

RETHINKING OF MOTHERHOOD IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Jung-Sook Lee*

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:27-28).

MOTHERHOOD IN CRISIS

One of the recent social problems in Korea is the lack of interest in child-bearing and rearing among young people. Although several remedies for the potential demographic and economic disaster which this phenomenon entails have been suggested both by governmental and civilian levels, none of them seems to be effective enough to cure this social illness. The primary reason for this crisis is, according to a survey, total cost for rearing a child, of which educational cost tops over other things.¹⁶⁶ Often, young people want to enjoy their life free from being responsible for anything other than themselves. They are concerned if their life becomes incumbent on their children after spending all they have on their children's education just like their parents. Thus, they are not interested in child-bearing or rearing.

The rise of women's social and economic status had possibly played a role in this phenomenon as the critics of feminists used to claim. But the Korean situation is certainly not so simple to pin down with such a criticism because not only young women but also men are protesting against a traditional social principle, i.e., "marriage, then, child-rearing." In fact, many analyze that a married-but-no-children syndrome may have been a negative outcome of overzealous mothers,

*Jung-Sook Lee, Ph.D., is Academic Dean and Assistant Professor of Church History at Torch Trinity. This article is a revised version of the article published in the book, *Scripture, Women, Theology* (Korean), in commemoration of the retirement of Dr. Sang Chang from her long time service in theological education and women's education at Ewha Womans University, Seoul, Korea.

¹⁶⁶Low birth rate has been a social problem since 2001 in Korea. It is true that Asia, in general, faces this problem, but the Korean problem has a lot to do with the cost of education. A survey conducted by a daily newspaper, *Chosun* and *Gallop Korea* (Jan. 29-30, 2005) shows that over 60% of married women with no child complained of high cost for childrearing, including education.

often nicknamed as child-managers, in Korea.¹⁶⁷ These mothers take their children's success for their own and so carefully plan their children's daily schedule as early as age two. They arrange tutors, teachers, or helpers for various areas, and drive them from one institution to another so that their children can learn in the best condition and under the best educational system as possible. Unlike young women who avoid child-rearing, these mothers push themselves into too much of child-rearing. To be sure, their attitude came from both peer pressure and their uncritical acceptance of success-oriented mentality that is dominant in Korean society; and it spreads rapidly, like an epidemic, to innocent mothers or prospective mothers.

MOTHERHOOD AND CHURCHES

Although many still consider motherhood as a biological truth for a woman, the whole notion has been challenged and scrutinized by scholars in gender and family studies. Their argument is that motherhood may not be a natural/biological concept, but a socially fabricated one. If it is true, motherhood may reflect some sort of ideology or an interest of certain group who contributed formulating such a concept. Further, it may oppress women because a certain way of motherhood becomes the absolute standard to measure the quality of woman's life. Generally this criticism revolves around mainly two issues: one is the romanticization of motherhood and the other is the absolutization of motherhood for woman's life. Romanticization of motherhood is with or without intention to normalize traditional mother's role and to beautify mother's work by giving uncritical credit to mothers' zeal and work for children, and to encourage mothers to show usual sacrificial love to her children and family. Absolutization of motherhood is to make women and others to believe that all women can become mothers of what they believe to be the best mothers. Unfortunately both ideas can make a negative impact on the role of women. In fact Letty M. Russell strongly criticizes that "women's ability to give birth, nurture, and take care of children *can* be used as a

¹⁶⁷Several books were published by mothers who became strategic managers for their children's education. One of them is *Daechidong Mothers' Strategy for 2008*, (Seoul: Easy Books, 2006), which became a best-seller.

means to oppress women.”¹⁶⁸ ‘To oppress women here has a twofold implication: the romanticization and absolutization of motherhood may confine women’s vocation to only mother and henceforth undervalues women who are not mothers whether married or not.¹⁶⁹ Another implication is that women who are mothers are evaluated by stereotyped standards that usually presume women as full-time mothers. Although the Korean phenomenon requires an in-depth sociological analysis such as the speedy rise of women’s participation rate in economic world¹⁷⁰, absence or lack of support for working women in terms of childcare system, and unreasonable burden of private education, the above criticism is still useful to comprehend a certain behavior of mothers in the name of motherhood. At this juncture it seems required to critically reflect our attitude toward a well accepted social concept. Further it gives us a chance to think about a side effect of overvalued motherhood, namely, exclusion of fathers from child-rearing process, and, as a consequence, both fathers and children endanger their intimacy and strong family tie.

