

**Mother Mary:
A Historical Look at Pentecostal Views of Mary**

by Lisa P. Stephenson

Introduction

In 1981, during the ninth ecumenical dialogue session between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals, the topic of Mary was designated as the focus of discussion. The reports from the meeting deem the session both helpful and successful in working through differences, though the subject was described as “volatile” and the conversation as “difficult.” There were some agreements between the two parties, but much of the time together was filled by the Pentecostal representatives raising objections and the Roman Catholic representatives responding.¹

The following year, Jerry Sandidge, who offered the paper for the Pentecostal side during the dialogue, published a revised form of his paper reflecting on the points of agreement and disagreement between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals on the topic.² In his article, Sandidge highlights four characteristics of Mary that he believes can serve as a consensus between the two traditions, and thus as a potential way forward for ecumenical relations. This article, therefore, will seek to demonstrate Sandidge’s claims more extensively, offering varied historical data from Pentecostal periodicals that elaborate further on his themes and suggest additional forays for ecumenical dialogue.³

¹Jerry L. Sandidge, *Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue (1977-1982): A Study in Developing Ecumenism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 237, 249.

²Jerry L. Sandidge, “A Pentecostal Response to Roman Catholic Teaching on Mary,” *Pneuma* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 33-42.

³For research on this topic, I utilized the digital collections of the Consortium of Pentecostal Archives (www.pentecostalarchives.org). The periodicals date from the beginning of the twentieth century until the end, and are primarily representative of Pentecostal denominations and voices within North America. Because of the constraints of the search engine, I used the search terms “Mother Mary” and “Virgin Mary” to find pertinent articles. In no way does this research exhaust the data, but it does provide a window into Pentecostals’ views on the subject.

Corroborating the Marian characteristics that Sandidge proposes with historical documentation is a necessary step if these points of agreement can serve to further ecumenical dialogue and understanding.

I will begin by addressing the reasons why Pentecostals have been reticent to embrace Catholic Mariology. In raising these objections I do not seek to give credibility to Pentecostals' understandings (or misunderstandings) of Catholic doctrine and practice, but to highlight what Pentecostals have identified to be the troublesome assertions. Though anti-Mary rhetoric surfaces, this assessment does not represent a wholistic Pentecostal perspective on Mary. It must be taken in context and balanced with more positive depictions of her among Pentecostals, which I will then turn to and explicate further. I will use Sandidge's proposed points of agreement to structure this Marian mosaic and ground his theological claims in historical sources. What emerges from the data is that, while some Pentecostals have been hesitant to embrace Catholic Mariology, their positive valuation of Mary has not been completely muted.

Anti-Mary Rhetoric: Pentecostal Rejection of Catholic Mariology

It is no secret that Pentecostals disparage Catholic Mariology. Within the literature, there are several facets of Mariology that Pentecostals find troubling and mention repeatedly in various articles. The apprehensions voiced coalesce around two primary themes that are interconnected: idolatry and Christology. With respect to the first concern, multiple authors describe Catholics' treatment of Mary as "worship" and Mary herself as an "idol."⁴ One author claims that the Roman Catholic church "deifies" Mary.⁵ Another describes a woman who was reciting some kind of Marian prayer as a "cry out to Baal."⁶ Still others describe Catholics as "heathen" who are in "darkness" and operating in "blindness" because of their beliefs and practices with respect to Mary.⁷ Perhaps the harshest allegation equates Catholicism with Babylon, an eschatological view that interprets the "Mystery

⁴"Tidings from Those Who Dwell Among the Heathen," *The Latter Rain Evangel*, July 1915, 22; Mrs. Thomas Anderson, "The Appalling Idolatry in South America," *The Latter Rain Evangel*, May 1926, 22-23; Ralph Williams, "Transforming Power of the Gospel in Central America," *The Latter Rain Evangel*, June 1935, 6; N. J. Poysti, "What is Bolshevism?," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, Mar. 28, 1936, 8-9.

⁵Charles Wm. Walkem, "Gems from the Greek," *The Foursquare Magazine*, Oct. 1946, 14.

