

The Presence of Mary in the Mystery of the Church^{*}

DAVID S. YEAGO
*Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary
Columbia, South Carolina*



IN THIS PAPER, I want to defend two theses which I believe myself to have learned from Pope John Paul II's remarkable encyclical on the Virgin Mary, *Redemptoris Mater*.¹ In that encyclical, the Holy Father has, I believe, brought the ecumenical discussion of Mary to a new level of theological seriousness, articulating with unusual clarity the deep assumptions of what might be called the long tradition of "Marian consciousness" in the Church, the awareness of Mary as a singular presence within the mystery of salvation. Moreover, and significantly for Protestants, he has done so primarily by way of meditative exposition of the Bible.

Thus the Pope confronts Protestants in a new way with this old-Christian "Marian consciousness" from which we have become alienated, getting behind standard disputes about particular Marian doctrines and practices to engage us on the ground of Holy Scripture. Such an approach calls for new thinking, new reflection, from the heirs of the Reformation, not simply repetition of old dismissals and recourse to old defenses.

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¹ Citations are from *Mary: God's Yes to Man: John Paul's Encyclical Redemptoris Mater*, introduction by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, commentary by Hans Urs von Balthasar (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988). References will be given in parentheses in the text and will refer only to the paragraph numbers of the encyclical, which are common to all editions.

My goal in this paper is to respond to the Pope's encyclical, not to expound it, so I shall summarize his rich teaching on Mary's "motherhood" of the Church and of the believer rather baldly and formally in two theses:

1. Mary is irreducibly *present* within the redemptive relationship of the Church and of the believer to Christ, not merely as a symbolic figure but as a particular person; there is no redemptive relationship to Jesus Christ that does not contain within itself a relationship to Mary, though not, of course, the *same* relationship;
2. Mary is present to the Church and to the believer both as the *prototype and model* of the Church and the believer, and also as an *active agent* of the formation of the Church and the believer.

I want to argue that these two theses are in fact well-grounded in Scripture and conform to the analogy of the faith, and should be accepted as such by Protestants. Whether the interpretation of Mary's motherhood that I will present in the course of making that case would be acceptable to Roman Catholic (or Orthodox) Christians more generally is beyond the scope of this paper—and it is not, in any case, my question to answer.

Furthermore, I shall deliberately exclude any discussion of the implications of Mary's motherhood thus described for the disputed doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, though the Pope does make connections between Mary's motherhood and those doctrines. One of the conditions under which our wayfaring theology must proceed in this present age is that unlike God, we mortals cannot utter in a single word all that needs to be said. Therefore there are always important matters that must be deferred to another occasion, or perhaps to the Kingdom.



Is it true, as the Pope suggests, that Mary is irreducibly present within the redemptive relationship of the Church and of the believer to Christ? I believe that this claim *is* true, and that its truth can be seen more clearly if we make the thesis slightly more precise: Mary is irreducibly present in the relationship of the Church and of the believer to *the Christ who is attested in Holy Scripture*, the one whom I will call the "scriptural Christ."²

² I adapt the phrase from John Behr's invaluable *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), though I am using it with reference to the Christian canon of Scripture as a whole while he uses it with a primary reference to the Old Testament. This bending of the terminology does not indicate any disagreement at all with the material point Behr is making by *his* use of the term. My debt to Behr's discussion of the relationship between Christ and Scripture in the early Fathers is significant throughout this section.

Since, moreover, it is the scriptural Christ—and he alone—who is the Savior, it is precisely within the *redemptive* relationship to Christ that Mary is irreducibly present. To clarify this claim, some discussion is necessary of what is meant by “the scriptural Christ.”

In what is probably the very oldest extant Christian text, Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, we are confronted rather abruptly with the claim that what the apostles preach is “not a human word” but “the word of God” (2:13). This claim locates the apostolic preaching in a very specific way within the narrative of the ways of the God of Israel with his people and his creation.

This God, the Holy One of Israel, is the One who creates by speaking and then speaks to what he has created. His word is thus a mighty word, inseparable from his deeds: His words act and his deeds speak. But the same time, this God knows how to make his very own mighty word audible to creatures within the space and time which they inhabit. He speaks His very own word in the particular human words of his messengers, so that their words, once spoken, do not die away into silence, but as Paul suggests, continue indefinitely to be “at work” mightily among those who receive them in faith. Therefore the testimonies of the God of Israel give life to the soul and make wise the simple, they give joy to the heart and light to the eyes.

In these last days, moreover, this God has at once acted and spoken by a man who *is* his word, his very own co-essential Word, uttered in flesh, in a particular human life. This man, in the singular course of life which he pursues and in the singular fate which he encounters, in his living, dying, and rising again, *is* God’s conclusive, unsurpassable word of power and wisdom in which revelation and redemption, truth and life, are given as one in inexhaustible plenitude (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23–24).

This man Jesus, God’s word uttered conclusively in flesh, has been raised up from death and sits at God’s right hand as Lord and Messiah. He is not a dead Person, one who cannot speak for himself, one of the silent who can only be the passive object of our historical research; he lives and shares in God’s own boundless freedom. As the risen and exalted Word, he is competent to provide for his own utterance, when and as he pleases. As a living and free Person, he has taken the initiative to make himself known, by commissioning messengers, apostles, and pouring out upon them the Holy Spirit, so that they may proclaim him throughout the world until the end of the age. The apostolic witness is therefore the word of the exalted Word, the testimony through which Jesus Christ, who is himself the conclusive and unsurpassable utterance of God’s own powerful Word, presents himself to the nations as their Savior and Judge.

