

Article

# Martin Luther and the Early Modern Beginnings of a Feminist Maternal Theology

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Received: 19 December 2019; Accepted: 3 March 2020; Published: 9 March 2020



**Abstract:** This essay argues that the German Reformer, Martin Luther, makes a contribution to a Christian feminist theology of mothering. His preaching and theology about child-bearing stand out in the Christian theology of his time because of the realistic way in which he describes the experiences of pregnancy and birth, especially in contrast to conventional descriptions of the Virgin Mary's maternity. Yet Luther is no feminist. He maintains essentialist views of women and attaches women too closely to home life. But his optimistic view of the female child-bearing body subverts the traditional Christian views of the cursed female body and affirms the power that women have in God's activities of creation and new creation.

**Keywords:** pregnancy; childbirth; Martin Luther; Christianity; mothering; feminist; feminist theology; Virgin Mary

## 1. Introduction

Christianity has not been kind to child-bearing women or their bodies. Its male-oriented theological legacy has given no particular attention to how pregnancy and birthing fit into God's providential or creative will. Christian theological reflection has allowed pregnant and birthing women to bear the brunt of a distorted religious imaginary based on a theology of the cursed female body from Genesis chapter 3, where God makes the pain of childbirth a sign of Eve's sin. Because the lived experiences of pregnant and laboring women have been connected to the suspicion of female bodies and agency in the Christian tradition, mothering and motherwork have not been traditionally seen as providing a legitimate base for talking about God. What kind of knowledge of the divine could the messy, deathly, primal events of pregnancy and childbirth possibly bring?

A feminist maternal theology seeks to draw upon the particularly female experience of bearing children and motherwork as a corrective to the misogynist views of Eve and female sinfulness. It relies upon the epistemological commitments of twentieth-century phenomenologists, who have argued that the perceptions, experiences, and relations of individual persons give rise to knowledge; knowledge, the dynamism of which often challenges reified categories of conventional wisdom.<sup>1</sup> One of the primary tasks of a feminist maternal theology is to gather up any bits and pieces from within the theological canon that name the actual bodily work of carrying and birthing children in order to challenge and stretch conventional forms of Christian thought about life, death, and the divine.

Two resources within Christian thought seem on the surface to be a help to a feminist maternal theology. They are, namely, the central position of the Virgin Mary as mother, and the development of twentieth-century white feminist theology. Yet these seemingly natural allies to a feminist maternal theology have a more complicated relationship to mothering and motherwork than meets the eye.

<sup>1</sup> Feminist theological epistemology is indebted to phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Wilhelm Dilthey. See (Husserl and Cairns 1960; Dilthey et al. 2002).

This essay turns to an unlikely—and admittedly limited—figure, the German monk, Martin Luther, to help it articulate a perspective on divine activity from the experiences of mothering. It utilizes Luther's lucid and concrete language about pregnancy and birthing in order to explore how child-bearing bodies can be locations of knowledge of the divine and of God's good creativity.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, much more must be said on the topic of how pregnancy and birth can add to the Christian theological imagination today. Every era in Christian history gives glimpses of how women were connecting their Christian faith to their lived experiences of mothering. Luther is but one small piece to a much larger theological project.

## 2. Mary as an Unsettled Model for a Feminist Theology of Mothering

Despite the fact that the Virgin Mary and Jesus—a mother and her child—stand at the center of the Christian faith, most Christian thought has differentiated her in profound ways from actual women who bear children. Since the Council of Ephesus in 341 officially named her the *theotokos*—the bearer of the Divine, the mother of God—theological treatment of Mary's body, sexuality, and maternity has been particular to her, with little consideration of her connection to the realities and experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in actual women. Everything about her mothering role is distinct from the their experiences.

Mary's body was elevated above other female bodies because she carried within herself the divine being. Her sexual purity and her pregnancy that came about without any sexual encounter turned her into an object of veneration. Thinkers in following centuries twisted and turned theology to protect her virginity. One of the earliest Byzantine Church Fathers, Ephraim the Syrian (306–373), started the tradition of suggesting that Mary was in fact impregnated by the Holy Spirit through her ear.<sup>3</sup> Right around the same time, Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, (c. 340–379), encouraged Marian devotion among Christians.

