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# Saved Through Childbearing: An African Feminist Interpretation and Theology

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## I Introduction

'Madam, open your mouth, push, push with your abdominal muscles and not your throat. Pu-u-sh, pu-u-sh, Madam please don't give up, don't fall asleep, save your baby's life, you will choke him. He is struggling and working so hard too.'<sup>1</sup>

This quotation is a part of the moving testimony of the experience of the process of a Christian woman while being helped to give birth to a child. Whether by natural process or even by caesarean section, every woman can tell the story of the pain involved in childbearing. Childbirth is the core of motherhood, the experience that this paper will examine critically in the context of feminist theology.

For the purpose of clarification, it should be stated at this juncture that the author considers feminist theology to be a valid field of Christian study.

This position is based on the conviction that what is real in human experience and Christian theology ought to speak to human liberation from oppression, marginalization and poverty. These conditions affect any group of people, and feminist biblical interpretation and theology ought to be done in the context of total experience of womanhood including the aspirations, challenges and pain.

The paper recognizes that some Africans think that feminist theology is a western idea that has no relevance in Africa. As a matter of fact some African women also support this opinion. Maureen O. A. Okeke, one time Chief Executive Officer of Megalose in Lagos said: 'The Nigerian woman is not marginalized. Marginalization is a thing of the mind.'<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to this kind of argument, the author is of the opinion that application of the principles of libera-

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1 Grace Yemi Oladokun, 'The Birth of life', *An African Call for Life* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1983), 140-141.

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2 Maureen O. A. Okeke, quoted by Bisi Alabi Williams, 'Maureen', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 21 August, 2005, 22.

tion theology to the feminist setting is needed in Africa because African women are facing exploitation. Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, a Kenyan feminist cultural hermeneut, asserts, 'When we look critically at our cultures, we know for certain that there are cases where our cultures dehumanize woman.'<sup>3</sup> She is not alone in this thinking.

In 1996 twenty seven theologians, male and female, from four West African countries, and over ten Christian denominations and academic institutions, held a conference in Nigeria to explore the theme, 'Women, Culture and Theological Education'. A part of the communique issued at the end of the conference read:

...We have observed that many women in Africa have not been treated as equals with men in dignity, opportunity and power..., [D] own through the ages women have been regarded as second class citizens, inferior to men, stereotyped into roles of despondency, submission and passivity. Women have been exploited as sex objects and many have looked on them as a necessary evil to fulfill men's sexual needs and bear their children. They have not been expressively included in the power centers and decision-making process in church and society.<sup>4</sup>

This is a very strong witness in support of the need for feminist liberation theology in the West African experience.

I would like to corroborate it further with my personal ministerial experience. In my pastoral practice I have seen wives and mothers marginalized in family lives. Some husbands have abandoned their wives (sometimes including children) for reasons like childlessness, having only female children, etc. Many African women are suffering and they stand in need of liberation.

Theology is an interpretative analysis of the revelation of God in any context of human experience. Feminist theology is the attempt to interpret the Christian faith from the perspective of the experience of suffering and exploitation of women. Models and issues of concern and interest constitute what is called the agenda of feminist theology. This paper does not make a distinction between the intellectual efforts, theoretical concerns and the social/practical ones. The feminist agenda is wide and includes: equality of sexes, incorporation of the experience of women in theological constructs; dealing with masculinist bias; women's rights in the home, places of work, church and society; violence against woman, involvement in state leadership and politics.

The paper is written from the viewpoint of an evangelical heritage. Evangelicals are Protestants who hold 'to the belief in justification by grace through faith and the supreme authority of Scripture'.<sup>5</sup> One of the distinct affirmations of evangelicals is the acceptance of the Bible as the true revelation of God. They give the Bible concentrated attention 'as a guide to

3 Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, edited by Mary Grey et al (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 92.

4 Protus O. Kemidirim and Mercy A. Oduoye, *Women, Culture and Theological Education* (Enugu, Nigeria: WAATI, 1998), 175.

