



Birth: Perspectives for Theology and Ministry

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The centerpiece of artist Judy Chicago's "Childbirth in America" exhibition is a quilted and embroidered batik entitled "The Crowning." Initially the motif seems to be a butterfly. On closer inspection, the "butterfly" consists of waves of purple depicting the crowning, i.e., the moment a baby's head emerges from its mother's body.

"Childbirth in America" reflects growing public interest in birth and birthing options.¹ And it stirs up questions. Where does the church fit into the contemporary questioning of birthing customs? Does our culture lack appropriate means of articulating the religious dimensions of birthing? The birth of a child evokes awe at the mystery of human life, but there has been a tendency to leave the shape of the birthing experience to doctors and hospitals, while the church concentrates on the second "birth" of baptism.

Or to return to "The Crowning": Where does the experience of birth fit into the church? "The Crowning" is a potentially powerful symbol for the seasons of Lent and Advent.² Is the lack of this symbol in our liturgical art due to an oversight, or is it because this symbol is deemed sacrilegious?

Bearing such questions in mind, let us begin to probe Scripture, church tradition, and contemporary reflections on birth.

I. BIRTHING IN A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The human yearning to comprehend childbirth and its attendant danger and pain are hardly new. The question lies unspoken in the depths of Genesis 3:16:

To the woman he said,
I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing,
in pain you shall bring forth children,

¹*Imprints*, Birth & Life Bookstore's review newsletter (7001 Alonzo Ave. N.W., Seattle, WA 98107), reflects the rapidly expanding body of literature on the subject.

²A variety of associations come to mind: the advent of the Child; the child being born as a symbol of the Kingdom—already present, yet not fully visible; the theme of suffering expressed in the purposeful, creative suffering of mother and child; intimations of resurrection in the child's movement from life in a limited world to a life in a brighter, fuller one.

yet your desire shall be for your man,
and he shall rule over you.

This familiar verse is the second of three poetic speeches which Yahweh delivers after the transgression of the first man and woman. At some point in their history these divine speeches (Gen 3:14-19) were probably independent etiological sagas, serving to provide an explanation of the limitations and needs of human experience. Perhaps Genesis 3:16 was once in the form of a curse, like the sayings to the snake (3:14) and concerning the earth (3:17). But as it stands it is a word of punishment directed to the woman. There is a clear distinction between the non-human world, which suffers under a curse, and humans, who are not cursed. They are addressed individually, and are held personally accountable for their actions.³

Sexual processes, not least menstruation and childbirth, are typically regarded as dangerous and defiling in primitive societies.⁴ Here the birthing process is not the offense. Rather the agony of birthing is the punishment for a separate offense, i.e., eating the forbidden fruit.

That offense had been declared punishable by death in Genesis 3:3. As the story concludes in Genesis 3:22ff., human disobedience is punished by expulsion from the garden, lest the human should eat also of the tree of life, and live forever. The punishments of Genesis 3:14-19 do not correspond so clearly to the crime. They seem to be additions fitted into the narrative framework.⁵ Placed as they are, these verses set the very recognizable limitations, struggles, and suffering of human existence in the context of alienation from God.

Why do women suffer such pain in giving birth? Why does woman continue to desire her man in spite of his domineering tendencies, and in the face of the recurring pain and danger of childbirth? Why are children born into a hostile world where humans must fight the animals in order to survive? Why must they spend all their days toiling for subsistence? These questions arise out of the experience of human existence as constantly threatened and vulnerable.

Considering the threat to a woman's survival posed by childbirth, and society's dependence upon this precarious process, it is little wonder that the hazards of childbirth are alluded to in the Genesis account of human origins. In modern technological society, too, this passage offers perspective on these persistent questions.

First, it points out that this state of affairs was not God's intention for human life. It should go without saying that neither woman's suffering in childbirth nor her subordination to her man are God's will.

Second, the story depicts the ambiguity of human existence. The joy of childbirth is clouded by fear and pain. The relationship between man and woman is not only the joy of belonging to one another, but also the struggle of "opposite" sexes. Genesis 3:16's sad echo of the joyful man/wo-man pun of 2:23 reminds us that the very culmination of created human existence, i.e., com-

³Cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 126, 128.

