MARTIN DAVIE

Mary – Grace and Hope: An Evangelical Anglican Response

Based on a paper he originally gave to a meeting of the Churches Together in England Theology and Unity Group, who had requested an evangelical response to the recent ARCIC document *Mary – Grace and Hope in Christ*, Martin Davie here offers a helpful introduction to the report's contents and central conclusions. He highlights seven elements in it that evangelical Anglicans should welcome but also notes problems with its argument and, in particular, its claims to have made advances in agreement in relation to the Marian dogmas that divide Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

Why discuss Mary?

In the Preface to *Mere Christianity,* C S Lewis gives the following explanation of why he has not discussed the Virgin Mary:

> …surely my reason for not doing so is obvious? To say more would take me at once into highly controversial regions. And there is no controversy between Christians which needs to be so delicately touched on as this. The Roman Catholic beliefs on that subject are held not only with the ordinary fervour that attaches to all sincere religious belief, but (very naturally) with the peculiar and, as it were, chivalrous sensibility that a man feels when the honour of his mother or his beloved is at stake. It is very difficult so to dissent from them that you will not appear to them a cad as well as a heretic. And contrariwise, the opposed Protestant beliefs on this subject call forth feelings which go down to the very roots of all Monotheism whatever. To radical Protestants it seems that the distinction between Creator and creature (however holy) is imperilled: that polytheism is risen again. Hence it is hard so to dissent from them that you will not appear something worse than a heretic – a Pagan. If any topic could be relied upon to wreck a book about 'mere' Christianity – if any topic makes utterly unprofitable reading for those who do not yet believe that the Virgin's son is God – surely this is it.[1]

Today, over half a century later, the kind of intense feelings generated by the topic of the Virgin Mary to which he refers have not gone away. For example, last summer both *New Directions*, which for the most part expresses the views of Anglo Catholic traditionalists in the Church of England and *English Churchman*, which describes itself

1 C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Geoffrey Bles, London 1952, vii.

as 'A Protestant Family Newspaper' commented on the recent ARCIC statement, *Mary – Grace and Hope in Christ*. Their comments reflect strongly held but diametrically opposed positions. The June 2005 edition of *New Directions* declared:

> We welcome ARCIC II's final report Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ…as we look back over the past half millennium, perhaps the greatest accusation that can fairly be levelled against our church is (to use a current buzz word) our lack of respect for Mary, Mother of God. We can be proud of our holy men and women in every century, whose devotion to Our Lady has been a gift to the wider Church. We can be proud of our Anglo-Catholic churches across the land, where thousands come to share in Marian devotion week by week. We can be proud of what many of our number have done to restore her shrines, at Walsingham and elsewhere. We must also feel shame that our church as a whole can be so cold towards Jesus' own mother. Of course there are legitimate differences of theology and devotion, but to suppose that it shows honour to Our Lord to be disrespectful of His Mother is a most horrible perversion. This often casual negativity is unbecoming to our Christian calling, and until it is more properly restrained it remains a mark of shame upon the Church of England.[2]

By contrast the *English Churchman* headline read 'ARCIC statement embraces blasphemous Marian Dogmas'. The subsequent article attacks Roman Catholic teaching on Mary in unmeasured terms. On praying to Mary it declares that 'the Roman dogma is pure superstitious twaddle and takes away from the glory of God' while on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception it states that it 'takes attention away from the saviour Christ and puts it on the saved sinner Mary! So Rome leads folk away from Christ and leaves them in superstition and under the wrath of God'.[3]

Given discussion of Mary throws up these kinds of polarised attitudes we can see why many involved in ecumenism tend to follow Lewis' lead and try to avoid discussion of Marian theology. It is just too divisive so why not discuss something less contentious instead? In the end, however, if we are to make any serious long term progress with ecumenism then at some stage we have to address precisely those difficult and sensitive issues which everyone knows are there, but which everyone is tempted to avoid. In the context of Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue, Roman Catholic teaching and practice with regard to the Virgin Mary is one of these issues. Unless tackled, there can never be full theological agreement between the Catholic and Anglican traditions and therefore no liturgical or ecclesial agreement either.

The publication of the ARCIC II report *Mary - Grace and Hope in Christ* is therefore to be welcomed. The 1981 ARCIC document *Authority in the Church II* noted a significant degree of agreement between Anglicans and Roman Catholics about Mary. It also noted the specific difficulties raised for many Anglicans by the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption. The new ARCIC document looks in detail at both the areas of agreement and the Marian dogmas. It is to be hoped that what it says will spark off the wider debate about these issues that is necessary in both traditions if there is to be further ecumenical progress between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

2 *New Directions* vol 8 no 121 (June 2005), p 3.

3 *English Churchman* no 7663 (27 May and 3 June 2005), p 1.

Welcoming this report as a stimulus to necessary debate and discussion is, however, not the same as welcoming everything that it says. As an Evangelical Anglican I have serious problems with a lot of what the report says, but, before explaining why I want to begin by outlining what the report says and explaining why, notwithstanding these problems, much that is in it should be welcomed.