The present age having outlasted the earthly lives of the apostles, the communities they gathered must carry on the apostolic mission, living under the rule of the apostolic testimony and bringing that testimony before the nations until the consummation of all things. It is thus part of the Spirit's provision for the apostolic mission that the Church has received a body of New Testament scripture, a manifold documentation of the apostolic witness. This apostolic scripture is configured with the scriptures of Israel around the Word made flesh in a kind of two-syllable utterance of "the one word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death: Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture"³—the scriptural Christ.

It is in the context of such assumptions as these that the Christian tradition, from 1 Thessalonians onward, has never allowed for any *space*, so to speak, between the "real" Christ and the scriptural witness, as though the Scriptures might be only obscure hints and clues to the identity of someone who stands apart from the Scriptures, perhaps even in opposition to them.⁴ That possibility, indeed, confronted the Church already in the second century in the complex phenomenon we call "Gnosticism," and its rejection was constitutive for that network of Christian communities which were then beginning to call themselves collectively "the universal assembly," the "Catholic Church." The Savior to whom the Catholic Church cries out and bears witness is the scriptural Christ, the Word made flesh whom the Spirit presents to us clothed in the words of the prophets and apostles. And this gives a peculiar quality to the relationship of the Catholic Church to God in Christ; as John Behr has said, "If God acts through his Word, then that Word needs to be heard, to be read, to be understood—the relationship to God is, in a broad sense, *literary*."⁵

³ *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, Article I.

⁴ Western mainline Christians today are tempted to be overly impressed by the statistically insignificant dissent from this consensus on the part of a small number of culturally elite European and North American Christians during the past two and a half centuries—a valid if one-sided description of what those of us to belong to such elites call "modern theology" and tend in our culture- and class-centeredness to regard as normative for the present and determinative for the future. Without denying the importance and insights of "modern theology," as far as *this* dissent is concerned we may legitimately recall Augustine's riposte to the Donatists: *Securus judicat orbis terrarum* ("The judgment of the whole Christian world stands firm").

⁵ Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 15. For an account of this "literariness" as the sacramental medium of the Spirit's witness to Christ in the church, see my essay, "The Spirit, the Scriptures, and the Church: Biblical Inspiration and Interpretation Revisited," in James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, eds., *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 49–93.

I have spent some time on this point because it is fundamental to the baseline question of Mariology: “Is Mary in any sense a ‘presence’ within the redemptive relationship of the Church and of the believer to Christ?” If we are clear in our minds that Christ the Savior is the *scriptural* Christ, that the redemptive relationship of the Church and of the believer to this Christ is therefore “in a broad sense, *literary*,” then the answer to this question is obviously “Yes.” *Mary is present within the redemptive relationship of the Church and of the believer to Christ by virtue of her presence in the scriptural testimony to Christ.*

The scriptural Christ, “Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture,” is set forth to us, especially in the four gospels, as one who is surrounded, despite his singularity and in a certain sense his loneliness, by a constellation of *others*: disciples, onlookers, and enemies. Among these “others” is inescapably his Mother, whose narrated relationship to him does not quite fit into any broader category but has its own unique contours. A Christ who did not stand in this singular relationship to Mary would not be the scriptural Christ; when we approach the scriptural Christ we also find with him, in her own place and in her own role, Mary his Mother.

This would be true in a certain sense even if the scriptural testimony never spoke explicitly of Mary, never named her or brought her, so to speak, on stage. The scriptural witness presents Jesus Christ to us as a true human being, one like us in all points except sin. Therefore, even if Mary were never mentioned in Holy Scripture, it would nonetheless be an article of the Christian faith that there was indeed a *Theotokos*, a woman who gave human birth to God the co-essential Son of God, a woman rightly called *dei genetrix*, “Mother of God.”

But of course this is *not* where Scripture leaves it. The Mother of Jesus is not simply present in the scriptural witness by implication, as a Christological postulate; she is named and presented to us directly as a character in the Christological narrative of salvation. Especially in the gospels according to Luke and John, moreover, she is sketched in two very different ways not only as a *person* in the story, but, so to speak, as a *personage*, a figure with a singular role to play, a character whose appearance on the stage is a matter of significant moment. About the *nature* of her role and her presence we will speak in a moment, but it is important first simply to register the fact of her presence as a theologically significant personage.

It is here, I believe, that we touch the root of what I have called the ancient “Marian consciousness” of the Church, the awareness of Mary as a singular presence within the mystery of salvation. *The Church’s awareness of Mary as a presence in the mystery of salvation arises from the Church’s confession*

*that the real and only Savior is the scriptural Christ, "Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture." A Christ without Mary, a Christ in whose presence Mary is not also present, would be some other Christ than the scriptural Christ, the construct of some variety of "gnosis falsely so-called."*⁶

This line of reflection suggests rather alarming conclusions about the meaning of Protestant estrangement from the "Marian consciousness" of the ancient Church, and these conclusions need to be faced. I believe that we should take seriously the criticism that the exclusion of Mary from the Protestant consciousness is indeed the symptom of a Christological disease, an alienation from the literary particularity of the scriptural Christ.

The deep root of this alienation lies, I believe, in the dynamics of Christian division. Among Protestants I believe that one outworking of the dynamics of disunity can be seen in a long-standing tension between the scriptural piety which Protestantism sought to inculcate and a persistent worry that the Bible might lead its readers across the boundaries which separate "us" as the true Church from "them," the Catholic counterfeit. The scriptural Christ, encountered without rigorous doctrinal-hermeneutical filters, might, after all, turn out to be a lawgiver (as in the Sermon on the Mount), or a promoter of celibacy; and of course, he might also turn out to have a Mother who is more than a postulate of Christological orthodoxy. Has Jesus Christ not indeed tended, in the history of Protestantism, to become at various times and in various ways a rather abstract figure? Even in the older Protestant orthodoxy, was he not at times reduced to a central moving part in a soteriological mechanism, defined by his competence to merit our salvation rather than by the complex detail of the multiple gospel narratives read in the context of the canon as a whole?

