

HONOURING THE VIRGIN MARY: A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

By JOHN A. ROSS MACKENZIE

‘THE END is where we start from’. T. S. Eliot’s word in *Little Gidding* speak also to those of us who belong to the religious and doctrinal heritage of the Reformed Churches. These are the bodies that derive their inheritance largely from John Calvin and the Westminster standards, which include the *Confession of Faith*, 1648, and the *Shorter Catechism* of the previous year. One who belongs to that tradition, George F. MacLeod, used to regale us with one of his tales about a free presbyterian lass who went to England to stay with her aunt. Tucking her in at night last thing, the anglican aunt assured her that angels would guard her bed. Miss Calvin pursed her lips and replied: ‘We in the Free Presbyterian Church do not hold much with angels’. And to those disowned angels most Presbyterians would also add the saints, notably the Virgin Mary and most of the cloud of witnesses who surround us with their attendant mercies, according to the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews.

With the generation from about 1930 to 1960, four centuries of Reformed Church history ended and a fifth began. During the four centuries Reformed Churches did not approve of Mary very much. But the generation that ended centuries of great, often gracious, but also grievous history, saw the start of something that is undoubtedly true to Calvin — a reflection on Mary’s part in salvation and a way of honouring her such as is found in Karl Barth’s ‘Miracle of Christmas’ in his *Church Dogmatics*, and in Max Thurian’s *Mary, Mother of the Lord, Figure of the Church*. It may yet be given to us, in the conversation where different traditions encounter one another, to discover afresh and witness to that honouring of the Virgin Mary which was the public and secret joy of early Christians both at their worship and in their prayers, but which has been silent and

unarticulated for the most part in the faith and worship of the Reformed Churches.

The silence is all the more perplexing, since Calvin himself evidently honoured the Virgin, who, he taught, was blessed because God has chosen her to be mother of our Saviour and Redeemer; because we see in her the mercy of God, as in a mirror, and because she has not only borne Christ in her womb, giving him his human nature, but also because she carries him in her heart as one who owes everything to the pure goodness of God. Calvin therefore summoned those who followed him not only to the praise but also to the imitation of Mary: 'And this is the greatest praise that we know how to give her . . . that we avow her as our teacher and that we are her disciples'.¹

If this joyful celebration of the Virgin Mary to which Calvin summoned his own generation, is indeed a desired word of truth for our time and place, then any reflection about Mary, or speech about her or honouring of her in the Reformed Churches will require of us three things. First, we shall have to define the biblical christology by which any language about Mary is to be controlled and in the light of which it is to be understood. Secondly, we should also try to clarify and interpret more fully those elements of discord which have set us apart from others for whom the veneration of Mary is traditional and normal. It seems as though we have already entered the period when, in spite of lingering prejudices, we can discuss these controversies more agreeably and peaceably. Thirdly, we may also consider together actions which are possible for the Churches as they work, worship and teach at various levels from the local congregation to ecumenical councils.

The honouring of Mary informed by a biblical christology

In his thinking about Jesus Christ and his saving work, Calvin and his immediate successors sought to work out the difficult transition from medieval modes of thinking and to place the theology of reform on the basis of scripture and the christology of the ancient christian writers. If we are to understand how he deals with Mary and her place in salvation, it will be important for us to realize that Calvin's chief aim was to return to and to reassert the co-ordinates of that classical christology. First, the activity of Jesus Christ is from God's side toward humanity, and therefore our salvation is wholly and utterly by the free grace of God. Secondly, the activity of Jesus Christ, as one with us in our humanity, is also directed from our side

toward God. Christ has taken our nature upon him. So when Calvin speaks about Christ and his work of salvation. He remains true to the christology of the ancient councils by insisting on these two affirmations. Alone of the whole human race Jesus is one in being with the Father. But what he accomplished among us and for us, he accomplished as one of us, one in being with our human kind.

How do we authentically confess Jesus Christ in theology and celebrate him in worship and prayer? In our own time this constantly recurring question is asked in various ways. The question is never more cogent than when we are confronted by one or other of two misunderstandings of Christ, known to the early Church as ebionitism and docetism but also familiar to us in different modern expressions.

