MARY OF NAZARETH
EXEMPLAR OF BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY

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Currently there is a cloud of confusion surrounding the subject of “spirituality.” From “creation spirituality” to “feminine spirituality” to “secular spirituality,” the proliferation of seminars, articles, and books attests to the burgeoning interest in this field. Perceptions of spirituality are often ill-conceived and indistinct. Furthermore, the means to spiritual growth presently advocated include deep breathing, Mongolian chanting, seeking jolts of psychic energy from crystals, and even donning a magnetic helmet which is claimed to induce “mystical states” on par with St. Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus. With the plethora of options available to explore spirituality, it is not surprising that confusion abounds both inside and outside the Church.

Consequently we need access to lives that are reliable and authentic in their experience of God, lives that will help to clarify this nebulous subject. In his presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Luke introduces certain individuals who responded appropriately to the revelation of God in Jesus. One such person was Mary of Nazareth. A closer look at a few familiar passages, the Annunciation and the Magnificat (Lk 1:26-56), reveals certain characteristics of biblical spirituality that are exemplified in Mary.

THE BIBLICAL IMPERATIVE

First, however, it is necessary to provide rationale for specifying “biblical spirituality,” given the smorgasbord of “spiritualities” offered within our consumer-crazed culture. The word “spirituality” is relatively recent, coming into vogue this century and these past few decades in particular. However, as its usage has become more popular, its meaning has become increasingly obscure. While the term is obviously derived from “spirit,” the primary focus is often placed on the human spirit rather than God’s Spirit. Hence “spirituality” becomes viewed as an “aspect of human nature,” like sexuality, which ought to be fostered to enhance personal fulfillment. For example Jonathon Porritt, director of Friends of the Earth and author of Seeing Green, defines “spiritual” as “that aspect of human nature that allows people to transcend the limitations of their material world, to seek meaning in that which cannot be defined materialistically or scientifically.”

In view of this perplexity, it is vital that our discussion of spirituality be grounded in biblical revelation. In contrast to those spiritualities based on humanistic psychology or other religions, Christian spirituality is rooted in the revealed Word of God. This conviction is clearly articulated by Donald Bloesch:

A true spirituality, however, will be grounded in the promises of God in holy Scripture. It will celebrate the glory of God, not the self-aggrandizement of the creature. In the midst of a rising tide of paganism and pseudo-spirituality, we need to recover the biblical pattern.

Therefore biblical exegesis is the starting point for our understanding of biblical spirituality. While an exegesis of the biblical passage concerned (Lk 1:26-56) is beyond the scope of the present article, it nonetheless forms the foundation for our investigation of spirituality.

Other sources of theological and spiritual reflections on Mary contribute further to our exploration. However,
the main intention is not to interact with centuries of Catholic doctrine, but to address the dearth of Protestant reflection upon Mary and to make some contribution in response. Unfortunately, because of Protestant reaction against excessive and inappropriate devotion to Mary among some Roman Catholics, we have failed to appreciate Mary’s significance in biblical history and spirituality. Consequently, we need to recover our rightful Gospel heritage, as this will serve to enhance modern spirituality.

Finally, out of the vast expanse of biblical literature, why has the writer of Luke-Acts been selected as a reliable guide to the spiritual life? The fact that this writer has contributed approximately one quarter of the New Testament materials establishes both his credibility as a witness and his passion for communicating truth concerning life with God. He alone of the Gospel writers produces two volumes: first, the “Gospel according to Luke,” and second, the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” While the Gospel recounts the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Book of Acts records the continued work of the Risen Christ through the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, both individually and corporately. This is important for our purposes, for it has long been recognized that the author of Luke-Acts shows particular interest in the lives of believers, both individually and corporately. This is important for our purposes, for it has long been recognized that the author of Luke-Acts shows particular interest in the Holy Spirit. At the same time, he is also distinguished among New Testament authors for his interest in individuals whose lives have been touched by God. Thus Luke is attentive to the Holy Spirit and perceptive with people. His striking portraits of individuals who encountered God provide tangible access to that mysterious meeting of God and man which comprises the spiritual life.

Luke highlights Mary of Nazareth for responding appropriately to her encounter with God. In Luke 1:26-56, the combined stories of the Annunciation of Jesus’ birth and the visit of Mary and Elizabeth serve to depict faith as the dynamic interaction between divine initiative and human response. A very brief consideration of this passage will reveal certain themes which inform our conclusions regarding biblical spirituality.

LUKE 1:26-39: THE ANNUNCIATION

The interplay between God’s initiative and Mary’s response becomes evident in the following outline, which is based on a structural analysis of the Greek text:

1. 1:26-28 The Angel Gabriel’s Appearance to Mary
   A. 1:26-27 Introduction
   B. 1:28 Initial Greeting of Gabriel
   2. 1:29 Mary’s Alarm
   3. 1:30-33 The Angel’s Announcement
      A. 1:30 Assurance of Mary’s Grace with God
      B. 1:31 Announcement of Jesus’ Birth
      C. 1:32-33 Adumbration of Jesus’ Person and Ministry
   4. 1:34 Mary’s Astonishment
   5. 1:35-37 The Angel’s Answer
      A. 1:35 A Divine Conception
      B. 1:36 A Sign from Elizabeth
      C. 1:37 A God of All Possibilities
   6. 1:38 Mary’s Acquiescence

Given this profound dialogue between divine messenger and human recipient, it is not surprising that the Annunciation has captivated the hearts and imaginations of believers in every generation since God sent Gabriel to a young Jewish girl. Behind the simple story, however, lies the ineffable truth of an event which has forever altered history. Luke’s purpose in recording the Annunciation may be summarized under two general headings.

First and foremost, the Annunciation is clearly about Christ. Through a careful development of parallelism between John the Baptist and Jesus, Luke reveals the identity and role of the Christ-child. Although the event is shrouded in mystery, the narrative makes it abundantly evident that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah (Lk 1:32) and the Son of God (Lk 1:35). As the Son of David, Jesus is proclaimed to be the fulfillment of pre-Christian messianic expectations. Yet according to the second part of the angelic announcement, Jesus is not only the Son of God in a messianic sense, he is the Son of God by virtue of his Spirit conception.