Protestant modernism in some of its moods protested against this theoretically overdetermined doctrinal Christ in the name of the Jesus of the synoptic gospels, but modernism was likewise unable to grasp the saving particularity of the scriptural Christ. Even more than in Protestant Orthodoxy, the Jesus of Protestant modernism is a Savior on a short leash. He must be firmly taken in hand, functionalized within a theory of religion and of our religious need, construed as a signifier transparent to the universal humanistic values which he signifies and therefore under their strict control. Otherwise he might lead his followers along strange paths of penitence and apocalyptic expectation, and thereby reduce their economic and moral productivity as citizens of the secular city; he might

⁶ A phrase used in one of the titles given to St. Irenaeus's great work, more commonly known as "Against Heresies."

cruelly demand with all seriousness the death of the sovereign modern self; *he might even turn out to be a Jew*.⁷

The breakdown of denominational identities in the contemporary churches, along with the widespread sense that modernity's rules of the game are losing their obviousness in the culture at large, gives us an opportunity, but no guarantees. We *may* indeed proceed implicitly or explicitly on the "postmodern" premise that every interpretation is a way of seeking power, and therefore harness the figure of Christ ever more arbitrarily and variously to our infinitely diverse felt needs and practical projects; but we may also take the occasion to relearn ancient arts of interpretation which enable an ordered but not finally "scripted" engagement with the redemptive particularity of the scriptural Christ.⁸ In this latter project, should we choose to undertake it, Mariology has an irreducible place; for the Mother of Jesus is irreducibly and distinctively present within the scriptural testimony to the saving particularity of her son.⁹



About the *nature* of that presence, our second thesis makes two claims. Mary is present to the Church and to the believer both as the *prototype and model* of the Church and the believer, and also as an *active agent* of the formation of the Church and the believer. The first claim, that Mary is presented in Scripture as prototype and model of faith and of the

⁷ The close connection between anti-Catholicism and anti-Judaism in Neo-Protestantism, and its effect on Neo-Protestant construals of New Testament history and theology, is a phenomenon of crucial significance whose history is yet to be written.

⁸ For an attempt at an orientation to these arts, see my aforementioned essay, "The Spirit, the Scriptures, and the Church."

⁹ This is not to say that Mariology is "necessary to salvation" in the strict sense; the absence of any explicit Mariology from the letters of St. Paul is enough to establish that. But the goal of faith and theology is not to see how *little* of Scripture we can take seriously and still be saved; the goal is the *maximum* of integrity in taking seriously and holding together in our understanding the *whole canon* of testimony with which the Church has been provided by the Spirit. After all, the New Testament canon itself is superfluous to what is "necessary to salvation," since the foundational apostolic preaching went on without it. The question of "necessity for salvation" arises when faith and mission have lost their way; it calls us, not to a reductionist purism, but rather to make distinctions *within* the totality of the biblical witness, in order to identify the chief point at which Scripture aims and to trace the ways in which its various aspects hang together to make that point. Since the Spirit's gifts are not given for no reason, we may assume that faith and mission are best served precisely by such disciplined attention to the *whole* of Scripture, not by a strategy of reduction.

Church, is less controversial, and is widely granted today among the small number of Protestants who have considered the matter at all. Indeed, the easiest form of Mariological agreement among contemporary Protestants and Catholics is undoubtedly to be found in a shared reading of St. Luke's presentation of Mary as "she who believed" (1:45), the paradigm New Covenant believer who trusts the promise of God and ponders His surprising ways in her heart. Three observations may serve to clarify the implications of this Lucan Mariology.¹⁰

1. In Luke's presentation, Mary's bodily motherhood, her pregnancy and birth-giving, are introduced in the context of the angel's greeting which calls forth her *faith*. Mary is not simply a biophysical vessel, an unwitting conduit through which the Son of God descends from heaven, picking up mortal flesh along the way. Her miraculous pregnancy is embedded in a drama, a narrative in which she is not only object but also subject, playing a part which engages her whole person. She is *addressed* by the messenger of God, *promised* that the child to which she shall give birth will be the Son of the Most High.

Mary therefore does not figure in the story of salvation only through the bare fact of her pregnancy; her pregnancy is located within a context of covenant and communion, of God's election and promise, and the faith which these evoke. Her role is therefore defined also by the distinctive way in which she consents to God's redemptive design, and to her vocation within that design. As Pope John Paul II has written, "The words 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord' express the fact that from the outset she accepted and understood her own motherhood as a *total gift of self*, a gift of her person to the service of the saving plans of the Most High" (par. 39). Her bodily "motherhood" is constituted in the covenant-exchange of divine word and answering faith, a faith which indeed involves "a total gift of self," and therefore, in Pauline terms, the presentation *also of her body* as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1).

