



Mary, Mother of God, and the Nestorian Hangover

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Mary is the exalted mother of God who, nevertheless, knows she is “of low estate” (Luke 1:48). How low? She is God’s lowly slave “according to the word” (1:38), and yet she cries out joyously, “My soul magnifies the Lord” (1:46). She can do no other because Mary is *simul*: at the same time God’s most “lowly slave” (1:48) and his most favored, “blessed among women” (1:42). Both of her lives derive from the peculiar Word that she served, who became her own blessed Son—the “Seed” promised to “our father Abraham” (1:73). She both came from that Seed in the flesh and gave birth to the Seed in the flesh—a most amazing mystery.

On account of this mystery, Mary teaches us faith. That faith is at once the most difficult and best to believe because, in it, she learned the difference between the cross and glory. With the eyes of

The role of Mary in the life of Jesus, and in the order of salvation, is that she is the theotokos, the God-bearer. Those who wish to avoid this language, like the bishop Nestorius and those who have followed him down the centuries, wish to avoid the fullness of the incarnation. Jesus, the Son of Mary and the Son of God, is God fully in the flesh.

God, Mary looked beyond her present, lowly life into the majestic, future promise: “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son” (1:31). The theme of Mary’s song, “Magnificat,” says that while sinners look upward, attempting to peer into God’s majesty, God is looking downward, seeing the lowly that we overlooked (1:46–56). Her lowly trust in God allowed her to do the impossible, as Gabriel said she would: “For nothing will be impossible with God” (1:37). Yet, as great as her promise was, she endured many subsequent attacks in the form of questions—most of them from her own son: “How can this be for I am a virgin?” (1:34); “Woman, what have I to do with you.” (John 2:4); “Who are my mother and my brothers?” (Mark 3:33). Finally, God handed his mother over to John: “Woman, behold your son” (John 19:26).

We honor Mary highly for this faith, calling her by her true name: “God-bearer.” Yet, we do not give her honor by robbing from her son. She is not a female aspect of the Trinity, nor is she co-redemptrix with Christ. Even her true virginity did not merit her mothering of God; nevertheless, it was her physical womb that gave birth to God and thereby set the world on fire. The most important words we have concerning Mary do not even use her name: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4–5).

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She gave birth to the Word made flesh, yet she saves no one (including herself). Mary must have been, and was in fact, saved by her own son—while she was being used as the sacrament who delivered God under the law. Without her, none of us would be redeemed, yet if you asked her, “Do you understand your worth?” she would say she only did what she must according to the word and “pondered it all in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Therefore, when we teach Mary, we state

two things: Mary is the exalted mother of God, the highest calling ever given on earth, and she is the lowest slave whose cross-faith is extolled from age to age. If we were bold enough, we would name more churches “Mary, Mother of God Lutheran Church”; if we were bolder still, we would say, “Mary, Slave of God Lutheran Church.”

The church has always had difficulty calling Mary “Mother of God.” This reluctance became explicit after the Nicene Council with Nestorius, the fifth-century bishop of Constantinople, whose ongoing disease within the church is named for him: the “Nestorian Hangover.” Its only cure is to call Mary God’s mother—historically and truly (not “once upon a time”), then to confess that she is so *on account of me*, theologically (the how and why of her birth). Human reason recoils at this name because it cannot fathom a God who decides one day to be born under his own law; even Zeus could not do that. Yet, because of what this unprecedented birth did to the law, Mary’s bearing of God made it all the way down to me in baptism (which is word-in-water *for me*) and the Lord’s Supper (which is word-in-bread-and-wine *for me*). In these sacraments, I confess the impossible: “Mary is Mother of God—born of a woman, born under the law—for me.”