⁴Penelope Washbourn, *Becoming Woman: The Quest for Wholeness in Female Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 11, 98.

⁵Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 98.

munity with "bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh," has negative as well as positive possibilities.

Third, this primeval story claims continuing validity. It calls into question all optimistic visions of trouble-free birth. Although the trauma of birthing is not God's will, it is the condition of existence in our broken world. This is not to say that there was a "pre-fall" state in which there

was no pain in childbirth. The pain, after all, will be *multiplied*, not introduced. The pain of childbirth becomes a punishment, an enduring reminder of the pain of separation from God, and of human responsibility for the disruption of that relationship.

The severe tone of Genesis 3:16 should be seen against the backdrop of a society which held the bearing of children in high esteem, deemed it a great blessing, and regarded it to be woman's singularly important role in society and God's creative work.⁶ Already in Genesis 3:20 the positive aspects of woman's procreative abilities are attested to by a new title: Eve, mother of all living. Passages like Genesis 16:4, 30:1ff.; and 1 Samuel 1:4ff. indicate that a woman's status was related to her childbearing capability. This is not to say that childbearing capabilities determined a woman's status. Several women of key importance to Israel's history experienced difficulty conceiving. Still, the stories of these very women—for example, Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah—attest to the high regard in which childbearing was held.

Childbearing had clear religious implications, too, in a society which viewed Yahweh's participation as the crucial factor in the process. Yahweh was believed to close the womb (Gen 30:2, 1 Sam 1:6); to open the womb (Gen 25:21 and 30:22f.); and to form the child in its mother's womb (Ps 139:13, 15; Jer 1:5; Job 31:15).

The social and religious significance of childbirth in ancient Israel is reflected in rituals associated with birth. The rituals prescribed for postpartum women are explicit in Leviticus. Labor and childbirth practices, on the other hand, are rarely noted in the Bible. Raphael Patai sketches a picture of Hebrew birthing customs based on a reading of biblical texts in the light of twentieth century Middle Eastern birthing practices.⁷ Patai notes that after the birth the child's navel cord was cut and tied, the child was washed, rubbed with salt, and swaddled. These acts were not only practical, but also had ritual significance. The cutting and tying of the navel cord, for example, signified the formal acceptance of the child into the family.⁸

Much more explicit are the rules for the rituals expected of the postpartum woman (Lev 12:1-8). A range of bodily discharges, including menses (Lev 15:19ff.) and the emission of semen (Lev 15:16ff.) were deemed defiling.

Mary Douglas, in her analysis of concepts of pollution, suggests that the meaning of defilement is difficult for us to grasp because of the modern view that holiness and impurity are at opposite poles.⁹ In primitive cultures sacred

⁶John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 61, 66.

⁷Raphael Patai, *Sex and Family in the Bible and the Middle East* (New York, 1959).

⁸*Ibid.*, 186. Ezekiel uses the alternative, i.e., the rejection and abandonment of the newborn, as a metaphor for utter degradation (16:4f.).

⁹Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1966)7.

rules are “merely rules hedging divinity off, and uncleanness is the two-way danger of contact with the divinity.”¹⁰ From this perspective, the ritual uncleanness of new mothers may be seen as an expression of respect for the forces at work in childbirth.

Douglas' discussion of characteristics of the Holy is also instructive. Rooted in the idea of separateness, the Holy is characterized by wholeness and completeness,¹¹ and requires that the categories of creation be kept distinct.¹² According to Douglas, this wholeness is reflected in the

requirements of physical health and wholeness required of priests and warriors.¹³ The new mother's uncleanness might be understood in a similar fashion. She is precisely not whole. In giving birth to the child which has been a part of her for months, she has lost a part of her pregnant self. Her body requires time to recover its nonpregnant state of wholeness.