Therefore, rethinking of motherhood is a “must” for Korean Christians, in particular, for young people who prepare or start making families in order to have a right perspective on Christian family. This reflection is important for Korean Christians because they tend to accept Christian values and practices within the Confucian framework of life. When it comes to family life, and gender relationship, Christian churches often pronounce their messages in tune with the Confucian values such as filial duty, women’s subordination, praise of mother’s sacrifice, and non-participant husbands at household work.¹⁷¹ In

¹⁶⁸ Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, eds., *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), s.v., Mothers/Motherhood.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Almost half of Korean women over fifteen (48.9%) are working as of July 19, 2005, according to the statistics prepared by the Korea National Statistical Office.

¹⁷¹ Certainly this phenomenon is changing, but it is still true that kitchen work and other household chores are predominantly considered women’s work in Korean churches unlike women’s wishes. Since Korean churches are dynamic and replete with many programs including meal services, women’s work in the kitchen becomes the biggest part of women’s task in a local church according to a survey. Although women’s work in the kitchen should be highly praised as eating together with others is, and it is one of the most important factors behind the success of Korean churches, it often enforces formulating Christian women’s proper role in terms of kitchen work. For

relation to motherhood, Confucian emphasis is immediately connected to success stories of two mothers educating their sons; mother of Mencius in China and Shin, Saimdang,” and mother of a great scholar during Chosun dynasty, Yulgok Yi Yi. Especially, Mencius’s mother is famous for moving three times in order to provide the best educational environment for his son when she barely managed her life as a street vender. Unlike Mencius’s mother, Saimdang Shin, the most respected mother among Koreans was from a good family who was able to enjoy literatures and arts from her youth. She educated her son so well to be one of two most prominent scholars in the history of Chosun dynasty. These two mothers have been role models for Korean mothers over forty years old; they have instilled an idea that children’s education ought to be a mother’s foremost important job. Further, it suggests that children’s success hinged upon mother’s efforts and investments.

Church ministers sadly observe that Christian mothers show no critical difference from non-Christian mothers in terms of children’s education and their desire for children’s success in the future. If there is any difference at all, Christian mothers pray for their children’s success in a more regular and organized way. Churches encourage mothers to come to early morning prayer services. Moreover they provide guided prayer meetings for mothers whose children are High School seniors. Approaching a Korean version of SAT test, churches hold a thirty-day (less or more) special early-morning prayer meetings, and on the test day, a whole-day prayer meeting for anxious mothers. We say that prayer meeting is one typical symbol for good Christian mothers in Korea. Here, we need to realize that Korean churches teach their mothers to be good mothers, yet, many times their teachings and encouragement are so different from that of non-Christians. Education, even religious education, is incumbent on mothers for most of the time. This overemphasis on the mother’s role as primary educator can be unchristian and creates at least three problems. First, Christian mothers are to be treated only as mothers, not as individuals who would need spiritual empowerment for their own soul. Secondly, this can fix traditional gender models as *de facto* and hence the father’s place at home becomes minimized. This phenomenon, though not intended, pushes fathers to indulge themselves in works. Thirdly, churches give

a survey, see Nam-Soon Kang, *Feminism and Christianity* (Korean) (Seoul: Christian Literature Society, 1999).

up the leading role as a cultural transformer if they continue to follow what the worldly culture advocates. If churches do not create their own understanding of motherhood, then Christian mothers would follow uncritically what the others do in the name of motherhood.

Behind these mothers Christian tradition plays some significant roles. Out of the list of mothers from the Christian tradition, Augustine's mother, Monica, comes preeminent among Korean Christians. Monica has been portrayed as a praying mother for her son's conversion and success, and many Christian mothers took her life as their role model.

Although tradition often empowers later generations, it can be dangerous when people misuse the tradition or discolor it. In case of mothers in the Christian tradition, people tend to look at them in their own way and romanticize their images so as to be revered by many. However, such a romanticized view of certain Christian mothers can be a cause of misrepresentation of true Christian motherhood. Furthermore, it will easily produce series of mothers who would take unchristian lifestyles for true Christian motherhood. Therefore, it is important to review the true picture of mothers in history with which mothers today may free themselves from distorted image of motherhood. In this article three mothers from the early church will be examined to see their true pictures as mothers in a given time period.

MOTHERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Mother Martyrs

Historians believe that there were more female martyrs than male martyrs during the first three centuries of Christianity. The reason behind this is not all that transparent, but there are at least three plausible factors to explain the phenomenon. First of all, there were more female Christians from the beginning.¹⁷² Second, women tend to be more susceptible and faithful to religious teachings and often had difficulty to flee from dangerous situation. Roman persecution had started as early as mid first century, but it was not until the early third

¹⁷²Rodney Stark observes claims that women outnumbered men in Christian community in the first centuries with various statistical evidences. Christianity was favorable among women because the religion itself, in its religious teaching and practices, was favorable toward them, unlike existing religions (*The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure and Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

century that Christians in the whole empire felt great danger in keeping their faith and life.¹⁷³ From this period we meet two famous mother martyrs and would like to observe them from a mother's perspective. They were Perpetua and Felicitas who became martyrs around 203 AD under the emperor Septimius Severus (193-211AD). Historians believe that Septimius Severus's edict on Christianity and Judaism became the watermark of a new phase of Roman persecution. Severus attempted to syncretize religions by adding the sun god, *sol invictus*. Religious syncretism was an unbearable policy for Jews and Christians due to their monotheistic belief. The emperor also prohibited any conversion and as a result many new believers were arrested. Perpetua and Felicitas were arrested at the time because they were catechumens.

Perpetua was a daughter of a prestigious family in North Africa and had an infant child whom she still nursed.¹⁷⁴ She was arrested some time after she converted to the Christian religion. Along with her, Felicitas, who seemed to be a maid and yet pregnant, and three other male fellow Christians, were arrested and locked up in the same prison. They encouraged each other while waiting for the day of glorious martyrdom. This story came down to us through the *Passion of Perpetua*, which was known to be written by Perpetua herself for the most of the works. However, the introduction and conclusion (including the day of martyrdom) was attributed to Tertulian, the most prominent Latin theologian of the time and their fellow Christian in Montanist church. Known to be the first extant Christian woman's literature, the *Passion of Perpetua* inspired many Christians for centuries and made many preachers, including St. Augustine to use it as an example of faith.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. I (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), chas. 5, 6, and 10. Gonzalez differentiates the first and second century persecution from the third and fourth centuries: While the former was sporadic and not systematic persecution, the latter was the empire-wide systematic persecution so as no Christian could escape from the persecution unless he or she denied his or her faith.

¹⁷⁴For the story of martyrdom, there are many translations including Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, ed., *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 70-77. For the background of this work, see Joyce E. Salisbury's *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁷⁵Perpetua's fame had been defaced most likely after Montanism was condemned as a heretic. Her being a woman leader was not accepted as the church became more institutionalized and male-centered.

Perpetua, a mother of an infant boy, was reminded of her being a mother and a daughter by her elderly father. It is obvious from her writing that she was suffered with the condition of the prison for her baby, and her elderly father's plea for her denial of Christ so as to save her life and to give peace and stability to her family, especially to her elderly father.¹⁷⁶ Nonetheless, she gave up the privilege and duty as a mother and daughter gave her life in the name of her loyalty to the Lord. Similarly Felicitas also gave her life for faith, leaving behind her just-born baby whom she had through her earnest prayers for early delivery.¹⁷⁷

Two mothers from this story became martyrs, leaving behind their infant babies to their family members. When we look at them from a hagiographical perspective, they are perfect examples for Christians because they stood against despisers by keeping their faith and did not show any fear in the face of their death. However, if we look at them as mothers, they are hardly good mothers. They deserted their infant children in order to be faithful to their belief. Some may say that they were virtual examples of modern liberated women because they lived and died for their own desire at the expense of their family. In a sense when women in early church period did not have an option to live their own belief and way, Christian women were encouraged to embrace a critically different view on life, known as the way of discipleship.¹⁷⁸ Becoming a true disciple of Christ was open to anyone, either men or women, young or old, important or obscure. It is not alarming to observe a lot of active virgins and widows in early church committees. When the society in general was not favorable to ordinary women, it was the Christian church that made women to think about their own life and destiny as children of God before they accept and follow the kind

¹⁷⁶Perpetua's father's plea is based upon Trajan's edict on Christians. Responding to the letter of Pliny the Younger, Trajan the emperor made his policy clear. Later known as the Trajan's policy, it basically aims not to seek Christians but to wait until they are accused for offense something other than just being Christians. It also indicates that although Christians are accused and arrested, they should be given a chance to deny Christ. The second part of this edict was valid until the end of persecution.