The christology of ebionitism in early Christianity simply disallowed the idea that we encounter God in Jesus Christ. In this way of thinking, Jesus remains little more than 'the stimulating man Jesus', to use Barth's phrase. In contemporary secular ideologies (or, as Ernest B. Koenker calls them, nature-ideologies), human culture and society find their distinctive values and fulfilment through the processes of history. But where the secular order proceeds in accordance with its own autonomous meaning and value, the divine presence in the world or initiative in its salvation, is not essential. In Koenker's words, 'The modern nature-ideologies recognize no radical disruption, no all-embracing need on the part of a fallen humanity, and consequently no comparable restoration or remission'.² But this is a christology which denies that our forgiveness, healing, and renewal are gifts to us by the free grace of God, in the loving activity of Jesus Christ from God's side towards us.

In contrast, docetism is a form of christology which in effect abandons the historical existence of Jesus, while retaining the divine Christ. But this is to put a wedge between the human Jesus and the divine Christ. It leaves an unbridgeable gulf between eternity and time, Spirit and matter. More concretely, it means that one determines in advance what it means to be human or to be divine, and then projects that definition on to Jesus of Nazareth. But we do not know what it means to be divine until we look at Jesus, who is the disclosure, the truth (Greek *alētheia* = unhiddenness) of God; and correspondingly, we do not know what it means to be human until we see in him also the authentic disclosure of what it is to be human. And to put a wedge between the two, which are one in him, is a failure to see that actual historical events, the stuff and dynamism of

human life, and not any predetermined ideas of how God is implicated in the world, are the disclosure of God's salvific will. The trouble with much contemporary spirituality is that it separates divine from human, and that its supernaturalism, which allows little place for the human and keeps itself aloof from the stuff and dynamism of life, is incapable of criticizing, let alone of resisting the docetism which finds expression in the totalitarianisms of modern politics.³

Despite being pulled in one direction or another as we try to answer the question of how we confess Christ in theology and celebrate him in worship and prayer, it is necessary to recall that in the protestant reformation, no less than in the theological line that we can trace from the New Testament to the major christological statements of the early Church, Mary the Virgin is the decisive 'No' to all the hubris of secular ideology and likewise to any attempt to keep God as pure Spirit from contact with the impurities of material existence. Precisely in her poverty and helplessness she is the witness *par excellence* to God's gracious activity towards us in Jesus Christ. 'When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law' (Gal 4,5). But as she gives her life to him within her own body, the gulf between Spirit and matter is bridged. She is not merely the convenient means — some of the docetists called her the 'tube' — through which divine being is admitted into the world. He who is born of her, very God, is also bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh.

In the modern period these ideas are part of the central theme of Barth's discussion of the incarnation in 'The Miracle of Christmas'. According to Barth, God comes to us in the incarnation as one of ourselves, to be our very own. So the dogma of the virgin birth is for him the confession of the *vere deus* whom we encounter in Jesus Christ. But it states no less that this Jesus Christ is the real son of a real mother, and in this complete sense a man, *vere homo*. More recently than in Barth, and within the same reformed tradition, Donald G. Dawe has used this affirmation of Barth as the basis of his own lucid treatment of Mary as the eternal bearer of Christ.

The Virgin birth is the necessary tie between the divine initiative that makes salvation possible and its concrete embodiment that makes salvation accessible. . . . She still stands before us, through the witness of scripture, as the Mother who bears and protects her Son. . . . Without her the redemptive mystery of her Son is lost. With her it is received with joy.⁴

With such examples before us, it is time for those of us who minister and teach in the Churches of the reformed tradition to ask serious questions about our habitual and even wilful exclusion of Mary from our confessing of the faith and our liturgical worship. To affirm and honour the Virgin Mary as the mother of him who is *vere homo et vere deus* is neither quaint nor antiquarian. It is humanly and theologically essential. Mariology is an integral part of christology.

