

## “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?” An Examination of Martin Luther’s Views on the Virgin Mary

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How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?  
An Examination of Martin Luther's Views on the Virgin Mary  
Roland Weisbrot

A person who finds themselves in a contemporary mainline or evangelical Protestant church will be hard-pressed to hear much about the Virgin Mary other than, as her title implies, she was a virgin, and that she was the mother of Jesus Christ. Both things are true and important in and of themselves for Christian doctrine and theology, but they are also very cursory statements in nature and do not really address the vital and dominant role Mary has played in Christian history and spirituality, even among the Reformers. As one scholar expounds on the importance of Mary in piety and culture in Christianity: “the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man’s activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done.”<sup>1</sup> Given her traditional stature in the Church, Mary is just too important of a character to ignore or relegate to the realm of unimportance. As Luther wittingly points out, partially reflecting contemporary Protestant thought, “I am to accept the child and his birth and forget the mother, as far as this is possible, although her part cannot be forgotten, for where there is a birth there must also be a mother.”<sup>2</sup>

Going beyond these simple statements of virgin and mother has long been taboo among Protestants. This is largely because the Reformers and their intellectual descendants reacted strongly against the Medieval Roman Catholic views and popular practices of piety surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.acnuc.talonline.ca/lib/ambrose/detail.action?docID=3051975#>; Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, n.d., 32. “The first recorded prayer to the Virgin comes from the very late fourth century, and rituals and feasts in her honor grew slowly and steadily from that point. By the twelfth century, many churches dedicated to Mary began to be built.”

<sup>2</sup> John W. Doberstein, ed., *Luther’s Works: Sermons I*, vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 213.

Mary; they specifically rejected her role as intercessor, regarding it as deeply heretical.<sup>3</sup> This was not always the case, however, as one scholar explains about the Reformers: “they themselves had a very explicit devotion to Mary, especially Luther but also Zwingli and Calvin in their own way.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the goal of this paper is to recapture the views of the Reformers about the Virgin Mary, particularly those of Martin Luther, in order to help Protestants tackle what has become a taboo subject and provide a more robust view of Mary and her role in the Christian life. To accomplish this task, this paper will utilize quotes about the Virgin Mary as found in the numerous volumes of *Luther’s Works*. Analysis of these quotes will give insight from Luther into the person of Mary.

### Person of Mary

The person of Mary has long been debated in the Church and has been subject to very intense arguments during the Christological controversies of the Ecumenical Councils, especially the first four. When it comes to the person of Mary, there are four important issues: her virginity, her status as the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), her title of Queen of Heaven, and whether she was born sinful or not (Doctrine of Immaculate Conception) and if she lived in sin during her life. Fortunately, Luther has something to say about all these issues.

### Mary’s Virginity

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy George, “Recovering a Protestant Mary,” *Christian History & Biography*, 2004, 13 “They were very critical of what they considered Marian excesses, and they talked at length about some of the ways in which Mary was given too much veneration, too much almost idolatrous worship, substituting her for Christ himself in some ways at the popular devotional level.”; Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 4. “Protestants criticized more than pious excess or popular misunderstanding, striking at the heart of many dearly held notions of Marian theology. Their rejection of any role for merit in human salvation in particular undermined Mary’s cult.”

<sup>4</sup> George, “Protestant Mary,” 13. On page 14, George notes: “The Reformers noticed that when all of the disciples had fled in fear, Mary remained true to Christ and his word. Her fidelity unto the Cross showed that the true faith could be preserved in one individual. And the Reformers honored her for this, considering her the mother of the (true remnant) church.”

When it comes to Mary's virginity, even the belief that she remained a virgin after giving birth to Christ (Doctrine of Perpetual Virginity), Luther remained a steadfast proponent of her chastity his entire life.<sup>5</sup> As he states in the following passage:

After the child is born they dismiss the mother and speak not about her, what became of her, but only about her offspring. Therefore, one cannot from these words [Matt. 1:18, 25] conclude that Mary, after the birth of Christ, became a wife in the usual sense; it is therefore neither to be asserted nor believed. All the words are merely indicative of the marvelous fact that she was with child and gave birth before she had lain with a man.<sup>6</sup>

In Luther's mind, Mary's virginity both before and after Jesus' birth was essential for the Scriptures to be fulfilled and for his theological views to be coherent.<sup>7</sup> This is especially evident in Luther's affirmation of the belief that Mary was impregnated by the power of the Word through the Holy Spirit rather than through sexual intercourse, thus preserving her virginal state.<sup>8</sup>

### Mary as the Mother of God (*Theotokos*)

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<sup>5</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, 34; Walther I. Brandt, *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society II*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 199. "A new lie about me is being circulated. I am supposed to have preached and written that Mary, the mother of God, was not a virgin either before or after the birth of Christ, but that she conceived Christ through Joseph, and had more children after that."

