

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
May 8, 2022

## **A Pregnant Church**

Galatians 4:12-20

Several years ago, one biblical scholar wrote a book titled *Our Mother Saint Paul*.<sup>1</sup> "Paul, pregnant?" you might ask. Actually, the book's contents weren't generated by developments in biomedicine or genetics, or drawn from themes in a science fiction novel. They were grounded in portions of his letters where Paul uses feminine metaphors to describe his work as an apostle. Texts like this morning's Scripture passage in which Paul is trying to restore a ruptured relationship with the Galatians.

In verse 19, Paul says, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. . . ." So here is Paul, comparing himself to a mother in childbirth. I'll have to admit, anytime that a male, including myself, starts talking about what it's like to give birth to a child, we're putting ourselves in a very precarious position. We speak from very limited, or perhaps even zero, experience. We're not the ones who had to go through the sickness, discomfort, and awkwardness of carrying the child in our belly. We're not the ones whose body got stretched and whose strength got taxed as the child grew larger in the womb. We're not the ones who had to go through the pain of labor and delivery.

Some of you may remember the comedy film called *Junior* that came out about twenty years ago. It starred Arnold Schwarzenegger as a scientist named Alex Hesse who undergoes a male pregnancy as part of an experiment. After having a fertilized egg implanted in his stomach, Alex starts taking a revolutionary new fertility drug, along with huge doses of female hormones. He gradually starts to take on many of the traits of a pregnant woman—mood swings, desires for strange food, soft skin, etc. Eventually Alex gives birth via caesarean section to a baby girl and names her Junior. I won't go into all the details and complications of the plot. It's basically a heartwarming comedy that revolves around Schwarzenegger's "maternal" condition.

When it comes to his relationship with the Galatians, Paul finds himself in a maternal condition. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth. . . ." Notice how Paul addresses the Galatians as his children. In some of his other letters, Paul compares his relationship to the congregation to the relationship between a father and his children. But in this morning's text, he gives the metaphor a new spin by describing himself as a woman going through the birthing process. He pictures himself as a mother in labor pains, struggling to give birth to the Galatians, all over again.

A few years ago, CNN featured a story titled "Meet the baby who was born twice." During a routine 16-week ultrasound, the child's mother, Margaret Boemer, received news from doctors that her baby had a tumor growing from her tailbone. As the tumor robbed the baby's blood supply, the baby became more ill each day and her heart began to fail. Some doctors advised Boemer to terminate the pregnancy. But physicians at Texas Children's Fetal Center offered her another option, fetal surgery.

At almost 24 weeks pregnant, Boemer underwent emergency surgery, during which doctors removed almost 90 percent of the tumor, which had nearly grown larger than the baby.

Then they placed the fetus back inside the womb and sewed her mother's uterus shut. Twelve weeks later, via C-section, LynLee Hope was born, for the second time. When she was 8 days old, LynLee had another surgery to remove the rest of the tumor before going home.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to the church in Galatia, Paul has already given birth to this congregation. He did that when he first came to them and proclaimed the gospel. He acknowledges that at that time, his own illness was a trial for the Galatians to bear. Yet they treated him warmly and welcomed him like he was an angel of God. So the Galatians had already received Paul and accepted the message he proclaimed. But now the Galatians have fallen under the influence of some rival teachers who are leading the Galatians astray by trying to add to the gospel of the cross. It's as if the Galatians are reverting back to their former way of life before they came to experience the freedom they have in Christ. What's more, these intruders have managed to alienate the Galatians from Paul. The Galatians now feel more attached to these rival teachers than to Paul himself.

So what began as a warm, intimate connection between Paul and the Galatians has turned into a cold, estranged relationship. You can understand why Paul is frustrated, upset, and perplexed. He writes with a heavy heart. Part of him wonders whether all his work with the Galatians will be subverted and come to nothing. But part of him—in fact the larger part of him—is eager to restore his relationship with them and to renew the bond they have in Christ. For all the damage that's been done, Paul still wants to see the Galatians renew their union with Christ and with himself. This is why Paul describes himself as a mother going through labor pains. It's like he's back in the delivery room, having to give birth to the Galatian community all over again.

Paul is worried that the Galatians have lost sight of what God has already done through Jesus Christ in order to redeem them from a state of slavery and powerlessness. Earlier in chapter 4, Paul has reminded them about the core of the good news: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (v. 4-5). So in God's time, at God's initiative, and by God's power, the Son was sent into the world, to set things right between God and the Galatians, and between the Galatians themselves.