The aim and content of the report

The aim of *Mary - Grace and Hope* is to assist the reconciliation of Roman Catholics and Anglicans by helping them to move beyond their disagreements and to achieve a new consensus about who Mary was and is and her place in the life of the Church. Following established ARCIC practice the report does not criticise or challenge the approaches taken in either the Anglican or Roman Catholic traditions. Instead it seeks to find a fresh way of understanding Mary that is consonant with Scripture and with the traditions of both the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Anglican Communion. It consists of an Introduction followed by four major sections and a conclusion.

Section A, 'Mary according to the Scriptures', surveys the biblical material relating to the Virgin Mary. It then summarises its findings:

> The scriptural witness summons all believers in every generation to call Mary 'blessed'; this Jewish woman of humble status, this daughter of Israel living in hope of justice for the poor, whom God has graced and chosen to become the virgin mother of his Son through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. We are to bless her as the 'handmaid of the Lord' who gave her unqualified assent to the fulfilment of God's saving plan, as the mother who pondered all things in her heart, as the refugee seeking asylum in a foreign land, as the mother pierced by the innocent suffering of her own child, and as the woman to whom Jesus entrusted his friends. We are at one with her and the apostles, as they pray for the outpouring of the Spirit upon the nascent Church, the eschatological family of Christ. And we may even glimpse in her the final destiny of God's people to share in her son's victory over the powers of evil and death.[4]

Section B, 'Mary in the Christian Tradition', examines how the Virgin Mary has been understood down the centuries. Contrary to what is often thought, it concludes there is convergence between the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions with regard to Mary:

> We are agreed in our belief in the Blessed Virgin Mary as Theotokos.[5] Our two communions are both heirs to a rich tradition which recognizes Mary as ever virgin, and sees her as the new Eve and as a type of the Church. We join in praying and praising with Mary whom all generations have called

4 *Mary – Grace and Hope in Christ,* Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg Pa. 2005, pp 28-29 (para 30). The text is also available online at www.ecumenism.net/archive/arcic/mary_en.htm. In all future references in this article the relevant paragraph number is given after the quotation.

5 This Greek word literally means 'God bearer' but it is often translated 'Mother of God'. It was used in the Christological debates of the fifth century to defend the unity of the two natures in the one person of Christ by stressing that the one to whom Mary gave birth was divine as well as human.

> blessed, in observing her festivals and according her honour in the communion of saints, and are agreed that Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church…(51).

Section C, 'Mary within the Pattern of Grace and Hope', is the theological centre of the report. It argues that in the New Testament we find the idea that the participation in the glory of God which is our final destiny in Christ is something in which we already participate through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is what St. Paul means when, in Romans 8:30, he 'speaks as it were from the future retrospectively' (53), describing the present state of Christians in terms of that glorification that will be at the end of time. The present is seen in terms of the future.

Within this framework, the report suggests that divine grace, working backwards from the future destiny of believers in Christ, can be seen to have been at work in a special way in Mary.

With regard to preparing her for her role as the mother of Christ, the section argues that:

> With the early church, we see in Mary's acceptance of the divine will the fruits of her prior preparation, signified in Gabriel's affirmation of her as 'graced.' We can thus see that God was at work in Mary from her earliest beginnings, preparing her for the unique vocation of bearing in her own flesh the new Adam, 'in whom all things in heaven and earth hold together' (Col 1:17). Of Mary, both personally and as a representative figure, we can say that she is 'God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand' (Ephesians 2:10). (55).

With regard to taking her to be with God at the end of her life, it states that:

> There is no direct testimony in Scripture concerning the end of Mary's life. However, certain passages give instances of those who follow God's purposes faithfully being drawn into God's presence. Moreover, these passages offer hints or partial analogies that may throw light on the mystery of Mary's entry into glory (56).[6]

The section declares that Christians down the centuries have come to see that it is right to believe that a similar anticipation of the destiny of all believers at the end of time took place at the end of Mary's earthly life:

> When Christians from East and West through the generations have pondered God's work in Mary they have discerned in faith…that it is fitting that the Lord gathered her wholly to himself: in Christ, she is already a new creation in whom 'the old has passed away and the new has come' (2 Cor 5:17). Viewed

6 The passages in question are specified as St. Stephen's vision of the risen Christ waiting to greet him in heaven (Acts 7:54-60), the promise given to the penitent thief on the cross that he would be with Christ in paradise (Luke 23:43) and the translations into heaven of Elijah and Enoch (2 Kings 2:11, Heb. 11:5, Gen. 5:24).

> from such an eschatological perspective, Mary may be seen both as a type of the church, and as a disciple with a special place in the economy of salvation (57).

The point here is that there is a twofold fittingness to Mary's being received into glory in this way: firstly, as someone who symbolically represents the Church as a whole and secondly, because of her special place as an individual in the purposes of God. These points then form the basis of the section's response to the Roman Catholic dogmas concerning the bodily assumption and immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, dogmas which it maintains both Anglicans and Roman Catholics are able to affirm when they are understood rightly.