If the Annunciation is primarily about Christ, it is also secondarily about Mary. Just as Jesus comes from God, so he also comes from humanity. In highlighting this profound truth, Luke very consciously portrays Mary of Nazareth as God’s “highly favored” one who is chosen for the supreme honor of bearing the Messiah. While Mary is not selected primarily on the basis of her own personal piety, she is singled out for her appropriate response to God’s grace. Her attentive reception of the divine word and humble acquiescence to it distinguish her, in Luke’s estimation, as an exemplary believer. Luke’s impression of Mary, based on the Annunciation account, is therefore summarized as follows:

He is voicing a Christian intuition that the virginal conception of Jesus must have constituted for Mary the beginning of her confrontation with the mysterious plan of God embodied in the person of her son. In Jesus’ lifetime and after the resurrection, according to Lucan tradition, Mary responded to that confrontation as a true disciple obedient to the word of God; and Luke assures us that her initial confrontation was also that of an ideal disciple. From the first moment that the grace
of God (the charis or ‘favor’ of 1:30) was proclaimed, it began to attract disciples. It is in this sense that Luke has learned from Mary as a ‘minister of the word’ (1:2), the first Christian disciple.7

So at the heart of the Annunciation lies the origins of Jesus the Messiah as the divine Son of God and the human son of Mary. A few theological implications are therefore relevant to our overall inquiry regarding biblical spirituality. Most importantly, Luke emphasizes from beginning to end that God has taken the initiative in the miraculous conception of Jesus. As Charles Talbert expresses it, “Mary was not out looking for God, offering her body to be used in some great redemptive enterprise. Rather ‘the angel Gabriel was sent from God ... to a virgin’ (1:26-27); And he came to her, and said’ (1:28).”8

The divine initiative finds its outworking in different ways. First, Luke stresses the fact that God’s redemptive acts take place within a history of salvation. Hence the virgin is engaged to a man “of the house of David” (1:27), so that God’s “inbreaking” takes shape in a context of messianic expectation. Not only the Davidic lineage but all of the allusions to the Old Testament reflect God’s continuing faithfulness to his covenant people. Thus for those who have eyes to see, Luke provides plentiful evidence for how this event stands in line with God’s former workings throughout biblical history.

At the same time, however, God’s initiative is expressed in new ways that are entirely unprecedented. He sends his angel to Nazareth, an insignificant village that finds no mention in the Old Testament, the Talmud, the Midrash, or Josephus.9 Gabriel is not sent to Jerusalem, the religious center of the Jews, but to a town in Galilee, the region of the Gentiles. Moreover he appears not to a king, nor to a religious leader, but to an adolescent village girl. He then honors this young woman Mary with the same address, that of “favored one,” which has previously been extended by God only in reference to Noah and Moses, two of the foundational covenant figures of the Old Testament.10 As if this in itself is not enough, God crowns his unparalleled creativity with the announcement of the virgin conception of his own Son through the Holy Spirit.

Mary’s role in the virgin conception reflects another crucial consideration regarding God’s initiative, namely, that he works through human instrumentality. For he deigns to direct his saving purpose through Mary, saying, “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus” (Lk 1:31). Her willing consent to become God’s instrument is thus conveyed within the context of God’s prior grace being granted to her. This mysterious interplay between divine initiative and human compliance is effectively articulated by Fitzmyer, who writes regarding the Annunciation:

The scene ends with the Lucan portrayal of Mary as an example of how God can make out of human nothingness an exalted instrument. A mere Jewish virgin, expecting to be married to her fiancé Joseph, finds her role reversed. Whereas she and her husband-to-be are unrecognized individuals in the Period of Israel, she has become kecharitomene, ‘the favored one’ (1:28), graced by God’s election and called to be the mother of the Davidic Messiah and the Son of God. The reversal of roles, announced by the heavenly messenger, elicits from her a cooperative response: She is ‘the handmaid of the Lord,’ the servant of Yahweh, his obedient, fully responsive instrument in the birth and destiny of the child who is to bring salvation, forgiveness of sins, and peace to humanity in a new way. Thus God, the lord of history, manifests his choice of an instrument to realize his plan of salvation, and Mary’s fiat becomes the expression of her willing acceptance in that realization and of her cooperation with divine grace.11

Luke’s portrayal of Mary as an exemplary disciple becomes further intensified throughout the next episode, to which we now turn.

LUKE 1:39-56: MARY’S VISIT WITH ELIZABETH; THE MAGNIFICAT

As above, only an outline of the passage and a brief presentation of the most relevant observations for our purposes will follow.

1. 1:39-40 Mary’s Journey to Greet Elizabeth
2. 1:41-45 Elizabeth’s Response: Prophetic Ecstasy
   A. 1:41a The Prophetic Witness of the Unborn John
   B. 1:41b-44 The Prophetic Witness of Elizabeth
   C. 1:45 The Proclamation of Beatitude
3. 1:46-55 Mary’s Response: Prophetic Song, The Magnificat (“My soul magnifies the Lord”)
   A. 1:46b-47 The Manifesto of Praise
   B. 1:48-53 The Motives for Praise
      a. 1:48-49a God’s Action on Behalf of Mary
      b. 1:49b-50 God’s Covenantal Character
      c. 1:51-53 God’s Action on Behalf of Israel
   C. 1:54-55 The Memory of God’s Promise
4. 1:56 Mary’s Return

It is not immediately evident that a simple exchange between two women could carry such enormous theological significance. Yet this remarkable rendezvous stands not only at the intersection of Luke’s parallel birth stories of John and Jesus, but at the critical juncture of the old and new
covenants, of God's transcendence and immanence, of time and eternity.

Artistically, the passage serves to draw together the otherwise independent birth accounts of John the Baptist and Jesus. The main characters converge in this crucial encounter, in which the unborn John leaps for joy in prophetic witness to Jesus' presence and both women burst with exhalation at what God is doing. When placed alongside the Annunciation account, a circle of blessing and praise flows between heaven and earth: Gabriel blesses Mary, Mary greets Elizabeth, Elizabeth blesses Mary, and Mary in turn rejoices in God. Within this circle of praise, central truths emerge concerning Jesus and Mary of Nazareth which have profound implications for biblical spirituality.

Once again, the main significance of the passage is about Christ, though the revelation of Jesus and the human response are closely intertwined. If Gabriel's Annunciation introduced the identity and role of the Christ-child, the visit of the two women serves to confirm his prophetic message concerning their respective pregnancies. Both miraculous conceptions are cause for rejoicing, yet Mary's child is clearly pre-eminent. The unborn Jesus receives homage from John's fetal jump, which foreshadows their future relationship of redemption. Yet the risk is recompensed with her reverent, appropriate measure of respect. As Raymond Brown observes concerning the Magnificat,

Ultimately it is about God. ... Mary herself, the lowly, the hungry, Israel his chosen servant, all appear in the song merely as the objects of his grace, as witness to what God delights to do for those who honour him.

... She remains a 'lowly servant-girl', despite the congratulations of all generations, precisely because it is as such that she is the appropriate channel for God's salvation to his people.13

Consequently, it is incumbent upon the audience to understand and appreciate Mary's blessedness as Luke presents it: She receives God's grace in the unprecedented miracle of the divine conception, and she responds appropriately with reverent obedience and worship. Her fortunate state is suitably expressed as follows:

The grounds of the blessing pronounced upon Mary are not performance but acceptance. Mary is blessed because she is a person of faith. She is praised not because of any special quality in her but because of her trust in the action of God. ... The blessing exalts Mary as exemplar of all who accept the action of God in the gift of Jesus. ... Mary is not separated from the rest of humanity by her faith, but by being the woman through whose body the humanity of God comes to a sinful world, she is one with humanity.14

Thus Mary is definitely upheld as being blessed on account of her faith, yet she is declared “most blessed” on account of her unique privilege of bearing the Christ-child (Lk 1:42).