⁶Mrs. L. S. Lambert, "Home Mission Needs," *The Church of God Evangel*, Jan. 19, 1946, 3.

⁷Alice E. Luce, "Portions for Whom Nothing is Prepared," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, Dec. 9, 1922, 6; Phebe Diorio, "Missionary News: Mexico," *The Bridegroom's Messenger*, Feb. 1963, 5.

Babylon” of Revelation 17 to be the Church of Rome and Mary as the woman riding the beast, the Queen of Heaven (Jer 44). As the scarlet woman of Revelation 17, Mary is thus the mother of all “isms” and cults. She is the “system that is blighting every nation wherever she has gone; that has held the nation in darkness and superstition and illiteracy. . . .”⁸ One author goes as far as to blame the Mariology in Russia for the rise of Bolshevism there.⁹

The concern over idolatry gets even more focused for some Pentecostals in terms of Mary’s relationship to Christ. This comes to the fore in comments about the day of Christmas being overshadowed by the Virgin of Guadalupe’s feast day at the beginning of December, or that processions for Mary during Holy Week claim most of the people’s attention.¹⁰ It was thought by some that Catholics loved the Virgin Mary more than they did Christ.¹¹ Other Pentecostals expressed specific concern that the doctrines of Mary’s assumption and immaculate conception put her on a level equal with Christ.¹² The issue of intercessory mediation was especially troubling to many Pentecostals because granting Mary this function seemed to replace Christ as the mediator.¹³ Commenting on this, one author says:

They have dethroned Jesus and even God Himself and in place of them have set up the Virgin Mary. It is not just Jesus who saves you, it is the Virgin Mary. If you are sick they point you to the Virgin Mary. To them, Jesus is only the child of the Virgin Mary. You hear scarcely anything of Jesus as a man.

⁸J. C. Kellogg, “Modern Women in Prophecy,” *Foursquare Crusader*, June 1, 1932, 3; Frank M. Boyd, “Current Events and Topics of Interest,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, July 26, 1924, 7. Seven years later some of the content from Boyd’s piece concerning Babylon and Catholicism appeared again in Stanley Frodsham’s “The Editor’s Notebook,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, June 20, 1931, 5.

⁹Poysti, “What is Bolshevism?,” 8-9. Though Poysti refers to the “Greek Catholic Church” with this charge, in all probability he was describing the Orthodox Church rather than the Roman Catholic.

¹⁰Diorio, “Missionary News: Mexico,” 2; “The Burlesque of Religion Witnessed in Guatemala,” *The Bridegroom’s Messenger*, July 1, 1908, 2; B. A. Schoeneich, “A Land Ruled by Priestcraft and Superstition,” *The Latter Rain Evangel*, Sept. 1912, 15.

¹¹Minnie Varner, “The Great Mission Field at our Doors,” *The Latter Rain Evangel*, Oct. 1922, 2-3.

¹²“The Pulse of a Dying World,” *The Latter Rain Evangel*, Feb. 1930, 17; “Passing and Permanent: Newsbriefs from the Christian Perspective,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, Dec. 20, 1953, 7.

¹³Mrs. L. M. Piper, “And the Lord Looked Upon Peter: Why Christians Deny their Lord,” *The Latter Rain Evangel*, Apr. 1919, 6-7; Luce, “Portions for Whom Nothing is Prepared,” 6; Cyril Bird, “Little Is Much When God Is In It,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, Mar. 3, 1923, 6-7; Varner, “The Great Mission Field at our Doors,” 2-3; E. C. Clark, “Religion and the World,” *The Church of God Evangel*, Sept. 4, 1943, 4.

His death means to them nothing at all. They are really Mary worshipers.¹⁴

While at first glance the attitude exhibited by Pentecostals may seem to be completely closed off to Mary, one should situate these views within their given contexts. That is, many of the negative views expressed appear in missionary reports from the field (primarily Mexico and South America), and one can only assume that there is already a pejorative predisposition, given the proselytizing framework. This is all the more true if, as several Pentecostals claimed, the Catholic priests were employing their parishioners' devotion to Mary as a weapon against the Pentecostal missionaries. For example, one author claims that a Catholic priest in Columbia erected a monument to the virgin Mary on a prominent peak in the Andes to work the townspeople into a frenzy of devotion to Mary and, consequently, hatred of the missionaries because of their lack of faithfulness to the virgin.¹⁵ Nonetheless, despite the context, the anti-Mary rhetoric among early Pentecostals might seem to diminish hopes for ecumenical progress. Is there really common ground between the two traditions on this topic? To this question we now turn.

