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The Communal Dimensions of Birthing Imagery in Paul's Epistles

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I. Introduction

Paul never uses the phrase "new birth"; but, in his letters, the apostle Paul used birthing imagery to describe the formation of Christ in believers (groaning/pains of childbirth [ὠδίνω/συνωδίνω, Rom 8:22; Gal 4:19], begetting [γεννάω, 1 Cor 4:15; Phil 10], the womb [κοιλία, Gal 1:15], etc.). Paul's birthing imagery operates metaphorically in ways that correspond to John Wesley's phrase "new birth," and careful examination of Paul's metaphors indicates important avenues for reframing some of the conversation around new birth in the Wesleyan tradition. Recent Pauline scholarship has tended to focus on the gender implications of Paul's birthing metaphors.[1] This paper, however, will focus on the communal dimensions of Paul's birthing images. For example, Paul describes himself as birthing or begetting his churches—the Corinthians, the Galatians, and indirectly the Thessalonians. Even individual births—such as Philemon or Timothy becoming Paul's children—are viewed ultimately as conversions for the sake of Pauline communities. Finally, in Rom 8, Paul speaks of Christians in labor together for the sake of God's future revelation in the world. The birthing imagery in Paul's letters suggests that "new birth" is not exclusively an individual experience, but is understood properly in the context of Christian community, the church. Furthermore, Paul's birthing imagery supports a relational approach to "new birth" that is at the heart of Christian formation in the Wesleyan tradition.

II. Exegesis

The metaphor of birthing appears in almost all of Paul's authentic letters (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). However, the imagery does not function the same way in each

[1]E.g., Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Susan Eastman, *Recovering Paul's Mother Tongue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

of his letters. For this essay, I will divide Paul's birthing images into three general categories and examine these categories separately before drawing out some implications for the wider conversation about new birth: 1) Paul gives birth to communities, 2) individual births for the sake of community, and 3) communities in labor together.

A. Paul gives birth to communities

In Gal 4:19, Paul invokes the metaphor of himself as one in labor pains for the Galatians. He writes, "My children, with whom again I am in labor pains until Christ be formed in you."[2]

This verse until recently had been largely ignored in the commentary tradition. Now, biblical scholars frequently begin their commentary on this verse with the ubiquitous, if not passé, warning that this verse is fraught with numerous difficulties for any would-be interpreter.[3] The three difficulties most commonly addressed are 1) the gender of the speaker, 2) Paul's claim to be in a labor again (or a second time) with the Galatians, and 3) the purported shift in metaphor from the first half of v. 19 to the second half of v. 19. The first difficulty is that Paul, who is male, describes himself as being in labor with the Galatians—a biological impossibility—which is mitigated by the realization that the metaphor is also found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (1 QH xi.6-13) and the Nag Hammadi texts (*Disc.* 8-9). Paul's second odd claim is that he is in labor "again" with the Galatians. Paul implies that the first "born again" experience did not take for the Galatians. The word "again" intimates that this additional experience is both unnatural and problematic. By using the phrase "born again," Paul admits that the metaphor is being stretched to cover this somewhat abnormal situation. The third unusual feature of Gal 4:19 that scholars often note is a shift in imagery. In the first half of the verse, Paul speaks of being in labor with the Galatians. However, in the second half of v. 19, Paul does not speak of the birth of the Galatians, but rather proclaims that the completion of his labor pains will result in the "formation of Christ in them." The claim often made is that Paul changes the metaphor at this point from the birthing of the Galatians to the

[2]All translations in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are my own translations.

[3]E.g., Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (AB33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 427; Susan Eastman, *Recovering Paul's Mother Tongue*, 89-126, esp. 94-95; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 29-39, 173-77, esp. 29-31.

birthing of Christ. However, this is not likely. Being "in Christ" and *vice versa* is central to Paul's theology in Galatians. Paul describes his calling as Christ being revealed in him (1:16). Similarly, in Gal 2:20, Paul writes "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Furthermore, the purported two ancient parallels in Galen[4] and Philo (*Spec. Leg.* 3.117), which supposedly use the word μορφόω—the same word that Paul uses in Gal 4:19—to describe the formation of an unborn child in the womb, actually use μορφόω to talk about bringing a fetus to viability. Thus, J. Louis Martyn is probably correct when he insists that the formation of Christ in the Galatians is not the birth of Christ, but rather the point at which in Christ the Galatians are made "viable for life apart from Paul's presence among them."[5] Thus, the "shift" in imagery in 4:19 is not necessarily as problematic as often posited.

