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## Joseph Ratzinger: Evangelical Ecumenist or How to Argue With a Traditional Protestant Over the Immaculate Conception

Joseph Ratzinger jako ewangeliczny ekumenista, czyli jak spierać się  
z tradycyjnym protestantem o niepokalane poczęcie

**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a trend among some traditional Protestant theologians to regard Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI as a sympathetic fellow-traveller and ecumenical dialogue partner, focusing on his implementation of the texts of the Second Vatican Council throughout his career, his unique approach to ecumenical dialogue, and his *biblical* focus when defending the Immaculate Conception in *Daughter Zion*. His robust Catholic commitment coupled with his thoughtful canonical exegesis makes him a valuable dialogue partner with those Protestants who have similar ecclesial and theological commitments on the other side of the Reformation.

**KEY WORDS:** Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, ecumenism, evangelicalism, Protestant, Catholic, dialogue, Mary, Immaculate Conception, Mariology, Vatican II

**ABSTRAKT:** Niniejszy artykuł opisuje tendencję zauważalną wśród niektórych tradycyjnych teologów protestanckich, którzy obserwując wytrwale wprowadzanie w życie tekstów Soboru Watykańskiego II przez Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI, jego oryginalne podejście do dialogu ekumenicznego i skupienie na biblijnych podstawach w obronie niepokalnego poczęcia w książce *Córa Syjonu*, postrzegają go jako pełnego zrozumienia towarzysza podróży i partnera dialogu ekumenicznego. Niezachwiana katolicka postawa Ratzingera/Benedykta w połączeniu z przemyślaną egzegezą kanoniczną czyni go cennym partnerem dialogu z tymi protestantami, którzy wykazują podobne do niego zaangażowanie na rzecz swojego Kościoła i teologii po drugiej stronie sporu zapoczątkowanego w okresie reformacji.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Józef Ratzinger, Benedykt XVI, ekumenizm, ewangelikalizm, protestant, katolik, dialog, Maryja, Niepokalane Poczęcie, mariologia, Sobór Watykański II

## Introduction

Theology is the church's enterprise of thought, and the only church conceivably in question is the unique and unitary church of the creeds. Therefore, theology may be impossible in the situation of a divided church, its proper agent not being extant—unless, of course, one is willing to say that a particular confessional or jurisdictional body simply is the one church. To live as the church in the situation of a divided church—if it can happen at all—must at least mean that we confess we live in radical self-contradiction and that by every churchly act we contradict that contradiction. Also theology must make this double contradiction at and by every step of its way.

Robert W. Jenson, 1997<sup>1</sup>

I was introduced to Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, when I was assigned *The Spirit of the Liturgy*<sup>2</sup> as part of my formation for ordination in 2010. Much like Barth's Romans was in the playground of the theologians, this book was a bomb for me. Formed from the cradle in revivalist evangelicalism, I took it for granted that "worship" (by which we meant music) had to induce a psycho-emotional response in the worshippers; the components of the worship service were to be selected or deleted, arranged or based on the end in view, whether it was evangelism, encouragement, exhortation, etc. Ratzinger taught me that worship was about God: gathering in the name of his Son and in the Power of the Spirit to offer thanks and praise to the Father. Indeed, to be so united to Christ through Word and Sacrament as to participate in the very life of God. From that explosive encounter on, Joseph Ratzinger slowly but surely displaced John Calvin and Karl Barth as the theologian to whom I first turned for catechetical preparation, sermons, and for the sheer love of reading theology. Ratzinger knew how to worship. Ratzinger knew how to think. And he did both with a heart full of the love of Jesus.

*Introduction to Christianity*<sup>3</sup> taught me how to teach theology; *Teaching and Learning the Love of God*<sup>4</sup> challenged my vocation to ordained ministry; *Eschatology*,<sup>5</sup> how to prepare my people (and me) to meet the Lord in death;

<sup>1</sup> R.W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Triune God*, New York 1997, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> J. Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, San Francisco, CA 2000.