Because of her virginal state, Mary had a birth without pain. Pain in childbirth was, after all, a sign of the curse upon Eve and all women because of her disobedience on the Garden of Eden, as Genesis chapter 3 narrates. Mary and her virginity became the anti-Eve. Eve brought death into the world while Mary brought salvation. Mary's womb did not pass down Adam's sin. Nor was it just a uterus. It was the very temple of the Almighty God.<sup>4</sup> Pain, labor, blood, and emotional conflict throughout the processes of pregnancy and birthing were not laid upon the sinless Mary. Any suffering that came from her life as a mother came from the fact that she witnessed her son's *death* rather than from birthing him into life. But the pain and fear at a life lost is vastly different than the pain and fear of a life brought forth.

On the other hand, in modern times, feminist theologians such as Marina Warner<sup>5</sup> have worked to untangle the mythology around Mary's virginity to show how actual women can gain strength and inspiration from her as a woman and mother. Other authors have shown how women, especially in Latin American countries, have used Mary as a religious-political figure to help them fight for dignity and the protection of their children.<sup>6</sup> This tension in Marian studies, and the prevalence of her virginity within the Christian imagination leaves her as a debatable source for a feminist maternal theology.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that Luke Timothy Johnson's recent book on the body includes a variety of bodily experiences, such as play, desire, work, illness, and pain, but it does not treat the transformative bodily experiences of being pregnant or giving birth (Johnson 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Examples of this abound in Byzantine, Coptic, and European Christian art. See for instance, Jan van Eyck, The Annunciation Diptych (1433–1435) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation\\_\(van\\_Eyck,\\_Madrid\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annunciation_(van_Eyck,_Madrid)).

<sup>4</sup> (Ellington 2001).

<sup>5</sup> (Warner 1976).

<sup>6</sup> There have been many political movements led by mothers, some of them inspired by the Christian understanding of the Virgin Mary. See (Gebara and Bingemer 1989; Stitt and Powell 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Much more, beyond the scope of this article, can be explored on Mary's connection to a feminist theology of mothering.

### 3. Twentieth-Century Christian Feminism and the Avoidance of Maternal Theology

The ambivalence toward the Virgin Mary by a feminist maternal theology is met by the ambivalence, in turn, of twentieth-century feminist theology toward mothers and mothering. Such an ambivalence toward mothering is not unique to Christian thought, although shame around female sexuality in faith communities surely plays a part. Ambivalence toward mothers and motherhood can be seen throughout twentieth century literature.<sup>8</sup> No one less than the godmother of modern feminism, said that mothering was the biggest obstacle to female emancipation.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, since the 1970s, *mothers themselves* have been writing about their own ambivalent feelings toward bearing and caring for children.<sup>10</sup> A feminist maternal theology navigates ambivalence toward mothers and motherwork from all sides: the feminist side, the maternal side, and the theological side. It is no wonder that feminist theologians from the latter half of the twentieth century avoided making mothering and motherwork any significant part of their theological agenda.<sup>11</sup>

Feminist theologians have focused on *equity* for women in religious leadership and in theological scholarship. For example, Elizabeth Schuessler-Fiorenza,<sup>12</sup> a feminist pioneer in biblical studies, worked to uncover women's leadership roles around Jesus Christ. She established a feminist hermeneutic of biblical interpretation that focused on a matrix of oppressions, which she furthered through the concept of *kyriarchy*. The female work of gestating and birthing had little to do with the roles of women that she recovered from New Testament narratives.

In the field of Christian systematic theology, the Catholic feminist theologian, Rosemary Ruether,<sup>13</sup> worked to break down the philosophical dominance of the spirit-body divide, and argued for a more embodied epistemology of divine wisdom. But the women's work of gestation and birthing remained on the margins of her thought. Both Schüssler-Fiorenza and Ruether carved out rituals and spaces for women to think and do theology under the strong patriarchy of the Roman Catholic Church even though mothering was not a significant theme in their works.