¹⁷⁷Felicitas was seven-month pregnant when she was arrested. Since the Roman law does not kill pregnant women, she was concerned if she would be killed with other criminals. She prayed God to give birth a child before the D-day and was able to deliver a baby in the prison.

¹⁷⁸Rosemary Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 18-9.

of life the existing society had set forth for them. It was a call to a true discipleship.

Often we are silent about the implication of women martyrs. We praise martyrs, but we are not sure how to appraise their bold action when martyrdom means renunciation of their family. In other words, women are in tension between family and their calling as a disciple.

Monica, an Example of a Christian Mother?

If Perpetua's writing tells us how she understood herself as a mother and a Christian, Augustine's *Confessions* provides us how St. Augustine (354-450 AD), as a son, understood her mother, Monica. Augustine's mother, Monica, enjoyed her fame as a most respectable mother among Korean Christians. She was a successful mother in terms of raising her child to become someone great, both in faith and career. Of course, Augustine praised his mother in his autobiographical book, *Confessions*, but it is also true that the Koreans' extraordinary zeal for education and children's success contributed to a great extent to make her fame loom larger than what it should be. Monica was a Christian while her husband was a pagan, and for this reason, many attributed Augustine's worldliness to his father and religiosity to his mother. Monica tends to be depicted as a perfect Christian mother who struggled with her prodigal son and finally succeeded in bringing his son to the altar for the Lord.

Although Augustine dearly praised Monica as his mother, he did not beatify his mother. It is interesting to see how candid Augustine was when he described his mother in his *Confessions*. As a spiritual autobiography that is extraordinary for an ancient man, the *Confessions* showed his life reminiscently from his youth to the aged and commented on each phase of his life with spiritual insights. From this book we can certainly learn his sufferings from his cardinal desires, and, at the same time, desperately seeking the truth to which he could devote his life. In this process his mother appears often as a mother who is so ordinary and hence unchristian just like other women of the time. A few examples are in order. The first one is what Augustine overheard from his parents' conversation over his adolescent signs:

Although she had warned me to guard my virginity, she did not seriously pay heed to what her husband had told her about me, and which she felt to hold danger for the future: for she did not seek to restrain my sexual drive within the limit of the marriage bond, it could not be cut back to the quick. *The*

reason why she showed no such concern was that she was afraid that the hope she placed in me could be impeded by a wife. This was not the hope which my mother placed in you for the life to come, but the hope which my parents entertained for my career that I might do well out of the study of literature. Both of them, as I realized, were very ambitious for me; my father because he hardly gave a thought to you at all, and his ambitions for me were concerned with mere vanities; my mother because she thought it would do no harm and would be a help to set me on the way towards you, I studied the traditional pattern of a literary education. That at least is my conjecture as I try to recall the characters of my parents [emphasis mine].¹⁷⁹

According to Augustine, both his parents had great ambition for him, and that ambition is certainly related to success in the world. It is also true that the ambition is not just for his son, but also for their future. About parental intention for his education, Augustine defended his mother by saying that her ultimate intention for his study may be related to his conversion unlike his father. In other places, Augustine confided that his education was possible by the sacrifice of his parents: the quality education he received in Carthage was not a result from the wealth of his parents, but from their zeal for providing the best education for their son.¹⁸⁰

Whereas Augustine's parents were eager in their son's formal education in school, they were not much concerned about her son's moral education. It is surprising to see that Monica did not pay due attention to son's sexual chastity. In this regard she was not different from her pagan husband. She did not dissuade her son from being sexually immoral for fear that her son's future might be hindered by early marriage. We may conclude from Monica's leniency toward his son's sexual inordinateness, her cold attitude toward Augustine's concubine, and her much effort to find the right (wealthy) match for her son¹⁸¹ that the mother was passive about her son's purity, but active about his success. In this sense, she was not different from mothers of the time because people at the time in the Roman Empire did not take seriously man's sexual perversity.

¹⁷⁹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), II, iii (8).