<sup>3</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, San Francisco, CA 2004.

<sup>4</sup> J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Teaching and Learning the Love of God*, San Francisco, CA 2017.

<sup>5</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, San Francisco, CA 2007.

*Daughter Zion*<sup>6</sup> deepened my understanding of Mary in New Testament by engaging with the Old Testament. I could go on—I sometimes wonder if I singlehandedly maintain Fr. Joseph Fessio's salary at Ignatius Press! Certainly, I am grateful for his bringing English editions of Ratzinger's work to North America.

I was once advised by a senior theologian that if I aspired to be a good theologian, I ought to apprentice myself to one both brilliant and holy. "Read everything they ever wrote!" he said. "And make sure they're holy and not just brilliant." Knowing this theologian to be very Reformed, I sheepishly admitted that I had already apprenticed myself to Ratzinger, by then Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. Imagine my relief when I could almost see him smiling behind his keyboard as he typed, "Me, too."

Why does Benedict speak so powerfully to me and to my friend? At first glance, an answer is not immediately forthcoming. After all, very few of his books are aimed at a general audience, let alone a Protestant one. They are for the Catholic faithful and, more narrowly, to their clergy. Furthermore, however much I recognize in Benedict a fellow pilgrim deeply in love with Jesus, his thought challenges the convinced Protestant at almost every step.

But that's precisely the place at which Benedict is so very valuable for me. I know I disagree with him and I'm pretty sure what I'm disagreeing about (and I often find out my disagreement needs nuance or is just plain wrong). I know this much because across the Reformation divide, he and I equally believe in Truth with a capital T. Together, we confess the reality of Revelation even if Ratzinger and I disagree over just what has been revealed. And that grants a certain foundation from which we can be open to surprising avenues of not only deepened mutual understanding but also agreement. This even as I daily move further from other Protestants for whom questions of truth and the revealed nature of Christian doctrine have been "sociologized" or "historicized" away. From the common commitment to the Truth, and to him who is the Truth, Joseph Ratzinger has become my teacher.

This paper works out just what "my teacher" means with specific reference to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Here is a point at which Protestants and Catholics are undoubtedly at logger-heads, a point at which "convergence-ecumenism"<sup>7</sup> has yielded little of significance. Is there another way? I would like to suggest there is in three steps. First, I summarize my perception of Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI as a peculiar kind of traditional Catholic, who

<sup>6</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditation on the Church's Marian Belief*, transl. J.M. McDermott, San Francisco, CA 1983.

<sup>7</sup> The term is Robert W. Jenson's.

doesn't neatly fit into either progressive or traditionalist pigeon-holes. Second, I point out the way in which Ratzinger's traditionalism has shaped a unique approach to ecumenical dialogue that similarly traditional Protestants intuitively "get." And third, I explore this approach as it is found in Ratzinger's treatment of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in *Daughter Zion*.

## Ratzinger the Traditional Catholic

I have always said, and even still say, that it was important that something [i.e., the Traditional Latin Mass] which was previously the most sacred thing in the Church to people should not suddenly be completely forbidden. A society that considers now to be forbidden what it once perceived as the central core—that cannot be. The inner identity it has with the other [i.e., the Novus Ordo Mass] must remain visible. So for me it was not about tactical matters and God knows what, but about the inward reconciliation of the Church with itself.