Clarifying and overcoming elements of discord

Any honouring of Mary within the Reformed Churches will require of us another step: that we try to clarify and interpret and thereby to overcome elements of discord which have separated us (I must say in fairness) from the main body of Christians from the beginning. In this process of clarifying and interpreting it may be possible for us to approach and even to embrace certain marian doctrines which our tradition has generally found to be out of harmony with the gospel.

Let us consider, first, the mystery of Mary's intercession in the communion of saints. Never at a loss for words in upbraiding the Romanists, Calvin consigns their prayers to the devil if they have recourse to any other mediator than Christ for their salvation. So it has been a characteristic part of protestant spirituality that each believer has direct and immediate access to God through Christ and in the Spirit. No other advocates or mediators are necessary, neither Mary nor Michael nor the apostles.

But there has been something else in protestant spirituality, even greater and more energizing than that stress on the sole mediatorship of Christ: it is the stress of all the reformers, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and Knox, on the Church as the communion of saints. The central and unifying element in Calvin's doctrine of the Church is the idea of incorporation into Christ. He constantly uses the language of being 'ingrafted' into the body of Christ to express this idea of union. We read in the *Institutes*:

Christ is not outside us but dwells within us. . . . Not only does he cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us.⁵

Christ unites himself with us daily more and more into one body. The consequences of this are profoundly important as we reflect on the mystery of Mary's intercession. For if we are the body of Christ

and one with him, then what is said of Christ is applicable also to us, and what is said of us must also, in a sense, be applied to him. Consider what this means in regard to intercession. It is not in this life only that we have hoped in Christ (1 Cor 15,19). Death does not end our personal influence or the power of our love. If, therefore, to be human is to visualize and care about interests larger than our personal ones; and if to be civilized is to form our minds so that they instinctively desire 'whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious' (Phil 4,8), then in that 'wonderful communion' in which Christ becomes completely one with us, all the loves and hopes that we have ever held, and all those who have ever loved us or borne us up, are not lost to us. They are ours, in an indivisible bond of fellowship.

It is not hard, if we are sensitive to that communion, to think of Mary as one with us in that bond, or to entertain the idea of praying like Mary. We know little of the home life or religious formation of Jesus, but the picture which emerges of Mary in the gospels is that of a woman to whom prayer was both habit and joy. Calvin is right. Commenting on the first lines of the *Magnificat*, he says: 'The holy Virgin shows us here that to praise God well our hearts must be touched by his goodness, and then our soul magnifies and praises him'.⁶

From the evidence which we can assemble from Acts 1,12ff we can see that Mary prays with devotion, one with those who are all witnesses to the resurrection of her Son; she prays as one open to the empowering of the Spirit by which their witness to Jesus becomes a possibility; she prays in an indivisible bond of fellowship where there is no lack or need; and she prays with faith that the promise of salvation comes to everyone, even those that are far off. (I am assuming that Peter's pentecost sermon, which includes that phrase, expresses the substance of early christian preaching as it was known to the first witnesses, including the apostles and Mary, Acts 1,13ff; cf 2,38-41.)

In the eucharistic prayer of the *Book of Common Order* (1979), and in similar rites used within the Reformed Churches, the worshipping people are bidden to join 'with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven' in offering their praise to the holy God. If the angels and archangels are now no longer disowned by a Calvinism purse-lipped or austere, surely Mary is among that cloud of witnesses with their attendant mercies. The marriage of Cana in John's Gospel revealed a woman who could visualize and care about

interests larger than her own; and the *Magnificat*, a mind centred upon what is just and gracious. Death does not end the power of that love or sense of what is gracious and right. When we pray, we pray with Mary. In the prayer from the vigil mass of the Feast of the Assumption in the revised Roman Liturgy the bidding comes:

Let us pray (with Mary to the Father, in whose presence she now dwells). . . . May the prayers of this woman clothed with the sun bring Jesus to the waiting world and fill the void of incompleteness with the presence of her child.

Those whose approach is still marked by the anti-marian attitudes which have blemished calvinist history will still abjure such forms of praying. But if we allow Calvin to speak his own mind and heart, we may learn to see that language like this is grounded in the gospel, theologically sound, and liturgically appropriate.

