

Do You Believe in the 'Immaculate Conception' of Mary?

Since the Bible does not specifically speak of the immaculate conception of Mary, I have rarely encountered it, considered it or even postulated about it. Raised as an evangelical-Pentecostal Protestant, I was not accustomed to even hearing, let alone reciting, the Hail Mary (in Latin, *Ave Maria*) prayer.

Therefore I was somewhat surprised to recently read that the Catholic observance of this 1854 papal decree is celebrated annually among Catholics on Dec. 8 as a "reality of the Faith." This caused me to pause and ponder what this seemingly foreign doctrine might mean to me and the present practice of our Christian faith.

The Mary Miracle

My friend and mentor Jack Hayford preached about the importance of Mary, the mother of our Lord, and wrote a well-received book, "The Mary Miracle," (reprinted as "The Christmas Miracle.") But it has been many years since I even reviewed it, let alone the novel dogma and extra-biblical, Catholic doctrine of Mary being born "without sin, from conception."

In his book, Hayford helps us comprehend our humanity and our limitations. God cares and wants His absolute best outcome for each of us through every situation. He continues to offer and fulfill miracles today in lives that are open to His invitation.

The Hail Mary Prayer

The Hail Mary is a traditional Christian prayer said regularly by Catholics and some Protestant denominations, which originally branched out of the mother church in the Reformation. It reverently addresses Mary, the mother of Jesus, with praise and petition:

"Hail Mary, full of grace, The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

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As with all church teachings, one must investigate what Scripture says concerning this dogma. Luke 1:26-38 tells us that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to the city of Nazareth, in the hill country west of the Sea of Galilee, to a young virgin named Mary (or *Miriam* in Hebrew). She was legally pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, who was a direct descendant of King David (Matt. 1:6-16). When Mary was "found to be with child," Joseph was told by an angel that this conception was from the Holy Spirit and not by human involvement nor unfaithfulness (Matt. 1:18-25).

Luke's account of the angel's visitation includes the announcement to Mary that God's grace (unmerited favor) had been bestowed on her. She had "found favor with God" and would "conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus" (Luke 1:30-33, ESV).

In verses 39-45, Mary's cousin Elizabeth experienced a unique confirmation by the child in her womb, John the Baptist, who leaped for joy when Elizabeth heard the voice of Mary's greeting to her. She spiritually discerned that Mary was blessed and "highly favored" of the Lord and her pregnancy was to result in the birth "of my Lord."

So the Bible does not speak of an immaculate conception of Mary in any direct way. We understand the conception of Jesus may be considered immaculate in the sense that it was supernatural and without sin, being “from the Holy Spirit.” But nothing is said of Mary’s supposed sinless conception nor birth.

Rather than Mary being a perpetual virgin, we are told she had other children (see Matt. 12:46, 13:55-56). Also, there is nothing in Scripture that speaks of the relatively new (1950) Catholic dogma of a heavenly assumption of Mary, where, at her death, she was “taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven.”

Apparently, medieval theologians often faced conflict regarding these subjects. Certain words or phrases were added to the prayer beyond just the words drawn from Luke’s account. Before the 1854 papal definition, many had pointed to Luke 1:28b, “Hail, [thou that art] full of grace” (Douay-Rheims Bible), to say that Mary was always filled with or endued with grace and thus without sin.

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Sin and the Savior

What does Scripture tell us about sin and the Savior? Paul’s epistle to the Romans gives us significant insight:

- Romans 3:23: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”—apparently, including Mary.
- Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord—“including for you and me!
- Romans 10:9-10: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart of one believes

and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved"—involving faith and function. We must believe and behave in conformity.

– Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that by testing you may reveal what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"—becoming immaculate in God's sight by the transforming and renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

The Best Gift of Christmas

Pastor Jack Hayford enjoyed Christmas more than any other pastor I knew. He reflected that his soaring joy and gladness at Christmastime was due directly to God's gift of Jesus to us and for us. In turn, as he wrote, "we give gifts because the Best and Grandest has been given to us."

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

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