

As for Mary's status as the Mother of God, Luther says the following in relation to the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), specifically the wording in Luke 1:49:

The 'great things' are nothing less than that she became the Mother of God, in which work so many and such great good things are bestowed on her as pass man's understanding. For on this there follows all honor, all blessedness, and her unique place in the whole of mankind, among which she has no equal, namely, that she had a child by the Father in heaven, and such a Child. She herself is unable to find a name for this work, it is too exceedingly great; all she can do is break out in the fervent cry: 'They are great things,' impossible to describe or define. Hence men have crowded all her glory into a single word, calling her the Mother of God. No one can say anything greater of her or to her, though he had as many tongues as there are leaves on the trees, or grass in the fields, or stars in the sky, or sand by the sea. It needs to be pondered in the heart what it means to be the Mother of God.⁹

Not only does Luther approve of the title of Mother of God for the Virgin Mary, he rejoices in it!

For him, such a title bestowed upon a human is a wonderful thing in and of itself and is consequently one of the preeminent titles among humanity. As Luther audaciously proclaims in another quote:

We too know very well that God did not derive his divinity from Mary; but it does not follow that it is therefore wrong to say that God was born of Mary, that God is Mary's Son, and that Mary is God's mother... Thus it should also be said that Mary is the true natural mother of the child called Jesus Christ, and that she is the true mother of God and bearer of God, and whatever else can be said of children's mothers, such as suckling, bathing, feeding – that Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God, etc.¹⁰

In this quote Luther emphasizes that he views Mary as being the Mother of God in every possible sense, from biology to the actual visceral and physical tasks of a mother such as feeding and bathing. By doing so, Luther displays his high Christology and firmly plants himself in the

⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works: The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat*, vol. 21 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 326; Martin E. Lehman, ed., *Luther's Works: Word and Sacrament IV*, vol. 38 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 275.: "The property of both natures makes one Christ and each of the two propositions becomes true... Mary is the mother of the Song of God; she is the mother of the Word of God."

¹⁰ Eric W. Gritsch, *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry III*, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 99–100.

boundaries of the traditional interpretation of Mary by the Church by taking extremely literally the title *Theotokos* as bestowed by the Third Ecumenical Council in 431AD. Yet, such strong and precise language about Mary's position as the Mother of God is unlikely to be found among contemporary Protestants.

Mary as Queen of Heaven

Though Luther does not flat out reject bestowing the title of Queen of Heaven upon Mary, he is very aware of the potential implications of wording and connotations so he cautions his listeners in the following way: "It is necessary also to keep within bounds and not make too much of calling her 'Queen of Heaven,' which is a true-enough name and yet does not make her a goddess who could grant gifts or render aid, as some suppose when they pray and flee to her rather to God. She gives nothing, God gives all."¹¹ As this quote reveals, Luther does not want to risk giving any credence to some of his contemporaries' beliefs that Mary was some sort of super-human celestial being with power and influence over the world that rivalled God's own. Words and titles were powerful that had to be chosen with care, lest they give off the wrong impression. For this reason, it did not take long for second and third generation Lutheran scholars and clergy to drop the title of Queen of Heaven altogether, opting for titles and wording for Mary that fit what they viewed to be orthodox and having origination in the ecumenical councils.¹²

¹¹ Pelikan, *Luther's Works: The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat*, 21:327–28.

¹² Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 25. "Based on the evidence presented in the main chapters, the conclusion argues that while Lutheran preachers strive to remain orthodox, especially accepting the statements of the early church councils, they transform the traditional image of Mary: she no longer serves as the powerful Queen of Heaven, but is only held up and praised as a meek, pious, chaste, and obedient girl. Because of the theological changes inaugurated by Luther and the social conservatism of the Lutheran clergy, Mary could no longer be portrayed as an active figure, but rather must serve as a passive representative of the faithful Christian." On pages 136-37 Kreitzer explains when the view started to change: "What we find, however, is that the attitude of reverence toward Mary characteristic of Luther and other pastors such as Johann Spangenberg, Caspar Huberinus (who