In relation to the dogma of the assumption, the section declares that, because of what has previously been said:

> …we can affirm together the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with Scripture and that it can, indeed, only be understood in the light of Scripture. Roman Catholics can recognize that this teaching about Mary is contained in the dogma (58).

In relation to the dogma of the immaculate conception, the section declares that:

> In view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One (Luke 1:35), we can affirm together that Christ's redeeming work reached 'back' in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings. This is not contrary to the teaching of Scripture, and can only be understood in the light of Scripture. Roman Catholics can recognize in this what is affirmed by the dogma – namely 'preserved from all stain of original sin' and 'from the first moment of her conception' (59).

At the end of the section the report expresses the hope that:

> …the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion will recognize a common faith in the agreement concerning Mary which we offer. Such a re-reception would mean the Marian teaching and devotion within our respective communities, including differences of emphasis, would be seen to be authentic expressions of Christian belief (63).[7]

Section D on 'Mary in the Life of the Church' identifies a fourfold role that Mary plays in the life of the Church. First, she provides the highest example of the life of grace. Secondly, she has a special place in the Church's life of praise and prayer. Thirdly, along with the other saints, Mary intercedes for the Church on earth. Acknowledging the unique mediatorial role that belongs to Christ, the section argues in the following terms that it is nevertheless legitimate to ask the

7 It also suggests in footnote 13 that 'in such circumstances, the explicit acceptance of the precise wording of the definitions of 1854 and 1950 might not be required of believers who were not in communion with Rome when they were defined. Conversely, Anglicans would have to accept that the definitions are a legitimate expression of Catholic faith and are to be respected as such, even if these formulas were not employed by them'.

saints to pray for us (and that, because of her special place in the economy of salvation, Mary has a distinctive ministry of intercession):

> The Scriptures invite Christians to ask their brothers and sisters to pray for them, in and through Christ (cf. James 5:13-15). Those who are now 'with Christ', untrammelled by sin, share the unceasing prayer and praise which characterizes the life of heaven (e.g. Revelation 5:9-14, 7:9-12, 8:3-4). In the light of these testimonies, many Christians have found that requests for assistance in prayer can rightly and effectively be made to those members of the communion of saints distinguished by their holy living (cf. James 5:16-18). It is in this sense that we affirm that asking the saints to pray for us is not to be excluded as unscriptural, though it is not directly taught by the scriptures to be a required element of life in Christ. Further, we agree that the way such assistance is sought must not obscure believers' direct access to God our heavenly Father, who delights to give good gifts to his children (Matthew 7:11). When, in the Spirit and through Christ, believers address their prayers to God, they are assisted by the prayers of other believers, especially of those who are truly alive in Christ and freed from sin (70).

Fourthly, Mary has a special motherly role both for the faithful and for the world as a whole.

This section then argues that devotion to the Virgin Mary as practised, for example, at places where Mary is believed to have appeared, is legitimate though not obligatory (73). It also welcomes the way in which, through the words of the Magnificat, Mary has become an inspiration for work for peace and justice (74). Finally, it argues there is no reason why asking Mary and other saints to pray for us should be a cause for 'ecclesial division' (75).

The Conclusion summarises the report's achievements in looking afresh at the teaching about Mary in Scripture and the Christian tradition (76-77) and finishes by setting out what it sees as the five 'Advances in Agreement' that this fresh study of Scripture and the Christian tradition has made possible. These are each discussed in some detail below in the critique.

What is welcome in this report

From an Evangelical Anglican perspective there are seven welcome aspects to this report.

First, it is welcome that the report explicitly endorses the normative role of Scripture in Christian theology: 'we remain convinced that the holy Scriptures, as the Word of God written, bear normative witness to God's plan of salvation' (6).

Second, it is equally welcome to see the explicit acknowledgement that the normative role of Scripture in Christian theology means that 'doctrines and devotions which are contrary to Scripture cannot be said to be revealed by God nor to be the teaching of the Church' (79).

Third, it is welcome that the report follows up its formal acknowledgement of the normative role of Scripture with an extended engagement with the text of

Scripture, both in terms of a general exploration of the biblical pattern of 'grace and hope' and in terms of a specific exploration of the biblical texts relating to the Virgin Mary.

Fourth, much of what is said in the course of this engagement with Scripture is also welcome. Especially, from an Evangelical viewpoint, there is a clear emphasis on the prevenient grace of God in calling particular persons to special tasks and a clear summary of the Christological meaning of the miracle at the wedding feast at Cana.

