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# Mary for Protestants? A New Look at an Old Question

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Should Mary be venerated by Protestants? That question frames the March 21, 2005 cover story for TIME magazine. David Van Biema has written an expansive and insightful report on contemporary developments among Protestants—developments that may influence some evangelicals.

Van Biema begins by introducing Reverend Brian Maguire, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Xenia, Ohio. Pastor Maguire has decided to combine his church's Good Friday observance with a Marian Festival, calling this move "a beautiful, poetic opportunity." As Van Biema notes, this kind of attention to Mary, the mother of Jesus, would have been controversial just a few years ago.

Nevertheless, the situation has changed so much that TIME's cover carries this explanation: "Catholics have long revered her, but now Protestants are finding their own reasons to celebrate the mother of Jesus." What's going on here?

The TIME cover story is part of a larger phenomenon, with many mainline Protestants turning to a reconsideration of Mary and incorporating the veneration of Mary into personal devotions and corporate worship. Some are going so far as to acknowledge Mary as an intercessor, addressing prayers to her as well as to other saints.

The background of this includes the argument put forth by feminists that a male-oriented world of biblical scholarship has ignored the roles played by Mary and other women of the Bible. Going beyond this, some feminist scholars argue that the Bible is itself warped by a "patriarchal" bias that sublimates and hides the role of women. Added to all this is the doctrinal evacuation of many mainline Protestant denominations and the influence of New Age forms of spirituality, often packaged as a "do-it-yourself" mix of whatever elements appear to be most interesting.

In the world of biblical scholarship, much of the attention to Mary can be traced to Beverly Gaventa, Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at Princeton Theological Seminary. In *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, Gaventa argues that Protestants have missed much of the biblical teaching concerning Mary. In other writings, she has pressed her case, proposing a recovery of Mary as a major figure in the history of the church. Furthermore, Gaventa has pressed on to argue that Protestants should join with Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians in addressing Mary as "Mother of all Believers." Looking especially at texts in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, Gaventa argues that Mary is so central to the gospel story that, other than Christ, "there isn't a figure comparable to her." Specifically, Gaventa points to several aspects of Mary's role as revealed in the Gospels, including, "Mary's consent to God's intervention in her life, her exultation in God's redemption, her pondering the meaning of Jesus, and certainly her persevering presence with other believers." As she concludes, "By identifying Mary as our Mother, we do not so much elevate Mary as recognize in her story the fundamental Lukan claim that nothing will be impossible with God, not even our consent to God's will."

Of course, referring to Mary as "Mother of all Believers" is characteristic of Roman Catholic piety and devotion. The New Testament clearly presents Mary as the human mother of Jesus, and affirms her role as the submissive, obedient, and trusting virgin in whom the Christ was conceived. Without doubt, Mary is presented in the biblical text as a model of faithfulness and devotion. Furthermore, her song of praise to God, commonly known as "The Magnificat" [Luke 1:46-55], offers a masterful tapestry of prophecy mixed with some of the most elevated theological themes found anywhere in

Scripture.

Nevertheless, to refer to Mary as “Mother of all Believers” is to go beyond the biblical text and to assign to the mother of Jesus a role that is, to say the least, not explicitly found in Scripture.

Though forms of Marian devotion can be traced to the earliest periods of church history, an expansion of Mary’s role became seemingly inevitable when she was declared to be “Mother of God” at the Council of Ephesus in 431. In naming Mary as “Mother of God,” the church was primarily concerned with the identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God—not with Mary as his mother. Nevertheless, when a theologian named Nestorius declared Mary to be the “Bearer of Christ” rather than “Bearer of God,” the church faced a Christological crisis.

In Catholic devotion, and in official church teaching, Mary would later be declared to have been free from original sin by the miracle of “immaculate conception” [1854] and to have been assumed into heaven without experiencing bodily corruption [1950]. Beyond official Catholic teaching, Marian devotion has become a staple of Catholic piety around the world. Most Catholics pray to Mary, asking for her intercession before Christ. The famous “Hail, Mary” prayer of Catholic devotion is based first in Luke 1:28, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The second part of that prayer, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death,” claims for Mary a role that is neither revealed in Scripture nor compatible with the unique role of Christ as Mediator.

Surprisingly enough, some Protestants now argue that believers should pray to Mary, and should request her intercession.

