

# Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

*Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

Pastor Matt Cadora

Week of November 29, 2009

## *Advent: Week 1 Sermon: Mediation and Magnification*

Twenty years ago, while on a two-week mission trip to Poland, those on our team had a great deal of interaction with those of a Roman Catholic background. As it is said there, 'to be Polish is to be Catholic.' So, a couple of our team members were invited to speak at a Polish school in a class that was led by a Catholic priest. Someone asked them what they believe about God and how their beliefs differ from Catholicism. While trying to articulate such differences, one of the guys also sought to highlight the commonalities. Thinking of Jesus' birth and of Jesus' sinlessness, he said, "We believe in the virgin birth and the Immaculate Conception..." To which, Scott Seaton, the leader of our team, urgently waved him off and said with gentleness and panic, "No, no! We don't believe in the Immaculate Conception!" What Scott knew (that his teammate did not realize) was that the Immaculate Conception is not a specific belief about Jesus, but rather a specific belief about Mary – that the mother of Jesus "did not have original sin at her conception nor did she acquire elements of original sin in the development of her life (whereas all other human beings have original sin from their conception due to the fall of Adam)".<sup>1</sup>

In lieu of what I spoke about last Sunday regarding Mary, I thought it might be timely and appropriate to share with you a glimpse of the ancient and orthodox resistance (within the Catholic Church) to this mistaken idea of Mary's immaculate conception. Specifically, I want to share with you an excerpt from a letter written by Bernard of Clairvaux (1096-1153). But first an explanation of how I came across this letter..

When I was in Vancouver last spring, Dr. Jim Houston gave me a two-volume book that he recently compiled called "Letters of Faith Through the Seasons", a collection of letters and excerpts of writings from Christians dating way, way back. For example, you may have seen the quote on the front of the bulletin last Sunday from Adam of Perseigne, a believer who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. That quote is contained in Dr. Houston's book. Indeed, the whole purpose behind Dr. Houston's gift of the books to me was because he invited me to share with you, the Faith congregation, the riches of some of these writings of the 'saints of old'. Throughout this Advent season, I will share with you certain letters and quotes that seem especially pertinent to texts and topics we are contemplating upon.

We are often much too ignorant of the Christians who have gone before us and what they can convey to us as we seek to follow in their footsteps and walk with God. Presbyterians are especially apt to appreciate those believers who stood so firmly for the faith in the Reformation during the 1500's and 1600's (and that is good and appropriate), but in the process, we pay little attention to the Church that existed before the Protestant Reformation. And, in tandem with our Reformed confession, we develop an aversion to almost all things Roman Catholic. But we need to recognize that, for those who lived prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic church was basically the only Church people had - and the abuses and corruptions that led up to the Reformation were not necessarily present at other times in the history of the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Elwell, Walter, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 'Immaculate Conception', Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 550.

With that in mind, I share with you this letter from Bernard of Clairvaux , a man read and oft quoted by such Reformers as Luther and Calvin. As a Cistercian reformer and confidante of rulers in his own day, Bernard of Clairvaux became the most influential Christian leader of the 12th century. In this letter, Bernard writes to the canons of Lyons, France, c.a. 1140, discussing his growing concern about their undue veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

*"Among all the churches of France, the church of Lyons is well known to be pre-eminent, for its flourishing strict discipline, grave conduct, mature counsels, and imposing authority and tradition...Because of this, I marvel...that you should wish to tarnish your good name by introducing a new festival at this time, a rite of which the Church knows nothing, both unreasonable and which has no authority in Church tradition."*

*"For you say the mother of the Lord should be highly honored. You are right, but the purity title you give her? The Virgin has many titles of true honor, many real marks of dignity, but she does not need any that are false. Let us honor her for the service of her body, the holiness of her life. Let us marvel at her fruitful virginity, and venerate her divine Son... Let us proclaim her to be... foretold by the patriarchs and prophets, chosen out of all and preferred before all..."*

*"But they claim to show records, so they say, of heavenly revelations (about her immaculate conception). How does it follow that her conception was holy because her birth was holy?...Where did this holiness come from?...How was it passed on?...Can it be said she was conceived holy because she was already holy before her conception?... Perhaps someone will argue she was herself conceived by the Holy Spirit, and not of man, but this has been unheard of until now! Rather I read that "the Holy Spirit came upon her," but not that it came with her,... nor that she herself was conceived by the Holy Spirit; she gave birth as a virgin, but she was not born of a virgin."*

*The angel answered (Mary), "The Holy Spirit will come upon you... So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God...For nothing is impossible with God." Luke 1"35-37.*

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<sup>2</sup> Houston, James M, Letters of Faith Through The Seasons, Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2006, p. 50-51.