Fifth, it is welcome that the report unequivocally affirms the virginal conception of Christ in spite of the way in which this is called into question in much liberal theology:

> The divine initiative in human history is proclaimed in the good news of the virginal conception through the action of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20-23; Luke 1:34-35). The virginal conception may appear in the first place as an absence, i.e. the absence of a human father. It is in reality, however, a sign of the presence and work of the Spirit. Belief in the virginal conception is an early Christian tradition adopted and developed independently by Matthew and Luke. For Christian believers, it is an eloquent sign of the divine sonship of Christ and of new life through the Spirit. The virginal conception also points to the new birth of every Christian, as an adopted child of God. Each is 'born again (from above) by water and the Spirit' (John 3:3-5). Seen in this light, the virginal conception, far from being an isolated miracle, is a powerful expression of what the Church believes about her Lord, and about our salvation (18).[8]

Sixth, that the report affirms the teaching of the Council of Ephesus that Mary is rightly to be called *Theotokos* is welcome. Rightly understood, this description of Mary upholds the core biblical teaching summarised by the Council of Chalcedon and Article 2 of the *Thirty Nine Articles* that Christ is one person who is both fully human and fully divine.

Finally, it is welcome that in discussing the propriety of seeking the intercession of the saints and of forms of devotion to the Virgin Mary the report stresses the unique role of Christ as the one mediator between God and humanity and the way in which we are enabled to pray through the work of the Holy Spirit within us (68). Also encouraging is the fact (para 70) that any idea of seeking the help of the saints in prayer '…must not obscure believers' direct access to God our heavenly Father, who delights to give good gifts to his children (Matthew 7:11)' and that doctrine and devotion that focuses on Mary 'must be moderated by carefully expressed norms which ensure the unique and central place of Jesus Christ in the life of the Church, and that Christ alone, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is to be worshipped in the Church' (79).

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8 What is also welcome is the way in which footnote 2 rejects the various suggestions that have been made to try to explain away the story of the virginal conception as a non-historical story invented on the basis of pagan or Jewish ideas or the need to combat accusations of illegitimacy.

What are the problems with this report?

In spite of these welcome aspects of the report there are aspects with which I have serious problems.

The historical development of Marian theology and devotion

Apart from some critical comments on the theology and popular piety of the late Middle Ages (para 43), what we have in paragraphs 31-43 of Part B of the report is simply a record of doctrinal and devotional developments concerning Mary in the Patristic and Medieval periods, unaccompanied by any kind of appraisal of them. This seems to be because the authors decided that developments before the late Middle Ages were not the source of current divisions between the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions and therefore did not require detailed consideration.

This decision is understandable, but arguably mistaken, because those ways of thinking about Mary that have been the cause of division between Roman Catholics and Anglicans have their roots in these Patristic and Medieval developments. Therefore, anybody seeking to make an informed judgment concerning later thinking about Mary has to be able make an informed judgement about these earlier developments as well. What is needed in order to make this possible, and what the report does not provide, is an explanation of the theological and historical reasons why these developments took place. What is also needed is an explanation of why these developments have been, and still are, viewed negatively by sections of the worldwide Church and then an explanation as to why they nevertheless think these developments are defensible. A bibliography outlining sources for further study would also have been helpful in enabling those who want to learn more about these matters to do so.

Mary in post-Reformation Anglicanism

The second problem is the report's account of the place of Mary in Anglicanism from the Reformation onwards. No one reading this report and lacking other sources of information would be aware of the fact that during the history of Anglicanism since the Reformation there have been a large number of Anglicans, arguably the majority, whose beliefs about Mary have been strictly limited to what is explicitly taught about her in Scripture and who have regarded asking Mary to intercede for them as completely impermissible. Furthermore, this position continues to be held by a very large number of people today both in the Anglican Communion as a whole and in the Church of England. Indeed, given the growth of Evangelicalism within Anglicanism, it may well be the case that the proportion of Anglicans taking this position is increasing.

To talk about the 're-appropriation' of Marian theology and devotion within Anglicanism in the way that the report does, without giving attention to this other point of view, is to distort both history and current reality. The report's intention is to use the development of Marian devotion in seventeenth century Anglican writers, in the Oxford Movement and in the Anglo-Catholic movement to show that such devotion is part of the permissible range of Anglican theology and spirituality and therefore to claim the gap between the Roman Catholic and

Anglican traditions is not so large as is often thought. However, this line of argument fails to reflect the fact that this development of Marian devotion has also been challenged by other Anglicans who have argued (often strongly) that it has no basis in either Scripture or the Anglican formularies. The place of Mary in Anglican theology and spirituality has been (and still remains) contested.[9] The report should have been honest about this fact. Neither the seventeenth-century writers mentioned in the report, nor the Oxford Movement nor the Anglo-Catholic tradition that grew out of it can rightly be seen as typical of Anglicanism as a whole.

Mary in Anglican worship

The third problem is the account given (para 49) of the 're-reception' of the place of Mary in Anglican corporate worship. Whatever may be true in other Provinces of the Communion, in the Church of England the liturgical developments during the twentieth century did not result in any forms of officially authorised liturgy that reflect the understanding of Mary set out in the report.