Pro-Mary Claims: Pentecostal Embrace of the Person of Mary

Whereas it is clear that some Pentecostals have been hesitant to embrace Catholic Mariology, the sources also reveal that some Pentecostals affirm the person of Mary. Positive depictions of Mary among Pentecostals can lay a foundation for further ecumenical dialogue and understanding between Catholics and Pentecostals. The historical sources help to expand and nuance Sandidge's four claims. Moreover, when it comes to favorable portrayals of Mary, Pentecostals actually adopt a Marian approach similar to Catholics! That is, while references to Mary are found in all four Gospels, the way in which she is portrayed in each work differs depending on the theological perspective of the author, and the distinctions are significant.¹⁶ It has even been suggested that these textual variations can account, at least in part, for the multiplicity of approaches to Mary among the many ecclesial traditions. Elizabeth Johnson says,

¹⁴Schoeneich, "A Land Ruled by Priestcraft and Superstition," 15.

¹⁵Dan T. Muse, ed., "Foreign Missions," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, Apr. 15, 1943, 6.

¹⁶The following are references to Mary in the Gospels: Matt 1:16, 18-25, 2:1-23; Mark 3:20-21, 31-35; Luke 1:26-56, 2:1-52; John 2:1-11, 19:25-27.

Protestants traditionally follow Mark's rather negative assessment of Jesus' mother; Catholics take from Luke a positive, personalistic view of her as full of grace and favor from God, a woman who cooperated with the divine adventure of bringing the Redeemer into human flesh; while Orthodox approach Mary in the iconic, symbolic manner of John.¹⁷

Pentecostals, rather than following the Protestant approach to Mary (via Mark), predominantly turn to the Lukan narrative when referencing Mary. This point of departure should come as no surprise given Pentecostals' penchant for Luke-Acts, and it results in a more favorable reading of Mary that parallels the Catholic approach.

Mary as Virgin

For Sandidge's first point of agreement, he maintains that both Catholics and Pentecostals can agree on Mary being a virgin, at least with respect to the virgin birth of Jesus (which is not to be confused with the Catholic belief of Mary's perpetual virginity). From the Pentecostal perspective this is certainly true, and this facet of Mary is mentioned countless times throughout the periodicals. In fact, the description of Mary as "virgin Mary" appears so frequently that one is left with the impression that "virgin" is a part of her name!

However, beyond serving as a reference to Mary's sexual chastity when Christ was born, Mary's virginity was also deployed for other theological means. It became a defense for Pentecostals in the battle for conservative Christianity and had more to do at times with creating a spiritual litmus test among Christians with regard to views of Scripture, the supernatural, and Jesus, than it did with constructing a view about Mary per se. This is illustrated clearly in a 1962 article entitled "The Virgin Birth: Fact or Fallacy?" The piece begins by saying, "Perhaps no other doctrine in the Bible has caused more intellectual and spiritual difficulty than that of the Virgin Birth of our Lord. Certainly no other doctrine has made it possible to detect more readily whether a man is a theological 'conservative' or a 'liberal.'"¹⁸ But the significance of this spiritual gauge does not stop here. The author continues:

¹⁷Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 3; Georg Kretschmar and René Laurentin, "The Cult of the Saints," in *Confessing One Faith: A Joint Commentary on the Augsburg Confession by Lutheran and Catholic Theologians*, ed. George W. Forell and James F. McCue (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 278-80.

¹⁸Raymond Becker, "The Virgin Birth: Fact or Fallacy?" *The Foursquare Magazine*, Dec. 1962, 3.

Even the rankest infidel must confess that the Bible represents Jesus Christ as having been conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. It appears to us that if one denies the teaching on this subject he has rejected the authority of the Book.