A birthing woman loses not only a part of her pregnant self; she also loses a lot of blood. According to beliefs widespread in the ancient world, blood when shed had uncanny power. For Israel, blood was sacred. Blood is life (Gen 9:4; Deut 12:23), closely related to the living God. The use of blood was a vivid and integral part of Israel's sacrificial rituals.¹⁴ Because of the sacredness of blood even the slaughter of animals was not permitted without ritual (Lev 17:4). The blood shed in bringing new life into the world must have been awesome and threatening, not only for the woman concerned, but for the whole community. To return to Douglas' analysis, the distinctions which preserve the well-being of creation are jeopardized. The participation of the divine and human in bringing forth new life is a contact which verges on too great an intimacy. As Otwell suggests, "the woman who had just given birth may have been 'unclean' because she had been too closely involved with the deity."¹⁵

In short, the Bible shows a healthy respect for the mysteries of childbirth. The hazards of childbirth are reflected not only in Genesis 3:16 and the rituals prescribed for postpartum mothers, but also in the record of the deaths of two women in childbirth (Gen 35:16-19; 1 Sam 4:19f.), and in the frequent use of travail as a metaphor for desperation or suffering (e.g., Ps 48:6; Jer 30:6; 1 Thess 5:3).

The Bible also affirms the social and religious importance of childbirth. Childbearing is shown as a sign of God's favor, and as a source of power and status for women. Giving birth is also seen as a sign of strength. As such birthing becomes an apt metaphor for God. Deuteronomy 32:18 describes God as "the rock who bore you,...the God who gave you birth." Still more startling, Isaiah delivers God's word of woe in the voice of a birthing woman:

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
now I will cry out like a woman in travail. (Isa 42:14)

¹⁰Ibid., 8.

¹¹Ibid., 51.

¹²Ibid., 53.

¹³Ibid., 51f.

¹⁴D. J. McCarthy, "Blood," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 115.

¹⁵Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed*, 176.

II. BIRTHING IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHURCH HISTORY: AUGUSTINE, KIERKEGAARD, LUTHER

By the time of Augustine, the positive evaluation of sexuality and childbearing reflected in the Hebrew Bible had been overwhelmed by the ascetic ideals which gained prominence in the early church. At the time of his conversion Augustine committed himself to a life of sexual abstinence. Before his conversion, Augustine had been infatuated with Manichaeism (which prohibited procreation entirely) and yet lived for years with a mistress who bore him a son. This

profligate turned celibate was destined to become one of the church's most influential thinkers—not least so in the area of sexuality.

Of particular interest are Augustine's view of sexuality and his discussion of original sin. Augustine's affirmation of the goodness of God's whole creation is weakest when it comes to sex.¹⁶ He views the goodness of sexuality solely in terms of procreation. According to Augustine, "The cohabitation for the purpose of procreating children, which must be admitted to be the proper end of marriage, is not sinful."¹⁷ However, desiring "carnal pleasure," even in marriage, involves venial sin.¹⁸

This mistrust of sexuality seems to be linked to the limits of rational and volitional control over sexual relations.¹⁹ At times Augustine expresses more than simple mistrust, suggesting a lingering distaste for the physical aspects of life. He frets about the "invisible stirrings of lust" and "intercourse untrammelled," and is repulsed by "the degradation of pregnant women."²⁰

This ambivalent attitude toward procreation is incorporated in Augustine's doctrine of the physical transmission of original sin. The doctrine emphasizes the solidarity of human sin and the universal human need for God's grace against the moral optimism of the Pelagians. Augustine develops the doctrine by noting that even the embrace which is "lawful and honorable" in marriage "cannot be effected without the ardour of lust," i.e., concupiscence. Hence "whatever comes into being by natural birth is bound by original sin."²¹ Lack of volitional and rational control over sexual drives would seem to equal sin. Although Augustine regards coitus as the point at which sin is passed on to the next generation, sexuality as a whole acquires guilt by association. Augustine's theory that the body of the Virgin remained closed in giving birth to Jesus put birthing in a still more dubious light. Did Augustine fear that the blood and mess of normal birth would have contaminated Jesus?²²

Augustine supported his views by referring to the church's practice of in-

¹⁶David Nikkel, "St. Augustine on the Goodness of Creaturely Existence," *Duke Divinity School Review* 43/3 (Fall, 1978) 185f.

¹⁷Augustine, "On Marriage and Concupiscence," 1.16, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (14 vols.; New York: Christian Literature Company, 1886-1890) 5.270.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, ch. 17.

¹⁹James Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 54. Cf. D. Nikkel, "St. Augustine," 186.

²⁰Quoted in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967) 396.

²¹Augustine, "On Marriage," 275.