Mary's Sinlessness

Though it is difficult to nail down exactly what Luther did and did not believe about Mary's sinlessness, a few quotes do provide some insight. First, Luther, like many other Reformers, rather resolutely affirmed that Mary had conceived Jesus without sin and thus did not need to undertake observance of Mosaic Law for women after childbirth:

As is written in Luke 2 [:22], she was purified according to the law of Moses according to the custom of all women, although she was not bound by that law and did not need to be purified [because she had not conceived with a man]. Out of free and willing love, however, she submitted to the law like other women that she might not offend or despise them. She was not justified by this work, but being righteous she did it freely and willingly.¹³

Although such language is absolutely foreign to contemporary Protestants, the logic makes sense and could be reconciled to modern Protestant views about Mary; after all, since Mary did not conceive Jesus sexually, it easily follows that she did not need to undergo the same purification rite as other women. The same, however, cannot be said about Luther's views on the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Second, although Luther is notoriously convoluted and shifty on the Doctrine of Immaculate Conception, there is one quote that suggests that he privately held to the belief:

But, lest I become too involved, let me state that my position is proved in this one instance, namely, that the Roman church along with the general council at Basel and almost with the whole church feels that the Holy Virgin was conceived

laments that the festival of Mary's Conception has been abandoned), and Johannes Brenz is quickly lost among the younger generation of reformers. This shift is already visible in the postils of Melanchthon but becomes especially noticeable in those sermon collections published in the 1550s and 1560s, which tend to stress Christ and spend little time discussing Mary, and in those published after 1570, which tend to be more critical both of Mary and of Roman Catholicism."

¹³ Harold J. Grimm, ed., *Luther's Works: Career of the Reformer I*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 368; Karant-Nunn and Wiesner, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, 52; Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 134. "Luther, in particular, even declared with the tradition that, as Mary had conceived without sin, that is, not in the usual manner, she also gave birth without suffering any pain or difficulty. But, as Christ was completely human, so he had a completely natural birth."

without sin. Yet those who hold the opposite opinion should not be considered heretics, since their opinion has not been disproved.¹⁴

In this quote Luther, leaves ample room for disagreement and asserts that Christians who do not hold to the Doctrine of Immaculate Conception should not be labelled heretics as, in his mind, there is not sufficient evidence to prove the doctrine either true or false.

Third and finally, Luther believed Mary lived a life completely obedient to the Law, though he qualified this by saying that it was not by her own work but that it was an extraordinary measure of grace made this possible: “Yet who doubts that God could give to someone so much grace that he would fulfill [the Law] completely (as we believe He did in the case of the Blessed Virgin), granted that He does not do it in every case?”¹⁵ Thus, a sinless life was possible, but only reserved for a very select few, including Mary, according to God’s grace and mercy. For Luther, Mary’s sinlessness was to be viewed as the exception rather than the rule.

In conclusion, Luther held a very high view of the person of Mary. A view which affirmed her perpetual virginity and her position as Mother of God (*Theotokos*), granted her the title of Queen of Heaven, albeit cautiously, and allowed for Mary, by and large, to be viewed as sinless. Thus, it is safe to say that Luther’s views on the person of Mary are in many ways far from what contemporary Protestants believe, teach, and confess.

¹⁴ Grimm, *Luther’s Works: Career of the Reformer I*, 31:171–72.

¹⁵ George W. Forell, ed., *Luther’s Works: Career of the Reformer II*, vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 156–57; Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 137.: “The most important element of the image of Mary that changed over the sixteenth century was the notion of her sinlessness. The early Lutheran preachers tended to maintain the Augustinian tradition that Mary was free from actual sin, although through God’s grace and not through her own power. Luther makes a number of comments about Mary’s freedom from sin, and even seems to have held to the immaculate conception, despite certain later ambiguous statements.... Luther is only comfortable saying that Mary erred, and thus we know that the church and its leadership can err.”

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