

Concerning the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception **By William Schnoebelen**

No one has more respect or admiration for the Virgin Mary than I do. I think she was one of the great women of the Bible.

As you may know, I was raised Roman Catholic and have 16 years of Catholic education under my belt, plus a Master's in Theological Studies from St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee (in 1980). I was ordained a priest in the Old Roman rite of the Catholic church in 1976 and was an associate pastor of a parish in Milwaukee for a couple of years. Thus, it is fair to say that I have not just "fallen off the turnip truck" when it comes to Roman Catholic teaching. I say this not to boast, but just to let you know where I am coming from.

For most of my life up until being Born Again in 1984, I said the rosary daily – often 15 decades (Benedictine Rosary). After ordination, I celebrated the Liturgy daily and I kept many of the common devotions to Mary such as you might be familiar with. However, the more I studied the Bible, the more I found some problems with key Catholic teachings concerning her.

Before we examine these in detail, may I ask your indulgence in setting some ground rules of sound Bible Hermeneutics?

- 1) I believe that the Bible is the **final** authority on all matters of faith and truth. I realize this may be at odds with what you have been taught as a Catholic, but it IS what the Bible says of itself. I will discuss this in more detail momentarily.
- 2) I believe that men and women *CAN* hear from Yahweh God today and receive revelation from Him. However, there must be some objective source of truth by which those revelations can be judged. This is true for any person, be it a lay person or a bishop or a pope. No man can be higher than Yahweh God and His Word. (See Isaiah 8:20 – **"if they speak not according to this word [meaning the Bible], there is no light in them"** and 1 Cor. 14:29 **"Let the prophets speak two or three and let the other judge."**)
- 3) A corollary to this is that since Yahweh God does not change (Mal. 3:6, Hebrews 13:8) **prior revelation must judge revelation** which comes along later. Logically, it stands to reason that since the Almighty is infinitely perfect, He cannot change. If He got "more perfect" then He would not have been perfect before; and if He got "less perfect," He would cease to be Yahweh and violate His own nature. Thus, something He says in the Old Testament will not be contradicted by the New. And something He says in the entire Bible will not be contradicted by subsequent revelation or teaching.
- 4) A final point of Bible interpretation which I need to establish is that you never base a doctrine on an obscure or isolated passage of Scripture. For example, on the basis of 1 Cor. 15:29, the LDS Church (Mormons) baptize their dead ancestors. That is the only passage in the Bible that mentions

such a concept, and its meaning is obscure. We are told in Matt. 18:16 and 2 Cor. 13:1 that “**at the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.**”¹ Thus, to proclaim a doctrine as being supported by the Bible, you need two or three clear passages to nail it down – just like you need two separate sites to triangulate a radio signal. A secondary part of this concept is that you never try to use an obscure verse to contradict a clearly stated verse.

Okay, having established that, let me just talk for a moment about the Catholic doctrine that says that truth is achieved by a combination of what is in the Bible and the magisterial teaching authority of the Church as it is found in conciliar teachings and papal pronouncements (especially those given *ex cathedra*).

The problem with that concept is that:

- 1) It has no support in the Bible and,
- 2) It does not make a lot of sense logically.

In terms of #1, I know that you will point me to Matthew 16 and the famous “thou art Peter” passage. As you probably know, Catholics interpret that verse differently than Christians do and that interpretation is subject to debate. That is for another time, if you like. The problem is, the passage is *OPEN TO INTERPRETATION!* A good case can be made for either side, although I believe the translations of the Greek words *Petros* and *Petra* offer a key to understanding it. If you do not know where I am going with this, I will be happy to explain elsewhere.

But here is the problem: first of all, it is the **ONLY** place in the Bible where such a concept as the supremacy of Peter and his successors can even be faintly adduced. Thus, it makes it unwise to build such a key doctrine on it. Additionally, since it is obscure in its interpretation, that makes it doubly dangerous to build a doctrine of such magnitude upon it.

Also, there are places in the New Testament where Peter’s supremacy seems to be contradicted. For example, in Acts 15, he is hardly running the council of Jerusalem. James, the brother of the Lord is running it. Peter is just one of the members of the ruling council of elders or apostles. Additionally, Galatians 2:11-14 has Paul rebuking Peter “**I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.**” That does not sound like Peter was any kind of supreme pontiff.²

In fact, the words “pope” or “pontiff” or even concepts related to them like supreme bishop do not appear *anywhere* in the Bible. In his own epistles, Peter just calls himself an apostle (1 Peter 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1). Surely, if he was the supreme pontiff of the entire church, *this* would have been the place to assert it.