5 Gabriel Fackre, 'Evangelical, Evangelicalism', *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 191.

conviction and behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, to evangelicals the Bible is the first, the primary and the most important source for formulating Christian theology. As the final authority and guide in Christian faith and practice it is used to evaluate all other sources of knowledge. This is a presupposition of this little theological exercise.

The contention of the paper is that while the various agendas of feminist theology are valid, from the viewpoint of evangelical understanding as exemplified by 1 Timothy 2:15, they are inadequate and so defective if they do not incorporate the primacy of childbearing (understood as motherhood). This thesis will be argued with a twofold objective—to engage in an interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15, and to propose a feminist theology of childbearing in the African context with particular reference to Nigeria.

## II An Interpretative Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:15

In 1 Timothy 2:15 we find a biblical revelation that should not be ignored in any serious Christian feminist theological effort; it states: 'But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety' (NIV). What is the meaning of 'saved' and 'childbearing' in this phrase? How will childbearing 'save' women? These are the major questions that this section will attempt to answer. One principle of biblical interpretation is to interpret a text in its context. Therefore, it is proper for us to first look at the historical background

and then the immediate context of the text, if only briefly.

### 1. The Historical Background

Scholars have adduced various proposed historical backgrounds for the text. According to the *Disciple's Study Bible*: 'This text contradicted an early non-biblical idea that women had to become males in order to be saved or that sexual relationships and birth are evil, part of the world's way instead of God's.'<sup>7</sup> Some interpreters think that the second idea is the more probable background, that is, that the writer, the apostle Paul, had in mind those false teachers who forbade people to marry (mentioned in 4:3). In this case, the apostle tried to persuade the Ephesian church, through Timothy, not to associate his own instructions with such an idea.

Without doubt, however, the text was written in the historical context of a double background—Jewish and Greek. In both cultures, during the first century women had a very low position. The apostle needed to give those temporary regulations not to bring the Christian church into unnecessary conflict with the prevailing cultures. What is more, if the women were allowed a more active role like teaching and leading a congregation they themselves would be considered loose and immoral.<sup>8</sup>

### 2. The Immediate Context

In 1 Timothy 2:8-14 the apostle Paul gave some guidelines concerning cor-

6 Fakre, 'Evangelical, Evangelicalism', 191.

7 *Disciple's Study Bible*, 1988 ed., 1548.

8 *The African Bible*, 1999 ed., 2007.

porate worship with an emphasis on some prayer attitudes of men, and the dressing and teaching roles of woman. He alluded to the order of creation and also referred to the historic experience of the fall of humanity. This context teaches us at least two things. The first is that these instructions were given against certain socio-cultural Greek and Jewish worship problems in the first century. He gave similar exhortations in some other New Testament texts (1 Cor 11:5-16; 14:33-35; 1 Peter 3:3-6). In view of the change in cultural values, it is reasonable to argue that the regulations under study lack normative authority for contemporary Christendom.

The second lesson is that the guidelines were not meant to make a case for superiority of male over female in the leadership of public worship. The apostle himself eloquently and emphatically declared the breakdown of such barriers in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28). However, critical objectivity demands that we recognize that he still upheld 'the universal principle of female submission to male headship',<sup>9</sup> in every culture in relation to some issues.

### 3. The Text

It would be naive to approach this text casually for it has been variously described as a 'difficult statement', an 'ambiguous promise' and one that is 'exceedingly obscure'.<sup>10</sup> The text is

apparently as debatable and controversial as the agenda of feminist theology itself. The interpretation will focus on the first part of the verse, 'But women will be saved through childbearing' and it will be done in two stages; the first is an interpretation of the constituent words—but, women, saved, through and childbearing.

The *first word* is variously translated as 'but' (NIV, NASV, NAB, GNB, NLI, ERV), 'notwithstanding' (KJV), 'nevertheless' (NKJV, ANT), 'yet' (RSV, NEB) and 'so' (TLB).<sup>11</sup>

It is translated from the Greek word (*de*) which distinguishes 'a word or clause from one preceding'.<sup>12</sup> It can also mean 'on the other hand'. In the text we see it as a conjunction of insight and encouragement.

