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Anglicans and Roman Catholics Together—On Mary

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A major report on Mary was released May 16 in Seattle by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. The document, known popularly as “The Seattle Statement,” is more formally titled *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* [see this [introduction and explanation of contents](#)] The document was long anticipated, and it deals with one of the crucial issues that has divided the heirs of the Reformation from the Roman Catholic Church. The veneration of Mary, along with the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, have long divided evangelicals from Catholics. In the case of this document, those divisions are not so much resolved as redefined. In the text’s most significant statement, the differences are declared to be no reason for continuing ecclesiastical division. “Affirming together unambiguously Christ’s unique mediation, which bears fruit in the life of the Church, we do not consider the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us as communion dividing.... we believe that there is no continuing theological reason for ecclesial division on these matters.”

That is quite a statement, and it is rather typical of the report’s tone and substance. Consider this statement about the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary: “In view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One (Luke 1:35), we can affirm together that Christ’s redeeming work reached ‘back in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings. This is not contrary to the teaching of Scripture, and can only be understood in the light of Scripture. Roman Catholics can recognize in this what is affirmed by the dogma - namely ‘preserved from all stain of original sin’ and ‘from the first moment of her conception.’” This appears to be a way of affirming something so general (“to the depths of her being”) that it is basically meaningless. In other words, Anglicans and Roman Catholics can believe very different things about this issue without declaring any difference of belief. Furthermore, to say that a doctrine “is not contrary to the teaching of Scripture” is a far cry from any claim that it is justified by Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* simply disappears.

The same pattern is clear in the statement’s section on the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, which declares, “we can affirm together the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with Scripture and that it can, indeed, only be understood in the light of Scripture. Roman Catholics can recognize that this teaching about Mary is contained in the dogma.” By any normal measure of language, the fact that Mary was taken into glory “in the fullness of her person,” does not imply anything close to the claim that Mary was bodily received into glory, with or without tasting death.

This document is most significant in demonstrating the influence of the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Anglican Communion. In a church increasingly divided over issues of human sexuality and biblical authority, the Anglo-Catholics have a natural upper hand over Anglican evangelicals in discussions with Roman Catholics. The Reverend Rod Thomas, a spokesman for the evangelical Anglican group [Reform](#), told [The Times](#) of London that the document was an attempt to “shoehorn into Scripture.” Speaking to the heart of the issue [see [article](#)], Rev. Thomas said, “If Mary has been wholly and completely assumed into Heaven and we are able to pray to her, it goes completely against the grain of Jesus Christ being our great high priest who intercedes on our behalf with the Father.” Even more sweepingly, he described the document as “theological fudge,” concluding: “The document goes nowhere near addressing the understandings of revelation, of scriptural authority and the uniqueness of Christ that were the cornerstones of the Reformation and are the cornerstones of evangelical faith today.” The Marian dogmas—and the larger reality of Marian devotion—remain issues of clear and irresolvable division between the heirs of the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church. The real issue in this report is not where the Roman Catholic Church stands, but where the Anglicans are going.

FOR FURTHER READING: The full text of the report is not yet available on-line, but may be released after the

document is presented May 19 at Westminster Abbey. For Catholic coverage, see [Catholic OnLine](#). For Anglican coverage, consult the [Anglican Communion](#).

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