However, it is not only secular reason that doubts this truth; the churches historically have also resisted saying this. Two infamous heresies recount the reason: Zwingli’s rejection of Christ’s words “take and eat, this is my body,” and Nestorius’s refusal to call Mary the mother of God. Early in the Reformation Luther publicly attacked the papal “eucharist” as a sacrificial prayer (*Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520). Meanwhile, down in Switzerland, Huldrych Zwingli picked up Luther’s reforming spirit and determined to “come out” a Lutheran; he attended a group of reformers eating sausages in Lent, the “Affair of the Sausages” (1522), although he himself did not partake.

However, Zwingli did not want to eat the body of Christ. His disgust at the thought made him reduce the bread and wine of communion to “signs” that denote unseen spiritual ideas that “faith” could then “believe.” He imagined fulfilling the first commandment (rejecting “idols”) by ridding the sacrament of its physical form of “icons.” Consequently, for poor Zwingli God was not born of a woman and not born under the law. God must remain up in heaven on his throne, eternally judging according to his law. God was imagined using his endless law, including its “signs” of the Supper, to separate sheep from goats and populate his kingdom only with the holy. He opined that

those who “remembered” Christ’s ordeal on the cross in the form of a sacrificial act of praying (eucharist) were separated from the goats who did not. In the Lord’s Supper, he concluded, Jesus’s body could not be born of a woman, born under the law; it had to be sitting in the judgment seat, above the law, to separate sinner and saint. Zwingli then analogized John 6 (Jesus’s feeding of the five thousand) to the Lord’s Supper and emerged with his fundamental legal principle: “The flesh profiteth nothing” (John 6:63). He then turned to Luther in scorn, saying: “No baked God for me.” After recovering from the shock of this carnival ride, Luther realized that Zwingli’s destruction of the sacrament included even more carnage than the Supper. It reproduced Nestorius’s old hangover: when you reject the command and promise “Take and eat, this is my body given for you,” you will also reject “Mary is the mother of God—for me.”

When Mary declared, “He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (Luke 1:49), the greatest thing she received was her name “Mother of God” (*Theotokos*). It took a major effort from Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria, to get the church to confess this properly at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE). By the time of the Marburg Colloquy (1529), the parallel struggle over sacraments prompted Luther to advance the whole doctrine of incarnation beyond the great Alexandrians Athanasius and Cyril. Teaching the incarnation correctly began with these theologians saying that Christ is mediator—not between two Greek substances, but between the “justifying God” and “sinners.” First Timothy 2:5–6 says, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.”

In Christ, there is both the *power* to save (that belongs only to God’s forgiveness of sin) and the *thing* that needs saving—the flesh-and-blood body that bears sin. In Christ’s one person there is both the forgiver and the body without sin that nevertheless becomes a sinner, the greatest sinner, and even sin itself (the Hypostatic Union, Isa 53 and 2 Cor 5:21). In his sinless body, Christ’s whole person takes our sin and defeats it. What occurs within his person is called “the communication of attributes”—whatever in us is not communicating with God (because of wrath) now in Christ communicates in a new way—interpenetrating the “justifying God” and “unjust man.”

Our evangelical teaching takes these majestic doctrines of the *person of Christ* (two natures, hypostatic union of person, and the

communication of attributes) and applies them to preaching, rather than to reason's speculation: Christ arrives to us in his word; he does not depart for the "distant" right hand of God. His incarnation accomplishes justification for sinners—one by one—through the preaching office. How? Preaching begins at the bottom, as Luther recounted to his students: "Why did Paul, in Galatians 1:3, add 'our Lord Jesus Christ' to an already fine, old Hebrew blessing—Shalom?" Because Christian faith "does not begin at the top, as all other religions do; it begins at the bottom."¹

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There has long been a fight between those who start Christology at the top (the Alexandrian "Logos Christology") and those in Antioch who began in their own way "at the bottom." The Alexandrians had a problem with the "fit of the incarnation": How can you get such a big God into such a tiny human being? These Origenists were never good at preaching either the incarnation or the cross. The other side, from Syria, insisted on beginning below, with a real human Jesus. For them, the question was: How do you advance from a real human being to someone who is fully God? They were bad at the kind of "divinity" that turned God into an abstract category or idea like "community," "justice," or "openness to the future." Antiochians invented clumsy theories about the man Jesus, who entered into a divine process (an evolution into godhood), or who served as a model that "divinely effects" others to improve their own lives—just as ripples in a pool come from a single pebble. Ultimately, the arch-heretic

¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), 26:30. Hereafter, *LW*.