<sup>6</sup> Brandt, *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society II*, 45:212; Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *Luther's Works: Table Talk*, vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 341.: "Then he was asked whether Mary also had intercourse with Joseph after the birth of Christ, for Matthew says that he 'knew her not until she had borne a son' [Matt. 1:25]. He [Martin Luther] replied, 'The church leaves this [to us] and has not decided. Nevertheless, what happened afterward shows quite strongly that Mary remained a virgin. For after she had perceived that she was the mother of the Son of God, she didn't think she should become the mother of a human child and adhered to this vow.'"

<sup>7</sup> Karant-Nunn and Wiesner, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, 34. "Mary's virginity was important to Luther because it reinforced the purity of Christ and allowed Old Testament prophecies to be fulfilled. It was not to serve as a model to other women in the way that her status as mother and wife was, however, but was a necessary part of her unique role as the *Theotokos*, the 'Mother of God,' a title that Luther accepted."

<sup>8</sup> Abdel Ross Wentz, ed., *Luther's Works: Word and Sacrament II*, vol. 36 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 341; Brandt, *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society II*, 45:205 "So this mother is a virgin, and yet a true natural mother; not, however, by natural capacity of power, but solely through the Holy Spirit and divine power."; Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works: Lectures on Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews*, vol. 29 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 114. "Therefore, the Lord 'went to the prophetess,' that is, to the Virgin Mary; for she submitted to no other man than God. And thus 'she conceived and bore the Son' of God, not from the flesh (which God does not have) but from the Holy Spirit."

As for Mary's status as the Mother of God, Luther says the following in relation to the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), specifically the wording in Luke 1:49:

The 'great things' are nothing less than that she became the Mother of God, in which work so many and such great good things are bestowed on her as pass man's understanding. For on this there follows all honor, all blessedness, and her unique place in the whole of mankind, among which she has no equal, namely, that she had a child by the Father in heaven, and such a Child. She herself is unable to find a name for this work, it is too exceedingly great; all she can do is break out in the fervent cry: 'They are great things,' impossible to describe or define. Hence men have crowded all her glory into a single word, calling her the Mother of God. No one can say anything greater of her or to her, though he had as many tongues as there are leaves on the trees, or grass in the fields, or stars in the sky, or sand by the sea. It needs to be pondered in the heart what it means to be the Mother of God.<sup>9</sup>

Not only does Luther approve of the title of Mother of God for the Virgin Mary, he rejoices in it!

For him, such a title bestowed upon a human is a wonderful thing in and of itself and is consequently one of the preeminent titles among humanity. As Luther audaciously proclaims in another quote:

We too know very well that God did not derive his divinity from Mary; but it does not follow that it is therefore wrong to say that God was born of Mary, that God is Mary's Son, and that Mary is God's mother.... Thus it should also be said that Mary is the true natural mother of the child called Jesus Christ, and that she is the true mother of God and bearer of God, and whatever else can be said of children's mothers, such as suckling, bathing, feeding – that Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God, etc.<sup>10</sup>

In this quote Luther emphasizes that he views Mary as being the Mother of God in every possible sense, from biology to the actual visceral and physical tasks of a mother such as feeding and bathing. By doing so, Luther displays his high Christology and firmly plants himself in the

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<sup>9</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works: The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat*, vol. 21 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 326; Martin E. Lehman, ed., *Luther's Works: Word and Sacrament IV*, vol. 38 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 275.: "The property of both natures makes one Christ and each of the two propositions becomes true... Mary is the mother of the Song of God; she is the mother of the Word of God."

<sup>10</sup> Eric W. Gritsch, *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry III*, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 99–100.

boundaries of the traditional interpretation of Mary by the Church by taking extremely literally the title *Theotokos* as bestowed by the Third Ecumenical Council in 431AD. Yet, such strong and precise language about Mary's position as the Mother of God is unlikely to be found among contemporary Protestants.

### Mary as Queen of Heaven

Though Luther does not flat out reject bestowing the title of Queen of Heaven upon Mary, he is very aware of the potential implications of wording and connotations so he cautions his listeners in the following way: "It is necessary also to keep within bounds and not make too much of calling her 'Queen of Heaven,' which is a true-enough name and yet does not make her a goddess who could grant gifts or render aid, as some suppose when they pray and flee to her rather to God. She gives nothing, God gives all."<sup>11</sup> As this quote reveals, Luther does not want to risk giving any credence to some of his contemporaries' beliefs that Mary was some sort of super-human celestial being with power and influence over the world that rivalled God's own. Words and titles were powerful that had to be chosen with care, lest they give off the wrong impression. For this reason, it did not take long for second and third generation Lutheran scholars and clergy to drop the title of Queen of Heaven altogether, opting for titles and wording for Mary that fit what they viewed to be orthodox and having origination in the ecumenical councils.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pelikan, *Luther's Works: The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat*, 21:327–28.