This sense that Mary's role of giving human birth to the Son of God is embedded in a drama of vocation in which her faith plays a significant part is another of the most elementary perceptions of the Mariological tradition, expressed concisely in the saying of St. Augustine that Mary conceived Christ in her mind by faith before she conceived him bodily in her womb. But the same point was also fully

¹⁰ I regret that limitations of space preclude any account of the two closely connected scenes in which the Mother of Jesus is presented to us in the Gospel of John. Such an account would, I believe, support the main conclusions of this paper.

acknowledged by no less than Martin Luther:

Because Mary the Virgin conceived and gave birth to Christ, therefore Christ was a real, bodily visible human being, and not only a spiritual reality—yet she conceived him and bore him spiritually. How so? Thus: she believed the word of the angel, that she was to become pregnant and give birth. With that very faith in the angel's word, she conceived and gave birth to Christ in her heart spiritually, at the same time that she conceived and gave birth to him in a bodily way. For if she had not conceived Christ spiritually in her heart, she would never have conceived him bodily. . . . Now what did she receive into her heart? Nothing but the word of the angel, that she was to become pregnant with the Son of God. Because she embraced the word and became pregnant with it in her heart, therefore she also became pregnant bodily with that which the word promised her in her heart.¹¹

This intertwining of Mary's bodily pregnancy with issues of election, promise, and faith precludes the possibility of viewing Mary as merely the logically necessary presupposition of the Word's true enfleshment. While the Lucan portrayal of Mary is undoubtedly *Christocentric*, she is not reduced to a function in a Christological scheme. Mary is presented as a character with her own profile, one who is confronted with the advent of the Messiah in a singular way and responds to it with words and actions distinctive to her. And the Gospel is interested in that profile, in those words and actions—not, to be sure, in competition with its interest in her Son, or simply parallel to it, but precisely as Mary *through* her distinctive words and actions stands in a *specific relationship* to her Son.

Even after the birth of Jesus, moreover, in the story of his presentation in Temple, Mary is mysteriously acknowledged in the Lucan account as having a *continuing* role in the story of salvation. According to Simeon's prophetic testimony, the coming of Messiah will cause division in Israel and provoke enmity; and it is somehow Mary's part to endure this division and enmity as a sword piercing her own being (Luke 2:34–35). There is surely a suggestion here that Mary's role in the story has not ended with parturition; she continues to be linked to her son's coming into the world and to its outcome.

¹¹ WA 23:185. Translations of Luther are my own from D. Martin Luther's *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883ff.), cited as WA. This and the other statements of Luther concerning Mary cited in this paper are handily collected in Walter Tappolet, ed., *Das Marienlob der Reformatoren* (Tübingen: Katzmann-Verlag, 1962).

2. As the one addressed in this singular way by the election and promise of God, Mary is not simply a private person but a *public* one; she is called by the angel's proclamation to an *office*, a public role within the communion of God's people and the history of God's salvation. Though the office of the woman who gave birth to God is necessarily unique, it is not without analogy to other roles and offices encountered in the narrative of salvation. The Lucan story of the Annunciation is notoriously constructed out of intricately interwoven reminiscences of and allusions to the Scriptures of Israel; like early Christians generally, the Evangelist turns to the Old Testament as the prophetic and typological explication of the new thing which the God of Israel has done in these last days.

Without attempting to untangle all the strands in Luke's web, it can surely be said that one analogy is crucial to the portrayal of Mary's role: the analogy to *prophecy*. While the Annunciation narrative is clearly reminiscent of the several Old Testament stories in which a child is promised to a woman who could not, in the ordinary course of things, bear children,¹² the Evangelist has also woven into his account elements which belong more characteristically to the call-narratives of the prophets.

It is striking, for example, that neither Sarah nor the mother of Samson nor Hannah nor Elizabeth is *addressed* as Mary is addressed. The three men as whom the Lord appeared at the oaks of Mamre announce the promise only to Abraham, while Sarah overhears, just as Gabriel speaks to Zechariah and not to Elizabeth; the angel does speak to the wife of Manoah, but only in the most abrupt and business-like fashion, without greeting or title; Hannah hears Eli's blessing—"The God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him"—but no direct "word of the Lord." But direct address is characteristic of the calling of prophets: Moses and Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Jonah, are all spoken to directly, summoned to God's service.¹³ Like Mary, moreover, Moses and Jeremiah are bewildered, unable to see how their task can be carried out; to them as to Mary the Lord or His messenger responds with assurance that God's own power will trump the weakness or the incapacity of His servant.

¹² Cf. Genesis 18:1–15 (Sarah); Genesis 13:2–24 (the unnamed wife of Manoah, mother of Samson); 1 Samuel 1:1–2:11 (Hannah). To these must of course be added Mary's kinswoman Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–24).

¹³ Cf. Exodus 3:1–4:17; Jeremiah 1:4–10; Ezekiel 2:1–3:11; Amos 7:14–16; Jonah 1:1–3, 3:1–2.

Furthermore, while the angel's reassurance that "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37) directly recalls the Lord's response to Sarah's laughter in Genesis 18:14, neither Sarah nor the wife of Manoah nor Hannah nor Elizabeth is promised the Spirit. However, the Spirit is associated with prophecy, as we have just been reminded in the announcement of John's birth: "even before his birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit," and like Elijah, he will speak and act under the impulsion of the Spirit (Luke 1:15–17). There is a parallel here between John and Mary, between the child promised in the first scene and the one to whom a child is promised in the second; if the Spirit marks John as a prophetic figure, then the promise of the Spirit to Mary associates her with prophecy also.

The connection between Mary and prophecy is further strengthened by the context: The opening chapters of Luke depict what Robert W. Jenson has called a "positive epidemic" of prophecy,¹⁴ all configured around Mary and her child. As Jenson puts it: "Mary . . . appears in these chapters as the central figure of a sudden resurgence of Spirit-inflicted prophecy: the prophetic Spirit comes upon Mary and by virtue of the result of this visitation also upon others."¹⁵ Thus when Mary visits her relatives in the hill country, Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit and speaks blessing upon her kinswoman and her child; even the unborn prophet is moved to inarticulate testimony. The Evangelist is at pains, moreover, to associate the prophesying of Elizabeth and the unborn John specifically with *Mary's word*, repeating the point twice; it is "when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting" (v. 41) that the Spirit fills her and it is "at the sound of her greeting" (v. 44) that the child leaps in Elizabeth's womb.

