

and Mary began a sexual union after Christ was born. Such a teaching is found nowhere in Scripture and is contrary to the consistent voice of the entire early Church. But doesn't the Bible also mention other brothers and sisters of Christ? Who are they and where did they come from? For one thing, they are never directly called the sons and daughters of Mary and Joseph. In several passages the Bible speaks of the children or relatives as "brothers". Abraham and Lot are called brothers, although Lot was actually Abraham's nephew. And Jacob and Laban are called brothers, even though Jacob was the son of Rebecca, Laban's sister. Scripture is therefore silent concerning the nature of this relationship between Christ and these brothers and sisters. Early Fathers differed slightly in their understanding of what the terms meant. Some, such as Saint Ambrose, believed that they were children of a former marriage between Joseph and a wife who died prior to Matthew chapter 1. Others taught that they were cousins. But on one point, almost everyone is in agreement: Mary and Joseph had no sexual union whatsoever, before or after the birth of Christ... Imagine being betrothed to the Mother of God. It was so with Joseph. His betrothed was ever-virgin.

ROYALTY

If we as the Church are called to be "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but . . . holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27), does it not follow that she who is the progenitor of the Lord of that Church should be of that same holy character? Not only has Mary by the mercy and power of God conquered both sin and death, the psalmist sees a glimpse of her in heaven through prophetic eyes. For in Psalm 45, Christ is King and Mary is at His side as Queen and rightly so. If God can make us "kings and priests" (Revelation 1:6) for all eternity, certainly He has the prerogative to crown her with higher honor in heaven's royal procession. Little did John and James realize, the day they argued about which of them might occupy the seat of honor at Christ's right hand in the Kingdom, that God the Father had already reserved that

space for the marvelous woman He chose to bear His Son for our salvation. The honor is appropriate for the most blessed of all women, the one who is our very icon of holiness. Who else could be more rightly rewarded? Thus the psalmist is well within the mark when he writes of Christ, "At Your right hand stands the queen" (Psalm 45:9)! OTHER TRADITIONS

There are two other beliefs concerning Mary that must be briefly mentioned and addressed. The first is her bodily assumption into heaven, the other her immaculate conception. It was widely reported in the early Church that shortly after her death, Mary's body was assumed into heaven. In later centuries, the Roman Church ratified this belief as dogma, while the Eastern Church withheld such an official imprimatur. Most Christians agree that such a miracle is within the realm of firm biblical precedent, Enoch and Elijah being two examples. Further, there is no known record of any gravesite or relics of the Holy Virgin. The assumption of the Virgin is safely seen as an historic Christian tradition, though not recorded in the Scriptures. The Immaculate Conception of Mary is a doctrine unique to the modern Roman Church. In an effort to distance Mary (and protect Christ) from the stain of sin, the Immaculate Conception holds Mary was conceived and born without sin. The Orthodox Church firmly rejects this doctrine on the basis of both Scripture and tradition. Whatever other excesses may have cropped up in history, the Roman Church has never believed or officially taught that Mary was in any way coequal with the Trinity or was to be worshiped with the Trinity. Such allegations are sometimes set forth by critics of the Roman Church, but without basis in fact....

Is it safe to say that no woman in history is more misunderstood by modern Christendom than the Virgin Mary? What is her proper due? As we attempt to face up to Mary honestly and openly, let us turn first to the Bible, the source book of all true Christian doctrine. We will consider what the New Testament teaches about her, and then we will turn to the Old Testament. To understand how the biblical record has been applied through the years by Christians, we will look specifically at Church history to understand both how she has been properly honored, and how excessive beliefs concerning her have crept into the picture. Lastly, we will look at how we must face up to her in light of the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT RECORD?

The Gospel of Saint Luke, the book of the beloved physician, gives us at least four crucial answers.