²²Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 105.

fant baptism. If all are not born sinful and in immediate need of regeneration, why was the church baptizing infants? In turn, the doctrine of original sin contributed to the increasing urgency of infant baptism in centuries to come, although the belief that the devil has special powers for inflicting physical evil on an unbaptized child, or for snatching it away, is probably equally important.²³ The same sense of vulnerability at the time of childbirth which seems to be the basis for Hebrew custom of rubbing the newborn with salt and the mother's ritual purification, lies at the root of popular conceptions of baptism. The issue has changed from a theological point of view, however. In the Hebrew rites the issue was uncleanness associated with the reproductive

process, and the process of ritual purification was primarily a means of reintroducing the mother into society. After Augustine the issue was sin, and the focus of purification rites was the child more so than the mother.

Some 1400 years later, S. Kierkegaard would reflect on Augustine's formulation of original (inherited) sin. His purpose was not only to maintain the solidarity of sin and the need for grace, but to find a clearer base for individual responsibility within this framework. In *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard rejects the tendency already apparent in Augustine to practically equate sex with sin.²⁴ Instead he uses the psychological category of anxiety as an intermediate disposition between innocence and sin. Sin is not simply equal to concupiscence or lack of control. Rather, sin is a possible outcome of anxiety, anxiety being the ambiguous feeling of attraction and repulsion towards something.

Kierkegaard writes that intercourse and birthing evoke heightened anxiety: "in the moment of conception, the spirit is farthest away and therefore anxiety greatest....In birthing woman is again at the outermost of one of the extremes of the synthesis, so the spirit trembles."²⁵ Birthing is a body-dominated experience that the spirit is hard-pressed to assimilate. Pain, the fear of death, and the loss of self are in constant tension with the promise of new life and motherhood. Kierkegaard suggests that the parents' anxiety is communicated to the unborn child.²⁶ The child is born naturally anxious, but not necessarily sinful. Later in his authorship, in *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard again focuses on the problem of sin, and comes to a position which includes the universality of sin. In a sense Kierkegaard leans more toward Augustine here, but in doing so he carefully employs a new metaphor. Sin is described as a universal sickness, and it is not linked to the birthing process.

By considering anxiety as it relates to the entire procreative process, Kierkegaard recovers in a potentially helpful way a sense of the mystery and awe expressed by the primal taboos regarding reproduction. At the same time his formulation serves to loosen the problematic equation of sexual desires and sin in Augustine. Although the notion of a hereditary transmission of anxiety may seem farfetched, Kierkegaard's discussion of anxiety in sexual relations and childbirth offers insight into these fundamentally ambiguous experiences.

²³E. S. Hartland, "Birth," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (13 vols.; New York: C. Scribners, 1908-1927) 2.643.

²⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *Begrebet Angest* in *Samlede Vaerker* (14 vols.; Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandels, 1901-1906) 4.337.

²⁵Ibid., 341.

²⁶Ibid.

Between these two considerations of inherited sin an important shift in the church's attitude toward childbearing took place. Despite a continuing emphasis on the doctrine of original sin in his theology, Luther's rejection of the celibate ideal meant that, at least for Protestants, Christian parenthood came to be honored as a universal Christian calling, and childbearing was once again valued as an important contribution to church and society.

By the time he wrote his commentary on Genesis in 1536, Luther had already been married over a decade. His exposition of Genesis 3:16 reflects a more positive, realistic attitude toward sexuality and the pain of childbirth than that of Augustine. Luther notes that the pain and

danger of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood are a punishment for sin, but this is still “a happy and joyful punishment” because

Eve hears that she is not being repudiated by God. Furthermore, she also hears that in this punishment she is not being deprived of the blessing of procreation, which she was promised and granted before sin. She sees that she is not being separated from Adam to remain alone and apart from her husband.²⁷

Luther sees the punishment as merciful, a help to keep woman humble, and points out that in marriage a part of these punishments is transferred to the husband, “for he cannot without grief see those things in his wife.”²⁸

Luther’s comments come like a breath of fresh air. He sees female sexuality and procreative ability as a good gift. He finds mercy even in the pain of punishment. The punishment is a sign that the woman’s relationship to God is broken, but not destroyed. Her suffering may be an occasion to strengthen her relationship to God.