Yet another way of approaching the mystery of Mary's intercession is to reflect on what Calvin called 'the intercessions which . . . spring forth from the emotion of love, in which we willingly and freely embrace one another as members of one body'. Now we cannot make Calvin say what he does not say, and, of course, he insists on speaking of Christ as the only way and the one access by which it is granted to us to come to God. But when he goes on in this part of the *Institutes* to discuss how we pray for one another in Christ's name, he also insists that this unique mediatorship of Christ does not hinder us from pleading for one another:

The saints still retain their intercessions, whereby they commend one another's salvation to God. . . . Let it remain an established principle that we should direct all intercessions of the whole Church to that sole intercession.⁷

At the conclusion of the Eighth Mariological Congress held at Zaragoza, Spain, 3-12 October 1979, an ecumenical declaration was signed by participants who included a number of Reformed. On the matter of intercession the declaration states as follows:

The saints who have entered into the fulness which is in Christ, amongst whom Mary holds the first place, can and do pray for us sinners who are still suffering and struggling on earth. The one and unique mediation of Christ is in nothing affected by this.

This is by no means out of harmony with Calvin, who discusses the same theme in his commentary on Timothy: 'The intercessions by which the saints help one another do not conflict with the fact that they all have one sole Intercessor'.⁸ Furthermore, from a reformed perspective the statements by the dominican scholar, Fr Frederick M. Jelly O.P., in a speech given at the 1981 annual meeting of the Mariological Society of America, are both appealing and constructive. In what he called a contemporary reappraisal of Mary's intercession Fr Jelly said: 'The mystery of Mary's intercession, as that of all in the Communion of Saints, receives its redemptive meaning and value from the unique mediatorship of her Son'. He continues:

Unlike the intercessory power of the other saints in glory, however, hers is truly universal since she received into herself the source of all life and so has been designated the spiritual mother of us all.⁹

As we ponder ideas like this and return to the sources in matters of controversy — which was Calvin's own principle — it can become for us a discovery of profound evangelical importance that Mary's intercession for us, depending solely on Christ's and in no way detracting from his, springs from the feeling of her love as the bearer of salvation. As a witness, with the apostles and the others, to the resurrection of her Son, as the enduring sign and form of how God pours out his Spirit upon all flesh, Mary is one with us in an indivisible bond of fellowship. She is the woman who visualizes and cares about interests larger than her own, and as at the first of Christ's signs, so she forever directs us toward her Son, saying: 'Do whatever he tells you' (Jn 2,5).

Church and scripture, grace and nature

In the controversies which have set Catholic and Protestant against each other, two recurrent themes have been the relationship between scripture and Church and that between grace and nature. In the polemics of the Churches of the west it was around these that the debates characteristically turned. For the early Church it was inconceivable to separate Church from scripture. It was not different in the theologies of reform in the sixteenth century. The desire and intention of Luther, Calvin and the others was that the Church should be formed and instructed by the Word of God. Thus in Geneva Calvin never ceased to preach that if we wish to know Jesus

Christ and bear witness to him, our only reliable source is the law, the prophets, and the Gospels. But the Reformation was a religious movement, carried out by men and women who never conceived of themselves as standing apart from the Church. So when Luther, in otherwise arrogant-sounding words, reflected on his own contribution to the reform and said, 'Then I was the Church', he did not mean that his alone was the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He meant that one thing alone is necessary, namely, the Word of God by which we live, and therefore it is the Church's central ministry to receive and hand on the gospel of grace.

The inner connection in Reformation thought between Church and scripture is clear, and the interaction is such that, 'as the preaching of the Word of God deepens the faith and life of the Church, so the Church in turn is built up in this christological circle as the living Body of Christ, who is the Word of God. But what has happened in Protestantism, particularly since the First World War, is a tendency to separate scripture from the hermeneutical context in which it is received and preached. The emergence of form criticism, for example, as a method of investigating the origin and development of the New Testament teaching about Jesus, cast much needed light on the faith of early christian communities. But since by a strictly scientific measurement Mary was seen to occupy a severely limited place in the early kerygma, biblical theology therefore assigns her a correspondingly minimal place. This is part of the explanation of the indifference about Mary in protestant Churches.