Paul used the 'but' to connect the instructions about worship already given (8-14) with the profound spiritual revelation that he was about to give about womanhood (15). According to Alan G. Nute, this verse clearly 'sug-

Press, 1973), 86.

<sup>11</sup> Alan G. Nute, 'The Pastoral Letters' *The International Bible Commentary*, F. F. Bruce (editor) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 1477; E. Glenn Hinson, '1-2 Timothy and Titus', *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Volume II (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), 316; Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Nottingham: InterVarsity, 1996), 87.

<sup>12</sup> Abbreviations for the various Bible Versions: ANT—The Amplified New Testament; ERV—Easy-to-Read-Version; CV—Contemporary Version; GNB—Good News Bible; KJV—King James Version; (Authorised) Version; NAB—The New American Bible; NASV—New American Standard Version; NEB—The New English Bible; NIV—New International Version; NKJV—The New King James Version; NLT—New Living Translation; RSV—Revised Standard Version; TLB—The Living Bible.

<sup>9</sup> William Barclay, *Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1956), 79.

<sup>10</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Timothy and Titus* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity

gests to the woman that she is not to think that her contribution is of negligible worth.<sup>13</sup> The phrase under study was thus apparently meant to encourage the women that whereas they were disallowed from playing certain roles in the church, they should not be discouraged as that limitation would not hinder the purpose of God for them that was meant to be fulfilled through childbearing.

The second word, rendered women is also stated as 'she' (KJV, NKJV, NEB, NAB), 'woman' (RSV, GNB) and 'women' (NA5V, ANT, TLB, NLT, ERV, CV). The Greek word (*sotheretai*) is to be translated as '*she shall be saved*'<sup>14</sup> but interpreted by the context as women (plural). It tells us the recipient of the promise. The promise is thus applicable to every Christian 'she'—whether single or married, whether she is giving birth to children physically or not. A Christian woman who is biologically barren but is godly, raises and trains children for God's Kingdom can appropriate this promise as a *bona fide* 'she'. It applies to every mother-in-the-Lord.

We now come to the word 'saved' itself. The Greek (*sotheretai*) means to save from peril, injury or suffering; keep from harm, preserve or rescue. It is especially used in the New Testament to describe salvation from spiritual disease and death (Rom 8:24).<sup>15</sup> This means that the word can apply to both physical and spiritual salvation and it

makes the meaning enigmatic.

If it is understood as physical salvation then it refers to 'woman's physical safety in childbearing', against the background of Genesis 3:16.<sup>16</sup> If it means the physical safekeeping of Christian women in childbirth, how shall we account for many spiritual, godly women who have died in the process of childbirth? On the other hand if the reference is to a spiritual salvation the verse can be spiritualized to mean that women (as well as men) 'are saved spiritually because of the most important birth, that of Christ himself'.<sup>17</sup>

This interpretation is questionable: Is this a reference to spiritual salvation of the soul from sin? How do we reconcile that with the overall New Testament message that salvation is by grace through faith? (Eph 2:8-9). How can the physical work of childbirth provide salvation? Does it then mean that faithful women in Christ Jesus who do not bear children will not be saved? Certainly no. The issue will be considered again later.

We now come to the word 'through' (NIV, RSV, NEB, NAB, NASV, ANT, GNB, NLT), 'in' (KJV, NKJV, ERV), or 'by' (CV). From the Greek (*dia*) the preposition can be translated as through, by, between.<sup>18</sup> According to the *Disciple's Study Bible* here 'through' does not mean 'by means of'<sup>19</sup> but as in 1 Corinthians 3:15, it means women will be brought (or come) safely through the process of childbearing;

13 William A. Lykins, *A Word by Word, Verse by Verse Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 1 Timothy, 1992, 14.

14 Nute, 'The Pastoral Letters', 1477.

15 George Ricker Berry, *Greek to English Interlinear* (Iowa Falls, U.S.A.: World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1981), 542.

16 Lykins, *Word by Word*, 14.

17 *Disciple's Study Bible*, 1548-1549.

18 *Life Application Bible*, 1988 ed., 2190.