Despite all the attention these various difficulties have received, there is one difficulty in Gal 4:19 that has received less attention: namely, that Paul describes himself giving birth not to one or even two individuals but to a whole community of persons. Three times in Gal 4:19, Paul makes it clear that he is in labor not with an individual but with a community, a church—or if we take the greeting of the epistle seriously that he is in labor with several churches in Galatia at once (1:2). In 4:19, Paul addresses his children (plural), and he describes his children as those with whom (plural) he is again in labor until Christ is formed in y'all (southern plural—if Paul is addressing churches in southern Galatia; or "you all" if northern churches). Paul's child to whom he is giving birth in Gal 4:19 is indeed a collective body, a community, a church.

In some of Paul's other letters he makes a similar claim about becoming the father of churches. For example, in 1 Cor 4:15, Paul claims that "in Christ Jesus through the gospel, I beget you (pl)." He is the father of the Corinthian church. So also, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of how he and his fellow workers instructed and encouraged them "as a father would his children (pl)" (1 Thess 2:11-12). The image of Paul as parent is perhaps invoked in other instances where Paul refers to his converts as his children or as his beloved (e.g., 1 Cor 4:14; 1 Thess 2:7-8; cf. 1 Cor 17; 2 Cor 2:19; 6:13; 12:14; Phil 2:12; 4:1). However, the image of Paul as father of congregations does not present the difficulty inherent in the image of

[4]Galen, vol 19, p. 181, in the edition by C. G. Kühn as cited in Martyn, *Galatians*, 424.

[5]Martyn, *Galatians*, 430.

Paul giving birth to a congregation. Paul can invoke the image of being a father to multiple individuals, even congregations like the Corinthians and Thessalonians, and the image does not have to suggest that the individuals were beget at the same time. However, in Gal 4:19, the image of Paul giving birth draws attention to the fact that the community is being born together; this is a communal birth.

Now, granted, the image does not have to be belabored in quite this way. Paul may be envisioning the birth of a single corporate identity. Paul could have gotten such a metaphor from the Septuagint. In the Septuagint, the verb ὠδίνω ("to experience labor pains")—another verb Paul uses in Gal 4:19—rarely has a direct object when used in the metaphorical sense. Nevertheless, Martyn cites one exception in the Septuagint text of Isa 45:7-11, where God is described metaphorically as being in labor and the object is identified as corporate Israel. The Isaiah text as Martyn notes is familiar to Paul given that he quotes Isa 45:9 about the clay questioning the potter in Rom 9:20 (cf. 1 Cor 14:25; Rom 14:11).[6] Thus, a Septuagint passage which Paul knows provides a parallel example of exactly this kind of cooperate birthing metaphor. In addition, a corporate birth fits well the argument that Paul has made thus far in the letter to the Galatians. Paul has insisted in ch. 3 that the promise was given not to Abraham's seeds or descendants but to the one "seed, that is Christ" (3:16). Thus, the birth of the Galatians in 4:19 seems to refer to their incorporation into the corporate body of Christ.

What have we learned thus far? Paul presents himself as a parental figure who has beget the Corinthian community and who is currently in the process of birthing the Galatian community. The image of Paul birthing the Galatians heightens the corporate dimensions of rebirth. Being "born again" in Gal 4:19 is not an individual, private experience; Paul anticipates the whole of the Galatian community being formed together in Christ.

B. Individual births for the sake of community

While Paul presents the birth of the Corinthians and the Galatians as a corporate experience, Paul also refers to individual conversions using birthing imagery. In particular, Paul refers to both Onesimus and Timothy as his sons. He insists that both men are extending Paul's ministry to various churches. Thus, their individual births ultimately are viewed as

[6]Martin, *Galatians*, 426-31.

for the sake of Pauline communities. Likewise, Paul in his own autobiography refers to God's call on his life from before birth not as an individual conversion story but as a commissioning of his ministry to the Gentiles. Paul refers not merely to his natural birth but also to the birth of his role as apostle to the Gentiles. It is not for his own sake that Paul is born but for the sake of the community.