While feminist theologians have helped women make great strides in recovering, retrieving, and reconstructing the roles that women have played in the Christian narrative, pregnancy, and birthing have not been key themes. Elizabeth Johnson, a prolific feminist and theologian in her own right, provides a sophisticated view of the mothering, nurturing characteristics of God in her book, *She Who Is*.<sup>14</sup> However, she provides no theological perspective on the real and actual phenomenon of pregnancy and giving birth. Serene Jones' book in *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*<sup>15</sup> focuses on sin, sanctification, and justification from a feminist perspective, but neither does she give attention to the particular female experiences of gestating and birthing. Although, her book, *Trauma and Grace*, deals with reproductive loss.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps pregnancy and birthing have remained on the margins of feminist theology because religious reflection on these primal female experiences cannot seem to shake the almost intractable philosophical essentialism which runs through so much of both Christian theology and the biological sciences. Women's bodies have been seen as their destiny. Indeed, the western feminist movement has made great strides on the topic of women's bodies. Feminists have shown that women's bodies do not

<sup>8</sup> See for example, (Apple and Golden 1997; Bassin et al. 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, especially chapters 6, "The Mother," and chapter 10, "Women's Situation and Character," (De Beauvoir 2011, pp. 524ff., 638ff). See also (Patterson 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Seminal works in the field of modern motherhood studies include (Rich 1995; Chesler 1981).

<sup>11</sup> There have been a few significant exceptions to this. French philosopher, Julia Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, in (Moi 1986, pp. 160–87); Miller-MacLemore (1994); Hebbelthwaite (1984); and (Jobe 2011).

<sup>12</sup> (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1992, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> (Ruether 1993).

<sup>14</sup> (Johnson 1992).

<sup>15</sup> (Jones 2000).

<sup>16</sup> (Jones 2009).

prevent women from doing any kind of job or physical activity that they want. Gender studies are also demonstrating that one need not be born a cis-gendered female to be a woman.<sup>17</sup>

But deep within the Christian imagination there remains a stubborn essentialist presupposition, namely, that women's bodies were *made* to give birth; and that birthing a child makes a woman a woman. For centuries, Christianity upheld the notion that one is not fully a woman if one has not birthed a child.<sup>18</sup> This is perhaps a more insidious theological view than others because it is so tied to what seems to be so-called self-evident biological facts about women's bodies. But just like any other organ in the female body, a woman's reproductive organs do not define her.

Not all mothers succeed in loving their children the way society or religion expects them to either. Many women who become mothers may realize that bearing and raising children is not the most satisfying thing in their lives. The perception that women will "naturally"—without effort or ambivalence—bond with their offspring is yet another form of an essentialist philosophy that feminism has worked to break down. The reality is that mothers struggle. They feel adoration and love for their children, but also rage, desperation, and frustration. As Adrienne Rich has so poignantly shown, motherhood is not a "sacred calling."<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. The Cursed Female Body in Christian Thought

Christian theological thought has seen mothering as a lived experience of God's *curse*.<sup>20</sup> Centuries of interpretations of Genesis chapter three upheld early Christian attitudes that the pain and labor of childbirth were physical, bodily signs of God's curse. The biblical passage reads: "Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate . . . .' To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.'"<sup>21</sup> Because pregnancy and birth have lived in the shadow of God's curse on Eve, Christianity has not appreciated the agency and "brains" of pregnant and laboring bodies.

Early Church Fathers such as Tertullian held that female flesh was suspect and repulsive. Female bodies were more deeply embedded in mortality precisely *because* they were capable of giving birth. As Tertullian claims in his treatise, *On the Flesh of Christ*, giving birth is fundamentally initiating human beings into death.<sup>22</sup> He describes the physical site of the pregnant and birthing body as locations of impurity.<sup>23</sup> The physical processes of pregnancy and birth are described by Tertullian as "muck;" the uterus was full of "filth;" a child came forth through a woman's "shameful parts" and "organs of ridicule."<sup>24</sup> All these things were physical signs that humanity comes into the world in a fallen and corrupted state, subject to death. But while women must bear the marks of sin and death in their bodies, men have nothing to hide or be ashamed of; they are free in Christ.<sup>25</sup> Such attitudes persisted throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period. One author of a 1679 manual for midwives<sup>26</sup> felt humiliated by the fact that he himself developed in his mother's uterus, which he described as "what was almost a sewer, between many bad smells and filth."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>17</sup> (Althaus-Reid 2004).

<sup>18</sup> For a nice discussion on essentialism in feminist theology, see (Jones 2000, pp. 22–48).

<sup>19</sup> (Rich 1995, pp. 41–55).