¹⁸⁰ Augustine said that his father was a man of "very modest resources," and had "more enthusiasm than cash" (*Confessions*, II, iii [5]). He also shared that he had to stop-out from the school because of his father's inability to pay his tuition at his age of sixteen. After his father's death at seventeen, his mother had to earn money to pay for his son's education. See, *Confessions*, II, iii (5), (6); III, iv (7).

¹⁸¹ *Confessions*, VI, viii (23).

Despite her weaknesses, Monica seemed to be the most important person in Augustine's life. He told us that his mother was a praying woman especially for her son's conversion.¹⁸² Monica prayed for her son so that he may rely upon God as father in place of his biological father. After his mother's funeral, Augustine became more reminiscent of his mother. He described his mother, "in the clothing of a woman but with a virile faith, an older woman's serenity, a mother's love, and a Christian devotion."¹⁸³ He also said that even Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, praised his mother for playing such a significant role in his conversion.¹⁸⁴ However, Augustine does not forget that it was not his mother's plan, but God's grace by which he became what he was. In this line he stressed that his mother was a mere path of God's grace. For example, as he talked about his mother's milk, "it was not my mother or my nurses who made any decision to fill their breasts, but your ordinance and the riches which are distributed deep in the natural order. You also granted me not to wish for more than you were giving, and to my nurses the desire to give me what you gave them."¹⁸⁵ Besides, he said that he learned a lot from his mother, nurses, authority of his teachers, but the goodness came to him not from them but *through* them [emphasis mine].¹⁸⁶ Whenever he speaks about mother, Augustine speaks of two mothers.

Monica = Biological mother = my mother
 Church = Spiritual mother = our mother¹⁸⁷

Throughout the *Confessions* Augustine repeats that he receives his physical needs from his biological mother, but spiritual needs from God

¹⁸²*Confessions*, VI, i (1), (2).

¹⁸³*Confessions*, IX, iv (8).

¹⁸⁴*Confessions*, VI, ii (2). Augustine reflects, "In good works 'fervent in spirit' (Rom. 12:11), she was habitually at the Church. When he saw me, he often broke out in praise of her, congratulating me on having such a mother, unaware of what kind of son she had in me--someone who doubted all these things and believed it impossible to find the way of life."

¹⁸⁵*Confessions*, I, vi (7).

¹⁸⁶*Confessions*, I, vi (7).

¹⁸⁷"Church as our mother" is occasionally seen in the *Confessions*, VI, iii (4); VII, I, (1). Augustine does not contrast the roles between biological mother and spiritual mother, although it is possible to compare these two metaphors of motherhood.

through his spiritual mother, the church. Church as mother was not foreign to Protestant Reformers, but certainly to many Protestants today.

For Augustine God is the creator and provider through his mother. He also contrasts his mother with the church, that is, spiritual mother for all Christians. Whereas his mother can have flaws, church cannot have flaw in leading us to God's world. When biological mothers can only be mothers of their own children, the church can be mothers for all, embracing and directing their ways of life. Through the *Confessions*, we may dare to say what Augustine believed to be true motherhood for Christians is not in mother's extraordinary effort, but more in trusting God's provision.

CONCLUSION

Motherhood should not be separated from mother. But they should not be automatically identified as if motherhood is exclusively mother's. Further motherhood often entails unnecessary claims for sharp distinction between men and women in terms of their roles the family. It can create undue burden to women, especially, working women out of their own choice or necessity. Korean society tends to believe and enforce a certain formula in regard to motherhood, which puts a heavy burden on mother's shoulders in relation to their children's success. The formula could be somewhat as follows:

Children's Education = Mother's responsibility and duty

Children's Education = Children's Success

Children's Success = Mother's Responsibility and Duty

Nonetheless, if Christians believe in their task as the transformers of the worldly values, they need to think differently from what the world suggests. Mothers, as seen in our Christian tradition, also urge us to rethink who mothers are and what mothers should do. Christians, men and women alike, are called to be disciples of God. Although some of us are also called to become family members of our own and serve God with and through the family, we are not to lose sight of the fact that our first call is to be a disciple of God. Thus, it deems useful to reflect what M. E. Ashcroft states, "Women have been encouraged to idolize their family lives. We are so used to thinking this is acceptable,

even laudable, that we forget that Jesus stood against this kind of idolatry.²¹⁸⁸

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¹⁸⁸M.E. Ashcroft, *Balancing Act: How Women Can Lose Their Roles and Find Their Callings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 72).

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