19 Lykins, *Word by Word*, 15.

'they will be brought safely through childbirth.'<sup>20</sup>

The last word is 'childbearing' (NIV, KJV, NKJV, NLT), 'bearing children' (RSV), 'having children' (GNB, ERV, CV), 'motherhood' (NEB, NAB), 'being good mothers' (CV margin), 'the Birth of the Child' (NEB margin), 'the birth of the (divine) Child' (ANT). It is translated from one Greek word (*teknogonias*)<sup>21</sup> and so childbearing is the best literal rendering. Now we know that childbearing is much more than biological childbirth but includes child nurture for growth. Moreover, in view of the virtues of faith, love, holiness and propriety required, childbearing is not to be considered as a mere natural exercise but a spiritual responsibility. This makes the interpretation as motherhood and being good mothers to be very appropriate.

The definite article before the Greek word (*tes*) provides another perspective for our hermeneutical task. Some interpreters explain that the reference is to the birth of a particular child, that is, the birth of the child Jesus. In ancient times it was suggested that the apostle refers here to the birth of Jesus Christ through Mary.<sup>22</sup> The verse therefore 'refers to women being saved spiritually through the most significant birth of all, the incarnation of Christ'.<sup>23</sup>

Having attempted an interpretation of the text through the analysis

of the key words, the phrase will now be examined as a whole. The best interpretation of the phrase, 'saved through childbearing', appears to be one that will relate the text to the most immediate reference to how woman (and man too) fell to the deception of Satan and sinned against God (1 Tim 3:14). It is interesting to note that in the story of the fall (Genesis 3) the three ideas in 1 Tim 2:14-18 also appear: The offspring to be borne by the woman will conquer the serpent, Satan, the agent of sin (15). She will bear the offspring in pain (16a); she will also live as a wife and mother in submission to her husband (16c).

When we put these elements of physical and spiritual salvation together, Paul appears to be saying that even if women play visible roles in church life, motherhood is also a profoundly spiritual role. As it was in the experience of the fall of man, with the promise made real in the experience of Mary who gave birth to Jesus Christ, Christian women should recognize that the apparently insignificant role of childbearing (motherhood) is not only natural but spiritual and God will preserve them from death (the consequence of sin) if they play the role spiritually. The *Amplified New Testament* paraphrase of the text is perhaps the best commentary on the verse:

Nevertheless (the sentence put upon women (of pain in motherhood) does not hinder their (souls') salvation), and they will be saved (eternally) if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control; (saved indeed) through the Childbearing, that is, by the birth of the (divine) Child.

20 *Disciple's Study Bible*, 1549.

21 David and Pat Alexander, *The Lion Handbook to the Bible* (Lion: Oxford: 1973), 619.

22 Lykins, *Word by Word*, 15.

23 Hinson, '1-2 Timothy and Titus,' p.316. Some scholars object to this view e.g. Bruce, *The International Bible Commentary* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1986), 1478.



Salvation is thus to be understood in the comprehensive holistic sense of finding life, satisfaction and achievement. This synthetic approach has significant meaning and application to women and men as well as to all Christians. It means that whatever role a woman plays in the church, her work as a mother is more basic, more significant and more fulfilling; motherhood is a very comprehensive feminine task. It is physical, biological, social and spiritual. This is a call for greater appreciation of the importance of childbearing. One cannot but agree with the opinion of John R. W. Stott:

So then, even if certain roles are not open to women, and even if they are tempted to resent their position, they and we must never forget what we owe to a woman. If Mary had not given birth to the Christ-child, there would have been no salvation for anybody. No greater honour has ever been given to woman than in the calling of Mary to be the mother of the Saviour to the world.<sup>24</sup>

Christian motherhood is then a call to a salvific responsibility. Christian women who give birth to and nurture children in the way of the Lord are performing an evangelistic task to populate the church and the Kingdom of God. This verse contains a similar message for men as well: Man sinned and so men were condemned to painful labour. Woman sinned and so women were condemned to pain in childbearing. Both men and women, however, can be saved, through trusting Christ

and obeying him.<sup>25</sup> Men who are given apparently loud, visible roles in building the church should do so with the awareness that Christ, the owner of the church, was born by a woman. Men and women are partners in the task of building the body of Christ (1 Cor 3:5-9).

Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:15 is therefore a unique soteriological point with profound ecclesiological implications for all Christians. God is telling us through the apostle that trust, faithfulness and obedience in living for Christ compensate when circumstances do not allow us to serve the Lord through some desirable church responsibilities. The Lord of the church is telling us here that when we lack opportunities to perform certain evangelistic and ecclesiological functions for the glory of God we should carry out our family responsibilities as a task of the Kingdom of God and find joy and satisfaction in nurturing our children to live for God. Here then is a crucial lesson not only for feminist theology but even for one that may be masculinist as well.

### III Towards a Feminist Theology of Childbearing: The Importance of Motherhood

Childbearing will now be examined from its need, importance, impact and agenda. From the discourse so far, it has been clarified that motherhood is more than a natural role. It is in fact social and even spiritual. The cultural, economic and political implications of motherhood call for a great appre-

<sup>24</sup> Stott, *The Message of Timothy and Titus*, 87-88.

<sup>25</sup> *Life Application Bible*, 2190.



ciation by society. The starting point is the biological childbirth.

It can be said that a woman is a womb-man, a man with womb. That definition is a significant assertion of at least two facts. The first is that it states the equality of woman with man, equality of the two sexes, female and male. Male chauvinism is thus a hoax and the idea of superiority of one sex over the other is theologically untenable; it is a product of the imagination of the sinful state of the human mind.

The second fact is that a woman has a special structure (the womb) for an additional responsibility (to give birth and nurture human life). According to modern midwifery, true labour takes place in three or four stages between 7 to 12 hours. Mothers have always stated that there is nothing comparable with labour pain in their life experience. Whoever has watched a human push in labour to deliver will have a rough idea of what that means. Most men desert their wives at that point.

A woman gives up her life at the moment of delivery to give birth to another life. I understand no woman knows exactly the moment the baby is delivered. She 'dies' momentarily and she wakes up to discover the baby by her side. God gives her life back to nurture the child. Motherhood should be valued more.

Childbirth is significant but there is more to childbearing. While the birth of a child takes place instantly, child-nurture is a life-long task. Unfortunately, modern society seems not to adequately appreciate the vital role of motherhood to develop a better-cultured, more-humane world. Katherine Kersten thus lamented most appropriately:

Clearly, society's most pressing

need at the moment is not more lawyers or accountants. What we need, I said, is more decent people, of the kind only strong families and dedicated parents can produce. We need people of character—self-controlled people who know right from wrong and are committed to the common good.<sup>26</sup>

In the biblical revelation the family is the fundamental means of Christian nurture and education (Deut 6:1-9; Eph 5:22-6:4). This means that the family is the most effective means to humanize and personalize society. If this is true then it is counterproductive for society to place greater value on building the career of the parents at the expense of family development. For instance, when a woman is given maternity leave to nurture her baby, it should be recognized as an important service to the community and the payment of her salary and allowances in the place of work should be done willingly and appreciatively (Ex 2:9). Is child nursing not more tedious than most jobs in life?

Reuben Abati once complained that the way female bankers are sometimes treated in Nigeria threatens family development. According to this well-known social and political commentator:

The woman's right to maternity leave is further abridged, and nursing mothers are given no concessions whatsoever... It is an assault on family values that is not extended to male employees. Are the banks saying that female bankers must forsake marriage and moth-

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Myles, *Textbook for Midwives* (E & S Livingstone Ltd., 1953), 241-242.

erhood in order to be successful in their chosen career?<sup>27</sup>

If this warped value system is not corrected, how shall we not be building a society where parents pursue wealth but have children that lack parental care and so become morally bankrupt? It is a materialistic tendency that is already rearing its ugly head, a twisted trend that is already bearing fruits of social and cultural dislocations and anthropological poverty.