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* Books 6–11 and *The City of God* Books 12–14. Theologies of Mary throughout the centuries have emphasized that Mary gave birth to Christ in a *painless* fashion, in order to show her purity. Interestingly, Martin Luther preached often that Mary's experience of birth, *including* the pain and the fear, was just like that of all other women.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 3: 14–16 New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

<sup>22</sup> (Tertullian 1954).

<sup>23</sup> (Burrus 2008, p. 53; Glancy 2008, pp. 276–77).

<sup>24</sup> (Tertullian 1954).

<sup>25</sup> (Tertullian 1842).

<sup>26</sup> Christoph Volter cited in (Crowther 2010, p. 149).

<sup>27</sup> (Rublack 1996, p. 87).

Virginity was therefore the norm for a sanctified woman; it was a norm that was unattainable by mothers. From its earliest days, Western Christianity continually socialized women into Early Church ideals of virginity. Women living in all-female monastic groups were distinguished by their virginal states from common women who bore the burdens of sexuality, birth, and child-raising. Writings on religious formation, such as the twelfth-century *Speculum virginum*, encouraged nuns to remain virgins.<sup>28</sup> Virgins were doing the work of Christ. They gained virility and honor in their persistence in lives of chastity, humility, virtue, and spiritual purity.<sup>29</sup> In other words, women were striving to negate their bodily capacities for procreation, which Christianity had encouraged them to do from early on in its history.<sup>30</sup> Female salvation was the goal of all this effort.

As the Middle Ages brought Christianity to new forms of devotion and theology, Medieval people were becoming more and more interested in how people could use their bodies in order to gain a virtual intimacy with Christ. One way to do this was to suffer, whether that be accidental, by illness, or self-inflicted. Medieval Christians sought to experience the *phenomenon* of suffering in order to gain intimate knowledge of Christ's own suffering.<sup>31</sup> Experiencing the stigmata, visions, patient suffering in illness, and even partaking of the Eucharist were all deeply physical experiences in which women were also able to participate, and through which they partook in both Christ's suffering and Christ's glory. In this era of a rich Christian imagination about physical phenomenon and the knowledge of God, the work of mothering began to make its way into ideas of spiritual virtue and sanctity.

One significant example of these changing attitudes toward motherwork can be seen in the figure of Elizabeth of Thuringia (1207–1231). Elizabeth became a spiritual hero in her own day and an icon of purity and penitence: she smiled through her sufferings, adorned herself in nothing but bare feet and wool, and served the poor and needy in every way she could. In short, she was pure as any virgin in a cloister. Yet, she was married and bore three children. But her children, rather than being all-too-fleshly signs of her unvirginal state, were seen as the vehicles in which Elizabeth became even more pious. Her love for her own children opened up her heart and her charitable spirit to *all* children, and she was praised for treating poor children as if they were her own.<sup>32</sup> Although the hagiography of Elizabeth of Thuringia does not focus on her work of pregnancy and birthing labor, her status as a mother brought her divine knowledge and added to her virtue.

## 5. Martin Luther: A Lived Theology of Pregnancy and Labor

Admittedly, the German Reformer, Martin Luther (1483–1546), is not an obvious resource for a feminist maternal theology. He will never be considered a feminist theologian in any modern sense of the word. He did not fight for the equity of women in issues of work, nor did he ever abandon fundamental philosophical presuppositions about the subordination of women to men. Even though he lived during a socially progressive time for pregnant women,<sup>33</sup> his anthropology is shot through with gender essentialism. Using imagery for male and female typical of his times, Luther held that the man is the sun in all its glory and the woman is the moon, (which is also an “excellent body”).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> (Mews 2001, pp. 22–25).

<sup>29</sup> (Newman 1990, p. 23).

<sup>30</sup> The famous story of Jerome's friend, Paula, illustrates that women were willing to abandon their children for the sake of reclaiming their 'virginity.' See (Malone 2004, pp. 135–40).

<sup>31</sup> See examples of this in (Brown 2002, pp. 60–193; Bynum 1988; Atkinson 1991, pp. 64–100).

<sup>32</sup> Anja Petrakopoulos, “Sanctity and Motherhood. Elizabeth of Thuringia,” in (Mulder-Bakker 1995, p. 271).

<sup>33</sup> (Rublack 1996, p. 85). Pregnant women caught stealing fruit could not be prosecuted and butchers were fined if they did not give pregnant or postpartum women cheap roast meat. Added to such protective laws, there was also growing awareness in medicine that a pregnant woman's body was doing hard physical labor.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” (1535), (Luther, p. 69); “Marriage and Motherhood—the Preferred Calling,” chapter 3 in (Stjerna 2009, pp. 32–38; see also Wunder 1998).