¹ See how I gave you two verses to support that assertion, not just one? There are more, but two will suffice.

² Note again, I gave two verses to support this.

Now, in terms of the second problem with this dual authority thing is the old expression which you may have heard: “A two-headed dog can’t hunt.”

You cannot have two supreme authorities. That is like having a pyramid with two peaks or having two presidents of the US. It is neither logical nor administratively sound. Either the Bible OR the pope/Magisterium has to have the final say. Otherwise, there is chaos. I would submit to you that no human being, however lofty, should be allowed to contradict the Word of the Almighty! Show me anywhere in the Bible where this is the case. I do not think you will find it.

Now, let us look at the Immaculate Conception. I am now into my 28th time through reading the entire Bible and I have never found the words or the concept behind the words taught or even *implied* in the Scriptures. That is a problem. Even when I was a devout Catholic, it was a problem for me – but I then accepted it on faith.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is based on several assumptions. As you said in your email, we *ASSUME* that Yahweh God would not want His Son conceived and carried in a sinful vessel or womb. But that is all that is, an assumption.

Let us look at something analogous. Today, every genuinely Born Again Christian has the Almighty living within him or her. Yet, if we understand the Bible, we know that all of us – even sincere Christians – are sinners (1 John 1:8). Even Paul, one of the greatest Christians who ever lived, said he was a sinner (Romans 7:14-19). If the Holy Spirit – indeed *even the entire Godhead* – can dwell inside of us sinful vessels, then can we assume that Jesus as a baby in mortal flesh could not dwell inside of a woman who was not perfect?

I think you would agree it is much more awesome to have the Father, the Son and the Spirit of Holiness in all that spiritual glory and holiness dwelling within you (2 Cor. 4:7, Col. 1:27, 1 Pet. 4:14) than to simply have the mortal body of Jesus as a fetus within a womb. That pretty much takes care of that assumption!

The main difficulty, however, with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is that is contradicted in several places by the Bible! If Mary was conceived without sin, then how do we explain these **clear** verses?

- Romans 3:9-10 - **What then? are we better *than they*? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:**
- Romans 3:23 - **For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;**

- Isaiah 64:6 - **But we are all as an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.**
- 1 Kings 8:46 - **If they [the people of Israel, such as Mary] sin against thee, (for *there is* no man that sinneth not,) and thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captives unto the land of the enemy, far or near;**
- Psalm 53:2-3 - **God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were *any* that did understand, that did seek God. Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; *there is* none that doeth good, no, not one.**
- Proverbs 20:9 - **Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?**
- 1 John 1:8 - **If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**

All these verses make it clear that a state of sinfulness is the *universal* human condition. The only exception is Jesus and that is clearly stated throughout the New Testament (and even in the Old Testament!). In the face of this avalanche of scriptures which say that all people are sinners, there is not *one* saying that Mary is somehow the exception to this rule.

There are two other passages which we need to look at because they illustrate the flaws in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in different ways. In Luke 1:47, from Mary's own lips she says she needs a savior: "**And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.**" How can someone who has never sinned need a savior?

Now, I know that there is a conventional Catholic response to this verse. I used to be a Catholic, remember. You even mentioned it in your email. The idea is that Yahweh God somehow took some of the power of the Atonement of the Cross and *took it all the way back in time* and applied it to Mary before she was conceived and washed away all her sins.

Now, you must admit that this is a rather Baroque explanation. Without any scriptural support, it just plain seems unnecessary and even silly. Plus, even then there is a flaw. You believe in free will, correct?

Well, even if Mary had all of her sins washed away at conception, what would happen after she was born and grew up?

I mean this: I had all my sins washed away when I was Born Again, but I still had free will. I still committed sins after that. 1 John 1, quoted above written to Believers, says that we all sin and if we say we do not sin, we are deceiving ourselves and others.

What was to keep Mary from sinning once she grew up, unless Yahweh God took away her free will and made her a robot or puppet? That is not in the character of our Creator. Mary would still have been human.

Look at the fact that she got worried and upset – perhaps even angry – with Jesus when he was “lost” in the temple at 12. That would have indicated a lack of faith in the promise of the Holy Spirit through the angel Gabriel. That would have been a sin. It would have been human, but it would have been a sin. That is one example from the Bible. Now, imagine trying to go through an entire lifetime – including having to go through the crucifixion of your Son – and not once having a lack of faith or a moment of anger at the Almighty? Such a concept makes Mary more of a goddess than a woman!