Joseph Ratzinger, 2016<sup>8</sup>

Above, I mentioned that my first serious introduction to Joseph Ratzinger took place in 2010 and that is true insofar as it is the beginning of my serious interaction with him as a theologian and, eventually, spiritual director at a distance. But it was not my first meeting. That came five years before, right about now. On April 19, 2005, I was on sabbatical at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, finishing up a manuscript that would become *Mary for Evangelicals*.<sup>9</sup> I was on the second floor with a number of students watching the television, its camera focused on the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square. When the words, "Habemus Papam," were heard, the audience in which I stood erupted in cheers and tears. When it became clear that Ratzinger was indeed the man, if anything the cheers became louder. I went up two floors to the faculty lounge, naively expecting to see certainly a more reserved, but similarly positive response among my faculty colleagues. Instead, I was greeted by a normally subdued theologian literally goose-stepping down the hall and angrily muttering in German. If other faculty colleagues were not as overt, they agreed that this

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, P. Seewald, *Last Testament: In His Own Words*, transl. J. Phillips, London 2016, p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> T. Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals: Toward an Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord*, Downers Grove, IL 2006.

was a very dark day indeed. Two very strong, diametrically opposed reactions to the man I would come to admire. In the intervening years, I became well acquainted with the caricature of the *Panzerkardinal*, God's Rottweiler who, for some at least, could not put a foot right (which is to say, left).

When I began to read Ratzinger seriously, please keep in mind I write as an outsider with some distance from the subject, I simply did not see the man my colleagues in Ottawa so intensely and personally despised. Rather, I met a man who accurately foresaw from a half-century away the travails of late modern Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant;<sup>10</sup> and who was convinced that the Second Vatican Council rightly plotted the way forward for the Catholic Church to meet those travails.<sup>11</sup> Who did not, in fact, suddenly morph from progressive to traditionalist after 1968, but remained a particular kind of progressive throughout. A progressive who, like St. John Henry Newman,<sup>12</sup> saw doctrinal development through the lens of a "hermeneutics of continuity" in which the Council clarified, deepened and developed what had come previously rather than initiating a rupture which rendered everything up for grabs.<sup>13</sup> There is, in other words, a tradition, which remains understandable to itself throughout developments that the inevitability of being-in-history brings.

I can think of no better example of the "tradition in progress" on display than the *motu proprio*, *Summorum Pontificum*, of 2007.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, as his explanation quoted above makes clear, *Summorum Pontificum* demonstrates Benedict's sincere conviction that the *Novus Ordo Mass* does not simply replace Pope John XXIII's 1962 Mass because it cannot. Likewise, this was not an attempt to roll back the clock on liturgical reform, though that is how

<sup>10</sup> J. Ratzinger, *The New Pagans and the Church: A 1958 Lecture by Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)*, transl. K. Baker, "Homiletic and Pastoral Review" January 30, 2017, <https://www.hprweb.com/2017/01/the-new-pagans-and-the-church/> [access: 15.06.2023]; J. Ratzinger, *What Will the Future Church Look Like?*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, San Francisco, CA 2009, pp. 101–118.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Peter Seewald's account of the Council in P. Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life*, vol. 1: *Youth in Nazi Germany to the Second Vatican Council 1927–1965*, London 2020.

<sup>12</sup> J.H. Newman, *An Essay on The Development of Christian Doctrine*, London 1909 [1845].

<sup>13</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings*, Thursday, 22 December 2005, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html) [access: 15.06.2023].

<sup>14</sup> Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter, *Given Motu Proprio, Summorum Pontificum: On the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970*, July 7, 2007, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20070707\\_summorum-pontificum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html) [access: 15.06.2023].

Ratzinger's critics sometimes presented it.<sup>15</sup> Rather, for Ratzinger, both forms of the mass reflect a common "inner identity," that is only seen when each is visible. Development, certainly, but not replacement.

At the same time, the 1962 Mass was not returned unaltered; it too, if it was to retain its truthfulness, had to develop. The ancient "prayer for the Jews" simply could no longer be used after World War II and the momentous changes in Jewish/Christian relations and understanding that followed. This was not done for the sake of good interfaith manners (indeed, it remains a prayer for the Jews' conversion and continues to face criticism), but because the old prayer no longer spoke truly in the new context. Once that became apparent the prayer was quickly changed.<sup>16</sup> But it was not simply a matter of excising the prayer or inserting the very different prayer found in the *Novus Ordo*. In Ratzinger's words,

One had to have a form of the prayer created that fitted with the spiritual style of the old liturgy, but which was at the same time consonant with our modern understandings of Judaism and Christianity. ... I'm still happy today that I managed to change the old liturgy for the better at that moment.<sup>17</sup>

Both prayers, it seems, were to sit side by side, each reflecting one facet of the complicated relationship between Jews and Christians.