1. **Mary is the greatest woman who ever lived.**

Whereas our Lord Jesus Christ tells us there is no greater man to walk the earth than John the Baptist, both the Archangel Gabriel and the saintly Elizabeth confess to Mary, "Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:28 and 42). She is the most blessed of women for several reasons, the greatest of which is that she conceived, carried, gave birth to, and nurtured the very Savior of our souls... She was sovereignly chosen by the Father to bear His only begotten Son. In that role, Mary is the first person in all history to receive and accept Christ as her Savior. You and I are called to enthrone the Lord in our hearts and lives-to follow her example in doing so. Early in Christian history she is called "the first of the redeemed". I remember entering a church some years ago and seeing a painting or icon of Mary with open arms front and center on the wall (the apse) just behind the altar. My first impulse was to wonder why Christ alone was not featured at that particular place in the church,

though He was shown in a large circle that was superimposed over Mary's heart. When I asked why she was so prominently featured, the Christian scholar with me explained, "This is one of the greatest evangelistic icons in the entire Church. What you see is Christ living as Lord in Mary's life, and her outstretched arms are an invitation to you and me to let Him live in our lives as He has in hers". The power of that icon stays in my mind to this day. For she has set the pace for all of us to personally give our lives over fully to Jesus Christ. Mary is also blessed because she found favor in the sight of God. Gabriel's words of encouragement to her were, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). Then he comforted her by saying, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30, italics mine). What does one do to become one of God's favorites, to be favored by Him? Remember Cornelius in Acts 10? He was the first Gentile to convert to Christ, "a devout man and one who . . . gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always" (Acts 10:2). Two verses later he is told in a vision, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God". The Lord took notice of his deeds of devotion and brought him salvation. In a similar way, Mary's purity found favor with God, and she was chosen to bear His Son. You say, "Wait a minute! Are you suggesting human merit earns salvation?" Not at all! As commendable as it is for us to live in purity, a devout life never merits salvation. Else why would Mary be called first of the redeemed, or why would Cornelius be baptized into Christ by Saint Peter? Prayer and devotion, however, do gain God's attention. When we seek Him with all our hearts, we do find Him! Do you want to be favored of God? Then give Him everything you have, give Him your very life. This is precisely what Mary did, and why she is to be considered the greatest woman who ever lived.

2. **Mary is our model for Christian service.**

While God certainly knew Mary desired to please Him, He did not take her service for granted. The angel explained how she would bear Christ. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest [God the Father] will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Now Mary had a decision to make. Was she willing? Hear her answer, for it is the doorway to the life of spiritual service for all of us. "Behold the maidservant of the Lord!" she said. "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Even if we are totally sincere about wanting to follow God, He will never conscript us apart from our consent! This is why He is called "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10). We are to choose freely to obey Him and do His will. Some thirty years later, by the way, Mary again had opportunity to exalt her Lord. She was with Jesus at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The servants who were in charge of the celebration discovered they were out of wine. Mary had no doubt as to who could solve their problem. Referring to her Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, she advised them, "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5).

3. Mary is the Mother of God.

...Whether we like to face it or not, the Bible teaches Mary is the mother of God... After Christ had been conceived in her womb, Mary paid a visit to the home of relatives Zacharias and Elizabeth, soon to be parents of John the Baptist. When Mary greeted her cousin, Elizabeth called her blessed and said, "Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). Elizabeth knew that her Lord, the Messiah of Israel, was in the womb of Mary. The title "Mother of God" took on great importance in the fourth century, when a heretic named Nestorius—a man who held high office in the Church—claimed that the one in Mary's womb was certainly man, but that He was not God. Orthodox Christians, with one accord, said, "Wrong!" To see Jesus Christ as something less than God in the flesh is sub-Christian. For unless the one in Mary's

womb was and is God, we are dead in our sins. To safeguard the full deity of Christ, the Church has always insisted that Mary be rightly called—as Elizabeth called her the Mother of God. This title, of course, does not mean mother of the Holy Trinity, for the Holy Trinity has no mother. Neither does it mean she originated the Person who is God the Son. It refers instead to Mary being the Mother of the Son of God, who assumed full humanity in her womb. Just as we insist on the Virgin Birth of Christ, we also insist that for the nine months Mary carried Him in His humanity He was at every moment fully God as well. Thus we say boldly and with great insistence that Mary is the Mother of God, Theotokos, God-bearer. To say anything less is to side with those who deny His deity. When a man buys a large plot of land and turns cattle out to graze on it, he fences in his acreage. He does so to protect his cattle, to keep them from wandering off, and to discourage rustlers. Similarly, the Church sets doctrinal fences around its foundational truths. And nothing is more basic and important to us than the deity of Christ. Because Christ is God, we set a firm and non-negotiable fence around His divinity by our unmovable confession that Mary is Mother of God.