Arius tried an in-between approach, searching for a third “element” between mortal and immortal that Christ could inhabit as a bridge between them.

Meanwhile, when Luther said “Begin below,” he did not mean to start with your picture of the historical Jesus and work your way higher (Antioch). He meant to begin with your God (your fearful, legal judge) at Mary’s breast, sucking his mother’s milk. Begin with your God in the womb, so that the jarring fear of accounting for your life before God subsides long enough to hear what God *promised*. Then, you will either be offended by God’s physicality (like the Alexandrians) or by his divinity (like the Syrians). Instead of offense, however, why not rejoice that you have a “graspable God” who was born of the Virgin Mary, under the law?

The greatest offense at the incarnate God came to light just before 430 CE, when Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria, began a series of thunderous letters threatening to excommunicate his fellow bishop, Nestorius, for refusing to call Mary by her name: Mother of God. Nestorius was a Syrian monk who became bishop in 428 CE. He entered that role with guns blazing to restore morality in debauched Constantinople. The city needed morals, so Nestorius began demanding a strict social life that limited his congregants’ visits to the gory “circus.” He then attempted to root out the new “urban monks” since he knew that monks belonged in desert caves. While these two efforts failed miserably, he did manage to shut down the last Arian church (alienating German mercenaries, who left and infected the churches that eventually became Luther’s own).

Subsequently, Nestorius’s reforms advanced beyond moralities. He took on doctrine as well, scolding the wayward “city monks” in a series of lectures that forbade the monks’ favorite prayer, which addressed “Mary, *Theotokos*.” “Strictly speaking,” Nestorius declared, Mary is only “mother of *Christ*, not of *God*.” As a reformer, Nestorius liked “strict speaking,” and of course, “theoretically” and “intellectually,” Mary could only be a mother to a human. At most, he would allow her to be called *Christotokos*, not *Theotokos* (Christ-bearer, not God-bearer). Cyril shot back at him with this famous syllogism:

1. If Mary is not “strictly speaking” the mother of God,
2. And Jesus is her son,
3. Then Jesus is not “strictly speaking” God.

As is the case with church administrators, Nestorius preferred vague terms for the incarnation: God was somehow *conjoined* to man (later the Lutherans would say “like two boards glued together,” *Solid Declaration* VIII, par. 14). Nestorius understood that the old teaching of the Antiochenes (that there were “two sons” with Christ) was not quite right. He was afraid that Cyril and his Alexandrians had lost the humanity of Christ—making Jesus into a little, powerful *deity* that walked around Judea knowing everything before it happened (including the cross) and performing miracles helter-skelter for no apparent reason. How was a Christian supposed to imitate that kind of divinity? Nestorius then fussed about how to avert their mistakes without losing the true divinity of Christ.

At this point, Luther discovered the problem: Nestorius was a “proud man.” Pride means that Nestorius wanted the language of theology to avoid all crudities, such as “God at Mary’s breast” or “God died on the cross.” These offended him because they broke universal laws. Pride derives from placing the law over the gospel so that Nestorius held the right *doctrine* of the two natures and the one person (Hypostatic Union), but he refused the proper *preaching*. He refused the “crude” *communicatio idiomatum*. Nestorius refused to say what a preacher must: that God has come to us, among us, and for us *in Jesus Christ the man and no other*.² Because of his preoccupation with law and order, Nestorius forbade any preaching or prayers (liturgy) that in his eyes would make God less honorable—and therefore make humans less honorable. The two most dishonorable things a preacher could say were: “Mary bore God,” and “God died.”

