

# What Should We Say about Mary?

BY CAROLE L. BAKER

**When a great aunt asked me casually, “Why did Protestants get rid of Mary?” my silence and befuddlement marked the beginning of a longstanding fascination with Mary’s role in the Christian Church. Three books reviewed here introduce the resurgent interest among Protestants in the mother of our Lord.**

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**I**n 2000, I began my seminary education at a Protestant seminary. The first semester I signed up for a course in Catholic Moral Theology. It was not because I had any particular interest in Catholic theology; I was, after all, a Protestant. But a friend I respected encouraged me to do so, and so I did. Had I been asked at that time what the significant differences were between Protestants and Catholics, I likely would have said something along these lines: Protestants do not worship Mary, and we do not think we need a pope telling us what to believe and how to live. Finally, Protestants have a personal relationship with Jesus. No mediation is required. Like most of the Protestants I knew, my identification as a Protestant mostly meant I understood what I was *not*, i.e. Catholic. And by Catholic I could only mean those few things listed above.

The course began. Thankfully it was lead by a Protestant theologian who took the texts, and Catholic tradition, seriously and therefore insisted that we do the same. Our last assignment was to read a book entitled *Mary: Mirror of the Church* by Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa. When the final class session opened, the room was completely silent. This was not typical for

this group of young, eager theologians who all semester long had come to class eagerly awaiting their moment to share their profound theological insights. Finally, a young man broke the silence professing, "I just don't know what to do with Mary." This confession prompted other similar confessions and I sat in amazement as I listened to these bright, articulate Protestants attempt to convey their befuddlement when encountering the Lord's mother.

When I returned home for Christmas, just days after the semester's close, this moment still haunted me. And when my great aunt, also a Protestant, asked me casually and without any prompting at Christmas dinner, "Why did Protestants get rid of Mary?" my own silence and befuddlement marked the beginning of what has now become a longstanding fascination with Mary's role in the Christian Church.

Along the way, to my delight I discovered I was not alone. Indeed Protestants have experienced a resurgent interest in Mary for several decades now. And this resurgence of Protestant reflection on Mary has resulted in numerous theological and devotional publications. For those unfamiliar with this movement within Protestantism, and even evangelical Protestantism, the following books may be of interest.



*The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007, 176 pp., \$19.95), written by Scot McKnight, is a small book that attempts to get evangelical Protestants not only interested but also excited about Mary. Why? McKnight claims that "the Cold War between Protestants and Roman Catholics over Mary has ended." (p. 5). Moreover, he claims that a book for evangelicals about the *real* Mary has yet to be written. These are two very bold claims set forth by McKnight in the opening pages. The real Mary, for McKnight, is not the Mary taken captive by polemics. Rather the real Mary is the one we encounter when considering her "life and character." This being the case, McKnight has organized his work thematically. He draws out characteristics he believes not only describe the real Mary, but with which his readers can sympathize and hopefully come to identify themselves in relation to the estranged mother of our Lord.

The chapter subtitles tell us Mary is a "Woman of Faith," "Woman of Justice," "Woman of Danger," and so on. All of this builds up to his conclusion that "This real Mary, the one who struggled to embrace Jesus' mission, is no offense to Protestants, but rather she is a woman for us to honor." And from here McKnight concludes with his characteristic boldness "calling for an event: a single day in each local Protestant church" which he suggests should be called "Honor Mary Day" (p. 144). Again, whether or not you are convinced by the end of the book to initiate such a day at your local church,

you will likely end up with a greater appreciation for the idea due to McKnight's labor of love. However, should you be convinced, McKnight provides an appendix filled with resources to help you organize a day in honor of the *real* Mary.

The zeal that marks his opening pages remains consistent throughout the book. Whether or not one is fully sympathetic with McKnight's exuberance, readers will find a sincerity and, as McKnight often puts it, a "fairness" that makes this book an enticing read. For those new to the conversation, this is a good place to start.



*Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 158 pp., \$24.95), edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, is a well compiled collection of essays written by thoughtful Protestants who have attempted to take seriously Mary's role in the Christian tradition and life of faith. The Foreword, written by Kathleen Norris, sets the tone: "If Mary points us beyond our traditional divisions, ideologues of all persuasions—conservative and liberal, feminist and anti-feminist—have long attempted to use Mary to argue their causes, with varying degrees of success. But Mary ultimately resists all causes" (p. x). This is a significant remark to have in mind as you work your way through the collection, as even here the writers represent a diverse range of perspectives on Mary that at times may say more about the ideological persuasion of the writer than Mary. This is not to say such persuasions are not a worthwhile exploration, and, in fact, these explorations exemplify the ways in which Mary continues to shape Christian thought and spirituality among Protestants. But, as Norris suggests, we are wise to recognize Mary's resistance to our causes.

The editors have organized the collection to include three major sections: "Encountering Mary," "Living Mary," and "Bearing Mary." In their Introduction they offer a brief rationale for each section which proves helpful and may in fact be worth revisiting as a framework for the reader's own reflection. What becomes clear in the Introduction, and is revisited and at times accentuated throughout the collection, is that this book is intentional in providing a *Protestant* picture of Mary. Though at times this emphasis comes across as an anti-Catholic sentiment, specifically related to Mariological doctrines, the editors express a desire for unity in the Church which they feel may be aided through the recovery of Mary's presence within Protestantism. They write, "The absence of Mary not only cuts Protestants off from Catholic and Orthodox Christians; it cuts us off from the fullness of our own tradition. We have neither blessed Mary nor allowed her to bless us" (p. 2).

