

Mary and the Reformation - Part 4 of 4 - Calvin

A Mixed Perspective

This French reformer differed from Zwingli and Luther. Coming later (1509-1564) as part of the second wave of the Reformation and being more distant from medieval forms of piety, Calvin did not share the popular Marian devotion of earlier days. It is sometimes said that Calvin had no Mariology but this is an error.

The commentaries he wrote on Scripture did not avoid reflecting on the Virgin Mary and her place in relation to Christ and Church. He preached on the infancy gospels and the nativity of Jesus, and referred to Mary in other sermons. Yet he had much to say against Catholic doctrines and devotional practices, including those focused on Mary and the saints.

Begin with the Husband

Like Zwingli and even more so, Calvin paid close attention to Joseph, the man whom Mary was to marry, “a poor carpenter, and yet of the royal line from which came the Redeemer of the world.” That he was “a just man” and in obedience to the Law would believe that Mary deserved death when he discovered her pregnancy. Yet he did not wish to speak evil of her, and “he hated the idea that this poor girl would die because of his report on her.” To free himself from the duty of reporting her he decided to break the promise of marriage and disappear from her life.

Calvin was aware that some followers of the Reformation claimed that Mary had children from Joseph after the birth of her first-born but called this perspective following the ancient heresy of Helvidius, and speculation beyond the testimony of the Scriptures. Joseph, said Calvin, “stayed in the service of God, submitting fully, rather than doing what would be more to his liking.”

The Annunciation

In 1555 Calvin wrote, in a commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, of the Virgin in the context of the annunciation. From this episode he drew a lesson in humility. The angel says to this girl, “Hail, you who have followed grace.” The grace does not belong to Mary but to God. What the angel acknowledges is her faith and fidelity, not her merits.

In reality she has no merits of her own. All she has is from God: “If Mary’s blessedness, justice, and life flow from God’s gratuitous love, her virtues and all her excellence are merely God’s liberality.” Mary is “agreeable”, pleasing to God, because God has chosen her. Calvin is quite correct in seeing that “Hail Mary, full of grace” is correctly translated as “Hail Mary, filled with grace” (by God’s action).

Mary’s Song (Luke 2:46-55)

The highlight of Mary’s visit and care for her cousin is her song of thanksgiving, the Magnificat. It is rich in teaching for Calvin. It is in three sections. “First, with solemn thanksgiving she celebrates the mercy of God that she has experienced in herself. Then she commends God’s power and judgments with particular praises. Finally she brings them down to the present case, in which she explains the redemption formerly promised to the Church and now made effective.”

The first part (Luke vv.46-49a) expresses the Virgin's profound joy. The faithful should rejoice: "God's fatherly grace is the only one, and salvation flows from it, both filling us with joy." From the second part (vv.49b-53) it follows that "the praises of Mary in which God's power and gratuitous favour are not solidly extolled are preposterous and adulterous." The third part (vv.54-55) places the accent on the incarnation: "Mary shows the divine power at work in the present circumstances of the coming of God's Son and Servant. Mary affirms that the divine promises that were made to 'Adam and Noah and others' will be fulfilled in all Abraham's descendants in faith".

Mary's Graces

The positive aspects of Calvin's Mariology emerge in the comments on Mary's prayer. In her song the Virgin Mother of Jesus does not, like hypocrites, extol her own virtues and affirm her humility, for true humility does not blow its own trumpet. She confesses her lowly estate and nothingness before God. By the same token, she proclaims the supreme authority and glory of her Creator and Saviour. Likewise, the 'blessedness' that, as she prophesies, all generations will proclaim of her does not belong to her. It belongs to God because it is the grace of God. As she sings of God rather than of herself, Mary becomes our teacher. She should be listened to, learned from, and imitated.

True Praise of Mary

Christian praise is praise of God. Yet Calvin was not against praising Mary if it was done in the right way: "Let us learn to praise the holy Virgin. But how? By going along with the Holy Spirit, and then there will be true praise." Mary herself recognised that, mere 'servant of the Lord' that she was, she was 'chosen by God before she was born, even before the creation, and numbered among God's own, and not as though she had come to God by her own motion.' In the inspired words of Elizabeth, "it is the Holy Spirit who proclaims Mary blessed because she believed, and in praising Mary's faith generally teaches us where true human happiness is located." Thus is Mary an object of admiration, praise, and imitation.

Calvin disagreed with those who ascribed sinful pride to her when she asked her twelve year old child why he lingered on behind in Jerusalem. "She was not pushed by any pride, but this query was prompted by three days of sorrow." While his parents knew something of his heavenly origins, they did not yet understand the true nature of his mission. The fact that she kept in her heart what her mind's intelligence did not yet understand, places Mary in the mystical tradition. The faithful, like her, should ponder deeply what God has done for them.

Annunciation

At the annunciation Mary was "a good teacher" provided we learn at her school as is fitting: Let us ask that it be done unto us according to the word of God." She was "a mirror of the faith that we must bring to our God." When she kept 'words in her heart' it was not for herself alone, but for future times: "She brings to us our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the honour that God has given her; this is how we must look at her: not so as to stop at her or make her an idol, but that by means of her we be led to our Lord Jesus Christ, for it is there also that she sends us."

The Word of God should be welcome in our heart "according to the example of the holy Virgin that each one should conform to the respect she showed for the Word of God." Calvin often

translated the biblical image of the Virgin Mary into examples of a holy life, of a model for faith, obedience to God, thanksgiving for Christ, listening to the Word of God, following the Holy Spirit, praising God, and of personally witnessing to God and Christ.

The ‘Infernal Abyss of the Papacy’

Calvin was relentless in his attacks on Roman interpretation of the Marian texts of Scripture as ‘idolaters who make an idol of Mary and ascribe to her what belongs to God alone’.

“The papists ascribe to her titles that belong to God. They call the Virgin Mary ‘Queen of heaven, Star to guide poor errant folk, Salvation of the world, Hope and Light.’ God appropriates nothing in Scripture that is not transposed to Mary by papists. They even call Mary ‘our Advocate’, a term which in the New Testament designates Christ or the Holy Spirit.

Calvin’s protest is well formulated in his sermon on Luke 2:15-19, the Shepherds at the Crib, “The papists call the Virgin Mary Treasurer of grace, and in blaspheming God they give her a frivolous and imaginary title, for they would like her to hold the office of our Lord Jesus, which is to extend to us all the goods that have been given him by the Father in order to share them with each of the members of his body as he pleases and as is fitting.”

Addressing prayer to others than God was anathema to Calvin; to make creatures hold divine power and authority is the essence of idolatry. He found irony in that the assumption prevented the papists from advertising relics of her.

Sobriety

Calvin saw the holy Virgin as picture, a special example of faith, an icon of true discipleship. This is Mary in relation to the soul. The Church’s mothering of the faithful is imaged in Mary’s mothering of Jesus. The generations that followed Calvin lost the positive aspects of Calvin’s perspectives on Mary.

Source

Tavard, G. H. (1996). *The Thousand Faces of Mary*. Michael Glazier: Collegeville, MN.

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