

Was there much common ground between the first Protestant Reformers and the Catholic Church?

By Graham Osborne

This was one of those shocking revelations that I had never expected. While I knew there was much agreement between Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation some 500 years ago, what caught me by surprise was the agreement in areas that I would never have expected – specifically, the Eucharist and the Blessed Mother! If I had to pick the biggest bones of contention we have today with our separated brothers and sisters in Christ, I would certainly include these two very areas!

Let's start with the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Many Protestants would absolutely reject the idea of Jesus being truly present bodily in the Eucharist. But stunningly, this is the belief that Martin Luther himself held, and strongly defended [however, unlike Catholics, he believed that the bread and wine were still present as well].

Luther himself would write one of the clearest defenses of Jesus' bodily presence in the Eucharist that we have from the first 1500 years of Christianity. In strong terms, he claimed that only a demonic influence could ever persuade anybody to believe that when Jesus said, "*This is My Body*", He was only speaking symbolically.

Here are his exact words: "*Who but the devil, hath granted such a license of wresting the words of the holy Scripture? Who ever read in the Scriptures, that "my body" is the same as "this is a sign of my body"?... What language in the world ever spoke so? It is only then the devil, that imposeth upon us...*"

Luther then summarized all the writings of the Church Fathers on this teaching, a body of Christian writings revered by Catholic and Protestant scholars alike. He would write that this question of Jesus' bodily presence in the Eucharist was so important, and the Church Fathers had written on this topic so often, that if Jesus' Presence was not in fact "real", one of them would have said so, at least once. But he emphatically states that every single one of them taught that Jesus' Body and Blood is truly present in the Eucharist.

Again, here are his own words: "*Certainly in so many Fathers, and in so many writings, the negative might at least be found in one of them had they thought the body and blood of Christ were not really present: but they are all of them unanimous.*" Powerful!

But let us shift gears to what, for many, is the most contentious of all Protestant - Catholic issues today –the Blessed Mother.

Incredibly, the three main Reformers -Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli -all believed that Mary was perpetually a virgin, and that she had **NO** other children! This

belief is virtually unheard of in Protestant circles today. But let the Reformers speak for themselves...

Luther would write unequivocally that, *"It is an article of faith that Mary is Mother of the Lord and still a virgin.... Christ, we believe, came forth from a womb left perfectly intact."* Wow! [I added that part...]

And **Zwingli** would echo Luther's teaching, stating, *"I firmly believe that Mary, according to the words of the gospel as a pure Virgin brought forth for us the Son of God and in childbirth and after childbirth forever remained a pure, intact Virgin."*

And **Calvin** would reiterate this position, expanding on several Scriptural details around the question: *"There have been certain folk who have wished to suggest from... [Matt 1:25] that the Virgin Mary had other children than the Son of God, and that Joseph had then dwelt with her later; but what folly this is! For the gospel writer did not wish to record what happened afterwards; he simply wished to make clear Joseph's obedience... He had therefore never dwelt with her nor had he shared her company.... And besides this Our Lord Jesus Christ is called the first-born. This is not because there was a second or a third... Scripture speaks thus of naming the first-born whether or no there was any question of the second."*

And what about Mary's preeminent title as the "Mother of God", which most Protestants would take exception to today? All of them held it!

Luther would write that, *"In this work whereby she was made the **Mother of God**, so many and such good things were given her that no one can grasp them.... Not only was Mary the mother of Him who is born [in Bethlehem], but of Him who, before the world, was eternally born of the Father"*.

Calvin, in his characteristic attention to detail would state that, *"It cannot be denied that God in choosing and destining Mary to be the Mother of His Son, granted her the highest honor.... Elizabeth calls Mary Mother of the Lord, because the unity of the person in the two natures of Christ was such that she could have said that the mortal man engendered in the womb of Mary was at the same time the eternal God."*

And **Zwingli** would write simply and beautifully that, *"It was given to her what belongs to no creature, that in the flesh she should bring forth the Son of God."*

Who would have ever thought there could be such consensus between Protestants and Catholics on things that, today, seem so divisive? Let us be encouraged by this!