This is, to be sure, no glorification of Mary in *abstraction* from her Son; it is as "the Mother of my Lord" that Elizabeth greets her. But she is greeted also as the one who *accepted* this vocation by faith in the divine promise: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (vv. 43, 45). Mary provokes prophecy as the one who brings the Messiah, but here as in the Annunciation narrative, her bodily "bearing" of Christ is inseparable from her faith. To bring the Messiah to the world is for

¹⁴ Cf. Robert W. Jenson, "An Attempt to Think about Mary," *dialog* 31 (1992): 259–64. I am deeply indebted to this article especially in this section, but also in other ways. It pursues the Christological and Trinitarian implications of the Lucan account much further than I can do here.

¹⁵ Jenson, 261.

her an office, a role bestowed on her by God's election and promise and accepted by faith.

Yet the blessings pronounced on Mary in the story of the Visitation also remind us that her office cannot simply be *identified* with that of a prophet. Though the Annunciation narrative is reminiscent of the call-narratives of the prophets, the angel's greeting to Mary is more akin to the eschatological proclamation to Israel—"Rejoice, Daughter Zion!" (Cf. Isaiah 54:1, Zephaniah 3:14, and Zechariah 9:9)—than to anything in the prophetic call stories. Mary's vocation is related to prophecy, but in a way that is distinctively "blessed."

Jenson has identified the point of distinction thus: "[B]y the Spirit's coming upon Mary she does not like other prophets before or around her bring forth a speech; she brings forth a child."¹⁶ Actually, Mary according to Luke *does* bring forth a speech, or rather a song, whose significance we have yet to consider, but Jenson's point is well-taken: the office laid on Mary by the angel, to which she consents in faith, is not centrally to speak words but rather to bear a particular child. The analogy thus described seems to cry out for explication in the terms provided by the prologue to John, which is also concerned with the relationship of prophecy to the coming of Christ:

[T]his child is personally and identically that Word of the Father communicated by every prophet—the same point is, of course, made by the whole rest of Luke. Mary is the prophet who utters forth the eternal Word himself and as such. It is because the Word is personally and completely spoken by Mary's willing gestation and parturition, that suddenly there are again Spirit-driven prophets. We may say: Mary is the *archprophet*, the paradigm and possibility of prophecy.¹⁷

That is to say, Mary's faithful bearing of the Word incarnate is the Spirit-wrought antitype of which all prophesying in the Old and New Covenants is either the anticipation or the recollection. All prophecy is the secondary and dependent utterance in "many and various ways" (Hebrews 1:1) of that same Word which Mary conceived and bore in his own Person, at once in her heart and in her body. All other prophecy is therefore possible only by virtue of this "archprophecy"; what Mary brings forth from her womb is the *truth* of all prophecy and her willing bodily utterance of the Word in person is the *form and measure* of every other act of prophesying.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jenson, 261–62.

3. Prophecy in the biblical witness is not only an individual but also a communal vocation; this association of Mary with prophecy as its antitype therefore imply a relationship of Mary to Israel and the Church. It is surely no accident that both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles begin with the coming of the Holy Spirit, in the Gospel to Mary and in the Acts to the disciples, in each case provoking an immediate outbreak of prophecy. Indeed, Luke depicts the events of Pentecost as the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that in the last days Israel will be transformed by the Spirit into a community in which *all* are prophets, young and old, slave and free, male and female. The Church, for Luke, is that renewed Israel, to which the Gentiles must now be called, an Israel re-formed by the coming of the Messiah albeit amidst conflict and schism which the twofold testimony of Luke leaves unresolved.¹⁸ How is Mary related to this renewal?

Mary does not fulfill her office from outside the community of God's people but from the inside. Mary is an Israelite woman, whose life is depicted by the Evangelist as "deeply enmeshed in the traditions of Israel."¹⁹ She and her husband obediently bring their newborn Son to Jerusalem to do what was commanded in the Torah; they piously make an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. Her canticle is saturated with Scripture; like the virtuous woman in Proverbs, she opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her lips is the teaching of *chesed* (Proverbs 31:26),²⁰ the covenant-devotion which responds to the *chesed* of God, the never-ending "mercy" toward Abraham and his descendants which God has "remembered" in the sending of the Messiah.

At the same time, Mary also belongs to the community of Jesus' disciples. If Mary is "she who believed" *par excellence*, then she is the paradigm of those who receive the reign of God drawing near in the Messiah Jesus, for faith is the fundamental mode in which human beings acknowledge and pay homage to God's reign and God's Anointed. Luke is careful moreover to clarify that Mary *persists through*

¹⁸ This is not to say that the Church is "all Israel"; the Church is the messianically renewed part of Israel, which awaits reconciliation with "Israel after the flesh" in the consummation of all things. I do not, that is, intend to suggest a supersessionist *replacement* of Israel by the Church, but rather a schism *within* Israel, to which the Church is one party.

¹⁹ Johnson, 56.