The first section, "Encountering Mary," provides reflection on Mary's role in the Gospels. Most writers note the seemingly minor role Mary plays if one only looks at the number of appearances she makes. But nonetheless, in spite of her slight presence in the written accounts, these writers find plenty from which to draw out the scriptural witness to Mary's significance. For example, in her essay, "Who Is My Mother?" E. Elizabeth Johnson finds Mary's "marginal" role in Mark's Gospel to be indicative of the underlying theological claims Mark wants to make about the radical redefinition of family initiated in Christ's death and resurrection. She writes, "The narrative of Mark marginalizes the figure of Jesus' mother in the same way that it relativizes and redefines all domestic relations within the Christian community" (p. 33).

Mary's participation in the redefining of roles comes up again in the second section of the book. In the essay "Ignored Virgin or Unaware Women: A Mexican-American Protestant Reflection on the Virgin of Guadalupe," Nora O. Lozano-Díaz reflects on traditional associations of oppressive characteristics attributed to Mary, and therefore also with the Virgin of Guadalupe, insofar as her submission to God's will has been translated culturally into the perpetuation of patriarchal views of women's submission to men. Interestingly, Lozano-Díaz suggests this unfair association of Mary with women's oppression is best confronted with a biblical view of Mary that, when read with a feminist sensibility, reveals "an active and assertive woman who made her own choice" when approached by God through the angel (p. 93). Moreover, the Magnificat serves to further display the courage this young woman had in order to carry out God's will, despite the potential dangers it would involve. The biblical Mary, she insists, is not a woman of disempowered passivity.

There are serious implications for recovering Mary for Protestants and many are touched on in this rich collection. For this reason it will be a helpful read for those who have already begun to rediscover Mary, as well as those who are just beginning to notice her absence.



In order for Protestants to truly take seriously Mary's role in Protestant faith, it will be important to do this in light of a broader historical and theological perspective. This observation is addressed and partially met in Tim Perry's *Mary for Evangelicals: Toward an Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006, 320 pp., \$24.00). In his Foreword for the book, William J. Abraham rightly points out that any deep theological reflection on Mary cannot avoid leading to serious theological reflection on many other matters that distinguish Protestants from both Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Perry's book does not shy away from this

reality and instead faces it head on by offering a rather straightforward historical retracing of Christian thought regarding Mary. Of course, a historical retracing is also a theological retracing, and as such readers will have the opportunity to engage material from the early centuries of Christian theology. These are the centuries, some Protestants may not be aware, before there was a “Catholic Church.” Indeed, one of the great gifts of

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Perry's work is that it serves as a helpful introduction to the Church's history and struggles to not only understand Mary, but Mary in light of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the earliest arguments regarding Mary were inextricably linked to arguments regarding Christ. And in many cases, it is these and related arguments that continue to resurface when Protestants begin

taking Mary seriously. Therefore, so that we do not deceive ourselves in thinking these are “new” questions, Perry provides a historical framework through which we can continue to work out what is at stake with regards to Mary. In his final chapters, where he lays out his argument for an evangelical recovery of Mariology, he states, “If the preceding argument is valid, Mariology is not by definition unbiblical and need not justify or culminate in impiety. The question then remains where to begin. There are several possible places — all of them ancient” (p. 269).

From here Perry goes on to make his own contribution in the long lineage of Christian reflection and theologizing on Mary. Here is where the previous “introductory” character of Perry's work ends. What Perry does in the concluding chapters to his book can only make sense in light of what he has laid out before, but even for the attentive reader Perry's own construction of an evangelical Mariology will not be easily digested. It is a careful and painstaking attempt to push evangelical reflection on Mary far beyond its usual confinement to oversimplified characterizations and dismissals of Mariological doctrines. Perry does not want this to be easy; if it were easily obtained it could be easily lost. Working through these final chapters, one becomes keenly aware of the complexities and implications of what Perry is proposing. No less a labor of love than Scot McKnight's proposal for an evangelical honoring of Mary, Perry's arduous theological exposition exudes a sobering passion for the same. You cannot walk away from this book without taking it, and Mary, very seriously.



Only time will tell if the current buzz about Mary among Protestants will produce any fruit. In the meantime, we might do well to inquire what that fruit might be. How will we know it when we see it? Where do we look?

Apart from the historical and theological debates surrounding her role in Christian life and worship, there is another history I have discovered that is much harder to bring into scholarly reflection about Mary. That is to say, there is a history of Christians whose experience and knowledge regarding Mary has not come primarily through rational assent to doctrines or dogmas, but rather through a relationship. The idea of relationship is certainly not new to Protestants. In fact, the relational character of Protestant faith is something we have unfortunately used to define ourselves over and against our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters. And yet, it is precisely this relational aspect that is missing from so much Protestant writing about Mary. In fact, throughout much of the literature, reviewed here and elsewhere, Protestants seem to resist this most of all. Such resistance often comes in the form of Mary being turned into a metaphor, or a mere example, that Protestants can find “useful” for reflection on their own life. When this happens, when we too quickly appeal to her “usefulness,” we deny ourselves even the possibility of relating to her as the Mother of God.

What should we say about Mary? Perhaps the challenge is implicit in the question; that is, we think we need to have something to say *about* Mary, rather than having something to say *to* Mary. A proposal: why don't we begin with the first words spoken both *to* and *about* Mary from God's own messenger, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28)? If we offer this as an address, rather than a theological proposition, we might begin to understand more fully what it means to honor Mary.



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