

Mary For Evangelicals: Toward and Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord. By Tim Perry. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006, 320 pp.

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Over the last twenty years Protestants, especially evangelical Protestants, have given new and serious attention to Mary, the mother of Jesus. This new look at Mary represents one stream within the now rising tide of evangelical voices determined to participate in ecumenical engagement with both Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology. Timothy George, J. I. Packer and Charles Colson among many others have embraced such dialogue as the necessary response to biblical concern for unity within the Body of Christ. By surveying key Marian Scripture texts and the development of Mariology from the Patristics to the present, Perry has made a genuine contribution such ecumenical conversation.

Perry argues that the New Testament treats Mary in two distinctly different ways; as person and as symbol. The development of Marian doctrine has seen the virtual eclipse of Mary the person by Mary the symbol. Such loss of the person of Mary compromises evangelical faith because of her significance for the doctrine of the incarnation. The centrality of both the incarnation and Christology and their interrelatedness for any authentically biblical or indeed any historically grounded Christian theology seems secure within the evangelical psyche and ethos. What has not been sufficiently realized, according to Perry, is the crucial role Mariology must play in any fully biblical

comprehension of the Incarnation. For evangelicals, a robust biblical Christology provides the chief protection against the lapse of Mariology into unbiblical encroachment upon the soteriological and mediatorial turf reserved for the One mediator between God and humanity, Jesus Christ. Faithful reading of scripture and survey of historical theology, Perry contends, will provide resources for such evangelical re-assessment of Mary, the person who always “leads us to Christ.”

Mary “the person” provides an abiding model for believers of all times, primarily in terms of her perseverance in faith. Mary believed God’s word to her and clung to His and her son in the face of extraordinary declarations by God’s messengers, her own inability to see the whole picture of God’s doings and plans for either herself or her son, and eventually, threatened persecution. Mary the symbol, as depicted in Luke, John, and Revelation, serves to model the corporate body of Christ extended in space and time.

In a controversial concluding chapter entitled “Advocate: Toward a Doctrine of Mary’s Work,” Perry offers some preliminary musings regarding what he calls “an attenuated Mariology.” Perry defends the notion of viewing Mary as in some sense an “advocate” and “mediator!” Such a brief and provocative crescendo seemed somehow disappointing given the lengthy biblical and historical theological foundation already in place. One expects that Perry will explore and defend his controversial conclusions more fully in future publication.

Perry approaches the possibility of intercession by departed saints by first noting the universal practice of intercession for fellow believers here on earth, even at great geographical distance. Such intercession is not considered either remarkable or as an encroachment upon redemptive or mediatorial prerogatives achievable only by Jesus

Christ. Against this background, if one believes that departed saints enjoy awareness of earthly believers, shouldn't the suggestion that they might intercede on behalf of their earthly brothers and sisters seem likewise unremarkable? Whether earthly prompting of such intercession should obtain is another matter but, according to Perry, not obviously outlandish either. Perry does concede that no direct biblical mandate or even sanction for such advocacy or intercession exists. Still, on the basis of "cumulative evidence" within the Scriptures, he defends the practice of expecting and even prompting such intercession as at least plausible.

The church militant might count on intercession by the church triumphant if such departed brothers and sisters are, as the scriptures teach, one with the church universal and a "great cloud of witnesses." Our communion with any believer anywhere rests upon the sole basis of our communion with Jesus Christ. The possibility of intercession implies no mediatorship except by the one mediator, our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. One who intercedes for us is not our way to Him, rather, He is our way to them, and theirs to us. Still, Perry concedes that, lacking biblical injunction to seek intercession from the "saints above," most protestant theologians would not sanction the practice, especially given the history of idolatrous attachment to such saints by many who plunge headlong into such practices.

Perry finally argues for the toleration of this practice since it is a matter of secondary importance; thus allowing for both its practice and its denial within the church. For those who choose to make use of this possibility, requests for intercession by Mary rests upon the same basis as does such access with regard to other saints, only that, as with other living saints, the intercessor is a specific person with a unique history, not a

generic intercessor. And what a unique history Mary brings to the table! Still, Perry does view as blasphemous the notion that Mary is in a position to sway or overturn verdicts of God the Son against which Luther railed so insistently.

On the highly contentious view of Mary as mediator and co-redemptorist, Perry offers serious and typically protestant refutations but also notes that these matters remain mired in older discussions and thus cry out for a fresh look. Explicit calls for non-Roman Catholic contributions regarding these subjects issued in Vatican II ought to be embraced, contends Perry, if for no other reason, to ensure that current Protestant rejection of the controverted titles for Mary rests not upon blithe and sloppy adherence to “the faith of our fathers” but upon our own convictions, confirmed by the fathers but also authentically ours.

Perry’s effort does provide a serious contribution to current re-appropriation of the doctrine of Mary, especially in his tracing of the history of development of Marian doctrine. And Perry’s consideration of the possibility of Marian intercession and even a kind of mediation by Mary models a kind of openness of spirit without which the pursuit of Christian unity cannot advance, much less succeed. Nevertheless, as Perry concedes, unity at the expense biblical truth where primary tenets of faith are in view can never be truly “Christian.” Perry’s attenuated Mariology will likely prove unpalatable in certain key respects by both Protestant and Roman Catholic observers; a plight that often befalls would-be peacemakers within the church. The usefulness of Perry’s work for the advancement of ecumenical understanding or even achievement will depend not only upon its openness to Roman Catholic sensibility but first and foremost, its serious comprehension of Protestant sensibility.