent to purify others should have an impure and contaminated origin. Thus it was not right that the human body which the essence of God took for its habitation should be defiled by the universal corruption of men. So the Holy Spirit acted here, and overcame the usual law of nature by means of his wonderful and to us, unfathomable power. For he brought it about that Jesus was not spotted with any stain or carnal defilement, but that he was born with perfect holiness and purity. By this, therefore, faith is taught to seek with assurance all holiness in Jesus Christ, and to seek it in him alone, inasmuch as he, and no other, has been exempted in his conception from human corruption.³

1. Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrestienne, Livre second* (Critical ed. by Jean-Daniel Benoit, Paris: Vrin, 1957).

2. Guilielmus Baum et al., eds., *Ioannis Calvini Opera* (Brunsvigae, 1891), Vol. 45, "Commentarius in Harmoniam Evangelicam," col. 35: *Quod Mariam appellat Domini sui matrem, notatur personae unitas in duabus Christi naturis, . . .*

3. *Inst.*, II, xiv, 4 (ed. Benoit, p. 257).

Not a hint of the person of the Virgin compromises the primacy of the Holy Spirit in this statement of the mystery of Christ's divinity.

Furthermore, far from pointing the way to any rank for Mary within the Church because of her motherhood of Jesus, the *Institutes*, Bk. II, Ch. 13, Sec. 3 (cited by our author, p. 277), emphasize that her function was that of an ordinary, normal woman. As such she is one with Rahab, mother of Booz. Indeed, what she, the Virgin, represents, is something quite "ordinary in nature."

(ii) Mr. Shuel does well in this section to admit that Calvin was "more cautious," and to try to follow the example himself. One wonders, however, just where in the reformer's writings he finds support for the insinuations conveyed by the statement that Mary's "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" (p. 279). This is the kind of language which prepares the way for Mary's accession to the right hand of God, that "unbalanced 'Marianism'" which our author supposedly deplors. Calvin's careful language on the other hand, locates her squarely in the midst of the common men and women to whom he recommends her example of faith and obedience as the means, the utterly human means, by which God works to the salvation of men.

For good reason are the two occurrences of "blessed" in the citation found on p. 280 enclosed in quotation marks. They mislead nonetheless. For the text at these points reads "happy" (*felix* and *beata*) and not "blessed" (*benedicta*). And the context makes abundantly clear that it is felicity and not a special consecration which is in question. That Calvin was cautious in the use of his terminology is clear from his comment on Luke 1:28, where the text before him read, "The Lord is with you, you are blessed (*benedicta*) among women." He writes: "For it is not to be taken, in my judgement, as a title to glory; rather it designates happiness."⁴ It goes without saying that Calvin did not understand the word in the shallow, subjective way in which we so often understand "happiness" today.

The question is not simply one of words, but of what is conveyed by the terms. It is definitely misleading to see in Calvin any idea of a special "setting apart" or consecration of Mary to a unique position on account of her becoming the mother of Jesus. "Blessing" in the sense of happiness, felicity at the hands of God: Yes. "Blessing" in the sense of being accorded privilege or superior status in the Church or order of salvation: No.

(iii) What then, is the significance of the supposedly "unique position as first within the Church" (p. 280) which Calvin reputedly claims for Mary? Surely Mr. Shuel does not find in any of the references he cites, or anywhere else in Calvin, the evidence to support his apparently hierarchical notion of priority? Surely her priority is that which the example of correct conduct

4. *Ioannis Calvini Opera*, Vol. 45, col. 25: *Benedictionem enim tanquam effectum et probationem divini favoris ponit. Neque enim pro laude hic, meo iudicio, capitur, sed potius felicitatem notat.*

must have over any one who is less exemplary. Surely the import of these references is that her authority is that of the faithful believer whose life and word point all men, as a road-sign, to their only sure salvation in the Son. Her authority for others resides in the assurance *about* God that she has *from* God. For this assurance about himself God wills all men to accept by beholding her witness. It is significant however, that Calvin nowhere hints of attributing to Mary an authority comparable to that of the Prophets and Apostles. Her claim upon men is that exercised by every Christian. It is the claim of faith upon lack of faith. To talk, therefore, of her unique position within the Church takes one far from the theology of John Calvin.