In Philemon, Paul claims that he beget an individual named Onesimus; however, the implications of Onesimus' new birth extend to the Christian community, affecting Paul, Philemon, and the church that meets at Philemon's house. Paul writes to Philemon on behalf of his "son Onesimus, whom he begot in prison" (v. 10). The conversion of Onesimus is often excluded from discussion about birthing because the verb here is "to beget" (γεννάω). The verb γεννάω occurs in the Matthean genealogy for the relationship between fathers and sons. However, it is also used frequently in the New Testament to refer to women giving birth (e.g., Matt 19:12; Luke 1:35; 23:2; John 1:13, etc.). For example, Elizabeth begets (γεννάω) John the Baptist (Luke 1:13, 57). In his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus is confused because as a grown man he knows he cannot reenter his mother's womb to be born (γεννάω) again (John 3:4). Thus, the verb γεννάω is used both for the role of men and the role women in bringing about new life. The implied gender of Paul in this metaphor is not as important as the relationship that is established between Paul and Onesimus, that of parent and child.

The individual conversion of Onesimus, which also afforded him status as Paul's son, is immediately set by Paul into the context of the usefulness of his conversion for other Christians. Verse eleven is a play on Onesimus' name. The name of Onesimus means "useful." Paul claims that previously Onesimus was the opposite of his name—he was useless. Now he is useful both to Paul and to Philemon. Paul contends that he would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, so that he could minister to Paul on behalf of Philemon (v. 13). This claim reinforces the new image of Onesimus as "useful." Despite this usefulness to Paul, he has sent Onesimus back to Philemon. Paul presents the newly begotten Onesimus as a gift to Philemon. Paul implies that Philemon is being given the opportunity to support Paul's ministry by freely sending Onesimus back to Paul. At the same time, Paul acknowledges that Onesimus now may be useful to Philemon in ways that he had not been useful previously (v. 11).

How exactly is Onesimus useful to Philemon? Onesimus is returning to Philemon forever (v. 15); however, he is returning "no longer as a slave,

but a more than a slave, a beloved brother" (v. 16). "Beloved" is one of the terms that Paul uses for his converted children in his churches (e.g., 1 Cor 4:14-15; Phil 2:12-15).[7] Paul has already named Onesimus as a son. In describing Philemon and Onesimus as "beloved brothers," Paul declares both men to be his sons, and Paul seems to insist that it is for Philemon's benefit that Paul has acquired a son and Philemon a brother.[8] Paul is not alone in thinking that relationships are more important for sons than monetary inheritance. Isocrates insists, "It is more fitting that a son should inherit his father's friendships even as he inherits his estate" (*To Demonicus 2*; trans. Norlin, LCL). Likewise, Musoinius Rufus claims that the best thing that parents can do for their children in to provide them with siblings. For, it is "better to have many brothers than many possessions." He continues, "I believe that each one of us ought to try to leave brothers rather than money to our children so as to leave greater assurance of blessings" (*Should Every Child* 100.2-3, 15-16).[9] Presenting Onesimus as a brother, Paul thus presents him as a blessing to Philemon.

All of the positive statements about Onesimus could be viewed as a rhetorical strategy employed by Paul to get what he really wants—namely, for Philemon to allow Onesimus to minister to him in prison. However, a less cynical reading of the text might suggest that Paul actually does consider Onesimus valuable after his new birth both to Paul and to Philemon in a way that he had not been before. Moreover, it is important to remember that while Paul is writing directly to Philemon, he also is addressing the church that meets at Philemon's house. The church who listens to this letter being read aloud is profoundly affected by the begetting of Onesimus as Paul's son, and the subsequent realization that his new birth has altered relationships within the community. Onesimus as Paul's son is no longer a slave, but a brother and co-laborer with Philemon and Paul in the ministry of the gospel. Paul refers to Onesimus as a partner (κοινωνός) in Philemon's ministry (v. 17), just as Paul considers Philemon to be his coworker (συνεργός, v. 2). Paul praises Philemon for refreshing "the

[7]John L. White, "God's Paternity as Root Metaphor in Paul's Conception of Community," *Foundations and Facets Forum 8* (1992), 278.

[8]In the letter's salutation, Paul refers to Philemon as "beloved" (v. 2), which may suggest that Paul describes Philemon as son from the beginning of the letter.