The Virgin Birth raises the question of supernaturalism. Practically every person who denies the doctrine rejects the supernatural as such. To say that the Virgin Birth is “symbolic, rather than physical,” is to cast doubt upon the very heart of Christianity, which is its supernaturalness.

The negation of the Virgin Birth is destructive of the whole fabric of the Christian faith. It seriously weakens, if it does not destroy, the doctrine of the Incarnation (God manifest in the flesh) upon which our confidence rests and without which the Christian faith cannot survive.¹⁹

The central place of the virginity of Mary amidst the culture wars is captured well by another author who said, “Many today are denying the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. If you take that out, you may just as well burn your Bible. It is all or nothing, for on this rests the entire plan of redemption.”²⁰

Thus, while Sandidge’s conjecture is true that Catholics and Pentecostals can agree on Mary being a virgin, historically this tenet of faith is more involved for Pentecostals. Recognizing this complexity provides the potential for an even broader basis of consensus between the two traditions. Catholics’ affirmation of Mary’s virginity signifies that there are also likely similarities between Catholics and Pentecostals on issues of scripture, Christology, and the supernatural. In this sense, Mariology can serve as a gateway to further ecumenical consensus on other theological points.

Mary as the “Mother of God”

For Sandidge’s second point of agreement, he proposes that both Catholics and Pentecostals can affirm the theological truth of the title “Mother of God”—and its intention to preserve certain christological claims—even if Pentecostals do not subscribe to its literal usage with respect to Mary. The historical sources bear this out and reveal the reason

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Aimee Semple McPherson, “Footsteps of Destiny,” *The Bridal Call Foursquare*, Dec. 1929, 7.

why Pentecostals shy away from the *θεοτοκος* label. It appears that many misunderstood what it meant to refer to Mary as the “Mother of God,” assuming it implied Mary’s connection with Christ’s pre-existence rather than his incarnation. One author says, “Now, Christ’s deity does not come from his mother. *Mary is never called the mother of God.*”²¹ A different author maintains that rather than being the “mother of God,” Mary was the “mother of Jesus.” This is the case because Mary only gave birth to Christ’s *humanity*, whereas his *divine sonship* has always existed. Jesus as the Son of God could not have been “born” via Mary, only “given.”²² Another author claims that “Mary did not produce God. She was merely the vehicle through which the human body of our Lord was to come.”²³

Moreover, to develop Sandidge’s point of agreement further, the historical sources reveal that Pentecostals not only affirmed the christological truths contained in the title *θεοτοκος*, but also heartily embraced Mary in the role of mother. In fact, outside of Christmas, the second most common mention of Mary is around Mother’s Day. Pentecostals did not hesitate to recognize Mary as the most beloved mother and to situate her in a preeminent place among mothers everywhere.²⁴ One author says:

Mary was the perfect mother. God was able to see that before He chose her to mother His Son. Jesus remained her little one throughout His lifetime, and her attitude toward Him was always one of affection and care. The protective instinct of motherhood never departed from her, even after the recognition of her son as the all-powerful Anointed One of God. Once when she feared for His safety, she went with His brothers into the streets to search for Him and lead Him to safety. Her heart pined for His nearness and her soul suffered for His welfare. She was a mother in the highest sense of the term.²⁵

²¹Charles Wm. Walkem, “Perplexing Problems,” *The Foursquare Magazine*, June 1949, 15.

²²Kellogg, “Modern Women in Prophecy,” 8.

²³E. S. Williams, “The Birth of the King,” *The Pentecostal Evangel*, Dec. 14, 1952, 10.

²⁴Aimee Semple McPherson, “Mothers of the Bible,” *Foursquare Crusader*, May 7, 1930, 6.

²⁵Charles W. Conn, “God’s Favorite Woman,” *The Church of God Evangel*, Dec. 13, 1947, 11.