The female body—her breasts, her arms—was made to bear and raise children;<sup>35</sup> women alone bore the promise of carrying on the human race.<sup>36</sup>

Women were also created by God to stay home and be the bedrock of families and Christian households. In fact, the rise of the “holy household”<sup>37</sup> can be attributed to Luther, for whom marriage and family were paramount. His numerous sermons and lectures remained highly consistent on this point.<sup>38</sup> Pregnancy and birth were all a part of the new Reformation household and women ruled in the “glory” of motherhood.<sup>39</sup>

Despite these important limitations, Luther did not question the dignity of women or female agency. He was not preoccupied with women’s sexual purity.<sup>40</sup> He did not show the kind of disgust for female bodies that was typical of a Church Father like Tertullian. He even criticized another church Father, Jerome, for the way he “rages at” women.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, Luther praised various biblical matriarchs in his Genesis lectures.<sup>42</sup> He affirmed that like men, they too were made in the image of God; they too, could speak of God and even prophesy.<sup>43</sup>

It is unfortunate that there are no direct words in the historical record by Luther’s wife Katharina von Bora, about her experiences of pregnancy and mothering. After all, it was most likely *her* experiences of carrying and birthing six children that informed Luther’s descriptions of pregnancy and labor.<sup>44</sup> He gives a glimpse of that through which she and others went with his comments that pregnant women “suffer “very painful headaches, dizziness, nausea, . . . vomiting, toothache;” and they have cravings for “raw, unnatural things . . . ”<sup>45</sup> When birthing labor starts, there is such “awful distress”<sup>46</sup> that the woman fears for her life. She must bring forth a child “with utmost peril and almost at the cost of her life.”<sup>47</sup>

Remarkably, Luther *preached* these vivid details of women’s experiences straight from the pulpit. The experience of pregnancy and childbirth was part of his preached word. From the pulpit, Luther insisted that men take care of their pregnant wives. He exhorted male listeners in his sermon from 1525 *On Marriage* to refrain from beating their pregnant wives or threatening them with knives. A husband

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis chapters 29 and 30,” ([Luther](#), vol. 5, pp. 314–15); See also ([Luther](#)). “Reihenpredigten über 1. Mose (1523/24),” *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Edited by J. K. F. Knaake, et al. 67 vols. Weimar: Böhlau. vol. 24, pp. 76–81.

<sup>36</sup> See examples of this in his sermons on Genesis 29 and 30 on Leah and Rachel in ([Luther](#), vol. 5, 331ff., 351ff). See also Luther’s 1531 sermon on Joel. Luther, “Sermon on Joel 2:28,” (1531) in ([Luther](#), vol. 34, p. 483). Luther also wrote a treatise on the consolation of women who lost their pregnancies or bore children who died before being baptized. See “Consolation for Women Whose Pregnancies Have Not Gone Well, 1542” ([Stjerna and Pedersen 2017](#)) Stjerna, Kirsi, and Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, eds. 2017. Introduction to Luther’s Lectures on Genesis 1:26-2:3 and 2:21-25. In *The Annotated Luther*. Edited by Euan Cameron. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, vol. 6. in *The Annotated Luther, Vols 1–6*, gen. eds. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert. Fortress Press, 2015–2017.

<sup>37</sup> ([Roper 1989](#)).

<sup>38</sup> See ([O’Reggio 2012](#)). See also ([Karant-Nunn and Weisner-Hanks 2003](#), pp. 88–136). There are divided scholarly opinions as to whether Luther’s attitudes towards women were helpful or hurtful to them. Scholars like Steve Ozmet saw Luther elevating the dignity of women. ([Ozmet 1983](#)). On the other hand, Luther’s downgrading of monastic communities curtailed the only all-female spaces where women could be educated and freely move about in society. He restricted women’s freedoms to the household. See for example ([Roper 1987](#)). There are many more resources on this much larger conversation.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” ([Luther](#), vol. 1, pp. 199, 201).

<sup>40</sup> Luther makes it consistently clear in his many sermons and lectures that sexual impurity is a problem for both *men* and women.