Then, as if all that is not enough, there is the fact that the Bible teaches:

- **For the wages of sin *is* death; but the gift of God *is* eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.** – Romans 3:23
- **...the soul that sinneth, it shall die.** – Ezekiel 18:4
- **Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:** - Romans 5:12

So here is the problem. *Mary died!* Oral history teaches it and even the Catholic Church teaches it. Her tomb is in Ephesus. She died and was laid in it. Now, I understand that since the 1950's it has been Catholic dogma that Mary was “assumed” into heaven – sort of her own personal “rapture.” But that was after she died. Now, if Mary had never sinned, as the Church teaches, *why did she even die at all?*

The answer is just common sense. Mary was a great and devout woman, but she was a sinner, just as everyone is a sinner.

Now, before I conclude, I wish to deal with one other possible scripture that is sometimes used to teach that Mary was somehow “special” and not contaminated with the stain of sin – even from conception. That is the angelic greeting to Mary in Luke 1:28: “**Hail, *thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.***”

First of all, I realize that the translation is slightly different than you may be used to (this is the King James Authorized Version). It does not change the point much. The word most Catholic Bibles translate as “full of grace” is *Charitoo*. According to the widely accepted **STRONG'S CONCORDANCE AND LEXICON** the word can mean “to grace, to endue with special honor, to make accepted, to be highly favored.” So rather than full of grace, it would be better rendered “thou that are highly graced.” Many Catholic apologists who use this verse focus on the “Blessed art thou among women” which is the same in both versions.

They claim that this statement implies that Mary is blessed above all women by being sinless and – indeed – conceived without sin. The problem with that is that the exact same phrase is used of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite in the Book of Judges: **“Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent.”** – Judges 5:24. Now, to be sure, Jael was a great and heroic woman of faith in the Bible who killed one of Israel’s greatest enemies. But I do not think anyone would want to claim she was sinless. Certainly, the Vatican does not claim that.

According to **VINE’S EXPOSITORY DICTIONARY OF NEW TESTAMENT WORDS** (p. 424), the word *Charitoo* is not properly translated as grace in the sense of to endue with supernatural grace. Thus, this verse cannot in any way be construed to mean that Mary was somehow conceived without sin – especially when there are so many verses which teach that *all* have sinned.

I think it is evident that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is something made up out of whole cloth to make Mary more important and also goddess-like in her nature. This is not Biblical and it is a dangerous doctrine, because it leads people into putting trust in her rather than in Jesus alone.

This dogma, which was only defined less than 200 years ago at Vatican I, has led to other errors and excesses with regards to Mary. Here is just one example. Pius XII taught that Mary was the “mediatrix of all graces.” I heard this since I was a small child. The difficulty is that – again – it is in direct contradiction of the Bible. We read in 1Timothy:

For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; - 1 Timothy 2:5

So, when you sign your emails, “To Jesus through Mary,” I am afraid you are placing your trust in a false assumption.

Remember, the only advice that Mary ever gave in the Scriptures is in John 2:5: **“Whatever he saith unto you, do *it*.”** Nowhere did Jesus tell his disciples to go to Mary for spiritual help after His ascension. In fact, is it not extraordinary that in all four gospels, nowhere does Jesus even call her “mother.” Where He addresses her at all, he calls her “**woman**” (John 2:4 and 19:26). Can you imagine how well it would go over if you called *your* mother, “Woman,” especially in public? She would probably be pretty offended.

But Jesus did this because (knowing all things), He knew that Roman church would come along centuries later and try and glorify his mother all out of proportion. Additionally, when some disciples wanted Jesus to give his mother and family some special treatment, remember what He said:

While he yet talked to the people, behold, *his* mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him.

**Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee.
But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?
And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren!
For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother. – Matt. 12:46-50**

This was said because He wanted us to understand that the only thing which made his mother special was that she was a Godly woman – and that anyone who does the will of the Father is also Jesus' blood relation.

Jesus told us that we must be Born Again (John 3:16). He did not tell us to go through His mother to get answers to prayer.

Please think and pray about this and read the Bible verses I have quoted you. Ultimately, no one (not even me or the pope) has the right to contradict the plain teaching of the Scriptures. Upon such people there is a curse (Rev. 22:18-19). Where does that leave all the popes who have added to the Scriptures by telling us we must go through Mary?

I would be happy to dialog with you on this.

This is a very important issue, because the dogmas surrounding Mary are central to the theological super-structure of the Roman Catholic religion. If they are wrong, then I would submit to you that you need to look to Jesus and His Word. I know you have a zeal for God and really want to serve Him (Romans 10:2-4). I am just trying to show you a more perfect way (Acts 18:26) which is simpler and more scriptural. Please take this seriously and seek the Holy Spirit in this matter. You are in our prayers always!

Shalom!
Bill Schnoebelen