For example, as the report indicates, August 15 is now celebrated in the Church of England and other Anglican churches as the feast day for the Blessed Virgin Mary. However, if we look at the Collect and Post Communion prayer set in *Common Worship*, we find they are extremely restrained:

> Almighty God, who looked upon the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary and chose her to be the mother of your only Son: grant that we who are redeemed by his blood may share with her in the glory of your eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.[10]
>
> God most high, whose handmaid bore the Word made flesh; we thank you that in this sacrament of our redemption you visit us with your Holy Spirit and overshadow us with your power; strengthen us to walk with Mary the joyful path of obedience and so to bring forth the fruits of holiness; through Christ our Lord.[11]

Furthermore, apart from mentions of Mary as the one from whom Christ was born, the only provision for mentioning Mary in the Eucharistic prayers in *Common Worship* lies in the option to include Mary alongside the other saints in phrases such as 'so that we, in the company of [N and] all the saints may praise and glorify you for ever', 'Gather your people with [N and] all your saints at the table in your

9 The contrasting attitudes of Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics to re-establishment of the Marian shrine at Walsingham clearly illustrates this point. Anglo-Catholics have tended to see its re-establishment as the recovery of something that was wrongly lost from the Church of England and a hopeful sign of the possibility of ecumenical rapprochement with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions while many (if not all) Evangelicals see it as a betrayal of the Reformation and a sign of a departure from biblical religion.

10 *Common Worship*, CHP, London 2000 p 438.

11 *Common Worship,* p 439 It has been suggested that the reference to 'glory' and 'obedience' in these prayers are intended to be capable of being interpreted in ways that are consistent with Medieval, Orthodox and Roman Catholic understandings of Mary. It is difficult to derive such an interpretation from the prayers as they stand and there is no evidence that General Synod authorised these prayers with the intention that they should be so interpreted.

kingdom' and 'Bring us at the last with [N and] all the saints to the vision of that eternal splendour for which you have created us.'[12] The important thing to note here is that such prayers do not commit the Church of England to any specific form of Marian doctrine other than the belief that she is a part of the communion of saints. It also needs to be noted that there is no provision in Common Worship for the saying of the 'Hail Mary' or any other prayers asking for the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

All this means that, at least so far as the Church of England is concerned, the claim that liturgical developments with regard to Mary are 'highly significant' cannot be justified.

Prayer and the departed

The fourth problem is what is said (para 51) about the way in which the Roman Catholic and Anglican communions 'are agreed that Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church.' The meaning of this phrase is further explained in Section D which teaches not simply that Mary and the other saints pray in general terms for the fulfilment of God's purposes for His people (an idea that is possibly defensible from Rev. 6:10 and 8:3-4), but that they give specific assistance to individuals who ask for their help. It follows that we are being told here that the Anglican tradition now agrees with the practice of seeking the intercession of the saints that was specifically rejected by the Church of England at the Reformation. As far as I am aware this claim is untrue. There has been no Anglican agreement on this matter, and to suggest that there has been is misleading.

The Marian dogmas: can we agree?

The final aspect of the report with which I have problems is the list of five advances in agreement at the end of the report. In order to explain why I find these problematic I shall look at each of the items on the list in turn.

The Bodily Assumption

The *first* claim affirms 'the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with Scripture, and only to be understood in the light of Scripture' (78 cf. 58). Although the phrase 'the fullness of her person' is nowhere defined, there are good reasons for thinking that it must mean something broadly similar to the Roman Catholic teaching that Mary was assumed into heaven in both body and soul. What we are being told therefore is that the belief that at the end of her life (either before or after death) Mary was taken up into heaven in both body and soul is 'consonant with Scripture.'

In the absence of any biblical statements about what eventually happened to Mary the only justification that is offered for this claim in the report is the appeal to the biblical stories about Enoch, Elijah, the penitent thief and St Stephen which are said to: '…offer hints or partial analogies that may throw light on the mystery of Mary's entry into glory.' The problem in the cases of the penitent thief and of St. Stephen is that in both cases we are dealing with a case of individuals entering into a state of disembodied blessedness where they will await the resurrection of

12 *Common Worship,* eucharistic prayers B, F and G (pp 190, 200 and 203).

their bodies on the last day. There is nothing to suggest that they were taken up into heaven in the 'fullness of their person'. The cases of Enoch and Elijah offer a better analogy but there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that what happened to these two individuals provides a precedent for the fate of either Mary or any other Christian believer. In the New Testament the only person who enters into glory in body and soul prior to the final resurrection of the dead is Christ Himself and there is no suggestion that this will be true of anyone else.

The suggestion these examples show a belief in Mary's assumption into heaven is 'consonant with Scripture' is therefore unsustainable. In normal English usage 'consonant' means 'consistent with' or 'harmonious with'. The fundamental problem with the report's argument at this point is that there is no general biblical pattern of especially godly people being assumed body and soul into heaven that could then apply to Mary: in the Bible itself what happened to Enoch and Elijah is seen as exceptional rather than normative.