Contrast this indifference with the wealth of marian piety to be seen in, let us say, a museum like the Prado in Madrid where in the exuberance of the spanish temperament marian devotion seems to eclipse the role of Christ. Mary's humanity and passion seem to gain more attention than the wounds of the crucified Redeemer. Against excesses in marian piety the canon or measure of New Testament teaching must be held. The doctrines, life and experience of the Church are always to be drawn from and corrected out of the Word of God in scripture. There is no such thing as a Church that can exist without that Word of God. Correspondingly, we cannot cut scripture off from the hermeneutical context in which it is believed and taught. The confessional statements of the Reformed Churches, notwithstanding what they have typically said about the sufficiency of scripture, is exposed only too often as a subjective and arbitrary interpretation, cut off from the organic life and common mind of the people of God.

In their insistence on the absolute priority of grace the Churches of the reformed tradition are unanimous. The liberal-minded John Cairns, professor of the United Presbyterian Church in the nineteenth century, is typical: 'I have now preached for forty-three years', he said on the occasion of the presentation of his portrait, 'and have been a Professor of Theology for more than twenty, and I find every year how much grander the gospel of the grace of God becomes'.¹⁰ This is the same Cairns who was so moved with piety before the tomb of Ambrose in Milan that he did honour to the relic. In his own words, 'I knelt down and kissed it, and forgot for the time that I was both Protestant and Presbyterian'.

Since grace is the personal communication of God, we apprehend it, or, better, are apprehended by it, as a personal word on the personal plane and by the mediation of Christ in the preaching of his gospel. So it is indispensable for us that we should be obedient to that ministry, for faith comes by hearing and by grace through faith we enter into union with Christ.

But with that preached word there must also be the *verbum visibile*. The grace proclaimed finds the forms and expressions of grace, and for the reformers this meant particularly the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The dialectic to which I have just referred between the grace which is proclaimed and the grace which is apprehended as visible sign may also be extrapolated to the dialectic between evangelical faith and catholic transformation, to use only partly adequate terms.

At its simplest, what after all is the evangelical witness? What do reformed people instinctively recognize as the authentic witness to the grace of God? It is preaching, preaching in order to salvation, the preaching of the grace through which we are saved. At its simplest, what is Catholicism? It is that union in Christ, that concrete oneness in the Spirit which is the place and mode of Christ's redeeming presence in the world. It is the community assembled around the eucharistic table, bearing witness to the grace that heals and elevates what is broken and fallen. Grace, in the scholastic phrase, perfects and does not destroy nature. And for all the risks of secularization that are involved and even of obscuring the evangelical character of the christian message, Catholicism has also historically held to its obligation to transform the structures of secular society. This is something of what I intend by the phrase catholic transformation.

When Christians of different commitments come together to

reflect on the place of Mary, one of the awkward questions that must be raised is how we are to assess and interpret the appearances of Mary. From the time of Gregory Thaumaturgus (third century) to Bernadette Soubirous (canonized 1933) the record is a long and important one. As in the case of any devotion or practice in the Church, the criteria for assessment or approval are a scriptural foundation and a critical examination of the evidence. How, then, can reformed Christians begin to deal with the devotions that are to be found at places like Lourdes or around our Lady of Pilar? My own conviction is that we shall make no progress in understanding one another unless we maintain the dialectic between evangelical faith and catholic transformation.

In December 1981, I was invited to give a paper in San Antonio, Texas, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the appearance of our Lady of Guadalupe. Three thoughts occurred. First, what was a presbyterian minister, sprung from Scottish Calvinism, doing in a place like that? Secondly, if Robert Louis Stevenson could learn to love the gaudy melon flower or whatever else he found in Samoa, I could learn to love our Lady of Guadalupe in San Antonio. Thirdly, 1531 was a very good year.