<sup>41</sup> ([Luther](#)). *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Tisch Reden*. 6 vols. Edited by K. Drescher et al. Weimar: Böhlau, pp. 531–532.

<sup>42</sup> See examples of this in his sermons on Genesis 29 and 30 on Leah and Rachel in ([Luther](#), vol. 5, pp. 331ff., 351ff). See also Luther’s 1531 sermon on Joel. Luther, “Sermon on Joel 2:28,” (1531) in ([Luther](#), vol. 34/2, p. 483).

<sup>43</sup> ([Mattox 2003](#)).

<sup>44</sup> One of the famous “Table Talk” excerpts claims that Luther looked “happily” at his pregnant wife, Katie, and said that “by the blessing of God and your fertility you have made me the father of six children . . . ” See ([Luther](#)). *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Tisch Reden*. 6 vols. Edited by K. Drescher et al. Weimar: Böhlau, no. 3319b, pp. 265–66. He even changed his children’s diapers. Martin Luther, “On the Estate of Marriage,” ([Luther](#), vols. 45, 40).

<sup>45</sup> Luther, “Lectures on Genesis 3,” ([Luther](#), vol. 1, p. 200).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

was to treat his wife kindly, as she is one of God's greatest gifts to men and humanity.<sup>48</sup> He preached how women *bless* the world by continuing to give birth despite the curse. In his 1525 sermon *On Marriage*, he names from the pulpit the physical work and symptoms of pregnancy.<sup>49</sup>

Luther's compassionate naming of female suffering displays a fundamental commitment to the *care* of those caught up in sin and sinful realities. Luther does not claim that women deserve this kind of physical suffering because their bodies are cursed. Instead, he calls on husbands and others to care for the woman who is suffering. The logic of a cursed pregnant body suggests that if a woman dies in childbirth, she deserved it; she bore the curse. But Luther does just the opposite. His compassion for pregnant women points to his fundamental belief that God does not abandon sinners. In his 1522 treatise *On Marriage* he advises that the following should be said to women in labor. He says:

"This is also how to comfort and encourage a woman in the pangs of childbirth, not by repeating St. Margaret legends and other silly old wives' tales but by speaking thus, 'Dear Grete, remember that you are a woman, and that this work of God in you is pleasing to him. Trust joyfully in his will, and let him have his way with you. Work with all your might to bring forth the child. Should it mean your death, then depart happily, for you will die in a noble deed and in subservience to God.'"<sup>50</sup>

Luther shows here that even if the female body is associated with a divine curse, laboring women should actually fight for life and fertility—and that this struggle against death is pleasing to God. It is a sacred struggle. Despite any modern discomfort with Luther's naming of a so-called happy death in the event of childbirth, he names an unspoken reality that all birthing women—even in the modern age—eventually realize: in pregnancy, labor and birth, they face death. If it is not their own death, it is the death of the child they are carrying.

Naming this reality is often avoided by the processes of modern medicine in the industrialized West. As Della Pollock points out, the machines and procedures that are used upon women in labor in modern medical institutions often obscure the fact that the event of birth exposes both mother and child to death.<sup>51</sup> But every laboring woman's body knows about the reality facing it. Maternal survival today truly hangs on the thread of highly educated midwives, nurses, and doctors who practice advanced medicine.<sup>52</sup> By naming the experiences of pregnant and laboring women, Luther's preaching and lecturing approached a *lived* theology.<sup>53</sup> In other words, he considered the bodily experiences of pregnancy and birth, the emotional toll it takes on women, the stamina needed to bring forth a child, and the ambivalence, fear, hope, and pain that women experience in this life event as a *legitimate* place from which to think about central Christian topics of creation, revelation, and the struggle of reconciliation. His mix of a medieval theological imagination and a modern way of naming reality bestows spiritual and theological meaning upon the significant life events that define mothering.

## 6. Obedience to God's Creative Process

Along with the sacred struggle of birthing a child, Luther also suggests that as women become pregnant and go through birth, they face down the curse and strip it of its power. Luther speaks of God's divine punishment upon Eve as a "happy and joyful punishment"<sup>54</sup> because it is a punishment

<sup>48</sup> Martin Luther, "Eine Predigt vom Ehestand," (Luther, vol. 17/1, p. 24).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," (Luther, vol. 45, pp. 39–40).

<sup>51</sup> See (Pollock 1999).