We are also told that the idea that Mary was assumed into heaven must be understood in 'the light of Scripture.' In terms of the argument developed in the report this means that it must be understood in the light of the biblical teaching that Christians have already been raised with Christ and therefore already participate in the glory of heaven. The problem is that the report overlooks the fact that in Scripture this belief exists in tension with the belief that the full manifestation of our resurrection with Christ will only happen when Christ returns and the bodies of those who have died are raised to new life (see 1 Cor. 15:1-58; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). Living the Christian life means living in the tension between these two realities: that we have been raised with Christ already but that we shall only experience this fully at the end of time. (Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Cor. 5:1-5). The report distorts the biblical pattern of grace and hope by suggesting that in Mary at least this tension has already been overcome.

A further problem is the fact that the report claims New Testament texts such as 2 Cor. 5:17 point us to the meaning of the tradition about Mary's assumption without acknowledging that in the New Testament such language is used in the context of the conviction that thus far the new creation has only been fully manifested in Christ Himself. Therefore when the report declares that 'the pattern of hope and grace already foreshadowed in Mary will be fulfilled in the new creation in Christ when all the redeemed will participate in the full glory of the Lord' it is giving Mary a role that in the New Testament belongs solely to Christ. In the New Testament it is Christ and not Mary or anyone else who foreshadows what will be when the new creation is revealed.

The Immaculate Conception

The *second* claim is 'that in view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One, Christ's redeeming work reached 'back' in Mary to the depths of her being and to her earliest beginnings' (78 cf. 59). As before we have here a statement phrased in vague language but what it seems to be saying is in line with the 1854 doctrine of the immaculate conception. The words seem to imply that in the case of Mary the redeeming work of Christ had a retroactive effect in that from the

beginning of her existence Christ dealt with sin in every area of her life. The report is therefore able to say that 'Roman Catholics can recognize in this what is affirmed by the dogma – namely 'preserved from all stain of original sin' and 'from the first moment of her conception'.' There are two problems with the report's case for believing that Mary was preserved from all sin in this way.[13]

The first problem is the Lucan text appealed to as direct biblical justification is Luke 1:28 where we read that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said: 'Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you.' The report argues that the underlying Greek here '…implies a prior sanctification with divine grace prior to her calling' (16). It later glosses this by saying that 'we can thus see that God was at work in Mary from her earliest beginnings, preparing her for the unique vocation of bearing in her own flesh the new Adam' (55). This argument is a classic example of 'eisegesis', reading into biblical passages that which is not there. Nothing is said in Luke 1:28 or anywhere else in the New Testament about Mary being prepared in some special way to be the mother of the Messiah, let alone this meaning she was miraculously preserved from sin. As George Caird notes in his commentary, 'Mary is addressed simply as the favoured one, the recipient of a privilege, the beneficiary of God's sovereign and unconditioned choice'.[14] In the context of Luke 1 Mary is said to be favoured by God because she has been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah (Luke 1:30-33) and she is chosen simply because she is chosen, not because she has been prepared in advance for the role by some miraculous work of God earlier in her life.

The report has (whether intentionally or not) perpetuated the theology reflected in the traditional Latin translation of Luke 1:28 as '*plena gratia'* – 'full of grace'. This (mis)translation (rejected by all modern versions including the Roman Catholic *Jerusalem Bible*) embodies the idea that grace is a quality in human beings. In the case of Mary this means she is fit to be the Mother of God because of her total sanctity. She is, as the report puts it, 'graced', that is to say made holy, by the work of God in her from the earliest moments of her existence and as such prepared for the vocation of being the Mother of God. The biblical idea of grace, however, is that grace is not a quality with which human beings, in this case Mary, are endowed. Grace is the gift of God's merciful favour to those who in and of themselves are totally undeserving (Eph. 2:1-10, Titus 3:3-7).[15] In the case of Mary this means that she has nothing in her that makes her fit to be the Mother of God, but God chooses her anyway. As so often Martin Luther gets the point exactly:

13 Although the dogma only talks about 'original sin' this does not mean that Roman Catholic theology is open to the idea that Mary then went on to commit actual sin. The idea is rather that being preserved miraculously from original sin Mary was as a result free from the actual sin that results from it.

14 G.B. Caird, *Saint Luke,* Penguin, Harmondsworth 1965, p 53.

15 For explanations of these different understandings of grace see, for instance, P.S. Watson, 'Grace' in A Richardson, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Theology,* SCM, London 1969, pp 147-149 and R. Kearsley, 'Grace' in S.B. Ferguson et. al., eds, *New Dictionary of Theology,* IVP, Leicester 1988, pp 280-281. It is true that in texts such as Acts 4:33, 11:23, 13:43, Rom. 5:21 and 1 Cor. 15:10 grace seems to be described in terms of the activity of God in the life of believers, but in context it is clear that what is being talked about is the effects of grace rather than grace itself.