But coming into the world was about more than just being born. He was "born under law" says Paul. In other words, Jesus the Son experienced all the conditions of humanity under the curse of the law. He took the law's curse on himself in his death on the cross, so that we could be forgiven, set free, and become children of God, having the Spirit in our hearts.

And as the Spirit dwells in our hearts and in our congregation, we will take on more of the character of Christ, individually and together. Paul knows what it's like to give birth to the same church, twice. But then notice how, in mid-sentence, Paul adjusts his birth metaphor to talk about something else that's very important. He says, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you. . .*" (v. 19).

"Until Christ is formed in you." So Paul is still talking pregnancy, but now he's talking about it in a different way. First he talked about himself as a pregnant mother delivering her children. Now he shifts to talking about the Galatian church as a pregnant people bearing Christ as an unformed fetus in their womb. The pronoun here in verse 19 is plural. The phrase "in you" basically means "among you" or "in your midst." Paul is describing a community that's formed in the image of Jesus Christ. Paul is indeed like a woman in labor, but all the pain and trouble are worth it, because it gives birth to a congregation where Christ himself takes shape and lives.

Paul certainly knows about this in his own personal experience as an individual. Earlier in Galatians, he talks about what it has been like to go through his own crucifixion and resurrection. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20). So Paul isn't asking the Galatians to be something that he isn't, or to do something that he hasn't. Christ is being formed in him. Christ is taking shape in him. That's why he says at the beginning of today's Scripture, "I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you" (4:12a). Paul is taking on more and more of the character of Christ, and he wants the Galatians to do the same. In other words, he wants them to be a pregnant church.

That's what every church should be, including ours. God's intention is for us to be a pregnant congregation. I'm not referring to the renovation of our nursery, and being prepared to care for infants who are here in our church family. Earlier in our service we gave thanks for the gift of Joy, as we dedicated her and ourselves to the Lord. She'll be one of the first babies to enjoy our refreshed nursery space.

The story is told about a woman who approached Smith Wigglesworth, a British evangelist, and told him that she felt God had called her to preach the gospel. The only problem, she said, was that she had ten children. Wigglesworth said, "Well, I'm glad that God has called you to preach the gospel, and I'm also delighted that he has given you a congregation."

Though children are a gift of God and a blessing to the life of a congregation, this isn't primarily what I have in mind when I speak of us as being a pregnant church. I'm talking more about how we ourselves are making room, personally and as a community of believers, for Christ to be formed in us, to live in us. Let me put it this way: If someone were to do a sonogram of this congregation, where would we see Christ being formed? Where would the ultrasound show the heartbeat of Christ, his self-giving love, pulsing in the life of this fellowship? Where would that sonogram show Christ alive in us, being formed in us, taking shape in us? At the same time, might it not also show things in our personal lives, and in the life of our congregation, that are hindering or blocking the development of Christlike character in us? What would the sonogram reveal about attitudes and actions that can threaten the formation of the image of Jesus Christ in our lives, individually and together?

Just three weeks ago, we gathered here to celebrate and proclaim the news that Christ is risen. And now we've arrived at Mother's Day. A few years ago, Lifeway Research asked participants in a study, "At your church, which day typically has the highest attendance for worship services? The top three responses were Easter, Christmas, and Mother's Day. Sorry guys, Father's Day finished last."<sup>3</sup>

The proximity of Easter and Mother's Day should remind us that the church is in the business of giving life, because God is in the business of giving life. As the old hymn begins, "I serve a risen Savior / He's in the world today." And Jesus' primary form of presence in the world is the community of his followers. This means that in order for you to be who God intends you to be, Christ must dwell in you, live in you. In order for our church to be what God intends us as a congregation to be, Christ must dwell in us, live in us. We're created by God to be a pregnant church. May Christ be formed in us.

<sup>1</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Scutti, "Meet the baby who was born twice." CNN. October 20, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/20/health/baby-born-twice-fetal-surgery/index.html> (May 4, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> "Mother's Day Attendance Third Among Holidays, Father's Day Last." Lifeway Research. May 11, 2012. <https://research.lifeway.com/2012/05/11/mothers-day-church-attendance-third-among-holidays-fathers-day-last/>