There is no alternative to motherhood in family upbringing for humanizing a community. God has given a woman a womb for this purpose as 'one of the most important roles for a wife and mother is to care for her family'.<sup>28</sup> This is particularly an African cultural value that should be cherished and preserved for our good. Gloria Waithe, now living in Lagos, is a Jamaican by birth and parentage but British because she grew up there. She confessed, 'I have come to see the way marriage is taken seriously and the family commitment to it. In the West it is not like that.'<sup>29</sup>

The impact of family life on people is another indication of the gravity of motherhood. In the area of crisis care and counselling, Christian psychologists have drawn the Social Readjustment Rating Scale. They have determined the stress value of life events that produce grief. According to the study, the life events that give the highest mean stress values are: death

of spouse (100), divorce (73), marital separation from mate (65); these ratings may be compared with being tired at work (47), retirement from work (45).<sup>30</sup>

This is not just a western, psychological theory. It is the reality of African human (female and male) experience. This is the corroborating opinion of Gloria whose marriage broke up: 'Marriage is a serious business and I failed in it. That is why I said it was my lowest point in life.'<sup>31</sup> She is not alone in this confession. Maureen also said one of the most tragic moments in her life was the death of her first boyfriend. She lamented: 'The death of my first love shook me to the very foundation of my life.'<sup>32</sup> It is the people and things we appreciate and value that can give us pain, grief and stress when we lose them.

The truth is that in African experience, family problems give most people more stress than problems in the place of work.<sup>33</sup> It is for this reason that it is a bit easier for a woman to have to give up her job to join her husband in another town or country to take care of their children; that is, under normal circumstances, it is not expected of a Christian woman to sacrifice her marital relationship for the sake of her career. In the final analysis, childbearing is more important to a woman than ca-

<sup>27</sup> Katherin Kersten, 'How the Feminist Establishment Hurts Women', *Christianity Today*, 20 June, 1994, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Reuben Abati, 'Banks: A Moral Dilemma', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 7 March 2005, 52.

<sup>29</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, 2190.

<sup>30</sup> Kamai Tayo Oropo, quoting Gloria Waithe, *The Guardian* (Lagos), August 28, 2005, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of pastoral Care and Counselling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 188-189.

<sup>32</sup> Waithe, *The Guardian* (Lagos), August 28, 2005, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Okeke, *The Guardian* (Lagos), 21 August, 2005, 23.

reer. There are women who even suspend their professional development while their children are young so they can give adequate care and attention to the children.

Along with motherhood, some other important concerns that feminist theologians and practitioners should continue to speak to are: promotion and protection of 'women's rights by improving knowledge, exercise and development of rights under customary, religious and statutory laws' of a nation,<sup>34</sup> violence against women such as sexual harassment of youth and rape; participation of more women in partisan politics and governance.

If motherhood is a noble task, an important, indispensable factor for human development, then conferences that are organized with 'the objective of empowering womenfolk for economic, mental and spiritual growth'<sup>35</sup> should include a strong emphasis on motherhood. Intellectual support for childbearing should be one important pre-occupation of African feminist theology.

Since motherhood, spiritual/community service, and a professional career are all integral parts of a woman's life we need to consider how to balance these concerns. It is encouraging to observe that African women are already achieving the sensitive balance. An example is T. S. Aina-Badejo, who, while serving as the General Manager of Lagos State Radio, said that 'moving from the office, I am going to church

to do something and at home being a mother and a wife. But by His (God) grace I have been able to balance it all.'<sup>36</sup>

It is therefore heartening to see that highly placed African women are pursuing this holistic agenda for the welfare of women and for the good of society. Chief (Mrs.) Oluremi Tinubu, the wife of former Lagos State Governor and a Senator of Federal Republic of Nigeria, commented during a conference organized for wives of state officials:

The woman has to take her place in the home as a woman and as a working woman; she must learn to balance both and try to be the real helpmate for her husband. Being a woman is enough pride, she should play her role well. No amount of achievement you get should make you to jeopardize your home, you have to be a wife in totality.<sup>37</sup>

This opinion is well grounded and expressed. It boils down to one point—'whatever else is true a woman is queen within her home.'<sup>38</sup> This is the importance of motherhood in the context of balancing all valid feminist interests. This is the foundation required to build a feminist theology, the skeleton needed to develop a theology of childbearing.