WOMEN GOD HONORS

Luke is renowned for his sensitivity in highlighting the role of women in the life of Christ and in the life of the early Church. The infancy narratives are particularly significant in this regard, for unlike Matthew, Luke focuses on Mary's experience in the birth of Christ. Although the
respective roles of Joseph and Zechariah are acknowledged in Luke's account, it is the women who hold center stage as the drama unfolds. In these initial scenes of the Gospel, a striking contrast is developed between a pious old man chastened for not believing and a virtuous young virgin commended for believing. The contrast is intensified in one of the closing scenes of the Gospel, when once again at the resurrection, women celebrate with witness and men are reluctant to believe (Lk 24:9-11). While "gender wars" have no place in the gospel of Christ, Luke nonetheless invites men and women to marvel at the remarkable faith of these women.

For, from the conception of Jesus to his resurrection, women have dared to believe the impossible. In so doing, they have been blessed in themselves, and they have been a source of blessing to all humanity. Hence they rightfully receive the following expression of honor:

As women ministered in the beginnings of the original exodus, in birthing, preserving, and nurturing the child Moses (Ex 1:15f.), so Elizabeth and Mary minister at the outset of the second exodus (Lk 9:31) in birthing, preserving, and nurturing the children whose destinies will mean, despite beheading and even through crucifixion, the dawn of a genuinely new age. 

ELEMENTS OF BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY EXHIBITED BY MARY

Our quest for a deeper understanding of biblical spirituality began by establishing the author of Luke-Acts as an authoritative and trustworthy guide. His purpose in writing the Gospel is set forth succinctly as follows: "... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Lk 1:4). What is striking to note for the present purpose is how God has disclosed himself in the events which Luke-Acts records. For God reveals himself primarily in story form. As Richard Niebuhr observes,

The preaching of the early Christian Church was not an argument for the existence of God nor an admonition to follow the dictates of some common human conscience, unhistorical and super-social in character. It was primarily a simple recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ and a confession of what had happened to the community of disciples.

So God comes not with a particular philosophy or a list of moral imperatives, but with a story to live and tell and one in which God desires our participation. That story finds its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God-in-Person who performs and perfects God's saving purposes for humanity.

If story is the primary way in which God has revealed himself to us, it is also the primary way in which we grow as persons. The recent recovery of narrative across scholarly disciplines has also left its imprint on the contemporary understanding and practice of therapy. The fundamental assumption is that we live our lives in story form, selecting and structuring our experiences as a drama which unfolds before us. Building on the theories of Michael Foucault, two therapists explain their premise for the central role of narrative in counselling as follows:

In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. Specific experiences of events of the past and present, and those that are predicted to occur in the future, must be connected in a linear sequence to develop this account. This account can be referred to as a story or self-narrative (see Gergen & Gergen, 1984). The success of this storying of experience provides persons with a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives, and this is relied upon for the ordering of daily lives and for the interpretation of further experiences. Since all stories have a beginning (or a history), a middle (or a present), and an ending (or a future), then the interpretation of current events is as future-shaped as it is past-determined.

So God reveals himself to us in narrative form, and our lives take shape and meaning in narrative form. Therefore biblical spirituality, put most simply, involves the intertwining of God's story and our personal story. Biblical spirituality entails reverent attentiveness to God's story and ready acquiescence with our life stories. Just as the Christian faith finds its fundamental expression not in propositional truth but in personal relationship, so biblical spirituality is not to be defined in pedantic argument but in the ardent, living color of real life. The God beyond history enters our history to tell us about himself, and to allow our destinies to be shaped by his purposes. Our lives are therefore fashioned according to our interaction with the divine Creator, with all the possibilities inherent in God's limitless creativity. Thus the starting point for a biblical view of spirituality lies in God's revelation of himself and his invitation for us to participate freely in the unfolding drama of creation and salvation.

In Mary of Nazareth, then, we identify one who has played a critical role in the story of salvation, and one who epitomizes a life of compliance with divine purposes. We readily identify with her in her humanity, and therefore seek to glean insights from her fruitful life of faith which will assist us in our own spiritual journey. Indeed, Mary's very humanity makes her all the more accessible and commendable as a role model of one who truly wrestled with the claims of Jesus.

No other person in history has experienced "the agony and the ecstasy" in relationship with Jesus as did Mary of Nazareth. No one else on earth shared the depth of intimacy she knew with Jesus in his mysterious conception, lowly birth, unpretentious childhood, turbulent ministry, gruesome death and astonishing resurrection. While being
fully human, with all the frailty and pain and confusion that entails, she nonetheless remained faithful to her Son from beginning to end. There may have been times of misunderstanding along the way (e.g. Lk 2:50; Mk 3:20-21), as there were with every other human disciple—Peter and the Apostle Paul, James and John, Nicodemus, the woman at the well. Yet the last glimpse of Mary is most significant: She is with Jesus’ closest disciples, in the upper room, “constantly at prayer” (Acts 1:14). Once again she is open and obedient to God, just as she first appeared in the Annunciation scene. Joseph Fitzmyer therefore summarizes her significance as follows:

As he [Jesus] was chosen to be his Father’s choice instrument of human salvation, so Mary has been shown favor, being chosen to be this Son’s mother. Yet she is not only ‘the mother of the Lord’ (1:43), but the one first depicted as a ‘believer,’ with all the doubts and anguish that that relationship to him will always entail.19

CHARACTERISTICS OF BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY THAT MARY EXEMPLIFIES

1. Recognition of God’s Gracious Working Throughout History

The Judeo-Christian tradition is distinguished among the world’s faiths and philosophies for its bold belief that God is present in human history. However turbulent her history, Israel stubbornly insisted that God is sovereign in ruling the world through historical events. Indeed, it was this belief which most fundamentally shaped Israel’s national identity and history, and which distinguished her from her Ancient Near Eastern neighbors. As Brevard Childs points out, “This concept of the significance of the historical event has no parallels in primitive societies.”20 Israel alone among the nations knew her God through his gracious revelation in salvation history.