Because of Mary's good example, Pentecostals believed that motherhood everywhere was honored and lifted up.²⁶ The significance of this for ecumenical dialogue is that, beyond Sandidge's point that there is consensus around the theological implications of the *title* "Mother of God," there is shared respect and admiration between Catholics and Pentecostals for Mary's *role* as a mother. Perhaps this shift in conversation between the two traditions would provide a more fruitful ground for dialogue, and offer other similarities to build upon that may lead Pentecostals to a more favorable attitude towards the designation *τηροτοκος*.

Mary's Holiness

For Sandidge's third point of agreement, he posits that both Catholics and Pentecostals can value and appreciate the holiness of Mary. Once again, the historical sources bear this out, deriving Mary's purity from various details of her narrative. Some Pentecostals associate Mary's holiness with her appointment to be Jesus' mother, offering it as a reason that God chose her. For example, one author says, "Her life was as spotless as the lilies that blossom in the woodland. Her heart was as pure as the dewdrop which sparkles in the morning sun. She was to be highly favored above all the daughters of men."²⁷ Another author suggests that it was the purity of Mary's heart and mind that garnered God's favor, referring to her as a "saint of God."²⁸ One author even goes so far as to connect Mary's holiness to her genealogy and notes that both the royal and priestly lines met in Mary, combining the dignity of the former with the sanctity of the latter.²⁹

Other Pentecostals connect Mary's devoutness with her positive response to Gabriel's announcement to her, attributing her obedience to her holiness. For example, "[Mary] must have been very pure and holy in mind and heart, great in faith and love, for she believed the angel when he told of the wonderful thing which would happen to her and she was willing to bear the reproach which the unbelieving and evil would make of it. She is a pattern for all women in chastity and obedience."³⁰

²⁶"Godly Mothers in the Church of God," *White Wing Messenger*, Apr. 26, 1947, 1; Frank J. Lindquist, "Christmas is for Everyone," *The Pentecostal Evangel*, Dec. 20, 1953, 3.

²⁷Bert Edward Williams, "The Birth of Christ was on This Wise: When God Bestowed Honor on the Poor," *The Latter Rain Evangel*, Dec. 1932, 3.

²⁸Conn, "God's Favorite Woman," 3.

²⁹Rolf K. McPherson, "Think on These Things: The Virgin Mary's Place in History," *The Foursquare Magazine*, Dec. 1947, 12.

³⁰Will Shead, "Marriage by the Word of God," *The Church of God Evangel*, Nov. 28, 1942, 8.

Still other Pentecostals noted Mary's holiness in reference to the *Magnificat*. One author commented that Mary's purity is demonstrated in this hymn because "none but the purest hearts could give such genuine adoration and worship."³¹ Another remarked that, particularly in Mary's song, there is a "note of holy joy" so high that it could only have been sung by someone whose spirit was free from guile. Moreover, this same author notes that the words that comprise the *Magnificat* are Scripture and thus demonstrate that Mary had an "unusual acquaintance with scripture" that served to produce wholesome effects in her life and helped to preserve her from evil so that she could be consecrated to God.³²

Further, among Pentecostals, we also see Mary's holiness mentioned in conjunction with the Day of Pentecost. In these instances it is noted that even though Mary was "sanctified," she still needed the baptism of the Spirit.³³

Thus, Pentecostals do not struggle to recognize in Mary's life a godliness that is both persistent and exemplary. Sandidge is correct in noting that Pentecostals can identify with this truth and the historical sources reveal that they do so in multifaceted ways. To continue to open further forays into this characteristic of Mary that can serve ecumenical relations, it would be worthwhile to explore further the interconnection between the perpetual work of the Spirit in Mary's life and the notion of sanctification.

Mary as an Example of Christian Faith and Trust

For Sandidge's fourth point of agreement, he claims that both Catholics and Pentecostals can subscribe to Mary as a model and example of Christian faith and trust. Out of all the points of agreement, this resonates most strongly with Pentecostals, who look at various moments of her life as recorded in Scripture and tease out affirming qualities.³⁴ This theme is best exemplified in an article titled "God's Favorite Woman."³⁵ In this piece, the premise is that Mary was God's

³¹Conn, "God's Favorite Woman," 11.

³²Paul F. Beacham, "The Song of Mary," *Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, Dec. 16, 1948, 3.