In 1531, the newly published *Augsburg Confession* explained the lutheran position on reform in the Catholic Church. Zwingli, wounded in battle at Kappel, was unceremoniously killed and the leadership of reform passed to Calvin. His father Gerard died in that same year, at loggerheads with the cathedral authorities. And calvinist scholars usually date the dawning of an evangelical awareness in Calvin to some time after his father's death and certainly by the fall of 1533. In 1945, Pius XII sent a radio message to the Marian Congress, meeting in Mexico, in which he spoke, shall I say, in a flowery style appropriate to the theme: 'On poor John Diego's apron, as tradition has it, brushes not of this earth left painted a very sweet picture that the corrosive action of time has, in a wonderful manner, left unimpaired'.¹¹

The latin effusiveness presents such an obvious contrast to the reserve of the reformer of Geneva. But in what is generally regarded as an autobiographical passage in a letter to Cardinal Sadoletto, Calvin grieved that early in his life he was little more than a conventional Christian: 'Thy word', he relates, 'which ought to have shone on all thy people like a lamp, was taken away, or at least suppressed'. His instruction in the faith had not paved the way for what he calls 'a sure hope of salvation'. But then — presumably

around 1531 — ‘it was as if light had broken in upon me’. From that time, of course, the evangelical movement could not be arrested and the gospel of grace was preached. John Calvin’s witness is therefore centrally the preaching of the grace by which we are saved and the faith that comes through the hearing of the Word. There is the sure hope of salvation.

The grace to which John Diego witnesses is the grace that perfects nature and the faith that finds cultural expression, specifically the small church of 1533 and eventually the Shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe. Neither great shrines nor even small churches in themselves obliterate superstition or poverty. But they can indeed be a witness to the grace that heals and elevates what is broken and fallen. They can be signs that all things may come to their perfection through the Word by whom all things were made.

We need both John Calvin’s lighted lamp and John Diego’s imprinted apron, for we are poor enough at bearing witness to God’s grace. Mary, Virgin and Mother, may yet become both the ground and occasion of the increasing unity of those religious traditions that are represented by one or other of the symbols. At its simplest, the witness of Mary is that her faith came by hearing. She is the first to hear the announcement of the gospel: ‘Rejoice, you who have received grace’. She heard the word that broke the silence, took that word into her very being, and gave it forth for the life of the world. Calvin spoke well, in saying that we should be her disciples. But in her ‘Yes’ to God she is also witness to the grace that transforms what is broken and in need of salvation: ‘He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away’ (Lk 1,52ff).

If ever I come to the shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe, I shall kneel down and reverence it; perhaps even for that moment forget that I am both Protestant and Presbyterian. Or better, I would like to remember words which come from my tradition and are better known than anything else, except perhaps a verse or two of scripture: ‘What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever’. The words of the *Shorter Catechism* are almost directly a paraphrase of a verse or two of scripture, even more widely known: ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour’.

NOTES

- ¹ Sermon XI on the Harmony of the Gospels, in *Corpus Reformatorum*, vol 35, cols 120ff.
- ² Koenker, Ernest B.: *Secular Salvations* (Philadelphia, 1960), p 60.
- ³ Dawe, Donald G.: *From Dysfunction to Disbelief: The Virgin Mary in Reformed Theology* (The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Washington D.C., 1977).
- ⁴ Dawe, Donald G.: *op. cit.*
- ⁵ *Institutes*, 3,2,24, in *CR*, vol 30, col 418.
- ⁶ Sermon X, in *CR*, vol 35, col 117.
- ⁷ *Institutes*, 3,20,19.
- ⁸ Commentary on 1 Tim 2,5.
- ⁹ Jelley, Frederick M., O.P.: 'Mary's Intercession: A Contemporary Reappraisal', in *Marian Studies*, vol XXXII (1981), p 84.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Wright, Ronald Selby: *Fathers of the Kirk* (London, 1960), p 213.
- ¹¹ Quoted in *Our Lady*, selected and arranged by the benedictine monks of Solesmes (Boston, Mass., 1961), p 260.