For this reason, Childs goes on to explain, “Memory plays a central role in making Israel constantly aware of the nature of God’s benevolent acts as well as of her own covenantal pledge.”21 For God to remember Israel means to act towards her on the basis of his covenant promise, as the Magnificat celebrates. Childs then makes an important observation which is vital to our consideration of biblical spirituality: He notes that “the object of God’s memory cannot consistently be confined to the past. The great acts of the covenant continue to meet Israel in her present situation.”22 Hence Psalm 111 speaks of God’s wonderful deeds in the past, and then declares that “he remembers his covenant forever” (v. 5; cf. Ps 105:8). Likewise Psalm 103 recounts the great acts of God during the time of Moses (v. 7), and then moves to the contemporary situation of Israel’s weakness (v. 14). On this basis, Childs concludes, “God’s memory encompasses his entire relationship with his people. His memory includes both the great deeds of the past as well as his continued concern for his people in the future.”23

Just as God remembers Israel, so Israel is called to remember God. A theology of remembrance developed, based on the frequent appeal in Deuteronomy to “remember how the Lord your God led you all the way” (Dt 8:2). The purpose of remembrance is set forth clearly in the preceding verse: Israel is called carefully to follow every command from God so that she might live and prosper in the promised land. Thus the call to obedience is integrally related to Israel’s historical memory. Childs explains that:

Present Israel stands in an analogous situation with the people of the Exodus. Israel is still being tested. The covenant history of Yahweh with his people continues. The role of Israel’s memory here is not to relive the past, because much of what is remembered is painful, but to emphasize obedience in the future. Memory serves to link the present commandments as events with the covenant history of the past.24

Therefore, as God’s plan for Israel unfolds, historical memory serves to establish a continuity between each new generation and the decisive events of the past. For example, Israel observes the Sabbath not merely as psychological recollection of God’s redemptive acts, but rather as a participation again in the Exodus event. Memory thereby functions as an actualization of the formative event in her history, so that the rest of the Sabbath is a sign of the continuing relationship of Yahweh to his people.25 Not only the Sabbath, but every day and especially the Passover offered the opportunity for later generations to participate in God’s redemptive history. Emil Fackenheim, one of Canada’s foremost Jewish thinkers, explains as follows:

These future generations, on their part, do not, like the maidservants at the Red Sea, see the presence of God. But to this day they recall twice daily in their prayers the natural-historical event through which that presence was once manifest, and the Passover Seder is wholly dedicated to it....

... Thus the pious Jew remembering the Exodus and the salvation at the Red Sea does not call to mind events now dead and gone. He reenacts these events as a present reality: only thus is he assured that the past saving God saves still, and that He will finally bring ultimate salvation.26

Memory as an act of actualization does not occur automatically, but only as Israel responds faithfully to the claims of the covenant. The corollary to Israel remembering God and prospering (Dt 8:18) is the nation forgetting him and worshipping other gods and consequently being destroyed (Dt 8:19). The call for Israel’s remembrance of Yahweh is therefore one and the same with the call for her covenant obedience. Over and over the psalmists inspire and the prophets admonish the people to “remember ... that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord” (Mic 6:2). Hence Childs provides the following summary:

The act of remembering serves to actualize the past for a generation removed in time from those former events in

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order that they themselves can have an intimate encounter with the great acts of redemption. Remembrance equals participation. The present rupture in relationship of Yahweh with his people stems from Israel’s failure to understand the saving acts (emphasis mine).

So Israel’s redemptive history continues as past events are recalled and relived through memory as an act of actualization. With the challenges of each new generation, Israel was to struggle intensely to interpret her present experiences in light of her past history. And struggle it was, for as Childs concludes from his comprehensive word study, “The vocabulary used to describe the wrestling process indicates the tremendous internalization which has transpired. To remember is to grasp after, to meditate upon, indeed, to pray to God.”

It is precisely this aspect of theological remembrance which Mary of Nazareth exemplifies in the Annunciation and the Magnificat. She receives the news from Gabriel concerning the divine conception in terms with which she can readily identify. The Annunciation itself by an angelic messenger recalls miraculous births to barren matriarchs of her faith. She is told her child will be given the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will have no end. The Holy Spirit will come upon her. The power of the Most High will overshadow her. A sign is given to her. Nothing is impossible with God. With staccato force, each note of Gabriel’s proclamation rings with allusions to God’s previous action in Israel’s history. Because Mary is steeped in Old Testament history, she is prepared to receive even such cryptic revelation concerning her child’s identity and mission.

Not only is Mary ready to receive such remarkable news, but she is also ready to respond adequately to it. Her recognition of God’s gracious working throughout history allows her to absorb the startling reality of her own blessedness, and then to celebrate it in the context of God’s continued redemption on Israel’s behalf. Her hymn of praise reflects how deeply God’s mighty deeds have penetrated her soul and shaped her worldview. Like the patriarchs, priests and psalmists before her, she hail’s God’s covenantal character. Like Hannah and the Old Testament historians, she recognizes God’s action on behalf of Israel and the dramatic reversals he accomplishes on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. And like the faithful remnant she represents, she recalls God’s covenantal promise to Abraham as the basis for her hope for the future. She is fully aware that her present experience is not an isolated incident, but part of the narrative flow of God’s remembrance of Israel. Mary therefore exemplifies the appreciation of covenantal history which enhances biblical faith.

The equivalent challenge for us today is voiced by Hugó Zorriña as follows:

And we would do well to keep in mind the fact that the whole poem [the Magnificat] is wrapped in remembered promises. God, the central protagonist, acts sovereignly in Mary because he remembers that his covenant is forever (Is 51:1-2). That is to say, there is a temporal continuity of God’s merciful actions on behalf of those who fear him—past (promise), present (remember), and future (fulfillment). The constant praise by Mary and the recognition of his blessings for future generations rests in the remembrance, in the generational memory of the oppressed who, like Mary, trust in the mighty arm of God.

It is especially noteworthy that the Magnificat is no objective recital of historic events. Instead, Mary exemplifies that remembrance of God which is the actualization of God’s covenantal history. She is no bystander, observing the course of Israel’s progression as though overlooking a river which swirls and rushes by rather she steps into the flow of events and is swept into the swift current of God’s redemptive purposes. In doing so, Mary demonstrates for us how we too can enter God’s continuing drama of salvation. For we are likewise invited to look back at what God has done for our great-grandparents by faith, and to open our lives to all the possibilities inherent in this adventure of faith. God beckons us to do so through the words of the prophet Isaiah:

‘Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many’ (Is 51:1-2)

This is precisely what Mary has done, and what her example encourages us to do. As Gail O’Day points out,

In the Magnificat, Mary sings of her present and future in the song and images that form the memory of her people: Abraham and Sarah, the Exodus, David. We, too, are called to call our present and future into being with the songs and images that place us in continuity with our past and our memory. In singing these songs, we continue to announce to the world that this God is the determinative one.

So Mary’s awareness of salvation history allows her to become a ready, willing participant in the continued unfolding of that history.