What a contrast to, for example, the hellfire preaching of Cotton Mather to pregnant women in Colonial America! Instead of proclaiming the God of love who cares for sinful, suffering human beings, Mather considered pregnancy an opportune time to consider the wrath of God and repent:

For you ought to know, your Death has entered into you, and you may have conceived that which determines but about nine months at most, for you to live in the world. Preparation for death is that most reasonable and most seasonable thing, to which you must now apply yourself.²⁹

Hellfire sermons on the subject of pregnancy are no longer the vogue in most theological circles. In fact, in the course of the last 200 years in this country, childbirth has become an increasingly secular and an increasingly impersonal process. No longer do the spiritual dimensions expressed in primitive taboos and rituals clearly inform birthing ritual. Nor is childbirth today under the direct auspices of the church as it was in an earlier era when the church licensed midwives.³⁰ Today childbirth in the U.S. generally takes place in the hospital, and is subject to its routine and ritual. Birth is not usually attended by pastors, and

²⁷Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 1.199.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 201.

²⁹Quoted in Richard and Dorothy Wertz, *Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America* (New York: Schocken, 1979) 21.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 6f., and Thomas Forbes, *The Midwife and the Witch* (New Haven: Yale, 1966) 143ff.

often not even by husbands. These tendencies challenge us to think anew about the relationship of birthing to divine activity and to pain, as well as to think through contemporary birthing rituals so as to assist couples in seeking the most meaningful experience of childbirth possible.

III. TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON BIRTHING

We are faced with two questions. First, how is birthing as it is experienced in our scientific, secular world to be understood from a theological perspective? Second, what is the appropriate role of the church in the birthing process—or does the church even have a role to play?

A. Themes in a Theological Perspective.

Four themes emerge from considerations of the physical and emotional experience of childbirth: (1) the experience of limitations; (2) dealing with pain; (3) anxiety and self-identity; and (4) the experience of awe. With the possible exception of physical pain, all four are experienced by both the mother and the father. All four aspects of the birthing experience may lead to questions with a religious dimension, which may be subsumed in a common question: What is God's role in all of this?

1. *The experience of limitations.* Augustine observed that in sexual relations reason and will are overwhelmed. He interpreted this in a negative fashion, and was thus suspicious of the entire sexual act.

Indeed, sexual intercourse does highlight the limits of rational and volitional control over the body. Lack of control over bodily processes comes to the fore again in pregnancy and birthing. From the very start it is clear that human beings are not in complete control. While we have fair success in accomplishing contraception, we have little control over the success and timing of conception. Once a woman is pregnant her body takes over, completely changing her shape, affecting her emotions, creating a foreign body deep within her own. The father-to-be fares little better. A part of him develops in a sphere completely out of his control, changing his wife's appearance and attitude toward him. This lack of control becomes still more pronounced in birthing.

A mature woman, used to regulating her own life, suddenly finds herself in the grip of an uncooperative organ, the uterus, which raises up and performs on its own, in spite of anything she may contrive to do for or against it. Her conscious and unconscious wishes hardly matter. It is out of her control.³¹

There is a certain inevitability to the process. The husband, whether sitting alone, anxious and impotent in the waiting room, or supporting his wife as her body does its work, is equally powerless to alter the body's progress.

Does this lack of control over the body, and intense perception of creaturely limits, lend itself to interpretation in a positive light? The lack of complete control over the body in this creative process is a reminder that we are body as well

³¹Arthur and Libby Colman, *Pregnancy: The Psychological Experience* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) 60f.

as spirit, and that there are limitations to an individual's "right" over his or her body. This experience of our limited ability to control vital life processes might also call to mind the God who sustains and blesses us, and who carries us through experiences we cannot control.

2. *Dealing with pain.* Pain and suffering remain a part of birthing. Women may choose to obliterate as much pain as possible, but in so doing they may endanger their baby and miss the fullest experience of the birth, including the ecstasy and release from pain which follow upon the child's birth. The physical pain of childbirth may be a singular opportunity for many women to test their own pain thresholds. This may not sound appealing in a culture which does not greatly value tolerance of pain, but it may play a role in the current trend toward natural childbirth. Although a husband may not suffer physical pain, he is rarely unaffected by his wife's travail, as the folklore about the expectant father fainting in the delivery room tells us.

