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Some Ecumenical Perspectives on "UT UNUM SINT," Pt. 3: The Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Icon of the Church, Intercessor: A Baptist Perspective

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**THE VIRGIN MARY,
MOTHER OF GOD, ICON OF THE CHURCH,
INTERCESSOR: A BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE**

*The Rev. Larry Bethune, Ph.D.**

I am grateful for the honor of your invitation today to address you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, at a Roman Catholic gathering on a topic not often addressed in Baptist circles. It is, of course, an impossible topic to address in twenty minutes, particularly because it presupposes so many prior questions which distinguish Baptist from Roman Catholic theology. But I appreciate your including a Baptist perspective in an ecumenical dialogue striving after Christian unity. And I hope in my clarifying Baptist distinctions, you will hear no lack of respect and gratitude on my part for Roman Catholic theology, history, tradition, and spirituality.

In *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II expresses a commitment to ecumenism and sets forth five areas "in need of fuller study before a true consensus of faith can be achieved" (no. 79). The fifth area in this list concerns the identity and role of the Virgin Mary with respect to the church. Thus, I was invited to speak on the topic: "Can we not all agree that Mary is the Mother of God, Icon of the Church, and Intercessor for Christ's disciples and for all humanity?" My Baptist response, in short, is "No, we cannot all agree, and why should we?"

Baptist theology was born out of the Enlightenment, in the confluence of both the Reformed and Anabaptist streams of tradition, and forged in the furnace of persecution by state-

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supported churches.¹ We bear the strengths and weaknesses of a rational and individualistic approach to faith which we believe to be biblical and Christ-centered. From the Reformed tradition, Baptists inherit a belief in salvation by grace through faith and an emphasis on scripture. From the Anabaptist tradition, we inherit a strong commitment to the priesthood of the believers and distrust of human authority structures which serve as gatekeepers of access to God.

Martin Marty has identified the unique contribution of Baptists to Christendom to be our bedrock belief in "soul freedom." Based upon a kind of Cartesian autonomy of the individual—*credo ergo sum* rather than *cogito ergo sum*, if you will, though hopefully there is a great deal of *cogito* in our *credo*—Baptist theology begins with the anthropological understanding that faith and belief can never be coerced by external authority, but must come from within. We believe every competent person—and that is almost every person beyond infants and the profoundly retarded—is responsible for his or her own relationship with God through Christ, and only through Christ. Baptists recognize a single confession of faith which constitutes membership in the church, the biblical confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord." This confession cannot be imposed by outside political or ecclesiastical pressure, but must be made personally and freely in response to the grace of God.²

Baptists trust the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice, the reliable prophetic and apostolic witness, inspired in origin and illumined in interpretation by the Spirit of God, the faithful instrument communicating the Word and will of God to the individual believer and the gathered church. We refuse any subsequent creeds or human leaders or ecclesiastical

¹The standard history of Baptists is Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 3rd ed., 1963).

²Brief and readable surveys of Baptist theology can be found in *Being Baptist Means Freedom*, ed. by Alan Neely (Washington, DC: The Alliance of Baptists, 1988), and Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 1993).

traditions as having ultimate authority for interpreting the scripture. All of these we view as being secondary to scripture and therefore derivative, pushed through the filter of human sinfulness, and consequently prone to error. But we also see them as interposed against the priesthood of Christ, who is the sole mediator of our faith and our only access to God through the work of the Holy Spirit. In the tradition of the biblical prophets who stood alone or almost nearly alone against the mainstream religious and political institutions of their day, Baptists have a history of dissent. It is an old saw among us that "where two Baptists are in a room there are at least three different opinions on any topic." And recognizing the fine line between heretics and prophets, which only the Spirit of God distinguishes through the forces of history, I cannot claim Baptists have been any kinder to their prophets than other traditions. But, historically, we have accepted the freedom of the Spirit to speak through any believer, our obligation to listen everywhere to discern the voice of the Spirit, and the competency of the common Christian to read, interpret, and proclaim the scripture. Baptists prize the continuing theological dialogue of all Christians—from the newest to the most experienced believer, from the youngest to the oldest—as a process through which God continues to speak.

Our churches therefore are a democratic theocracy in which all baptized members may participate since all have equal access to the Spirit of God through Christ, whom we pray will guide us in all decisions. The clergy have no power beyond influence, persuasion, and their individual vote, and each congregation is autonomous, called together to interpret the gospel and accomplish God's mission in their local context. Every level of organization for ministry beyond the local church is a cooperation of congregations or individual Baptists and nonbinding on the believer. We believe the unity of the Body of Christ cannot and should not be achieved by doctrinal conformity or intellectual agreement, but solely by the actual one Spirit of God dwelling within each individual Christian.

I should add that this understanding of faith means no one Baptist can ever speak for all Baptists (including this paper which reflects only my point of view on the point of view of

Baptists regarding Mary), and that Baptist stances in the public sphere merely represent the majority of Baptists at a given meeting where such a decision is made. Consequently, Baptists have often shied away from global ecumenical organizations. It is easier, out of our theology, for us to be involved in ecumenical efforts at a local level. I will understand if you do not recognize these ideals in some of the Baptists you know. But then, you would not want me to form my understanding of Roman Catholic theology anecdotally from the marginalized Catholics or rebel priests of my acquaintance. As in all of our confessions, Baptist ideals are continually being tested in practice and have even been abandoned by some Fundamentalists, who have claimed the label Baptist (and taken over the Southern Baptist Convention) but favor a creedal and authoritarian theology instead.