Richard Niebuhr addresses the contemporary church with the same need for the Christian faith to remain grounded in historical revelation. Against those philosophers who seek to loosen faith from its moorings in history, he insists that God is not only the God of abstract thought, but “He is always the God of history, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or the Father of Jesus Christ.” Christianity cannot escape its partnership in history, and any attempt to
circumvent our historical situation inevitably leads to the dangers voiced as follows:

We may be tempted, with the individualists of all time, to seek a direct path to what we mean through inner religious experience. Can we not say that when we speak of God and revelation we mean events which occur in the privacy of our personal, inner life or what we feel to be basic in our moral consciousness? Yet once more we discover that visions, numinous feelings, senses of reality, knowledge of duty and worth may be interpreted in many ways. We cannot speak of inner light at all, save in ejaculations signifying nothing to other men, unless we define its character in social terms, that is in terms which come out of our history.  

Finally, Mary’s song illustrates another important aspect of biblical spirituality as it relates to God’s redemptive history. It has been pointed out, but must be emphasized, that Mary celebrates her own blessedness in the context of God’s remembrance of her people Israel. She enters the narrative stream of salvation as a personal prerogative as well as a national heritage. She thereby manifests both the individual and corporate dimensions of faith, described as follows:  

Like Miriam and Hannah, Mary begins on a note of praise and thanksgiving. Her opening words are not the occasion for privatistic reflection about herself and her subjective experience of God. Instead, her experience of God is understood and interpreted in terms of God’s faithful actions throughout history. Mary’s experience is part of the larger experience of Israel’s knowledge of God. Her God is known in the specifics of human existence and experience, even in the specificity of the low estate of a servant.  

Unmistakably, Mary knows God personally; yet only in the framework of Israel’s covenant history does she extol the God of her salvation. It is this corporate identity and community life which is often sadly lacking in the West, where individualism has dominated since Enlightenment times. Hence it is all the more essential for Western Christians to grasp and to grow in the communal aspects of biblical spirituality. Eugene Peterson voices the need in this way:  

The gospel is never for individuals but always for a people. Sin fragments us, separates us, and sentences us to solitary confinement. Gospel restores us, unites us, and sets us in community. The life of faith revealed and nurtured in the biblical narrative is highly personal but never merely individual: always there is a family, a tribe, a nation—church.  

So once again, Mary of Nazareth shows us central components of biblical faith. Her example thus serves as a gentle but strong corrective to certain misguided expressions of modern faith.  

Biblical spirituality, therefore, calls for the recognition that God is present and active in human history, pre-eminently in the earthly and ongoing ministry of the Risen Christ. It insists that God remembers his people, thereby acting towards them according to his redemptive purposes. And it invites his people to remember him, or to participate personally in the narrative flow of salvation history. Only as we internalize the events of historical revelation and realize God’s work in our own lives will we discover the intimate knowledge of God which Mary evidences. And only as we balance the personal and corporate dimensions of our faith will we enter into the wholeness of God’s blessing which she celebrates.

2. Receptivity to God’s Grace as Manifested in One’s Own Life  

The biblical record begins with the most important words ever written: “In the beginning God ...” (Gen 1:1). Out of the tohu vebohu, the “emptiness and void,” God created. Out of the chaos, God brought order. Out of the darkness, God brought light. Out of the dust of the earth, God created humankind. From the very inception of the universe, it is God who creates, God who establishes, God who calls forth order and life and beauty and meaning. And it is God who initiates relationship with the human creatures God has hand-crafted in his own image and to whom God has imparted his own life-breath.  

When the intimacy of that relationship is violated by human disobedience, God still comes to Adam and Eve with the most important question ever asked: “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9). Even when the image of God is “rolled in the dust” as a consequence of the Fall, God relentlessly pursues his most prized creatures and woos them back into relationship with himself. The remainder of biblical history is essentially the story of human response to God’s initial question. Where humans respond to God’s initiative, simply affirming “Here I am” in transparency and trust, there is opportunity for God to re-create, to redeem and to bless. Where humans resort to hiding from God, there is deterioration back into the tohu vebohu, the dark chaos and cold emptiness of sin.  

The startling reality in all of this is that God creates with a question mark. Every human life is open-ended, with the outcome dependent upon human choice. Every time God comes to a human, as is his habit, he risks the refusal of his love and the violation of relationship. Given the gift of our human freedom, then, it cannot be taken for granted what would happen when Gabriel advanced upon a Galilean bride-to-be. Our deep familiarity with the story must not detract from the open-ended nature of Mary’s call. For like every other human in history whom God approaches, Mary of Nazareth could either hide like Adam, remain hard-hearted like Pharaoh, or heed God’s message like Isaiah and reply, “Here I am.” Her choice forever altered human history and earned her unrivalled respect. Thus her words remain the epitome of trusting acquiescence to God’s purposes: “I am the Lord’s servant... May it be to me as you have said” (Lk 1:38).  

The fact that Mary willingly complied with Gabriel’s announcement concerning the divine conception reveals that
she not only recognized God’s work throughout history, but she was also receptive to God’s gracious intervention in her own life. Biblical spirituality necessarily involves both facets, for apart from the intersection of God’s eternal purpose in the temporality of our own existence, faith remains at best a brilliant constellation in dead space beyond the orbit of our lives. No matter how bright and alluring the starlight, it is only a mere reflection of true light from aeons ago and cannot penetrate our present lives to provide the sustenance we need. In contrast, when the True Light shines into the dark soil of our lives and we receive the warmth of its gentle rays, then it is faith germinated within us. As Jesus pointedly illustrates in his Parable of the Sower, the initiative for a faith relationship rests with God who graciously disperses his word as a sower casts seed. Yet faith cannot come to fruition unless it finds fertile conditions within our lives.

A young girl from Galilee provides an exquisite portrait of that mysterious process of spiritual germination. Silently and imperceptibly as a mountain wild flower unfurls delicate petals into the surrounding snow, so Mary’s heart warms to the gentle radiance of Love-light from afar. Passive recipient she is, as traditionally represented; nonetheless, she is also an active instrument in reaching out to embrace the Source of her new life-calling. Her receptivity allows God’s initiative to find fertile ground, yet her active assent allows tender faith to flourish in the sudden burst of God-light which comes with Gabriel’s announcement.

Consequently, Mary grows into a graphic example of biblical spirituality which incorporates divine initiative and human instrumentality. The potential miracle of the divine conception becomes realized through her compliance with God’s purpose. In the same way, the recurring miracles of our spiritual growth are only possible as we submit to God’s purpose. In the same way, the recurring miracles of our spiritual growth are only possible as we submit to God’s purpose. Otto Piper explains the interplay between the divine and the human as follows:

Just as in the Virgin Birth the divine feat would not have succeeded except for the assent given to it by Mary and Joseph in acts of faith, so it is with the new birth. Divine and human activity do not lie on the same level, for it is God who takes the initiative. Apart from it no miracle would happen. But in order to become a historical event, the divine purpose needs human beings who are prepared in a representative way to offer themselves to God as instruments. By means of faith, man is enabled to become God’s fellow worker.

