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Blessed Art Thou Among Women: The New Debate Over Mary

Thursday, July 16, 2009

The issue of Mary remains one of the hottest debates on the Protestant/Roman Catholic divide, and new proposals for Marian doctrines are likely to ignite a theological conflagration. At stake is not only the biblical understanding of Mary, but the integrity of the work of Christ.

The current debate came to light in the Vatican newspaper *L'Observatore Romano* which reported in early summer that the Pope had asked a commission of Catholic theologians to consider the advisability of declaring Mary “Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces and Advocate for the People of God.”

According to the paper, the 23 theologians—all experts on Mariology—unanimously recommended that the Pope drop the proposal. And yet, according to a constant stream of reports in the media, this Pope is not easily deterred. John Paul II seems intent upon raising Marian devotion to new heights under his pontificate, and his consistency in this regard is reflected in nearly every papal statement.

Evangelicals naturally wince when Catholics exhibit Marian devotion. The entire structure of Marian theology is so foreign to the Bible that evangelicals have difficulty understanding how such an unbiblical notion could have arisen, much less gained near supremacy in Roman Catholic popular devotion. How can the veneration of Mary not lead to a decrease of devotion to Christ?

That same question troubled a young Polish man named Karol Wojtyla, who would later be Pope John Paul II. As a young factory worker, Wojtyla was attracted to Marian devotion, but first he had to get over his concern “that I should distance myself a bit from the Marian devotion of my childhood, in order to focus more on Christ.” He did overcome this concern, and entered a new “mature form of devotion to the Mother of God.”

In fact, John Paul II credited Mary (in the form of Our Lady of Fatima) with saving his life during the 1981 assassination attempt. His papal motto, also found on his episcopal coat-of-arms, is addressed to Mary as *Totus Tuus*—“totally yours.”

Proponents of the new Marian dogmas have organized a massive lobbying effort with the Vatican. According to some reports, the Pope has received almost 4.5 million signatures on petitions, and an average of more than 100,000 letters per month. Much of the energy (and money) behind this movement is from the United States, where a coalition of Marian devotees is pushing for a papal declaration.

Mother Angelica—one of religious television’s most improbable characters—couches her exhortation in a warning: “If the Holy Father would define this dogma, it would save the world from great catastrophes and loosen God’s mercy even more upon this world.” *Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici* (“The Voice of the People for Mary Mediatrix”), a Catholic lay movement based in Steubenville, Ohio, is spearheading much of the effort. Its founder, Dr. Mark Miravalle of Franciscan University, states that he has “great moral certainty” the new doctrines will be declared by John Paul II to be infallibly revealed dogmas of the Roman Catholic church before the year 2000.

Currently, the church recognizes four Marian dogmas. The most important of these, Mary’s divine maternity, was

defined by the Council of Ephesus in 431, granting that Mary is rightly called “God-bearer” because she was the mother of Christ. Later dogmas declared Mary’s perpetual virginity (649), Immaculate Conception (1854), and Bodily Assumption (1950).

Tragically, each new Marian doctrine has moved Roman Catholic theology and devotion increasingly away from the Holy Scriptures and toward human innovation. In reality, the declaration of Mary as “God-bearer” brought ill effects upon the Catholic church. The original issue in that fifth-century debate was not Mary at all, but Christ. The council acknowledged Mary was the “God-bearer” in order to affirm the deity of Christ without question.

Quickly, however, the doctrine came to magnify Mary. In popular Catholic devotion—and in the writings and sermons of popes—Mary is now called the Queen of Heaven, the Mother of all Graces, and an abundance of other unbiblical titles. By the time of the Reformation, the veneration of Mary was established Catholic piety and theology. John Calvin warned of “those titles full of anathema, by which, while they would honor the Virgin, they most grievously insult her.” And to those many others have been added.

In the medieval church, Mary was already understood in a mediatorial role, and as intercessor to her Son. As Calvin retorted, praying to Mary “is assuredly altogether alien from the Word of God.” As the Bible clearly reveals, there is but one Mediator, Jesus Christ, and his mediatorial work cannot be supplemented by Mary.

While careful Catholic theologians insist their Marian doctrines do not diminish or impugn the saving work of Christ, this is the inevitable result. And, though Catholics claim their veneration of Mary does not distract from the worship of the Trinity, Marian devotion has virtually eclipsed the worship of God in many quarters.

Marian devotion is profoundly lacking in biblical support. Scripture reveals Mary to be a worthy model of humble submission to the will of God, as the virgin who was the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. But Scripture does not reveal any suggestion that Mary is to be venerated, that she should be honored with unbiblical titles, that she was perpetually a virgin, that she was conceived without sin, that she was assumed into heaven before death, that she participated in any way in the atonement, or that she serves in any mediatorial role. To the contrary, the Bible makes clear the only true worship is the worship of the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God is a jealous God who will not allow the worship of any creature—even the earthly mother of Jesus the Christ.

The debates over Mary emerged anew in the Reformation and remain a major divide between evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Unfortunately, few Protestant theologians have been willing to address the debates head-on. Despite his own theological deficiencies, Karl Barth did get to the bottom of this issue. Mariology, he said, “is an excrescence”—“a diseased construct of theological thought.” Further, “In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest.” What should be our response? Barth suggested one simple word—No.

Clearly, some Catholics are concerned about the ecumenical impact of the proposed new doctrines. They should well be warned. Nothing will more clearly demonstrate the profoundly unbiblical temptations of Roman Catholic theology than the adoption of these new Marian doctrines. Mary is not in any sense a co-redeemer, co-mediator, or advocate. She is not a dispenser of grace. Like all Christians, she is a sinner saved by the grace of God through the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In reality, new papal declarations may not mean much anyway, because the proposed Marian doctrines are already firmly ensconced in popular Catholic piety. This is an infusion of paganism all evangelicals must resist.

We have no right to grant to Mary—or to any saint, or to anyone else—what the Bible does not explicitly ascribe. In this we should all take Mary’s advice given as Jesus performed his first miracle: “Whatever He says to you, do it.” Nothing more—and nothing less.