²⁰ This reading assumes that something more is meant by Proverbs 31:26 than "she teaches her children to be kind," which most commentators seem to prefer. Even in wisdom literature, I have difficulty accepting that "Torah" and "*chesed*" in such close conjunction could have so blandly moralistic a connotation.

time in this obedience of faith; confronted with the shepherds' report of angelic testimony to her Son, with Simeon's dark words about the sword which will pierce her heart, and with the intimation given in his twelfth year of the all-consuming vocation that will take her Son away to death,²¹ she does not turn aside in frustration or fear but holds in memory what she does not understand and ponders it in her heart.

The Second Vatican Council was right therefore to speak of Mary's *pilgrimage* of faith;²² the Holy Father's description of this pilgrimage is, I believe, true to the Lucan presentation:

To believe means "to abandon oneself" to the truth of the word of the living God, knowing and humbly recognizing "how unsearchable are his judgments and how *inscrutable his ways*" (Rom 11:33). Mary, who by the eternal will of the Most High stands, one may say, at the very center of those "inscrutable ways" and "unsearchable judgments" of God, conforms herself to them in the dim light of faith, accepting fully and with a ready heart everything decreed in the divine plan (par 14).

In this posture, Mary stands at the intersection of the Old Covenant and the New. In her, by God's election and grace, the drama of Old Covenant Israel reaches its turning-point, and the vocation of the renewed Israel, the Messianic assembly, the Christian Church, is prototypically embodied. She is "Daughter Zion" (Zephaniah 3:14 and Zechariah 9:9), Israel called to receive with joy the advent of the Lord her King, the childless woman to whom is promised a vast multitude of children (Isaiah 54:1ff). Precisely as one who *persists* in her consent to God's proclamation and promise through the course of a temporal pilgrimage, she is also the archbeliever and the arch-prophet of the New Covenant, the one who paradigmatically receives the reign of God by faith and renders it present in power to the world, all the while walking "in the dim light of faith." She thus articulates in her own being the constant *form* of the existence of the people of God at *every* point in the story of salvation: expectant and receptive faith issuing in prophecy, barren incapacity transmuted by God's Spirit into fruitful virginity, lowliness unexpectedly exalted.

It is, of course, in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ that this form is redemptively constituted; it is to his image, not Mary's, that we are to be conformed for our salvation. Mary's paradigmatic role

²¹ Johnson, 61–62, notes the parallels between this story and the resurrection narratives.

²² Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, par 58.

is different in *kind* from that of her Son: she is *not* the Redeemer but the prototype of the redeemed; she is not the one in whom we participate but the paradigm of that participation. Jesus the Messiah in his dying and rising is alone the *forma formans*, the form-giving form, the one in whom all things hang together (Colossians 1:17) and around whose crucified and risen Person the whole creation is to be blessedly configured. Mary by contrast is the *forma formata*, the form which has received formation, the prototype precisely of those who are not the Savior, but cling to him by faith, and on the way of faith's pilgrimage endure the protracted inscription of his image on their being.²³

As the paradigm of the existence-in-faith of the people of God, Mary is likewise the archprophet and Christ-bearer in whom the *office* of the Church as a prophetic community takes prototypical form. The Gospel of Luke begins with promise that the Holy Spirit will come upon Mary and that "the power of the Most High" will overshadow her (Luke 1:35); it ends with the risen Christ promising the disciples the Holy Spirit ("what my Father promised") and enjoining them to wait in the city until they are clothed with "power from on high" (Luke 24:49). The point is reiterated at the beginning of Acts, in a close verbal parallel to the promise made to Mary: "You will receive power *when the Holy Spirit comes upon you*, and you will be my witnesses . . ." (Acts 1:8). As the Spirit came upon Mary so that she bore the Word incarnate, likewise the Spirit comes upon the Church so that it brings forth prophetic words of witness; as Mary by the power of the Most High gave birth to the great King whose royal dominion will never cease, likewise the Church, clothed in power from on high, is sent forth to proclaim the reign of this King "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

We should not, however, move so rapidly to the analogy of mission that we ignore Christ's command to the disciples to "wait in the city" (Luke 24:49). It is just in this "waiting"—so antithetical to

²³ This suggests that it is *not* an adequate account of Christ's redemptive work to view him as a sort of productive prototype of our own authentic existence in faith, as many modernist theologies have done. An adequate doctrine of atonement requires recognition that Christ has acted and suffered in our place in such a way that he does and endures *pro nobis* what we could not do or endure for ourselves. Cf. my essay, "Crucified Also for Us under Pontius Pilate: Six Propositions on the Preaching of the Cross," in Christopher R. Seitz, ed., *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 87–105.

our contemporary can-do evangelism-ideologies—that the Church identifies most fundamentally with Mary the Virgin Mother, acknowledging its sheer incapacity to be what it is called to be. Like Mary, the Church cannot bring Christ into the world by any strength or ingenuity of its own; no more than a virgin can give birth to a child can we who are “fools, and slow of heart to believe” (Luke 24:25) be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth. The Church’s assumption of prophetic office begins therefore not with a “Grow Your Church” seminar, but with the persistent and expectant *prayer* of the community of disciples in the “upper room” (Acts 1:13), surely an allusion to the “upstairs room” (Luke 22:12) in which the Eucharist was instituted.²⁴ In the midst of this waiting and praying community, St. Luke is careful to tell us (Acts 1:14), stands Mary the Mother of Jesus, in whom both the poverty and the dignity of the Church are prototypically embodied.²⁵



We are left with one final and thorny matter. Mary, according to our second thesis, is present in the Church not only as “the *prototype and model* of the Church and the believer,” but also as “an *active agent* of the formation of the Church and the believer.” This is, of course, the point at which awful specters arise unbidden in every Protestant mind, not in every respect without reason. Protestants have been discouraged from any serious consideration of the idea of Mary’s active “motherhood” in the Church by Roman Catholic elaboration of that idea with what heirs of

²⁴ Cf. Johnson, 333.