Dealing with even limited pain and suffering gives rise to the question: Why has God allowed it in creation? Genesis 3:16 retains its simple profundity: childbearing, part of life in a sinful world, is subject to pain, contradictions, and sorrow. Indeed the whole creation is groaning and travailing (Rom 8:22). And birthing is not only pain. It is also purposeful suffering. When a woman is delivered of a child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world (John 16:21).

The suffering of birthing may link us to parents whose anguish only begins with birth, as in the case of a stillborn or unhealthy child. And the agony of travail may lend insight into the heart of the God who suffers on the cross, the same God who suffers with a child who refuses to be born (Hos 14:13).

3. *Anxiety and self-identity.* Kierkegaard noted the presence of anxiety in birthing, and interpreted it in terms of the tensions implicit in the human synthesis of body and spirit. The physical aspects of pregnancy and birthing are powerful reminders of our kinship with the animals. At the same time, giving birth is an intense emotional, social, and spiritual experience. No wonder it gives rise to ambiguous feelings in both the man and the woman! Both can be expected to experience not only pride and joy, but also fear, resentment, and hostility toward the essentially impersonal process taking place within the woman's body, and the prospect of parenthood. If these ambiguous feelings are acknowledged and shared, they can provide a special opportunity for personal spiritual growth and can greatly enrich the couple's relationship.³²

Theological questions are implicit in the couple's search to come to terms with their anxieties, and to find a new understanding of themselves in relation to one another, their parents, and the coming child, and the meaning of life and death. This search might appropriately be set in terms of a God who is present in human life indirectly as the giver of life and sustainer of the created order, and also as the God who speaks to human beings, offering guidance, hope, and meaning to those who are anxious, suffering, and confused.

4. *The experience of awe.* Science may explain the workings of the reproductive process, but the birth of a child evokes joy and wonder that reach out for religious language. Giving birth is also accompanied by powerful negative emo-

³²P. Washbourn, *Becoming Woman*, 97; A. and L. Colman, *Pregnancy*, 118.

tions. It has been said that "giving birth is as close to dying as any other human experience."³³

Our culture tends to fence off birth, as well as sickness and death, within the confines of the hospital, thus limiting access to the awe-inspiring mysteries of life and death. Similarly, the pregnant woman's negative feelings are often denied by facile reassurances or medical information, ignoring her need to articulate her feelings in symbolic form and to work through

the dark aspects of the experience into a new self-understanding.³⁴

The church might well do all it can to recover a sense of the awesomeness of birth, thus benefiting a culture plagued by superficiality, and supporting women in their spiritual pilgrimage.

B. The Role of the Church

This leads to our second question: What is the church's role in birthing?

First, the church does have an appropriate role. If we really hold that the holy God became flesh, then the human body with all its limitations and possibilities, as well as the human spirit, is claimed by God.

Second, there is a clear need for ministry to pregnant and birthing couples. Pregnancy and birth is a time of spiritual crisis which the medical world is ill-equipped to handle.

Third, the church itself might benefit from a renewed appreciation of birthing.

How might the church's ministry develop? First, the church has a responsibility to think through the issues involved in birth and incorporate respect for the birthing process in teaching and preaching. The church has a checkered history which has left a heritage of misunderstandings. It is time for these to be admitted and corrected.³⁵

Second, the church can offer pregnant couples pastoral support. This might take the form of groups for baptismal instruction which begin meeting before the baby's birth, thus offering a natural support group with a religious focus. It might take the form of increased visitation during pregnancy by pastor and/or lay visitors.

Third, the church can lift up the vocations of health care professionals, encouraging them in providing sensitive, family-centered childbirth.

Fourth, the church might inform itself of, and support community efforts, to provide safe and meaningful alternatives in childbirth for all people.³⁶

Finally, the church might try to incorporate birth imagery and experience into contemporary worship: perhaps a public prayer of thanksgiving marking a woman's return to church after coming safely through childbirth; perhaps Lenten paraments bearing a purple butterfly.

Children will continue to be born whether or not the church takes an active interest in the process. But does the church really want to neglect this opportunity for spiritual renewal and new life?

³³P. Washbourn, *Becoming Woman*, 97.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵The persecution of midwives as witches comes to mind as an example.

³⁶The infant mortality rates in this country are deplorable.