<sup>52</sup> According to the World Health Organization's 2017 report, around 300,000 women die in childbirth every year around the globe (World Health Organization 2019).

<sup>53</sup> As a side note, the male theologians who dominated the *twentieth* century (Barth, Rahner, Bultmann, Moltmann, Pannenberg, etc.) did not name the human experience of pregnancy and birth in their theologies. In this regard, Luther is still a helpful figure for Christian thought.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," (Luther, vol. 1, p. 198).

that threatens the Devil. In other words, the curse upon women places them in a unique position of using it to fight against death, and fight *for* human life. The power that women have to give birth is precisely the power that God harnesses to become incarnate and reconcile the world.

In a lengthy gloss on Genesis 3:15, Luther narrates how the “Seed” of the woman will defeat Satan. In Luther’s mind, the “Seed” here is the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>55</sup> Because women have the power to reconcile the world, to bring about new humans and thus bring about a new humanity, they become the world’s biggest threat to Satan. Luther says, God “makes all women suspect to Satan and worries him with endless concern and care.”<sup>56</sup> He continues, “Not only does she [Eve] keep the blessing of fruitfulness . . . but she has the sure promise that from her will come the Seed who will crush the head of Satan.”<sup>57</sup> In the hands of a woman, the curse has become a tool in its own defeat. Since child-bearing women participate in the same process that Mary went through in carrying and birthing the Savior of the world, they too participate in God’s work of incarnation and world reconciliation. Luther turns curse theology away from a theology of fatality into a theology of natality.<sup>58</sup>

The sacred struggle of birthing<sup>59</sup> and the power of the female body against Satan’s rule all point to Luther’s view that child-bearing is a *godly* activity. Luther wants Christians to see the struggles of labor as something that God wills for a *positive* good, not as a negative sign. Birthing labor is actually a sign precisely of obedience to God’s will. Further, it is a sign of obedience to God’s *creative* will, and respect for God’s will to preserve the humanity that God created. Facing the symptoms of the curse with courage and stamina, according to Luther, not only brings defeat of the devil. It also brings about God’s promise to never abandon humanity. In particular, it is a promise given specifically to women engaged in a specifically female bodily function. Luther says:

“If you were not a woman you should now wish to be one for the sake of this very work alone, that you might thus gloriously suffer and even die in the performance of God’s work and will. For here you have the word of God, who so created you and implanted within you this extremity.”<sup>60</sup>

Luther insisted that this life-and-death pain was the very same pain of Christ. It reflects and reveals God’s own birth pangs in the creation of a new humanity. Luther acknowledges that creation entails risk. Indeed, the birthing woman knows this better than anybody. Because of this, pregnant and birthing women are placed in a position to participate in God’s creative processes in a way that only pregnant and birthing women can.

## 7. Conclusions

Although Martin Luther was no feminist in the modern sense of the word, he recognized that pregnancy and childbirth are deeply physical and profoundly bodily events in a woman’s life that give her a very particular understanding of the divine. He witnessed how his wife, Katie, carried and birthed his children, and then he incorporated that particular female work into his theology. He uses the specific experiences of mothering to name how women participate in the reconciling work of Christ, imitate Christ in their suffering, threaten the Devil, and participate as agents in God’s creative, natal will. Because he affirmed some of the physical and lived experiences of child-bearing women, he is a more helpful figure for a feminist maternal theology than, say, traditional Christian reflection on the Virgin Mary, the maternity of whom has been highly idealized and distinguished from the actual experiences of child-bearing. Much more work needs to be done on the impact upon a feminist

<sup>55</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” (Luther, vol. 1, pp. 192–198).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> I take the notion of “natality” from (Arendt and Canovan 1998); and the work of (Jantzen 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” (Luther, vol. 1, pp. 192–93).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., “The Estate of Marriage,” (Luther, vol. 45, p. 40).



maternal theology by Mary and by the many female voices throughout the long centuries of Christian thought. These voices can be found in devotional literature, women's correspondence, women's non-religious biographical writing, and by analyzing the ways that predominantly male theologians in history have incorporated female experiences into their thought (or not). The lucidity of Luther's descriptions of child-bearing provides one constructive piece of the Christian theological tradition to be gathered up by a feminist maternal theology and utilized in inching the bodily knowledge of mothers closer to the center of Christian reflection.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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