So what to make of all of this? On the one hand, I have yet to meet the revanchist so feared by liberal Catholics (and Protestants) when I read Ratzinger; on the other, neither do I see the stalwart defender of the historically immune, pristine faith so-prized by some Catholic traditionalists. I see a Vatican II progressive who, unlike the Hans Küng/Edward Schillebeeckx progressives, reads the Council as bringing forth treasures new and old (Matt 13:52), as preparing, clarifying, and deepening the tradition in order that the tradition might speak evangelistically and prophetically to the modern world.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See R. Schmit, *Attempt to Resurrect pre-Vatican II Mass Leaves Church at Crossroads*, "National Catholic Reporter" December 8, 2012, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/attempt-resurrect-pre-vatican-ii-mass-leaves-church-crossroads> [access: 15.06.2023].

<sup>16</sup> See *Nota della Segreteria di Stato*, "L'Osservatore Romano" 148/31 (2008), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Benedict XVI, Seewald, *Last Testament...*, op. cit., p. 198.

<sup>18</sup> One of the most interesting early readings of the Council by a self-identified evangelical Protestant argues rightly that Vatican II left the struggle for the Catholic Church not between the traditionalists and the progressives, but between developmental and revolutionary progressives, represented ideally by Ratzinger and Küng respectively. See D. Wells, *Revolution in Rome*, Downers Grove, IL 1973. See also, T. Perry, *Evangelicals*

## Ratzinger the Ecumenist

Certainly division is harmful, especially when it leads to enmity and an impoverishment of Christian witness. But if the poison of hostility is slowly removed from the division, and if, through mutual acceptance, diversity leads no longer to mere impoverishment but rather to a new wealth of listening and understanding, then during the transition to unity division can become a *felix culpa*, a happy fault, even before it is completely healed... Even as separated brethren, we can be one.

Joseph Ratzinger, 1986<sup>19</sup>

I understand that Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, is a polarizing figure, drawing out strong reactions among critics and admirers. One of his Catholic critics, a friend of mine, quipped when I expressed admiration for his leadership of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), “It’s easier for you. As a Protestant, you’ll never be under his thumb.” Perhaps unkindly expressed, but there is an element of truth to it. It *is* easier for me to admire someone with whom there never was or will be a direct hierarchical relationship. Nevertheless, I believe my reading of his theological position as a “developmental progressive,” can be supported by the evidence better than other options available.

What does Ratzinger, as a developmental progressive, bring to ecumenism? That’s the next question to be considered. I will not tackle it fully. Not only is it more fully addressed elsewhere in this conference (and I have no desire to demonstrate my ignorance more than I already have!) but also, Carl Trueman has already penned *the* evangelical, indeed, robustly Protestant response to Ratzinger’s peculiar ecumenical vision.<sup>20</sup> Because I cannot add to or argue with Prof. Trueman in any substantive way, I will simply unpack the quote with which this section opened.

I observe first of all that, Ratzinger both assumes division among Christians and that its healing will be a divine work. This assumption is notable for two reasons. First of all, it acknowledges that “convergence ecumenism,”—so named

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*and the Reception of the Second Vatican Council*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, eds. C. Clifford, M. Faggioli, New York 2023, pp. 556–569.

<sup>19</sup> J. Ratzinger, *On the Progress of Ecumenism: A Letter to the Theologische Quartalschrift, a Periodical Published in Tübingen*, [in:] *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, transl. M.J. Miller et al., San Francisco, CA 2008, p. 135.