Robert W. Jenson, a theologian affiliated with the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton, New Jersey, argues that Protestants should feel free to pray to Mary and other saints. In his words, “There seems to be no reason why I cannot ask also a departed believer to pray for me. And if I can do it, there will certainly be contexts where I should do it.” Jenson, a Lutheran, is fully aware that his proposal contradicts historic Lutheran teaching. As he told *TIME*, the pastor of his Lutheran youth would have been dismayed by this argument. “My pastor would have been horrified,” he reported. “The pastor was my father.”

In the final analysis, Jenson does not provide much of a theological argument in defense of his claim that believers should pray to Mary. In *Mary, Mother of God*, edited by Jenson along with Carl E. Braaten, several theologians offer reconsiderations of Mary’s role in both theology and piety.

Inevitably, the background to all this is the Marian saturation of Roman Catholic devotion. Martin Luther, whose love and appreciation for Mary are well documented throughout his sermons and writings, eventually ceased to address prayers to Mary, believing that the practice was neither sustained by Scripture nor profitable for believers. As he advised fellow evangelical pastors at Erfurt in Germany: “I beseech in Christ that your preachers forbear entering upon questions concerning the saints in heaven and the deceased, and I ask you to turn the attention of people away from those matters in view of the fact . . . that they are neither profitable nor necessary for salvation. There is also the reason why God decided not to let us know anything about His dealings with the deceased. Surely he is not committing sin who does not call upon any saint but only clings firmly to the one Mediator, Jesus Christ. In fact, such a person is on safe and sure ground. Why do you want to turn away from the safe and sure and bother with that which is neither necessary nor commended?”

Baptist theologian Timothy F. George of Beeson Divinity School suggests that evangelicals should take care, lest they neglect the Bible’s positive statements concerning Mary. At the same time, when it comes to asking for the prayers of Mary and other saints, George concludes that “there’s no biblical warrant for us incorporating this into piety.”

George argues, “It is regrettable that many evangelicals do not distinguish between official Catholic teaching about Mary and the popular beliefs and practices of Marian devotion.” If this is so, much of the blame can be laid at the feet of Pope John Paul II, whose demonstrations of Marian devotion include references to her as “Mediatrice,” “Co-Redemptrix,” and “Mother of all Graces.”

When interviewed by *TIME*, I responded that the new theological constructions proposed by some Protestants concerning Mary are evidence of “overreaching,” “wishful thinking,” and risk “flirting with Catholic devotion.”

David Van Biema’s report including coverage of persons such as Mary Burks-Price, manager of Pastoral-Care

Education at a Louisville hospital, who told of discovering a role for Mary as she pondered a statue of Mary which stood next to a barn. "Her hands were outstretched, and her face was looking down on me with this great compassion," she reported. "I realized that she knew what it was like to see her son die on the Cross, to bear that sorrow and grief. I felt like she was giving me a window into the compassion God had for me in my own experience." TIME further reported that Burks-Price fills her office with images of Mary, including porcelain statuettes, prayer cards, and icons. Beyond this, she prays the Rosary with Catholic patients and reports that sometimes, "I know [the prayer] better than they do."

In this case, Burks-Price is not merely flirting with Catholic devotion, but accepting it whole scale. She may claim to remain a Baptist by affiliation, but she has accepted theological assumptions and spiritual practices that are fundamentally at odds with both the Bible and Baptist tradition.

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.

As I told TIME: "Insofar as Evangelicals may have marginalized Mary's presentation in the Bible, it needs to be recovered. But the closer I look at the New Testament, the more convinced I am that it does not single her out for the kind of attention that is being proposed. We have not missed the point about her. To construct a new role for her is simply overreaching." Van Biema explained that "Mohler's judgment may sound blunt, but his questions are legitimate Protestant ones. The point at which Marian respect turns into Marian veneration is more easily parsed by theoreticians than by believers trying to work out its practice."

The TIME cover story is a prime example of a serious theological issue treated with respect and fairness. In the final analysis, evangelical Christians should gladly affirm every truth about Mary revealed in the Scripture, gladly receiving her as a model of piety, devotion, and faithfulness. Nevertheless, Mary is not presented as sinless, and her faith at times is clearly tested by the circumstances of Jesus' life and the content of his teaching. Yet, it is Mary who was the obedient young virgin in whom Jesus Christ was conceived, and it is she who was the faithful mother who stood at the foot of the cross until the end. But, affirming all that the Scripture reveals about Mary, we must take care to go not even one step further.

In the end, perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from Mary is found in the instructions she gave to the servants at the wedding of Cana in Galilee, at which Jesus performed His first miracle: "Whatever He says to you, do it." Take it from Mary.