³³Aimee Semple McPherson, "The Holy Spirit," *The Bridal Call*, July 1923, 6-7; idem, "Baptism of the Holy Spirit and Its Place in the Church," *Foursquare Crusader*, Mar. 22, 1939, 8.

³⁴For a more extensive treatment of this theme see Lisa P. Stephenson, "Truly Our Sister?: Pentecostal Readings of Mary," in *Receiving Scripture in the Pentecostal Tradition*, ed. Martin Mittelstadt, Daniel Isgrigg, and Rick Waldholm (Cleveland: CPT Press, forthcoming).

³⁵Conn, "God's Favorite Woman," 3, 11, 14.

favorite woman because there were various characteristics that Mary embodied to such an extent that she was “a little higher, a little deeper, a little broader in most things than the others around her.”³⁶ The point of highlighting Mary in this way was that her life should serve as a model for Christians today to emulate.

In order to exemplify the praiseworthy nature of Mary, the author, Charles Conn, highlights several facets of her life that are commendable. First, he notes that one of the most “striking” things about Mary was her “seemingly boundless faith.”³⁷ Specifically, that Mary could believe such an absurd claim that she would have a son while still being a virgin—even if she could not understand it—attests to her faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, Mary’s piety was exemplified by her ability to “effectually praise God.”³⁸ Her *Magnificat* points to her spiritual passion and the purity of her heart. In this passage of scripture one finds genuine adoration and worship. Third, Mary used great discretion after leaving Elizabeth’s presence and returning home: there is no record of Mary telling her secret to anyone—including Joseph—or of demanding fanfare, self-claimed virtue, or honor. No, Mary just returned home quietly. Fourth, the biblical narrative notes that Mary was a woman of meditation: she treasured up all the things that had happened after Christ’s birth and pondered them in her heart. Mary “spent much of her time in reverent meditation and musing on God’s righteousness, Person, and Word. Religion to her was not a perfunctory task to be performed regularly, but it was an inner experience that never grew old, that never relaxed its hold on her heart and mind.”³⁹ Fifth, Mary was a woman of obedience. This is the case not only initially in her faith-filled response to God’s choice of her as the mother of Jesus, but also in her attitude towards Jesus later, reflected in her response to the lack of wine at the marriage in Cana. While telling others to do whatever Jesus commanded them, her advice reflected the posture she herself had taken towards him. Lastly, but most importantly, Mary’s constancy is lifted up. Describing this aspect of Mary’s character, Conn writes,

She held on; she stayed, not only when the warm winds of eager youth were blowing, but through blasting tempests of hopelessness and despair, and finally through the doldrums of loneliness, of weakness, of helplessness. No up-and-down experience was in her heart, no vicissitudes ever occurred in her spiritual life. After the cruel death of her son, most mothers

³⁶Ibid., 3.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 11.

³⁹Ibid.

would have quit, or, at least, ceased an active part in religious work. But not constant Mary. On the day of Pentecost she was still with the followers of her son. . . . Regardless of the shock of seeing Jesus crucified, her stout heart kept beating for God.⁴⁰

As this demonstrates, Pentecostals can and do subscribe to Mary as a model and example of Christian faith and trust. Consequently, perhaps the ways in which Mary has informed and formed Catholic spirituality should not be altogether unwelcomed among Pentecostals. Further exploration that seeks similarities on this point between the two traditions should be pursued, recognizing that Mary can play an integral role in Christian discipleship and that this utilization of Mary is not altogether foreign to Pentecostals.

Conclusion

Given the historical data above, Sandidge's optimism regarding the existence of shared convictions between Catholics and Pentecostals concerning Mary is not the result of far-fetched ecumenical hopes. Rather, there is significant ground to warrant focusing in on his four points of agreement in hopes of revealing even more vistas of commonality between the two traditions. The historical sources provide a window into what Pentecostals have thought about Mary and the ways in which she is incorporated into the tradition, even if it is on the margins. Continued dialogue between Catholics and Pentecostals in this area can serve to push Pentecostals to see in Mary a Spirit-filled woman who should be honored within the faith.

⁴⁰Ibid., 11, 14.

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