<sup>20</sup> C.R. Trueman, *Is the Pope (Roman) Catholic? Joseph Ratzinger on Ecumenism*, [in:] *The Theology of Benedict XVI: A Protestant Appreciation*, ed. T. Perry, Bellingham, WA 2019, pp. 152–167.

by Robert W. Jenson—has failed. I know I'm risking caricature here, but I would describe convergence ecumenism as a largely political project that treats doctrinal disagreement as secondary, focusing instead on removing practical barriers to mutual recognition of "true churches," and therefore, intercommunion among them. Given that goal, there are precious few achievements to point to so far. But pragmatics is not Ratzinger's concern. He rejects convergence ecumenism because it treats truth as a secondary matter. More on that in a moment. Moreover, convergence ecumenism is Protestant in its DNA. Therefore, no matter how "successful" it might turn out to be—and the history of the last 50 years is ambivalent—it cannot be fully embraced by a Catholic.

Unpacking that leads to the second reason for the assumption's notability. Ratzinger's position on the primacy of the Catholic Church, that she solely can claim the title, *Church* with a capital C, is notable precisely because it's *not* his. Rather, it is the position of Vatican II. Whatever elements of sanctification and truth are found outside it, the Church subsists in the Catholic Church. Indeed, those external elements naturally drive toward union with the Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> Those elements come from Christ, lead to Christ and "belong by right to the one Church of Christ."<sup>22</sup> The CDF's repetition of these sentiments in the 2000 document, *Dominus Iesus*<sup>23</sup>—with footnotes!—was greeted with consternation. Many Protestants and not a few Catholics saw the document as an ecumenical setback. I remain genuinely confused—again, as a Protestant, on the outside—as to why. And even more confused when responsibility for the "setback" was laid almost exclusively at the feet of the then Cardinal Prefect rather than the Congregation he led, or the Council the document quoted, or the then Pope himself, who said much the same thing in the more positively received encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*,<sup>24</sup> published only five years previously. Ratzinger on ecumenism is faithful to the Council to the letter!

Following the path set by Vatican II, then, Ratzinger's ecumenical aims are more modest and more hopeful than the convergence ecumenists.<sup>25</sup> More

<sup>21</sup> Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, no. 17.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*.

<sup>25</sup> It is striking that the Joint Declaration on Justification, published between *Ut Unum Sint* and *Dominus Iesus*, and for which Ratzinger deserves at least much credit/blame, does *not* signal the end of the Reformation, but more modestly proposes that in the light of significant areas of agreement on the doctrine those areas of disagreement that persist ought not to be regarded as church dividing. Cf. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church*, October 31, 1999, <http://www.christianity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/>



modest because divisions over matters of truth persist; so deep are they that only God will finally heal them. Until God does, the purposes of ecumenism remain (1) to acknowledge, repent of, and reject hostility and violence. Thankfully, this has largely been accomplished in Europe and North America. Where Christianity is a young religion, however, such anti-Gospel behavior continues and so Ratzinger's call remains potent. And (2) to overcome the impoverishment of division and through it work to create a wealth of understanding. Which brings us to hope. Where the ecumenists are looking to accomplish a political rapprochement more elusive than that sought after by the Koreans, Ratzinger knows the matter belongs to Him for whom nothing is impossible. If we pursue a wealth of mutual understanding, God may sanctify and augment our efforts by bringing good out of the evil of division, turning it ultimately into a happy fault.