²⁵ Several times in the discussion following the lecture on which this paper is based, the question arose: “Why Mary? Why should she be regarded as the prototype rather than, say Paul?” The answer, I think, has two parts. First, it is Mary’s distinctive placement in the gospel narrative that leads to the conclusion that she is the prototype for Paul’s faith, not he for hers. It is she for whom the calling to faith and witness was inseparably joined to the task of giving bodily birth to the Son of God. When Paul tells the Galatians that he is “in the pain of childbirth until Christ is born in you” (4:19), it is a bit difficult to regard him as the prototype of *that* stance. Second, the question may betray a need to *derive* Mary from the gospel-message by a chain of necessary inferences, which is of course impossible. Mary is a contingent phenomenon. But if the gospel is true, then *nothing* in the economy of salvation, indeed, nothing in creation or creation itself, is “necessary” in that sense. If the gospel is true, God’s love and freedom are prior to all necessity; all that is, and especially the mystery of salvation, is a meaningful concatenation of contingencies rooted in God’s free election. Mary, like Israel, like the form of the sacraments, like the make-up of the biblical canon, is simply one more such contingency.

the Reformation must regard, even on the most charitable reading, as truly ill-advised terms such as “co-redemption” and “co-mediation.” Such language seems to violate clear biblical rules of speech²⁶ and in any case must surely be a standing invitation to theological and devotional disaster. Nevertheless, I believe that it is possible and necessary to affirm the active agency of Mary in the Church without in any way intruding her into the role which is Christ’s alone.

We might begin by asking about the relationship of Mary’s *mode of presence* in the Church to the possibility of her *agency*. If Mary is present to the Church by way of the scriptural testimony to Jesus Christ, if her presence is therefore “in a broad sense, *literary*,” what sort of present *agency* is conceivable for her? The answer seems clear: as a literary presence, even a literary presence uniquely presented to us in “God-breathed” words (2 Timothy 3:16), she can be an agent toward us only if she speaks to us, only if we are *addressed* by her word.

Mary’s Son, indeed, is God’s very own co-essential word made flesh; his whole life is in every aspect of its concrete particularity a word addressed to us. As a character in the narrative testimony to the Word made flesh, Mary is so to speak *taken up into* this “one word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death,” and is set before us by God as the prototype of our formation by faith in the incarnate Word. It is only the presence of Mary in the scriptural testimony to the one word which God addresses to us in the concrete particularity of the human career of Jesus Christ that grants her any recognizable presence at all within the redemptive relationship of the Church and of the believer to Christ.

But that presence will be an *active* presence, will encompass a continuing *agency* of Mary toward the Church and the faithful, only if Mary is presented not only as speaking and acting in relation to God, her Son, and others around her in ways that are exemplary *for* us, but likewise as speaking with authority to us. Only if she is not only, as it were, spoken to us in the word, but also *speaks* a word to us within the word, will it be possible for her to be recognized as an active presence in the continuing life of the Church and of the faithful.

²⁶ E.g., “There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Jesus Christ, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:5–6); putting the “one mediator” alongside the “one God” surely implies exclusivity (“*only* one God,” “*only* one mediator”) in both cases. Likewise: “[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let whoever boasts, boast in the Lord.’” Here too the context requires that the “wisdom” which Jesus Christ has become for us is our only wisdom; this exclusivity must then also attach to the “redemption” grouped here with wisdom.

As matters actually stand, there is a word which Mary speaks to us in the scriptural testimony to Christ: she speaks to us in her song, her Magnificat.²⁷ Though spoken in the context of her meeting with Elizabeth, the Magnificat clearly transcends the specificity of that situation and proclaims the great deeds of God to “all generations.” While Mary’s archprophecy consists chiefly in willingly bearing and bringing into the world the Word made flesh, here the archprophet herself utters prophecy, explicating for all the world the “great things” which the Mighty God has done for her. This song, which is simultaneously thanksgiving and proclamation, is Mary’s word spoken to us within the word. Here she is most certainly presented not simply as a model or example but also as a speaker to whom we should pay heed; that is, she is presented as exercising *agency* toward us.

If the Magnificat is the specific scriptural locus of Mary’s active agency in the Church, what follows concerning the *character* of that agency? Perhaps surprisingly, it is at this point that Martin Luther has a neglected contribution to make to an evangelical Mariology. Not only did Luther affirm Mary’s motherhood of the Church and every Christian,²⁸ but in his sermons, especially those for the Feast of the Visitation, he persistently speaks of Mary as a present agent in the Church, precisely *as the singer of the Magnificat*, in terms that do not seem casual even though they are not developed very fully.

Luther’s description of Mary’s agency has two related dimensions. To begin with, she is the Church’s teacher of praise and thanksgiving. “She leads the choir, and we should follow her with singing.”²⁹ But this is not simply an exemplary role; Mary not only models thanksgiving but teaches it: “Learn from this professor (*Meisterin*), if you want to give thanks.”³⁰ Her Magnificat is not only a model thanksgiving, but a liturgical text sung daily in the Church, and, Luther says, “it would be good if it were sung

²⁷ The claim that the Magnificat is, in truth, the word which the Mother of God addresses to the Church is not, it should be noted, touched *directly* by historical-critical discussions of historicity, authorship, and sources of the text. Only if we had positive knowledge from other sources that Mary’s attitude was quite otherwise, would the former claim be threatened directly by historical-critical questioning; short of that, the question “What is Mary’s continuing witness to all generations?” is not simply reducible to the question, “What are the facts behind the Visitation narrative?”