<sup>34</sup> I testify that in my pastoral practice I myself handled counseling for family life problems more than any other aspect of human life.

<sup>35</sup> 'On violence against women and girls', *The Guardian* (Lagos), August 28, 2005, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Dafe Ivwurie, 'Elishammah's Street Love', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 5 June 2005, 12.

<sup>37</sup> T. S. Aina—Badejo quoted by Andrew Iro Okungbowa, 'A Rebel in the Air', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 4 August 2005, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Oluremi Tinubu quoted by Omolara Akin-toye, 'Women Reaching for Greater Heights', *The Comet* (Lagos), 24 October 2005, 18.

## IV A Feminist Theology of Childbearing

In view of the foregoing interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15, and the biblical, cultural and practical issues related to the primacy of motherhood, the stage is now set to formulate a feminist theology of childbearing. For the purpose of clarification it should be stated that this feminist theology is done from the perspective and experience of womanhood.<sup>39</sup> It is not basically a liberation from oppression or marginalization. The paper will adopt a contemporary fourfold scheme being used to examine a biblical/theological issue: creation, fall (alienation), redemption and consummation.

### 1. Creation and Childbearing

The Spirit of God hovered over the waters at creation to give life and orderliness out of the formless, empty and dark earth (Gen 1:2). Is this not a good picture of God 'pushing' (though without effort) to bring forth creation? There and then God gave the male and female the awesome task of childbearing to responsibly populate the earth (Gen 1:27-28).

I propose that there are hints of feminine imagery in the Genesis 1 account of creation, God pushing to give birth to the earth. Creation was an event of childbearing. In the Genesis 2 account the LORD God is also portrayed as a designer, a potter who fashioned the human from the dust of the earth. Pottery is also a feminine task in tra-

ditional Yoruba culture. Elsewhere God is described as nursing mother (Is 49:15), midwife (Ps 22:9-10), and female homemaker (Ps 123:2).<sup>40</sup> Women are especially endowed by God through the process of childbirth to bring new life into the world. Being created in the image of God, women imitate God through childbearing. By the enablement and grace of God women continue to push today physically to give birth and spiritually to give rebirth.

### 2. Alienation and Childbearing

One of the ways to define the biblical concept of sin is 'the break of relationship'. It illustrates the nature of sin as 'a state of our being that separates us from the holy God'.<sup>41</sup> The breakdown of relationships in the world validates the story of the fall of man as the history of the fact that sin has entered the human race.

The first Eve (in the presence of and with the active consent, support and collaboration of Adam) chose to be deceived by Satan, to disobey the word of God and rebel against divine authority (Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7). Their disobedience alienated them from God's presence, plan and favour (Gen 3:8, 23-24). It also alienated human beings from one another. After the fall we read the story of how Cain killed Abel his brother and he was cursed (Gen 4).

However, as a good parent of creation and humanity, God took the responsibility to reverse the alienation

39 L. Peacore, 'Feminist Theologies', *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 317-322.

40 Barclay, *Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 79.

41 Conn, 'Feminist Theology', S. B. Ferguson (ed.), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 256.

of man. God arranged for the offspring of the woman to defeat the devil (Gen 3: 15). The second Eve, Mary, through submission to God gave birth to the second Adam, Jesus Christ who fulfilled the promise (Rom 5:12-19). This is a sensitive and fair theology which shows that not only was woman part of the problem of the historic cause of alienation in the experience of humanity, but also that she was actively involved in the provision of God to reverse the resultant alienation.

A Yoruba proverb, '*Eni to ba bi omo oran ni yoo' pon*' translates as 'the woman who gives birth to a child with problems will have to take care of the same'. This was true in the roles played by God in the biblical story of creation, alienation and redemption. Today, Christian women have significant roles to play in the efforts of the church to deal with the problem of sin which manifests itself as disconnections in the family, church, working places and the larger society. Women (and their husbands) give birth to the children responsible for so much evil and atrocities in our world. They also have an equally crucial role in saving our crooked generation.