This Augustinian language, claimed by both Protestants and Catholics resonates with me and I have seen it in my own life. One of my prized possessions is a copy of a letter sent by Pope Benedict XVI to Todd Hains of Lexham publishing house to express his gratitude for an anthology of essays I edited under the title, *The Theology of Benedict XVI: A Protestant Appreciation*.<sup>26</sup> He wrote, "Their studies show sincere love for Jesus Christ, deep intellectual honesty and the readiness to give witness to the Truth. Such publications are an expression of authentic ecumenical dialogue. United in the one Lord Jesus Christ, with best greetings, I am sincerely yours ..."<sup>27</sup> These essays were not fawning; neither were they unnecessarily polemical. They were legitimate attempts to get to grips with the thought of a theologian who the essayists believed, had much to teach us regardless of disagreements. This it seems to me is a more realistic and finally more hopeful ecumenism that confidently and prayerfully leaves full visible communion in the hands of him who implored his Father that we would be one.

So what does Ratzinger bring to ecumenism? A vision that is, I believe, at once more realistic and modest *and* more daring and hopeful than that that has been typically practiced since Vatican II. Neither rigidly traditionalist nor straightforwardly progressive, it is deeply indebted to the texts of the Second Vatican Council, and one that is actually attractive to Protestants (like me) who have similar convictions from the other side of the Reformation.

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documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-justification/en.html [access: 15.06.2023].

<sup>26</sup> T. Perry (ed.), *The Theology of Benedict XVI: A Protestant Appreciation*, Bellingham 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter to Todd R. Hains*, August 27, 2020 [author's archive].

## Ratzinger the Evangelical

The aim of [canonical exegesis] is to read individual texts within the totality of the one Scripture, which then sheds new light on all the individual texts... If you want to understand the Scripture in the spirit in which it is written, you have to attend to the content and to the unity of Scripture as a whole.

Joseph Ratzinger, 2007<sup>28</sup>

Should we want “proof” texts of the chief Marian teachings, perhaps it can be this: if one takes John 1 as what it is, John’s equivalent of Matthew’s and Mark’s [sic] birth stories, and inserts Mary explicitly into her places in the story, the Marian doctrines immediately result.

Robert W. Jenson, 1999<sup>29</sup>

The title of this last section is a little tongue in cheek. What, after all, does evangelical mean? On a strict reading of the Greek, of course Ratzinger is an evangelical thinker insofar as his thought is grounded in the announcement of the good news that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, rose on the third day. On a European/German reading of the term, where evangelical simply means Protestant, he’s not. But what happens when an American inflection is added?

Evangelicalism is a peculiar sort of Anglo American Protestantism organized around four nodes: conversionism (one does not inherit Christian faith; one becomes a Christian), crucicentrism (the work of Christ in his passion is the central theme of evangelical spirituality), biblicism (the Bible [alone] is the source and norm for theological thought), and activism (encompassing both evangelism and social action, evangelicals have historically been committed to working for social transformation according to Gospel norms).<sup>30</sup> If this meaning of the word “evangelical” is taken, the matter is, I would suggest, a bit more complex. Of course, Ratzinger is not a Protestant. But his writings show an affinity for argumentation that Protestants get at an intuitive level. We do read Catholic

<sup>28</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, transl. A.J. Walker, New York 2007, p. xviii.

<sup>29</sup> R.W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2: *The Works of God*, New York 1999, p. 204.

<sup>30</sup> Commonly called the Bebbington Quadrilateral, these four nodes have been scrutinized, criticized, and amended by church historians both friendly to the evangelical movement and not. But it has held up remarkably well in the 35 years since it was first propounded in D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, London 1989.

theologians from across the spectrum, but some of them require us to work harder than others. Even those with whom way may be largely sympathetic, like Pope St. John Paul II, come to the task of theology in a very different way. Ratzinger, however, *feels* familiar because his vocabulary is biblical, while his mode, style, and cadence are all largely Augustinian. He rather paints us as King Agrippa to his St. Paul: “Almost, thou persuadest me...” (Acts 26:28).