> 'O Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, you were nothing and all despised; yet God in his grace regarded you and worked such great things in you. You were worthy of none of them, but the rich and abundant grace of God was upon you, far above any merit of yours. Hail to you! Blessed are you from henceforth and forever in finding such a God.' Nor need you fear that she will take it amiss if we call her unworthy of such grace. For, of a truth, she did not lie when she acknowledged her unworthiness and nothingness, which God regarded, not because of any merit in her but solely by reason of his grace.[16]

The second problem is the way the report appeals to the general teaching of Scripture. The report correctly declares that Scripture speaks of God's care for all, even before they are born, and his call of some even from their conception. It also notes that Christ's death frees from sin those who preceded him historically (54 and 59). However, in neither case does this biblical teaching point to the idea that either Christians in general or Mary in particular are preserved in holiness and kept free from sin by the action of God from the earliest moment of their lives. On the contrary, the explicit biblical teaching is that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). There is no suggestion that this is not true of Mary as well although the report attempts to get round this. It states (in a footnote) that although Paul's assertion 'might appear to allow no exceptions, not even for Mary', it must be set in 'the rhetorical-apologetic context of the general argument of Romans 1 – 3' where it is seen to have 'a quite specific purpose…which is unrelated to the issue of the 'sinlessness' or otherwise of Mary' (59, fn 12).

The difficulty with this argument is that in Rom. 1:18-3:23 Paul shows both Jews and Greeks are in equal need of the gospel precisely by arguing that each and every individual, whether Jew or Greek, is a sinner (Rom. 3:9). In the words of F.F. Bruce, St Paul is saying that 'all men, as individuals, have sinned'.[17] This being the case, his teaching is clearly related to the issue of the sinlessness or otherwise of Mary. It tells us that she too was a sinner. This means that we have to say that the report's contention that what they say about Mary here is 'consonant with Scripture' is unsustainable. What is said in this item is not only not built upon Scripture, it is in fact contrary to it.

The Marian dogmas, Scripture and tradition

What the above analysis in turn means is that the next claim – that 'the teaching about Mary in the two definitions of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of hope and grace, can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures and the ancient common traditions' (78 cf 60) is also unsustainable.

The report attempts to show that the two definitions can be seen as consonant with Scripture but this argument simply does not work. Even interpreted within the theological framework of 'grace and hope' suggested by the report they are not in line with what Scripture teaches. Furthermore neither can they rightly be said to be consonant with the 'ancient common traditions'. The phrase 'ancient

16 M. Luther *Das Magnificat* cited in W. Hollewenger, 'Ave Maria: Mary, the Reformers and the Protestants', *One in Christ* 4, 1977, p 287.

17 F.F. Bruce, *Romans,* IVP, Leicester 1983, p 102.

common traditions' means the traditions of the Patristic period and it is clear these show only qualified support for the beliefs reflected in the definitions.

In the case of the Immaculate Conception, although there were those like St. Augustine who were reticent about acknowledging Mary's sinfulness, nevertheless, as the report acknowledges (para 38) there were also Fathers who held she was a sinner. As John Kelly notes, even after the Council of Ephesus in 431 had declared Mary was *Theotokos* 'the old doubts about her sinlessness and moral perfection continued to be widely held. In the East the tradition going back to Origen which stressed her human frailties and lack of faith in her Son was remarkably slow in dying; in the West the conviction that only Christ has been ideally good, and Augustine's more recent teaching about original sin, remained as stumbling blocks for even longer'.[18]

In the case of the Assumption we are dealing with a belief that only seems to have arisen in the fourth century and even then took some time to be generally accepted. It therefore cannot be said to be a belief that is representative of the Patristic period as whole. It is not part of the most ancient common tradition.[19]

The questions of authority

If the argument that the definitions are consonant with Scripture and patristic tradition fails then the next claim also fails – the statement that agreement about the definitions contained in the report 'when accepted by our two Communions, would place the questions about authority which arise from the two definitions of 1854 and 1950 in a new ecumenical context' (78).

The argument on which this statement is based (paras 61-63) is that if the approach to Marian doctrine set out in the report were to be accepted by the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches as an authentic expression of the faith they share, then this would provide a way through the ecumenical impasse currently caused by the existence of the two Roman Catholic dogmatic definitions concerning Mary. It would do this because Anglicans would be able to recognise the substance of the Roman Catholic dogmas as based not simply on the authority of the Pope and the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church (the standard Anglican critique of them) but as a legitimate expression of the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Early Church.

The problem is if it can be shown that the approach to Marian doctrine proposed is not consonant with Scripture and the teaching of the Early Fathers then the whole basis put forward for ecumenical rapprochement collapses: the problem for Anglicans of dogmatic definitions rooted solely in Roman Catholic tradition and Papal authority would remain.

Mary and prayer

The final claimed area of agreement is that 'Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry of Christ, our unique mediator, that Mary and the saints pray

18 J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (5th edn), A&C Black, London 1980, pp 498-499.

19 It should also be noted that, as J K Elliott comments, the Assumption 'originated in apocryphal literature' (J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, OUP, Oxford 2004). The samples contained in this volume make clear this literature is entirely legendary in nature. No one has ever succeeded in showing this material is based on reliable historical tradition concerning what happened at the end of Mary's life.

for the whole Church and that the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us is not communion-dividing' (78, cf. 64-75).