### 3. Redemption and Childbearing

Since womanhood was significantly involved in the event of alienation, she had to be equally involved in that of redemption. Alienation came through Eve, redemption came through Mary. In her submission to serve the Lord the Holy Spirit came upon the latter (Lk 1:35, 38). She became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mt 1:18-20). Mary 'pushed' to give birth to Jesus Christ (Lk 2:6-7; Mt 1:21).

At the dedication of Jesus on the eight day, Simeon prophesied that a sword would pierce the soul of Mary (Lk 2:35). About thirty three years later this prophecy was fulfilled as she stood in pain and agony to watch the sacrificial death of her son as the lamb to atone for the sin of the world (Jn 19:25-26). Just as a woman has to 'die' to give birth to a child, Jesus also had to die to give us new life (Jn 12:23-24).

Through the experience of Mary the entire mankind was saved in childbearing. For Mary and all Christian women today, childbirth and child nurture are not only physical, biological functions but spiritual and ministerial assignments. When women give birth, they are also required to snatch their offspring from sin, evil and wickedness in the world, lead them to the Saviour and nurture them in faith. Such godly children will deal with the various alienations in the world, restore relationships and harmony between man and God, man and fellow men, man and creation.

### 4. Consummation and Childbearing

Creation participated in the judgement, curse, suffering and pains that came as a result of the alienation of man. The Lord cursed the ground because of the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:17b-18). The earth also groaned as Jesus bore the weight of the sin of man on the cross at Calvary (Mt 27:45). The shaking of the earth, the splitting of the rocks, the opening of the tombs and the violent earthquake that accompanied the death and resurrection of Jesus are symbolic of the beginning of the experience of redemption of crea-

tion (Mt 27:52; 28:2). Since then creation has been waiting eagerly for its full redemption (Rom 8: 18-25).

The New Testament speaks of the mystery of wisdom and insight (Eph 1:9-10), for the unity of all things through Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup> These cosmological and eschatological implications of redemption make the gospel of salvation full and perfect. God has called on women through faith in Christ to contribute to the process of reconciliation of the cosmos through the birth and rebirth of children, thereby raising a great multitude 'from every nation, tribe, people and language' that will stand before the throne and in front of the Lamb (Rev 7:9). Christian women have a sacred and divine task to continue to 'push' in childbearing to give birth and rebirth to godly children who will establish the will of God in the human heart and prepare men and women to enter the Kingdom of God at the end of the age.

## V Conclusion

My love and compassion for the struggling infant brought me strength. I really pushed, as agonizing as it was. Then came, the thrust and then the cry: 'Congratulations, Mummy', said the doctor to me. Tears of joy and wonder rolled down my face.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> J. E. Colwell, 'Sin', *New Dictionary of Theology*, 641.

<sup>43</sup> Emiola Nihinlola, *The Fullness of Redemption* (Ibadan: Sceptre Prints, 2004), 37-39.

That is the continuation of the testimony of the birth of life used at the beginning of this article. It is considered suitable also as the conclusion to a paper, which has argued that feminist theology is valid and necessary. The phrase, 'saved by childbearing', has been subjected to some exegesis and hermeneutics. The paper has also contended that childbearing is vital to womanhood, to society, to the church and to the Kingdom of God. It is not just a biological activity; it is eminently social and spiritual.<sup>44</sup>

While women should be encouraged to aspire and excel in economic and political development of a society, it should not be at the expense of motherhood. Since childbearing is so significant, it ought to be an integral part of the agenda of feminist theology, social concerns and ministerial actions.

As a practical theological undertaking, the author is appreciative of the roles wives and mother play. The paper implores women to continue to push, push and push for birth and rebirth. Holistic childbearing is the hope of creation, the continuation of the human race, the social development of the human community and the evangelization of the world. Women will find joy, satisfaction and fulfilment in life now through motherhood. God will congratulate them for it. They will be 'saved through childbearing'.

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<sup>44</sup> Ladokun, 'The Birth of Life', 141.