And what of the honours supposedly due to her in recognition of her unique service (p. 282)? The honour Mr. Shuel has in mind differs, apparently, from that of Calvin, for in quoting (p. 282) from the *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists* our author not only takes up the reformer's thought in the middle of a sentence, but in so doing he leaves out a part of the sentence which noticeably alters the idea contained in that which he does render. Here is what precedes:

Elizabeth therefore pronounces here that her cousin is blessed because of the blessedness of the Son. Now inasmuch as it was not Mary's greatest felicity to bear Christ in her womb, but only an honour that God gave her in second place (for the first and central point of her well-being was to be reborn into the new life by the Spirit of Christ), nonetheless, not without cause is she called blessed . . .⁵

It is, in fact, less "plain" throughout Calvin's work than Mr. Shuel would have us believe, that the reformer considers that "God's choice of Mary as the 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" (p. 282). Let us rather listen to Calvin himself:

Now the Virgin is treasurer of grace in another manner [than that conceived by the Papists]. How so? Because she kept the teaching, that which today opens for us the kingdom of heaven, that which leads us to our Saviour Jesus Christ; she kept that as a trust, and now by means of her we have received it; and by it we are edified today. Here then is the honour which God has accorded her; here is the way in which we should look to her; not in order to stop with her, nor to make of her an idol, but in order that by means of her we may be led to our Saviour Jesus Christ, seeing that it is to him indeed that she sends us back. And yet we are taught by the example of the holy Virgin, to receive the word more carefully and more attentively than we have been accustomed to.⁶

II

If there is still some doubt as to what was Calvin's attitude to "Marianism" within the framework of the Roman church, perhaps Mr. Shuel will permit us to hear him further:

5. *Ibid.*, col. 35, comment on Lk. 1:42; translation after the French text, *Commentaires de Jehan Calvin sur le Nouveau Testament*, Tome premier (Toulouse, Société des Livres Religieux, 1892).

6. *Ioannis Calvini Opera*, Vol. 46, sermon 25 on Lk. 2:15-19, col. 308.

But as to the Papists, it is certain that they make of the virgin Mary an idol. For in according to her the office of advocate, in claiming that she mediates between God and men, that she is the life, the light, and the hope, what shall remain any more for our Saviour Jesus Christ to do? Is he not stripped in this way of the priesthood which was given to him by God his Father? It is just the same for all their patrons which they delude themselves into believing.⁷

It can hardly be said that Roman Catholic Mariology has undergone any recent developments which would have further recommended it in the opinion of Calvin. Mr. Shuel misleads us in suggesting that on this point Calvin offers us common ground with the Roman communion. Actually we have every reason, indeed more since his day, for accepting fully Calvin's stern judgement upon the place that Mary occupies in Roman theology and the Roman church. If Mr. Shuel's honest impression is that the Reformed tradition has no more legitimate contribution than this, no better "convincing alternative to the unbalanced 'Marianism'" of the Roman church, to offer to the ecumenical discussion, then indeed, let us who share that tradition begin our re-reading of Calvin! For if that is really the case we surely have been faithless to our theological heritage. One suspects, however, that if Mr. Shuel had read Calvin the way Calvin should be read, he would never have had to pose his question. For to the inquiry as to whether "the essential doctrinal principles" of the Reformed tradition "necessarily impose on its adherents either the inhibited silence or the automatic rejection of a serious Mariology," the reformer himself replies most clearly: "Let this then be a sure axiom—that there is no word of God to which place should be given in the Church save that which is contained, first in the Law and the Prophets; and, secondly, in the writings of the Apostles, and that the only due method of teaching in the Church is according to the prescription rule of his word."⁸ Is this what we call "inhibition"?

"If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (I Peter 4:11) . . . What else is this than to banish all the inventions of the human mind (whatever be the head which may have devised them), that the pure word of God may be taught and learned in the Church of the faithful,—than to discard the decrees, or rather fictions of men (whatever be their rank), that the decrees of God alone may remain steadfast?⁹

Surely there is nothing "automatic" about this?

Mr. Shuel has obviously overlooked a statement of Calvin, which, far from supporting his suggestion for a *rapprochement* of the churches on the grounds of "a serious Mariology," ventures the idea that it is this very compromise of a basic Reformation position and principle which makes for disunity. In a passage where he describes the teaching power of the Church, Calvin goes on:

7. *Ioannis Calvinii Opera*, Vol. 29, sermon on Deut. 34, col. 213.

8. *Institutes*, IV, viii, 8.

9. *Institutes*, IV, viii, 9.

God deprives man of the power of producing any new doctrine in order that he alone may be our master in spiritual teaching, as he alone is true, and can neither lie nor deceive. This reason applies not less to the whole Church than to every individual believer.

10. But if this power of the church which is here described be contrasted with that which spiritual tyrants, falsely styling themselves bishops and religious prelates, have now for several ages exercised among the people of God, *there will be no more agreement than that of Christ and Belial.*¹⁰

Calvin advises another path towards unity: "Herein is the unity of the faith happily realised, when all, from the highest to the lowest, aspire to the head."¹¹ As to who that person was, the reformer leaves no possible doubt.

10. *Institutes*, IV, viii, 9–10; italics mine.

11. *Institutes*, IV, i, 5.