Inherent in the divine initiative is the underlying reality of divine grace. By God’s grace, the Spirit hovered over the waters bringing creation out of chaos (Gen 1:2). By God’s grace, the Spirit hovered over Mary bringing God-life to the virgin void within her (Lk 1:35). And by God’s grace, the same Spirit hovers over the broken fragments of our lives and redeems us so we cry out “Abba, Father” in a new relationship of intimacy (Rom 8:15). Through Mary’s readiness to be instrumental in God’s redemption, we now receive God’s grace in an unprecedented manner. As Beardsley points out,

The virginal conception shows not only the initiative of God in the work of salvation; it also shows its completely gratuitous nature. ... The Incarnation was a complete gift from God. Neither cosmos with its hoarded treasure of riches nor mankind with its creative genius and technical prowess can lay claim to Jesus or conjure him up from its own resources. He comes as gift or he does not come at all.

From his miraculous conception through his miraculous resurrection, Jesus’ entire earthly ministry was a gift of divine grace. Hence the lives of his followers are likewise enveloped in God’s grace, precluding any human merit.

In her receptivity to God’s gracious work in her own life, Mary reveals two truths that are of great importance to our understanding of biblical spirituality. First, she was prepared to receive God in expected ways. As noted above, her grounding in biblical history allowed her to assess and exult in Gabriel’s news according to covenant theology and messianic expectation. She was able to recognize God’s faithfulness because she was well acquainted with God’s ways. What greater incentive is there for us to cry out to God, like Moses, “Teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you” (Ex 33:13)? And what better reason to keep company with Jesus, who says, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (Jn 14:7)? So Mary reminds us that there is no substitute for becoming increasingly acquainted with God in the ways God has always revealed himself: through the witness of creation, through biblical revelation and ultimately the life of Jesus, through his people of yesterday and today, and through a lifetime friendship of prayer. As we learn more and more to discern God’s ways, we become increasingly receptive to God’s gracious work within us.

If Mary shows us how to anticipate God’s work in expected ways, she also shows us how to remain open to him acting in unexpected ways. There was no precedent for God to announce his presence in Nazareth, a town of the Gentiles, and certainly not to address an ordinary Jewish girl as being highly favored. Nor was there any inkling whatsoever that God would surprise his people with the gift of his own Son, a God-man born of a virgin. Again there is need to strip away the layers of jaded familiarity with bathrobe-clad shepherds in plastic-doll pageants, and to be filled anew with a sense of absolute astonishment at God’s revelation to Mary.

How are we to grow in such receptivity to God? Perhaps most widely recognized is Mary’s genuine humility, which is a fundamental prerequisite for biblical faith. It has been emphasized that her humility went beyond a mere personality trait to incorporating the objective condition and subjective attitude of reliance upon God. She is therefore a prime example of what the Psalmist celebrates, “For the
Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation” (Ps 149:4). She also typifies God’s promise to exalt the humble. In view of her authentic lowliness before God, she rightly receives the following recognition:

Mary’s abandonment to the divine good-pleasure, her openness to the divine will, her unquestioning acceptance of the divine invitations, mark her as a lowly maid, as one of the ‘anawim, one of those who are poor in spirit, whom her Son would one day declare blessed and to whom He would promise the kingdom of H is love.

Since the same biblical requisite holds true for us, we would do well to heed Mary’s example and open ourselves in humility before God. For as Susan Muto reminds us,

Humility opens our inner ears. It enables us to acknowledge the truth of who we are and who God is. Only the humble can understand the deep resonance of God’s voice in the whole of creation. Humility withstands any arrogant tendency to reduce the world to our purposes. When we live in humble presence, God may reveal to us while we read insights that transcend human expectations. Humility makes possible this playful interchange between us and God that is full of surprises.

Another aspect of Mary’s silence is her characteristically contemplative stance toward God and life. Among the relatively few New Testament references to her, Luke mentions twice that she “treasured” and “pondered” the events in her heart (Lk 2:19,51). She is quietly attentive to God and to what he is doing in her midst. In like manner, we are to cultivate such reverent attentiveness if we desire to perceive God’s presence in our midst. Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenges Christians today, saying, “Just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is meditation.”

Biblical teaching makes no careful distinction between meditation and contemplation, yet spiritual theology over the centuries has sometimes distinguished them in this way:

While meditation focuses primarily on a rumination upon Scripture, God, his works, the creation, and other significant devotional writings, contemplation consists in resting in the loving awareness of God and is not usually attached to any particular thought or Scripture passage.

Mary combines both aspects in single-hearted worship and watchfulness. She therefore awakens us to biblical spirituality, or that loving attentiveness to God’s word and to his witness all around and within us. In order to cultivate this quality, we would do well to take note of Susan Muto’s reminder that “The meditative stance is not a matter of imposing our thoughts on reality but of attending in quiet vigilance, in gentle reverence, to what is there. Listening reminds us that spiritual formation is first of all a question of receptivity.”

If Mary models the contemplative life, she no less manifests the active life. Contrary to traditional images of her in wrinkleless robes and cloistered bliss, Mary shows us what it is to be receptive to God in the ordinariiness of our everyday affairs. Tradition has it that Gabriel came to her as she drew water at the well. After the Annunciation, she promptly set off to visit Elizabeth. Before long, she would face more arduous journeys—first to Bethlehem, then to Jerusalem, later to Egypt, later still back to Nazareth where her days would be filled with the domestic duties obligatory upon any Jewish mother. Despite all the activity, she attends to God and stands ready for him to intervene in her life. Gretchen Gaebelien H ull observes, “She was open to being interrupted, not only having her day interrupted, but her whole life forever changed in this most startling way.” So midst the hustle and bustle of life, she remains open and pliable to the prompting of her God. Henri Nouwen also encourages us to discover God in the ordinary events of daily life, saying,

The spiritual life is not a life before, after, or beyond our everyday existence. No, the spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now. Therefore we need to begin with a careful look at the way we think, speak, feel, and act from hour to hour, day to day, week to week, and year to year, in order to become more fully aware of our hunger for the Spirit.

In the ongoing rhythms of faith, there is the inherent tension between the active and contemplative life which Jesus himself addresses in his encounter with Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42). Hence it is significant that Mary is apparently able to hold the two aspects of biblical spirituality in proper balance. She thereby demonstrates the “living paradox” which Parker Palmer advocates as follows:

Rather than speak of contemplation and action, we might speak of contemplation-and-action, letting the hyphens suggest what our language obscures: that the one cannot exist without the other. When we fail to hold the paradox together, when we abandon the creative tension between the two, then both ends fly apart into madness. That is what often happens to contemplation-and-action in our culture of either/or. Action flies off into frenzy—a frantic and even violent effort to impose one’s will on the world, or at least to survive against the odds. Contemplation flies off into escapism—a flight from the world into a realm of false bliss.