<sup>12</sup> Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 25. "Based on the evidence presented in the main chapters, the conclusion argues that while Lutheran preachers strive to remain orthodox, especially accepting the statements of the early church councils, they transform the traditional image of Mary: she no longer serves as the powerful Queen of Heaven, but is only held up and praised as a meek, pious, chaste, and obedient girl. Because of the theological changes inaugurated by Luther and the social conservatism of the Lutheran clergy, Mary could no longer be portrayed as an active figure, but rather must serve as a passive representative of the faithful Christian." On pages 136-37 Kreitzer explains when the view started to change: "What we find, however, is that the attitude of reverence toward Mary characteristic of Luther and other pastors such as Johann Spangenberg, Caspar Huberinus (who

### Mary's Sinlessness

Though it is difficult to nail down exactly what Luther did and did not believe about Mary's sinlessness, a few quotes do provide some insight. First, Luther, like many other Reformers, rather resolutely affirmed that Mary had conceived Jesus without sin and thus did not need to undertake observance of Mosaic Law for women after childbirth:

As is written in Luke 2 [:22], she was purified according to the law of Moses according to the custom of all women, although she was not bound by that law and did not need to be purified [because she had not conceived with a man]. Out of free and willing love, however, she submitted to the law like other women that she might not offend or despise them. She was not justified by this work, but being righteous she did it freely and willingly.<sup>13</sup>

Although such language is absolutely foreign to contemporary Protestants, the logic makes sense and could be reconciled to modern Protestant views about Mary; after all, since Mary did not conceive Jesus sexually, it easily follows that she did not need to undergo the same purification rite as other women. The same, however, cannot be said about Luther's views on the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Second, although Luther is notoriously convoluted and shifty on the Doctrine of Immaculate Conception, there is one quote that suggests that he privately held to the belief:

But, lest I become too involved, let me state that my position is proved in this one instance, namely, that the Roman church along with the general council at Basel and almost with the whole church feels that the Holy Virgin was conceived

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laments that the festival of Mary's Conception has been abandoned), and Johannes Brenz is quickly lost among the younger generation of reformers. This shift is already visible in the postils of Melanchthon but becomes especially noticeable in those sermon collections published in the 1550s and 1560s, which tend to stress Christ and spend little time discussing Mary, and in those published after 1570, which tend to be more critical both of Mary and of Roman Catholicism."

<sup>13</sup> Harold J. Grimm, ed., *Luther's Works: Career of the Reformer I*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 368; Karant-Nunn and Wiesner, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, 52; Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 134. "Luther, in particular, even declared with the tradition that, as Mary had conceived without sin, that is, not in the usual manner, she also gave birth without suffering any pain or difficulty. But, as Christ was completely human, so he had a completely natural birth."

without sin. Yet those who hold the opposite opinion should not be considered heretics, since their opinion has not been disproved.<sup>14</sup>

In this quote Luther, leaves ample room for disagreement and asserts that Christians who do not hold to the Doctrine of Immaculate Conception should not be labelled heretics as, in his mind, there is not sufficient evidence to prove the doctrine either true or false.

Third and finally, Luther believed Mary lived a life completely obedient to the Law, though he qualified this by saying that it was not by her own work but that it was an extraordinary measure of grace made this possible: “Yet who doubts that God could give to someone so much grace that he would fulfill [the Law] completely (as we believe He did in the case of the Blessed Virgin), granted that He does not do it in every case?”<sup>15</sup> Thus, a sinless life was possible, but only reserved for a very select few, including Mary, according to God’s grace and mercy. For Luther, Mary’s sinlessness was to be viewed as the exception rather than the rule.

In conclusion, Luther held a very high view of the person of Mary. A view which affirmed her perpetual virginity and her position as Mother of God (*Theotokos*), granted her the title of Queen of Heaven, albeit cautiously, and allowed for Mary, by and large, to be viewed as sinless. Thus, it is safe to say that Luther’s views on the person of Mary are in many ways far from what contemporary Protestants believe, teach, and confess.

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<sup>14</sup> Grimm, *Luther’s Works: Career of the Reformer I*, 31:171–72.

<sup>15</sup> George W. Forell, ed., *Luther’s Works: Career of the Reformer II*, vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 156–57; Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 137.: “The most important element of the image of Mary that changed over the sixteenth century was the notion of her sinlessness. The early Lutheran preachers tended to maintain the Augustinian tradition that Mary was free from actual sin, although through God’s grace and not through her own power. Luther makes a number of comments about Mary’s freedom from sin, and even seems to have held to the immaculate conception, despite certain later ambiguous statements.... Luther is only comfortable saying that Mary erred, and thus we know that the church and its leadership can err.”



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