²⁸ “Therefore Mary is Christ’s Mother, and the Mother of us all, although he alone lies on her lap. . . . If he is ours, then we are to be in his place; where he is, there we also are to be, and everything he has is ours, and therefore his Mother is also our Mother.” *WA* 29: 655–56.

²⁹ *WA* 27:241.

³⁰ *WA* 29:452.

twice.”³¹ Its authority can only be compared with that of the Lord’s Prayer: “If you want to pray for all on earth, take the Our Father. Here [in the Magnificat] you have the general thanksgiving for all things, also for your own affairs.”³²

But in the nature of the case, thanksgiving and praise are necessarily *theological* undertakings; or rather, thanksgiving and praise are the root of Christian theology. To thank and praise God is necessarily to *proclaim* His great deeds and in so doing to *interpret* them. Thus Luther also names Mary “our dear professor and teacher” (*unsere liebe Meisterin und Lehrerin*), who teaches us to understand the Old Testament scriptures as witness to her Son. “This little maid has seen more acutely into the scriptures than all the Jews, and she has connected with all the prophecies and examples which are to be found anywhere in Scripture.”³³ Therefore her canticle is the most concentrated and adequate articulation of the very heart of the Christian faith:

The dear Virgin is occupied with no insignificant thoughts; they come from the first commandment, “You should fear and love God,” and she sums up the way God rules in one short text, a joyful song for all the lowly. She is a good painter and singer; she sketches God well and sings of him better than anyone, for she names God the one who helps the lowly and crushes all that is great and proud. This song lacks nothing; it is well sung, and needs only people who can say yes to it and wait. But such people are few.³⁴

Understood in these terms, Mary’s “motherhood” of the Church consists in the speaking of a word for the Church and all the faithful to hear. Mary’s word in the Magnificat opens the chorus of Christian praise, and provides the Church and all the faithful with the essential words for praise. At the same time, her words of praise are necessarily also words of instruction: She teaches us to see in the coming of her Son the mercy and might of the God of Israel. Just as a mother teaches her children by precept and example the ways of the family, and prepares them to live well in the surrounding human community, so Mary teaches the Church and all the faithful the ways of God’s household and forms them so that they may live well in the environment of His inbreaking reign in Jesus Christ.

It is moreover chiefly through her *word* to us, through the Magnificat, that Mary’s prototypical *embodiment* of faith and prophecy become

³¹ *WA* 34/I:566.

³² *WA* 29:452.

³³ *WA* 29:451–52.

³⁴ *WA* 34/I:566.

graciously formative for us. Through the Magnificat, her paradigmatic faith becomes not so much an example of impossible purity by which we are measured, as an available form of life into which we are invited to enter. To be formed by Mary our Mother means in the first place to stammer and lisp along with her in her song; in so doing we take our stand with her in faith and join with her in prophecy and praise, and it is chiefly in this way that she shapes us as worshipers and servants of the great King whom she has brought forth into the world.



Let me close with a few words of counsel in response to a question which is bound to arise: How might contemporary Protestants begin to recover an appropriate awareness of Mary's presence in the mystery of the Church? In the spirit of walking before one tries to run, I have only three simple-minded suggestions.

First, celebrate those feasts of Christ in which Mary appears as a significant personage in the story of salvation: in addition to Christmas, the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the Presentation of our Lord in the temple. If these feasts are suppressed, and their gospel lessons passed over in the liturgical cycle, then Mary's literary presence in the Church is effaced and the figure of the scriptural Christ is truncated.

So keep the feasts: Celebrate them even when they occur on weekdays and "not enough people will come" (that terrible phrase which perhaps more than anything else discloses our practical godlessness). Pastors, when you preach on these texts do not be afraid to take Mary as seriously as Scripture takes her. Laypeople, celebrate these feasts with prayer and thanksgiving and the reading of Scripture even if your pastor has more important things to do. The Mother of God cannot, to be sure, replace your pastor; but compared with her your pastor is, after all, only a pastor.³⁵

Second, sing the Magnificat. Sing it at home, and sing it at Evening Prayer in the congregation. Of course, this advice requires that Evening Prayer actually be *observed* in the congregation. It would not be a bad way to rediscover the Magnificat for the pastor simply to turn up at the Church every evening at a stated time to pray and sing Mary's song with anyone who comes, or alone if necessary. On the other hand, the presence of a pastor is not *required* for Evening Prayer; if the pastor is not interested, no one can rightly stop the people of God from praying and singing together nonetheless.

³⁵ Cf. Charles Williams, "A Dialogue on Hierarchy," in *The Image of the City and Other Essays*, ed. Anne Ridler (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 129: "The Mother of God was not an apostle, yet the apostles were—only apostles."

Third, when you sing the Magnificat, do not de-gender it as contemporary liturgical versions often do. In liturgical use it is chiefly the use of a feminine form for δούλη that reminds the congregation of the particularity of the canticle as Mary's song. To translate "servant" rather than "slavewoman" suggests that the Magnificat cannot become the Church's song without ceasing to be the song of the particular woman Mary. If anything in this paper is true, this suggestion should be vigorously resisted. The Magnificat is the Church's song because it is the song of the specific Jewish woman Mary, whom God's election and promise have set in the midst of the Church as the prototype of the Church's faith and prophecy and therefore as the archsinger of the praise of God's mercy in Christ. When we sing the Magnificat, all of us, male and female together, take our stand with Daughter Zion, the Lord's slave-woman, identifying with her, and joining in her song, the primal, and in this life unsurpassable, articulation of the joy of the kingdom. **N-V**