Biblical spirituality, then, requires receptivity to God manifesting his presence in one’s own life. It responds to God’s gracious initiative in asking us, “Where are you?” with a simple, trusting openness that replies, “Here I am.” It means carefully cultivating the soil of our lives in preparation for the God-light to penetrate and bring dormant faith to wakeful attentiveness. Vigilant availability will allow for God to act in both expected and unexpected ways, not presuming the possible but daring to believe the God of the impossible. Receptivity may be fostered through genuine humility and a reflective stance which encompasses both the active and contemplative life.
Mary’s reaction to her extraordinary experience of God radically breaking into human history is most significant. Having shown recognition of God’s gracious work throughout history and receptivity to it in her own life, she also manifests the rightful response of willing, joyful participation in God’s redemptive purposes. Many aspects of her exemplary response to God have already been set forth thus far. However, the various dimensions may be summarized as wonder, worship, and witness.

Of the four Gospel writers, Luke in particular stresses the sense of wonder with which people responded to Jesus’ ministry in word and deed. Preceding Jesus’ public ministry, the infancy narratives record intense awe on the part of those who witnessed the events surrounding his birth. The entire story is wrapped in mystery which causes men and women to marvel. And Mary herself is foremost among those who stand amazed at what God is accomplishing among them. She is deeply aware of her own wonderful blessedness, as well as that of her people in being remembered by their covenant-keeping God. Yet she is not oblivious to the oppression around her, as though expecting some immediate escape from it. Rather the source of her wonder becomes articulated in the Magnificat as she recognizes God’s work in the dramatic reversal of what was apparent and what was actual, or of things as they were and things as they would be. Robert Tannehill observes,

This sense of wonder is conveyed by the tensions in Mary’s poem. There is tension between what people are by human standards and what God makes them through the messiah Jesus. Mary is a woman of humble state; yet God has done great things for her. God acts in the same way for the humble and hungry in society, while putting down the mighty and rich. It is this reversal of the ordinary which produces the sense of wonder.

Biblical spirituality, then, responds to God with a deep sense of wonder at who God is and how God works within and around us. Biblical spirituality recognizes our lowly state, and marvels at how God can transform ourselves and our human condition according to his purposes. Even when there is a disturbing dissonance in our anticipation of God’s work and the apparent conditions around us, biblical faith apprehends the “already and the not yet” of God’s eschatological reversal. Tannehill wisely notes,

Mary did not make her statements about God on the basis of a survey of political and economic developments. She was responding to signs, events with special meaning as revelations of a purpose of God only partially fulfilled and still hidden from the world. . . .

Like Mary, we must celebrate God’s salvation in advance on the basis of signs that require faith. . . . If we are to rejoice with Mary, it will probably not be because of what we read in statistical reports of economic trends but because of certain events which, like God’s work with Mary and Elizabeth, can be signs for us. These events, though less than the full salvation for which we hope, reveal to us the God who surprises the world by overturning its expectations and standards.

Wonder spills over into worship, as we acknowledge to God his marvellous ways. Mary’s inner elation bubbles over into ecstatic praise which characterizes God’s people of gratitude. The joy she proclaims is not merely a passing sentiment but a sign of the reality of God’s eschatological inbreaking. On account of Mary’s fitting hymn of worship, Dick France commends her as follows:

We may congratulate her, indeed, on the song itself, for here we see Mary as a prototype of faith in God her Saviour, and so as a recipient of his blessing. It is the greatness of Mary that she knows that she is little and that God is great, and on this we congratulate her. It is through such people that the God of power makes himself known. He is name is holy, and his kindness lasts from one generation to another for those, like Mary, who honour him.

Mary appropriately earns further acclaim from the great reformer Martin Luther: “The tender mother of Christ . . . teaches us with her words and by the example of her experience, how to know, love, and praise God.”

Wonder inspires worship, and together these induce witness. Witness is central to our rightful response to God, for it fulfills the outward dimension of participating in God’s redemptive purposes. God breaks into the disarray of our lives, creating order and granting hope, and then we are to share in God’s work as he seeks to transform the lives of those around us. As a carpenter’s son “helps” his father to cut, plane and sand the boards to build his tree house, so God invites us to “help” in his ongoing work of building up the kingdom of God. As we watch what the Father does around us, we wonder and we worship, but we also join in the ministry of Christ as willing, joyful apprentices. Jesus himself instructed his disciples, saying “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (Jn 14:12).

What is it that Jesus did, which we as his disciples are also called to do? The life of Christ makes it abundantly clear that the Gospel encompasses both the proclamation of God’s word and participation in God’s work. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth and purposely read a quotation from the prophet Isaiah which functioned programmatically for his entire mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Lk 4:18-19).
Jesus later commissioned his disciples “to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Lk 9:2). Witness, therefore, necessarily involves active engagement in both God’s word and God’s work.

Once again, Mary of Nazareth serves to illustrate effective witness to God’s word. In her unique case, she literally received and brought forth the Living Word of God. Although we will never duplicate the physical experience of having God Incarnate reside within us, we still discover a symbolic element in her experience of miraculous conception which corresponds in some mysterious way to the divine life created within us. As God’s Word dwells within us (Col 4:16), the Spirit witnesses to the presence of Christ. For example, even before Mary states anything about her miraculous conception, the Spirit both reveals it to Elizabeth and inspires her to prophesy in response. Mhagama points out,

The mission of God’s word engenders new life in the hearts of the recipients. . . . The Spirit filled Mary, enabling her to conceive in the most unexpected manner; and then puts words into the mouth of Elizabeth that she could not have been able to utter otherwise. When the Spirit takes hold of a person, one cannot resist speaking.51

Furthermore, Mary depicts the way in which God’s word is always on a journey. Just as she received God’s message through Gabriel and carried the Living Word from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to Egypt to Nazareth, so we are to follow Christ’s command to carry his word to the ends of the earth.

In this regard, it must also be noted that God entrusted his most precious word to women. If women were granted the privilege of being the first witnesses to Jesus from his conception through his resurrection, there is no adequate reason to prevent their full freedom in bearing witness to Jesus today.

The necessary complement to proclaiming God’s word is participating in God’s work. Together these comprise sound witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Mary exemplifies such active engagement in God’s saving deeds through her humble obedience to his purposes. As previously stressed, her humility was not simply a personality trait but a decision, a willingness to stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed and to look to God her Savior for deliverance.

