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GOD USES THE WEAK RATHER THAN THE STRONG

By D.B. Knox

The Protestant Faith

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Sometimes a feeling of disappointment arises in the Christian's heart that the church is not a more impressive body. It is constantly being ignored by the great ones of the world, and we wonder why this should be so, since it is the Church of God, the Almighty Creator; it is the body of Christ, the Divine Son of God; it is the sphere where the Holy Spirit is at work. But, although the church has all these supernatural qualities, it is not very impressive by outward standards. However, the Bible tells us that this outward unimpressiveness is God's deliberate policy. His object is not to impress the senses, but to change the heart from evil into good at the deepest level. For it is possible to make a superficial impression without effecting any real heart change. God's method is to work through the unimpressive, strange though this may seem to us. Thus Psalm 8 says that out of the mouths of babes and sucklings God has ordained strength in order that His power might be all the more demonstrated, and in Mt. 11 Jesus praised his heavenly Father because He had kept back knowledge of Himself from the wise and prudent and revealed it, as it were, to babes. St. Paul made the same reflections in I Cor. 1. He drew the attention of the Christians in Corinth to the unimpressive character that that early Christian congregation at Corinth presented. He said that God had not called into a knowledge of salvation many wise as the world counts wisdom, nor many great ones, nor noble, but he went on "God chose the foolish things of the world that He might put to shame them that are wise; and God chose the weak things of the world, that he might put to shame the things that are strong; and the base things of the world, and the things that are despised, did God choose, yea and the things that are not, that he might bring to nought the things that are: that no flesh should glory before God."

God's power is all the more plain when He works through people unimpressive in themselves.

Otherwise we are inclined to take the credit to ourselves. You will remember that this was the reason why Gideon's army had to be so drastically reduced. Otherwise the nation would have relied on the strength of its numbers, and would have vaunted itself against God saying "My own arm has saved me" Judges 7:2. As St. Paul said, God's power is made perfect through our weakness.

Since this is God's principle in effecting His purposes, it is not surprising that the true Christian church has always been unimpressive, and its members undistinguished, judged by purely human standards, and comparatively small in number, though great in faith. On the other hand there is a standing temptation for us as Christians to forget this, indeed to be ashamed of it and to seek to advance God's work by using worldly means to impress, and to seek to commend the Gospel by other things than its own inherent goodness. Thus splendid and conspicuous buildings do not in themselves advance God's cause one iota, but on the other hand they may prove a hindrance if they get in the way of God's method. Similarly high sounding titles hinder rather than advance the true work of the Christian ministry, although they are doubtless valuable on a superficial, this-worldly level in obtaining entree to people of influence in the world. Christians are always under temptations to try to impress the world by something other than the Gospel and to spend a good deal of money in promoting ourselves. But in doing this we only get in the way of God's work. He effects his purposes through our prayer and witness to Christ and for this he mostly chooses the unimpressive by man's standards.

The principle of which I am speaking is clearly illustrated in the coming of Christ as man. He chose to be born into the home of a Galilean peasant, not into a royal palace where He would be

called Prince and be deferred to and where He would be able to wield all sorts of this-worldly influence, and He chose as His mother not a member of a well connected family but a humble obscure woman, who, in spite of the high privilege she was given, remained in obscurity throughout the period of Christ's ministry and the early years of the Church. It should be noted that outside the gospels there is only one reference to the Virgin Mary in the rest of the New Testament. This is in the first chapter of the Acts where she is mentioned as one amongst a group of women who were engaged in prayer with the disciples prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel. After this reference the New Testament is quite silent about the mother of Jesus. Plainly she did not take a prominent part in the Apostles' work of founding the church.

Mary herself in her song the Magnificat referred to her lowly station, praising God that he had had regard for the lowliness and humbleness of her situation. It is a grave mistake to translate, as does the Latin Vulgate, this word 'lowliness' by 'humility', as though God had taken into account Mary's moral perfections. There is no suggestion of this in the original, which speaks only of God choosing Mary in spite of her low station in life. Modern Roman Catholicism has obscured this lowliness of Mary by the place its theology accords to her. She is put almost on an equality with our Lord, and there is a constantly growing parallelism between the Divine Saviour and the Virgin in Roman Catholicism which obscures Christ's unique pre-eminence in salvation by exalting Mary to His side. Thus, Pope Benedict XV said only so recently as 1918 in his letter *Inter Sodalicis* (May 22 1918) "She has suffered together with the suffering and dying Son ... so that it can rightly be said that she herself together with Christ has redeemed the

human race", and Benedict urged the faithful "To venerate the Virgin of Sorrows to offer God the merits of the prayers and suffering of the same Virgin who stood at the foot of the cross of Jesus; trusting in these merits to obtain for themselves and for others the grace to persevere in faith and in the Christian life. Mary suffered and offered her Son to placate divine justice: so we may well say that she with Christ redeemed mankind. All those who seek Mary's protection will be saved for all eternity". Here we are taught to trust in Mary's merits for our eternal safety. Such non-biblical teaching diverts our attention from the merits of Christ, in whose name alone we are to be saved. Mary's exaltation in modern Roman Catholic theology does not stop here but it is further taught that only through the Virgin Mary can we obtain grace from God. Thus Pope Leo XIII declared on September 22, 1891 "No grace comes to us except through Mary ... so that as no-one can approach the supreme Father except through the Son, similarly no-one can approach Christ except through the mother". There are many other recent papal declarations to the same effect. Thus the Virgin Mary is frequently called co-Redemptrix with Christ, and she is thought of as standing at Christ's right hand dispensing all the gifts which He has to give to men. In this development we have a grave distortion of Biblical truth. Indeed there is no trace of this teaching in the Bible. This is admitted by the Roman Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott who on page 214 of his "Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma" admits that the first suggestion of this doctrine dates from the eighth century and even then it is only a very slender testimony, adding "The testimony became more numerous during the peak period of the middle ages".

This teaching about the Virgin Mary's place in the Christian religion which is so conspicuous a feature of modern Roman Catholicism subverts the

doctrine of the Bible which teaches that Christ alone is our Mediator. Moreover it is inconceivable, that if it were true that Mary plays the part in God's purposes that modern Roman Catholicism ascribes to her, she should be so inconspicuous a figure in the New Testament. As I say, she is only mentioned once outside the Gospels and in the Gospels themselves she is mentioned very seldom. The Roman Catholic view of Mary cannot be reconciled with the view of the mother of Jesus in the New Testament account. The Biblical picture does not place the mother of our Lord on the side of God and Christ, but altogether with the rest of mankind. Indeed, Jesus Himself deprecated any special honour being ascribed to His relatives after the flesh. In Mark 3:34-35 when He was told that His mother and His brothers were calling Him, He replied "Who are my mother and my brothers" and looking round on those who sat about Him he said "Here are my mother and my brothers, whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother". Again in Luke 11:23 when a woman in the crowd invoked a blessing on His mother Jesus replied "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it".

The true view that we should take of the virgin mother is that she is a witness to us of how God acts when He saves, for His method is to choose that which in the eyes of the world is nothing. It is of her low estate that she speaks in the Magnificat, and the rest of the New Testament testifies to the truth of this. It is a grave mistake to exalt Mary into a position not accorded to her in the Scripture, and which in reality contradicts the whole method of God's salvation. God we must adore and honour; and we adore Him the more in that He uses simple unobtrusive people for His work of blessing. If it were not so He would not be able to use most of us. And as we work for Him, let us remember that God's work is not advanced by outward splendour or impressiveness by this

world's standards; it is our inner faithfulness which He uses to bring about His purposes of blessing and renewal in the world.

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