4. We are to honor Mary and call her blessed.

...The Bible tells us that During her three-month stay at Elizabeth's house, Mary offered one of the most beautiful prayers of praise to the Lord in all the Scriptures. It begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord", and thus it has become known as "The Magnificat". In that prayer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary prophesied, "henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). Essentially, all generations in Church history have done so; only the last few centuries have faltered... From the beginning of recorded Christian worship, Orthodox Christians have taken special care to venerate or honor Mary in the Liturgy. There is an ancient hymn which begins, "It is truly right to bless you, O Theotokos (Mother of God)". She is also called in this hymn "ever-blessed and most pure". The bibli-

cal injunction to honor Mary is followed and taken seriously. We do not, of course, worship Mary, for worship is reserved for the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But she is most certainly to be honored and venerated. And because Christ is our elder brother, the firstborn of many brethren, we honor the Virgin Mary as our Mother, our Lady, as well. Just as Eve was mother of the old Adamic race, so Mary is the true Mother of the new race, the Body of Christ, the Church. Perhaps in part because we refuse to honor Mary, our generation seems to struggle with honoring anyone. For example, next time a presidential news conference comes on T.V., watch closely how most of the press corps behave! Far from merely trying to get the story, many are out for intimidation and willful dishonor. While God's word tells us to honor the king (1 Peter 2:17) and to give preference to each other (Romans 12:10), our generation seems to delight in challenging and humiliating other people, especially those in authority. Not only are we who are Bible-believing Christians urged to give honor to whom honor is due (Romans 13:7), we are called by God in no uncertain terms to bless the Mother of our God. We cannot get around that point in Scripture.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MARY

We know that the Old Testament is more than just an inspired account of the history of mankind, or of Israel in particular. In its pages is also the prophetic record concerning our Lord Jesus Christ. He is typified throughout. Moses is a type of Christ, in that he leads the people out of bondage into the land of promise. David typifies Christ as King of Israel. Adam was a type of Christ as head of the human race. Often overlooked, however, is the fact that the Virgin Mary is also seen in the prophetic pages of the Old Testament. Most Christians are aware that the Prophet Isaiah predicts Mary's virgin conception of Christ when he writes: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). But there are numerous other passages which speak

of Mary as well.

EVER-VIRGIN

From the very early years of the Church, Mary was called not only Virgin, but Ever-Virgin. She was seen as never having had a sexual union with Joseph, before or after the birth of Christ. Ezekiel 44:1, 2 is a passage often referred to by the early Fathers in this regard. It states: "Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces toward the east, but it was shut. And the LORD said to me, 'This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut.' "In traditional interpretation of this passage, Mary is the temple and Christ is the Prince of Peace. The gate mentioned is seen as a picture of Christ's passage through the door of Mary's womb. You might not find that interpretation in some of today's commentaries, but it was held by the great majority of early Church Fathers, as well as many of the Reformation leaders. At this point, however, a very valid question can be raised. If she remained a virgin, why does the Gospel of Matthew tell us that Joseph knew not his wife until Christ was born (Matthew 1:25)? From a scriptural standpoint, the presence of the phrase, "until she had brought forth her firstborn Son" does not automatically mean that Joseph must have known her afterward. This is because in both Greek and Hebrew the word until or to can have several different meanings. We find it in 2 Samuel 6:23: "Michal the daughter of Saul had no children to [until] the day of her death". It is used again in Matthew 28:20 where the risen Christ says "Lo, I am with you always, even to [until] the end of the age". And in Deuteronomy 34:6 we read that Moses was buried "in a valley in the land of Moab . . . but no one knows his grave to [until] this day". Obviously the use of the word in these passages does not imply that Michal had a child after her death, that Christ will depart at the end of the age, or that Moses' burial place was discovered the day Deuteronomy 34:6 was written. By the same token, the word until in Matthew 1:25 does not mean that Joseph