With that in mind, I turn finally to Ratzinger’s defense of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception as it is found in his slim volume on Mariology, *Daughter Zion*.<sup>31</sup> I have chosen this work because at first glance its ecumenical value is not readily apparent.<sup>32</sup> It was not written for a mixed audience, but to those Catholics, who, in the years following the Council, have begun to wonder about the place of Mary in doctrine and devotion. Ratzinger wants to strengthen Marian belief in a time of diminishment. In addition to the audience, the subject matter is also problematic. Mary remains a flashpoint for disagreement. Whatever rapprochement may have been achieved especially in the decades following the Council, more traditionally minded believers continue to part quite sharply on Marian matters. Evangelicals will remember that Mary came to embody *all* the concerns of the Reformation. Traditional Catholics will add to those arguments the deep emotions encountered when someone criticizes one’s mother. The modern dogmas are themselves especially neuralgic. I chose this work because it invites the question: “What on earth can this book say about the Immaculate Conception to an evangelical Protestant?”

Ratzinger takes on the challenge of rearticulating the doctrinal and devotional significance of Mary *by appealing to Scripture*. And here, again, he is a man of the Council. He follows Pope St. Paul VI’s instructions in *Marialis Cultus* closely. Specifically, he will present Mary within the bounds provided by Holy Scripture as much as possible, and he will do so in a way that will not unnecessarily antagonize non-Catholic readers.<sup>33</sup> So, the audience is foreign and the subject matter is fraught, but the method is familiar and the style not immediately off-putting. So, perhaps there’s some room there after all.

The objections Ratzinger raises at the outset are familiar to Protestants: the Immaculate Conception is absent from the Bible, it is diametrically opposed to what is (namely, the universality of sin and the corresponding need

<sup>31</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion...*, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> I treat the work as a whole in T. Perry, “Behold the Handmaid of the Lord”: Joseph Ratzinger on Mary, [in:] *The Theology of Benedict XVI: A Protestant Appreciation*, ed. T. Perry, Bellingham 2019, pp. 118–135.

<sup>33</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*. See esp. nos. 29–37.

for saving grace).<sup>34</sup> We do not have space to expand on these objections here. But no matter. Ratzinger is not interested in rebutting them directly. Rather, he circumvents them in a way Protestants will then find intriguing: they are themselves *insufficiently biblical!*

Where evangelical Protestants would immediately point to the paucity of Marian material in the New Testament in general, Ratzinger would start off by turning us to the Old Testament, and specifically to the repeated theme in the prophets of the holy remnant: those faithful among the people of God who did not “bow the knee to Baal.”<sup>35</sup> Typological reading of the Old Testament in this way, for so long foreign to Protestant exegesis, and evangelical exegesis in particular, has been returning especially over the last two decades. So, even if the subject matter—Mary as typological fulfilment of the remnant—is new, the move is not. His next move takes us to the Old Testament. *If* it is right to read Mary in this way, i.e., as the embodiment of faithful Israel, then it must surely also be right to read Mary in the light of the New Testament’s faithful community, i.e. the Church. Thus, St. Paul’s exalted ecclesiological language of Eph 5:27, is seen in Mary. She foreshadows and renders visible the Church’s eschatological reality, which brings us to this third, dogmatic move. The Immaculate Conception, theologically, means that sin is not natural to humanity, but an aberration. She is in her immaculacy, truly human. Thus, her graces, which are the graces of the Church are at the same time the hope of every believer. Grace has not removed Mary from us as it has allowed us through her to glimpse the end of all who are united to her Son, our Savior.

The near half-century since *Daughter Zion* was published, of course, has not led to a renewed ecumenical engagement over the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, even if there has been some positive engagement about Mary in general.<sup>36</sup> And here I think we need to remember Ratzinger’s realism about Christian division: the divides are real, deep, and so persistent that it will be nothing less than a divine work that heals them. My own conviction is, we would actually have to be closer than we currently are to engage fruitfully in that kind of discussion. We Protestants are a fissiparous bunch, after all, and even if some of us would like to carry on such a conversation, very few on our side are actually listening because we no longer believe we want to Reform the

<sup>34</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion...*, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion...*, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., D. Bolen, G. Cameron (eds.), *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, London 2006.