Now I realize you have not gathered for a primer in Baptist theology, but my Baptist response to the identity and role of Mary is based upon these prior commitments. Generally speaking, Mary plays little role in Baptist theology and almost no role in Baptist spirituality. Frankly, some of this lack of attention is probably sexist, especially in the American South. While American Baptists have openly accepted the equal role of women in all spiritual matters (God being free to call whomever God might choose), with stellar exceptions and until recently, Southern Baptists and other more conservative Baptist groups have treated women as secondary spiritual beings in the church. The role of women in the church is still hotly debated among Southern Baptists, the issue of ordination left to the local church, but not without banishment from denominational institutions.³ I envy the way the role of Mary in Catholic theology and spirituality leads people to experience the feminine attributes of God and recognize God's ministry through women.

But the primary reason Mary plays such a diminished role in Baptist theology is her relatively small role in the Bible.

³This struggle is reviewed and positive gains celebrated in *The New Has Come: Emerging Roles among Southern Baptist Women*, ed. by Anne Thomas Neil and Virginia Garrett Neely (Washington, DC: The Baptist Alliance, 1989).

Discussions of Mary among Baptists are limited to those few biblical texts where Mary is mentioned. She is occasionally upheld as a model of obedient discipleship (as when the Nativity texts or Acts 1:14 are being studied), but just as often is viewed as a disciple whose understanding of Jesus' identity was as confused as that of the other disciples (as in the latter part of the second chapter of Luke or the passage where Mary and his siblings try to see Jesus in Mark 3:31-35 and parallels). And she is seen as a sympathetic but largely symbolic character in Jesus' expression of compassion from the cross in John 19:25-27. Baptists generally have no knowledge nor find any biblical warrant for the highly developed Catholic traditions regarding Mary, such as her perpetual virginity or her immaculate conception and assumption (or dormition, in Orthodoxy). For Baptists, Mary is a person like any person, called to a unique role in God's plan of salvation, given a choice, and making the right choice by God's grace in spite of her human imperfections.

More to the point, Baptists would resist recognizing Mary as an icon of the church with any status beyond other biblical disciples consenting to God's call. But Baptists even resist using crosses as icons of the church, for fear of a misunderstanding of symbolism. There are several reasons for this Baptist discomfort with icons. Biblically speaking, we hear Christ's commandment to baptism and the Lord's Supper as a means of remembering and proclaiming his death, burial, and resurrection, but find no other symbols of the church so commanded. Baptists cast a wary eye on the use of other symbols, statues, and rituals as tending towards idolatry—the confusion of the symbol with the reality it represents. Even those Baptist churches more comfortable with representative art and the use of symbols in worship explain frequently what these symbols mean, in order to prevent misunderstanding.

Baptists also refuse to recognize any unique intercessory role for Mary or any other saint on earth or heaven. So strong is our belief in the high priesthood of Christ, we reject any other mediator as competing with Christ. Why triangle a message through another person when the grace of God allows direct access to the worst sinner who turns to God through Christ for help? A Catholic friend of mine helped me to understand the

intercessory role of Mary and the saints in Catholic theology when she asked me if Baptists ever ask friends to pray for them. "Of course we do," I said. "It's the same thing," she said. It is a lovely image, but I am not sure it is the same. We do ask friends to pray for us and I have known some Baptists who spoke to their beloved deceased, but seldom with requests for intercession with God, and never with the thought that they could not speak to Christ just as directly. I do not know if it is any different in Catholic theology, but Baptists would seldom ask anyone to pray for them without praying to God directly themselves. We think of praying with one another and never through one another.

Most difficult of all is the idea of Mary as "Mother of God." At one level, the Bible asserts this as a logical conclusion of the infancy narratives. Jesus is God in human flesh. Mary gave birth to Jesus. Therefore, Mary is the "Mother of God." But even the earliest use of *theotokos* brought contentious Christological discussion. Is Mary generative of the divine nature or rather the channel of God's inseparable connection with humanity?⁴ Baptists would tend towards the latter, preferring to translate *theotokos* "bearer of God" rather than "Mother of God." Realizing that Protestants and Baptists have been accused of reviving Nestorian Christology, I would assert there are other ways of preserving Christological orthodoxy without addressing the role of Mary beyond the mystery of what God made possible in her womb. Baptists do not consider original sin to be biological, but spiritual, not passed on by birth, but by every individual's participation in human nature and community. Without clear biblical evidence otherwise, Baptists assume Mary participated in human sinfulness in the same way as all other human beings, and needed herself the salvation Jesus would provide. So yes, perhaps Baptists can agree

⁴In discussion of this point, one respondent asked whether I intended to reduce Mary's role simply to being "a womb used by God." By no means! But in her significant role as one who consents to God's will and as parent and family to her child, responsible for nurture and teaching, Mary is once again an exemplary saint. She shares these responsibilities with Joseph, other family members, and even the Jewish community of the first century.

that Mary is *theotokos*, but with a careful definition of what that term means.

And that is all my point. An individual Baptist might well affirm all three of these descriptions of Mary and still be a faithful Baptist. The majority probably would not. Since Baptists find unity only in our common profession of faith that "Jesus Christ is Lord" and ultimately only in the reality of the God we share beyond our feeble attempts to comprehend and verbalize the Mystery, we cannot all agree with each other and do not insist on trying. It is our experience that belief must always be open to correction by God, or, in the name of God, we may wind up opposing God and throwing up walls preventing people from access to God rather than opening doors to include them.

Thank you again for opening the door and including me in your reflections today, and may our Savior bless you and your work with God's peace.