These are indeed jarring and offensive things; nevertheless, Luther realized they had to be said—not only in lists of doctrines that are tucked away in libraries, but also liturgically, especially when they publicly offend reason. Like Nestorius, Zwingli and the sacramentarians were ashamed of saying “This is my body” and having people “take and eat.” That led Zwingli down a rabbit hole: “Was Christ really in the bread? Can you eat his body? Are we telling people to eat a baked God? Shame! The flesh profits nothing!” It was the same rabbit hole Nestorius entered when he was offended by the monks’ prayers extolling Mary as Mother of God. He was afraid that they would

² LW 41:222.

confuse God with a human source, lest God become less dignified. Zwingli wanted to ensure that God remained holy, pure of sin, and separated from earthly contamination. It meant that he was correct grammatically in a rigid sense: *God* is not born of Mary, because the human is not the source of the divine nature. “Born” means (by the rules of grammar) that the one born has the *nature* of the one giving birth as an effect comes from its cause.

Yet, Nestorius’s rigid logic led to absurdities itself, since “rigidly” one could not even say that Mary gave birth to her own child’s soul—only God does that. Naturally, Mary did not bear the divinity as its source—whatever “natural source” could mean for divinity (one suspects it means begotten of the eternal law). More importantly, when we speak of the incarnation of the Word of God, there are not two sons who came to dwell among us—but one. This is true because God is in Christ (one) reconciling the world to himself by being born under the law. To say that, we break a series of logical rules of grammar concerning the nature and purpose of the incarnation to get Christ preached to real sinners. God must be preached so that the justifying God and sinners belong together—even though the law demands their separation.

The doctrine of the two “natures” of Christ was developed for proper preaching—that especially includes the communication’s proper word “*idioma*.” An *idioma* is a thing (attribute or characteristic) that can put into words what it means to be “human” as opposed to “divine.” For example, the *idiomata* of humans include dying, suffering, weeping, speaking, laughing, eating, drinking, sleeping, being born, having a mother, suckling the breast, and the like. Whenever we use such words, we are speaking of humans. When we switch to adjectival “things” that apply to God’s nature, we find the exact opposites: immortal, omnipotent, infinite, not born, does not sleep, does not eat, and the like. Nestorius thought that the work of the church (and so his wayward monks’ prayers) meant keeping these two apart—that God and humans must be divided as far apart as possible. Why? So that God can remain holy in our minds and our worship to keep the first commandment. God must remain in high heaven—although he simultaneously stoops down to help lowly humans *make themselves holy and perfect*. God must, however, do this from a distance, by using his own divine attributes as “ideal goals” for humans to reach. So, God sits in holy heaven waiting to see how well his humans perform (of

course, along with his gracious help in reaching up to his high place). Few can enter!

At this point Luther made his crucial contribution to Christology: Nestorius might be fine as a philosophy teacher (though syllogisms have to work both ways—not one), but the good bishop doesn't know a thing about preaching Christ. If a preacher says to the congregation, "There goes *Jesus the carpenter* of Nazareth, who is walking down the street to fetch water," Nestorius would say, "Fine, that is acceptable verbiage." It recognizes the proper *idiomata* of human beings and tells us to imitate Jesus: we should carry water if Jesus did.

Yet, if the preacher then says, "There goes *God* down the street fetching water," Nestorius would get flustered: God doesn't do those kinds of things! Fetching water is beneath him! You can say "the man Jesus" carries water, but not God! I will not allow that in my church! Worse yet, Nestorius figured, when you say such inanities about God's *idiomata*, it ends up leaving no water for humans to fetch! If a preacher said, "God carried water," he would be telling his congregation what the divinity did (very easily), but not explaining to the congregation that they must now reciprocate by doing likewise for God. Nestorius's preaching must explain how the church must fetch water for the deity.