church and therefore treat division as a scandal. On the contrary, it is a fact of our ecclesial life that, if not quite celebrated, is certainly not painful.<sup>37</sup>

In hope, however, we evangelicals ought to recognise the ecumenical reward of listening closely to this argument for the following reasons. It turns us back to consider our reception of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. If we are beginning to return to patristic modes of reading the first Christian Scriptures (and we are), then different conversations about what that text *means* and *how* it means are going to take place. On this, Ratzinger is a master teacher—indeed the reception of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture is one of his favourite themes, running through his entire corpus. Second, Ratzinger turns those of us who are confessionally oriented (Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, etc.) back to our own confessions, there perhaps to be surprised. For not only is Mary consistently presented as “the Blessed Virgin,” but that is merely a contraction of “Ever-Virgin” of the earliest confessions, some of which also call her “pure,” and even “immaculate.”<sup>38</sup> What do these words mean when they are uttered not by a Pope, but by, for example, Huldrych Zwingli, the Reformer of Basel?

Third, we may actually need to reconsider the charge that the Immaculate Conception is (to repurpose Article 20 from the Thirty-Nine Articles), grounded upon no warranty of Scripture. In the second quote with which this section began, Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson provocatively suggested that the modern Marian dogmas result when readers place Mary where she belongs in the prologue of John’s Gospel. I have a similar idea in mind, but I want to use a different analogy. Evangelicals are fractious. We like to fight. One of the things we fight about is baptism. Is it necessary? Who can be baptized? What does baptism look like? These are open questions among evangelical believers. Salvation Army members, for example, say no to the first. On the second, Baptists say: believers only! Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians open the font to the children of believers. On the third, immersion, pouring or sprinkling is a division from which entire denominations have been made. When it comes to the Bible, Baptists and other “believers-only” evangelicals point to the book of Acts with its lack of infant baptisms as their key support. Magisterial Protestants on the other hand invoke Paul’s theology of baptism in Rom 6 and the New Testament appropriations of the Red Sea and Noah’s Ark as baptismal images as not just permitting the baptism of infants, but demanding it. This

<sup>37</sup> For more on this, see P.J. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church*, Grand Rapids, MI 2016.

<sup>38</sup> See T. Perry, *Mary in the Reformed Confessions*, “Ad Fontes: A Journal of Protestant Letters” Spring (2023), pp. 11–17.

is an ongoing debate. Consideration of Ratzinger's argument likely will not persuade those who, like the aforementioned Baptists, require explicit New Testament justification before they will assent to the Immaculate Conception. On the other hand, it might at least invite Magisterial Protestants to reconsider their objections because it treats the Old Testament in a manner analogous to the New Testament's treatment of the Old in baptism. So, will Ratzinger make Marian devotees of us? Likely not. But for those of us who receive him as our teacher, he will force us to reconsider our theology of Scripture, our own confessional history, and our own exegesis of Scripture in potentially fruitful ways, ways I wager we would not have considered without ecumenical engagement. I can't help but think that such exercises are small indications of what, in the end, will be regarded as a "happy fault," in a grand sweep of God's dealings with his people.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I've tried to sketch how a convinced Protestant who is nonetheless scandalized by the division in Western Christianity can come to a deep appreciation for the thought of Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. That thought is accessible to some Protestants because of its biblical focus and Augustinian shape. It is so clearly and winsomely expressed that it easily clears away misunderstanding and stimulates theological reflection in his own tradition. This paper has been self-referential because it is so much my own story. I have apprenticed myself to a brilliant and godly theologian and I have benefitted. My plea to other Protestants is the plea of Barth to his Catholic students: "Read Ratzinger!" My plea to my separated brothers and sisters is to keep giving us such gifts! We need them. And my hope is that you will see just what a gift you have given us not in God's Rottweiler, but in God's border collie—a faithful companion of the Good Shepherd.

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