



Volume 63 | Issue 2

Article 14

12-1-2020

Howard's "Showing: What pregnancy tells us about being human" (book review)

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Recommended Citation

DiRoberts, Kyle D. (2020) "Howard's "Showing: What pregnancy tells us about being human" (book review)," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 63 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol63/iss2/14>

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Book Reviews



Howard, A. R. (2020). *Showing: What pregnancy tells us about being human*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 232 pp. \$21.99. ISBN 9780802877239

Agnes R. Howard is assistant professor in humanities at Valparaiso University's Christ College. Her teaching and research interests include early U.S. history, American Puritans, women's monasticism, and the cultural history of maternity and childbearing.

In *Showing*, Howard has developed the content as a reference, which “allows a kind of archaeology of the way our pregnancy culture emerged and a reflection on how we might do better” (p. 21). For Howard, pregnancy can be viewed through various lenses, for example, “biology or anthropology or evolutionary development,” which tells the story of what pregnancy means. However, her purpose is to focus upon “presumed experts” and what they had to say about pregnant women and “what they advised women to do” (p. 21). She asserts that “this book is not a hearts-and-flowers tribute to motherhood,” in fact, this kind of caricature “distorts the importance of pregnancy and should be avoided” (p. 22). She also desires to move the reader beyond an individualistic approach to childbearing, to a reading that includes meaning “not only for current parents-to-be but for church and community more broadly” (p. 23).

In chapter 1, Howard focuses primary on the childbearing culture in the United States, which for Howard “requires some looking backward into the European history of ideas and practices surrounding reproduction” (p. 23). Chapter 2 provides a historical sketch of embryology and birth in the United States. She writes, “This history provides foundation for the birth practices many Americans now take for granted” (p. 23). Howard in chapter 3, demonstrates that women serve as a vital witness in childbearing as “one who witnesses in a unique way the formation of a new person, and second as one who shows others what is involved in bearing life” (p. 24). Chapter 4 focuses upon the virtuous way in which the mother offers protection and provision to the fetus-in-utero (p. 24). Chapter 5 employs certain virtuous terms to describe maternity, words like: prudence, courage, hope, charity, and hospitality (p. 24). In chapter 6, Howard discusses the way in which the presence of the fetus alters the identity of the mother (p. 25). This identity change in the mother affects relationships with friends, the father of the child, family, and the

mother's community at large (p. 25). In conclusion, Howard offers practical ways in which the American culture and church might "better honor these labors and transformations of childbearing" in support of the women's work (p. 25).

Overall, *Showing* is clear and thorough with well-documented endnotes. I believe Howard has accomplished her goal and *Showing* would be a helpful academic resource in the college or university setting.

Reviewer

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