Two secret truths that undergird Nestorius's rigid, legal logic then came to light: 1) God can't be sullied by bodily, earthly, physical, and demeaning things. Especially, God can neither become "a sinner" nor "die." 2) The liturgy must save a safe space for humans to do the works that the law demanded of Jesus and so demands of us. The gospel cannot say that God does everything as almighty, since surely the thing that makes a human human (and so in the *image of God*) is free will. If God gets too close to humans by incarnating too much, won't he take away the human essence? Won't he remove our free will?

Luther discovered why Nestorius (and then Zwingli) did not want to preach either of two words: "God died" or "This man Jesus created the world." Why not? The reformed, and always reforming, bishop of Constantinople did not want God made *unholy*; he did not want God taking into himself the things that make humans unholy. What is that? Well, it comes down to the human body. Nestorius then drew a fatal conclusion: justification (and so holiness) requires the separation of human and divine—especially in the body. These two *idiomata* do not belong together. They must be separated for humans to be saved and simultaneously for God to remain holy. To regain their lost holiness,

humans must become “like” God, who is sinless. Consequently, Nestorius made room for the law within the incarnation (as any Puritan reformer does): God must remain an eternally good “role model” for what pure law looks like; he must resist entering too deeply into the world—especially into its flesh. Otherwise, God would lose his purity and at the same moment intrude upon a human being’s best attribute. If God entered the flesh too deeply, he would be infected with sin itself. He would then lose his own free will and, at the same moment, take away the free will (or mind) of the “man” that he entered.

In the end, Nestorius’s problem wasn’t Mary after all. He felt duty-bound to protect God from the incarnational disgrace of the flesh while leaving room for human free will—even over against God. Nestorius wanted a skinny, fleshless God that a good monk could use as a model for the godly life. Mary bearing God had to go! He knew the *idiomata* but he didn’t know the “communication” of the *idiomata*, and consequently, he didn’t “get” the incarnation. The incarnation nauseated him; it ruined his plans for the reformation of society. However, Jesus is not like two boards glued together—nor is he a new kind of mixture of the two into a “Jesus smoothie.” In Christ, creature and Creator interpenetrate so we no longer know what God is like without starting “below,” with Jesus. We don’t even know what a human is without starting with Jesus.

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Everything God is is right there in the man Jesus—creator, eternal, unthwartable in will, predestining, and merciful. We have no other God than him—in the flesh. Consequently, we refuse to discard Mary’s name. It was given by God so that we may learn what the incarnation is, and why Jesus became “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14). God not only entered the mess of human flesh and sin but became part

of it. He came so far down that “his skin smokes,” as Luther liked to say. More yet, God’s Son took the mess of flesh, embroiled in sin, and made it his own; he took our sin. Luther finally paused in his examination of Nestorius to sigh and pray, “O Lord God! We should always rejoice in true faith, free of dispute and doubt, over such a blessed, comforting doctrine, to sing, praise, and thank God the Father for such inexpressible mercy that he let his dear Son become like us, a man and our brother!”³

Statements such as “Mary bore God” and “God died” find their proper place in preaching, prayer, and hymns. As an abstract idea, “Mary bore God” is false. As an address to a sinner “*for you*,” it functions as the law for those who take offense and the gospel for those who receive it as God’s deep, loving, intractable act—while they are yet sinners. Church doctrine can speak of Jesus in two natures and one person, or even say that Mary bore Christ, but it can’t say what the preacher must: “Here he is, the Son of Mary and of God—given for you.”

We preach Christ specifically as a true human who came to dwell among us in his body. As such, he is God who is born of woman, born under the law. Although he was without sin himself (above the law), he came under that law to take our sins into his body—unto death. In preaching this, we say that Mary is *Theotokos*, that Jesus Christ ate with sinners, that he became a sinner, and even that he became sin itself: “For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Not only did Jesus’s human nature die on the cross, but God died. God’s reason for this was to give himself wholly and completely to you, withholding nothing—while you are ungodly. In faith, we overcome our shame of the God who dies, the God who is born of the Virgin Mary, and say openly that God gives himself to us bodily in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of sin. Then we take and eat God, Mary’s son. ☩

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³ LW 41:103.