The first problem here is the claim that 'Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry of Christ'. The argument is that biblical passages such as John 2:1-12 and John 19:26-27 indicate that Mary has a continuing maternal role in heaven caring for the faithful and bringing their needs to the attention of her son. However, the passages in question do not provide an adequate basis for such beliefs. There is nothing in them to suggest that what St. John wanted his readers to understand was that Mary had a continuing maternal role in heaven. In the absence of any evidence that this was his intention we cannot simply take incidents from the fourth Gospel and use them as the basis for seeking to decide what is currently happening in heaven.

The second problem is the more general issue of whether it is legitimate to ask the saints to pray for us. As Article XXII indicates, after long debates about the matter the English Reformers eventually came to the view that the invocation of the saints was theologically illegitimate[20] and, at least as far as the Church of England goes, this still remains the official Anglican position. The argument put forward by the report for invoking the saints is that if we can ask people on earth to pray for us we can ask the same of the saints in heaven. This is not a new argument. It was a standard argument on the traditionalist side at the Reformation and was explicitly rejected by the English Reformers as can be seen, for example, in the *Second Book of Homilies* (described in Article XXXV as containing: '…a godly and wholesome doctrine'), in the Homily 'Of Prayer'.

What the report is suggesting is therefore that Anglicans should accept an argument that was explicitly rejected by the English Reformers and is still explicitly rejected by one of the Church of England's official doctrinal standards, without giving us any new or cogent reason why we should do so. That is not a good basis for ecumenical agreement.

Finally, the report suggests that the issue of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us is 'not communion-dividing'. This is a problematic suggestion. The term 'communion-dividing' is never defined and, as we know, what it means to be in or out of communion with someone is a much debated issue. Further, if communion-dividing means that which divides the visible Church then it is communion-dividing in the sense that there is no prospect of the Roman Catholic Church being in full communion with a Church that did not officially permit and practice the invocation of the saints and equally no prospect of Evangelical Anglicans ever agreeing to be part of a Church that did.

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20 The use of the adjective 'Romish' in Article XXII can be a red herring on this point. It does not mean 'that particular version of the invocation of saints practised in the Roman Church', but rather 'the invocation of saints, which the Roman Church practices'.

Conclusion: what then can we say?

For the reasons given above I could not as an Evangelical Anglican endorse the conclusions of *Mary - Grace and Hope in Christ* as expressing what I believe or what I think my Church should accept. However, I do not want to end on this negative note. I know that what I have said will inevitably be seen by many Christians as dishonouring to Mary, but that is not my intention. I want to say with Huldrych Zwingli: 'The more honour and love grows amongst humankind, the greater honour and respect will grow towards Mary because she has borne us the great and merciful Lord and Saviour'.[21] Therefore, in order to honour Mary, I want to finish by saying what I think we can rightly say about her on the basis of the witness of Scripture.

Firstly, on the basis of Matt. 1:23 and Luke 1:35, we can say that Mary was the *Theotokos*, the God bearer, the Mother of God.

Secondly, on the basis of Luke 1:28 and 1:30 we can say that as such she is a person who has been highly favoured by God, someone who has been privileged by being given a uniquely significant place in God's economy.

Thirdly, as the one who was the Mother of God it is legitimate to describe her with many of the Early Fathers as the 'new Eve'.[22]

Fourthly, we can rightly say that in spite of her human frailty and sinfulness Mary is a model for Christian discipleship. She is the one who was obedient to God's word (Lk 1:37), who praised God for His mighty works of salvation (Luke 1:46-55), who pondered in her heart the things she learned about Christ (Luke 2:51), who brought people's needs to Christ and told people to be obedient to Him (John 2:3-4), who stayed with Christ to the end when other disciples had run away to hide (John 19:25-27), and who devoted herself to prayer with other members of the first Christian community as they waited for the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

For all these reasons we can glorify God for the life and witness of Mary and join with all generations in calling her blessed.

Dr Martin Davie is the Theological Secretary of the Council for Christian Unity and Theological Consultant to the House of Bishops. In this article he is writing in a personal capacity.

21 *Zwinglis Werke* 1:426 quoted in W. Hollewenger, 'Ave Maria', p 289.

22 In the words of St Irenaeus, 'And just as through a disobedient virgin man was stricken and fell into death, so through the Virgin who was obedient to the Word of God man was reanimated and received life. For the Lord came to seek again the sheep that was lost; and man it was that was lost; and for this cause there was not made some other formation, but in that same which had its descent from Adam He preserved the likeness of the [first] formation. For it was necessary that Adam should be summed up in Christ, that mortality might be swallowed up and overwhelmed by immortality; and Eve summed up in Mary, that a virgin should be a virgin's intercessor, and by a virgin's obedience undo and put away the disobedience of a virgin'. Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 33 in I.M. Mackenzie, *Irenaeus's Demonstration of the apostolic Preaching,* Ashgate, Aldershot 2002, p 11.