Biblical spirituality therefore takes both aspects of humility, the objective condition of lowliness and the subjective reliance upon God, with utmost seriousness. When these are not kept in balanced proportion, biblical witness goes askew. On the one hand, Protestant evangelicism has notoriously erred on the side of spiritualizing Mary’s humility. Her Magnificat is read as though she is “standing on the threshold of the New Testament unaware of the real significance of what she is singing about” and “intoning a hymn for a remote and spiritual future.”52 Those who do not hear the expressed concerns of the lowly and afflicted, who come to her hymn from the vantage point of the powerful and the proud, must be reminded that

Mary’s piety is not ahistoric. She represents all the poor (anawim) who wait for the messianic liberation. We have seen that contextually, structurally, and thematically the song unquestionably breathes liberation as the prophetic dimension of the gospel in Luke. The radical and militant similarities of the Magnificat with the songs of Hannah and of Moses are no mere coincidence.53

Hence Martin Luther gives a sober warning to all who approach the Magnificat: “The mightier you are, the more you must fear.”54 The biblical reality is that God will bring down the mighty, as he did in the Exodus, and exalt the humble. And he will judge us according to our willingness to attend to the needy ones (e.g. Mt 25:31-46). So biblical witness entails participating in God’s habitual care for the poor and oppressed.

On the other hand, Protestant liberalism and certain liberation theologies have notoriously erred on the side of interpreting Mary’s humility primarily in material terms. From this vantage point, her Magnificat “ceases to be a simple cradle song and becomes something more like a revolutionary manifesto.”55 While there is truth to this observation, and it provides a counterbalance to an excessively spiritual interpretation, the crux of the issue concerns the source and power of the revolution. Charles Talbert rightly insists that “in Luke’s understanding God’s social revolution, like the conception of Jesus, is not the perfection of the human by human striving but the result of the divine breaking into history.”56 God’s people are actively to participate in his work of overturning the values of human society and establishing justice for the oppressed. Yet it will be the redemptive action of God and not merely the social action of humanity that will ultimately achieve a just society.

Finally, in addition to her humility, Mary is renowned for her radical obedience to God’s call. Her response to the Annunciation is not merely commendable but actually incumbent upon every Christian, who is likewise called to respond to God, “I am the Lord’s servant . . . May it be to me as you have said” (Lk 1:38). The calling is costly, for as Gail O’Day emphasizes, “Mary is asked to renounce biological, physical, and cultural norms on the basis of nothing more than the word of God. And she does.”57 Yet the same willing compliance with the divine plan is required of God’s people today. For her humility and obedience in responding to God, Mary is well worthy of the honor she receives:

In summary we may say that Luke presents Mary as one who shows us how to respond to the call of the gracious God. Though her vocation was unique and is unrepeatable her response is of the kind that we ought to imitate. We appreciate her as the faithful, obedient disciple, who longs to be filled with the Spirit of God and to do his will.58
In closing, the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims that God has broken into the chaos (tohu vebohu) of our planet's history and he yearns to do so in our personal history. Where there is darkness and void and despair, the Spirit of God hovers, bringing light and meaning and hope. God's ultimate purpose is to restore us into intimate relationship with himself and to free us from every form of suffering and oppression, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. We are therefore invited to respond to God's gracious initiative and to participate in his continued work of recreating, redeeming, and blessing humanity.

Biblical spirituality involves careful and prayerful attentiveness to God's redemptive history and to our place within it. It encompasses awareness of God's salvation and adequate response to it. Mary of Nazareth has served us well in both capacities. In allowing her own life story to become intertwined with God's greater story, she exemplifies basic elements of biblical spirituality that remain fundamental to each generation of his people. She recognizes God's gracious redemption throughout history, and is receptive to the creative outworking of his grace in her own life. She responds to God with wonder, worship, and witness which incorporate God's word and his work. Consequently, Mary of Nazareth provides a pattern of the humble obedience and faithful commitment that is required of every believer blessed with God's grace.

1 See the LXX of Gen. 6:8 and Ex. 33:12,17; cf. Acts 7:46.
9 Ibid., 290. Hence Nathaniel's question in John 1:46: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”
10 See the LXX of Gen. 6:8 and Ex. 33:12,17; cf. Acts 7:46.
15 Ibid., 399.
17 For example, it has been recognized that “human existence and experience are fundamentally narrative in form.” Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, “Introduction: Why Narrative?” in Why Narrative? 8. Consequently, there are profound implications for theology and ethics. These authors summarize as follows:

We are concerned with suggesting that narrative is neither just an account of genre criticism nor a faddish appeal to the importance of telling stories; rather it is a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions (Ibid., 5).
21 Ibid., 51. In a comprehensive word study, Childs demonstrates that the one verb zakkah (“to remember”) is used to describe both God's redemptive action toward Israel and Israel's response in faith to his action.
22 Ibid., 41-42.
23 Ibid., 42.
24 Ibid., 51.
25 Ibid., 53.
27 Childs, 56.
28 Childs, 65.
31 Niebuhr, 29.
32 Ibid., 26.
33 O'Day, 207.


40 Foster, 285, n. 2.

41 Muto, 83.


45 The word generally used is *thaumazo*, the verb “to be astonished, wonder at, be surprised.” Of the 25 occurrences in the synoptics, 13 are found in Luke’s Gospel. In addition, there are 4 occurrences in Acts. See NIDNTT, Vol. 2, s.v. “thaumazo,” by W. Mundle, 623.


48 Ibid., 41.

49 France, 44.

50 Quoted in Frank C. Senn, “My Soul Doth Magnify the Lord,” *Dialog* 20 (Summer 1981), 246.


52 Ibid., 236.

53 Ibid.


57 O’Day 206.


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**MAKE ME LIKE MARY**

Make me like Mary — Faithful Believer in miracles, in the impossible.

Make me like Mary — Humble Implant new Life in me by your Spirit.

Make me like Mary — Vessel In whom your Word becomes Incarnate.

Make me like Mary — Servant Let your Light live and breathe within me.

Make me like Mary — Exalted May your Message be birthed through me.

*Tina Ostrander, 1998*

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**MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS, AND THE APOSTLE JOHN**

Susan McCoubrie

I attend a Bible Study at my church, Saint John the Evangelist Episcopal in St. Paul, Minnesota. For the season of Advent, we decided to examine the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of Christ and his mission. During the third week in Advent, our Rector posed the question, “Of all the characters in the Bible, who would you like to interview concerning who this Christ is and why he came?” We pondered the question for a moment and before I could open my mouth to say “Mary,” a man in the group said: “Mary, his mother.”

We then mulled over the few passages that deal directly with Mary, particularly Luke 1, John 2:1-11, and John 19:25-27. We thought it interesting that Jesus’ first miracle was making water into wine (significant to a eucharistic community) and was witnessed by Mary. We were also interested in the fact that Jesus gave John, the disciple he loved, the responsibility to care for his mother. We considered how John’s relationship with Mary, the discussions they had, and the insights they shared, may have played a part in the Gospel of John. Recalling Mary’s words in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), we looked at the Prologue of John’s Gospel and found phrases that seemed as if they might have come from Mary. We concluded that Mary is a probable source for John’s insights into Jesus’ true identity.

Susan McCoubrie was for many years on staff at the CBE National Office, and currently volunteers as Prayer Letter coordinator. She is also membership secretary for the Twin Cities Chapter.