[9]O. Larry Yarbrough, "Parents and Children in the Letters of Paul," in *The Social World of First Century Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (eds. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1995), 133-34.

hearts (τὰ σπλάγχνα) of the saints" (v. 7); now, Paul is sending Onesimus whom Paul describes as his heart (τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα, v. 12). Paul, thus, further establishes the connection between Philemon's ministry and Onesimus. Paul never explicitly asks Philemon to manumit Onesimus.[10] Nevertheless, Paul makes it clear that Philemon is to treat Onesimus not as a slave. Paul tells Philemon to accept Onesimus as a fellow-worker (v. 17) and to charge to Paul's own account any wrong that Onesimus had done (v. 18). Moreover, while Paul claims that he knows Philemon will do "even more that what [Paul says]" (v. 21), Paul still warns that he will be coming for a visit to ensure that Philemon follows through on Paul's instruction (v. 22). The inclusion of the community in the addressees of the letter raises the stakes; Philemon must follow through on Paul's instruction.[11] The implications for the community at Philemon's house are not preserved in the NT, but can only be assumed to be profound. Thus, Paul begets an individual son Onesimus but that birth has profound implications for others, namely Paul, Philemon, and the whole community that meets at his house.

A second individual whom Paul describes in the terms of a father-son relationship is Timothy. With regard to Timothy, Paul does not use any verb of or related to being born. However, he does twice refer to Timothy as a son. In 1 Cor 4:17, Paul refers to Timothy as his "beloved and faithful child in the Lord." And in Phil 2:22, he compares Timothy's participation in Paul's ministry to a son who cares for his father. Timothy appears to have special status with regard to Paul. Yet, his individual status is not separate from his serving Paul and Pauline communities. In 1 Cor 4, Paul is sending Timothy to serve the Corinthians and to remind them of Paul's teaching (v. 17). The Corinthian Christians have Paul as their father; but Paul is concerned that they are turning to other leaders. So, Paul is sending Timothy as an exemplary son, to be a living illustra-

[10]Several scholars have noted that manumission may not have really been freedom in Rome; thus, this might explain why Paul does not ask for manumission. E.g., see Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Sociological Studies in Roman History 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 118, 142- 44; Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (2002; repr. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 10-38; Joseph Marchal, "The Usefulness of an Onesiumus: The Sexual Use of Slaves and Paul's Letter to Philemon," *JBL* 130 (2011): 757.

[11]Chris Frilingos, "'For My Child, Onesimus': Paul and Domestic Power in Philemon," *JBL* 119 (2000): 91-104.

tion to his Corinthian offspring of how children should act.[12] Similarly, Paul in Philippians recounts Timothy's genuine concern for the Philippians' welfare, as well as his work on behalf of Paul and of the gospel. Moreover, in Philippians, Paul writes that he looks forward to sending Timothy to be with the Philippians and to minister to them in Paul's absence (Phil 2:22-24), a role which he fulfilled among the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:17) and the Thessalonians (1 Thess 3:1-5) as well. As Paul's son, Timothy stands in as the substitute for Paul when Paul is prevented from being present with a community. Thus, Timothy is described as Paul's singular son; but his role as the son is to be a minister to Pauline communities.

Paul alludes to one other individual birth in his letters: namely his own. In Gal 1:15-16, he writes, "But when God, who appointed me from my mother's womb and called me through his grace, was pleased to apocalyptically reveal his son in me, in order that I might spread the good news of him in the Gentiles . . ." This is the only passage examined in this essay which is not a metaphorical birth; Paul refers to his mother's actual womb. At first glance, this would not seem to fit the theme of "new birth." However, Paul does not allow us to draw so neat a distinction between his natural birth and what could be referred to as his "new birth" and calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles. From his mother's womb, Paul claims that he was appointed by God and called through grace. The claim is particularly surprising given what we know of Paul's life before Damascus. Paul offers an autobiographical account of his former way of life in the verses immediately preceding. In Gal 1:13, he writes that "I used to persecute the church of God excessively and (tried to) destroy it." Paul posits that the grace and calling of God came while he was still in his mother's womb, which would mean it precedes his persecution of the church. Paul's emphasis is on the grace of God which supersedes the trajectory of Paul's natural life. This is not a story about natural birth, but an account of God's supernatural grace by which God reaches out to Paul before even the possibility that Paul could reach back.[13] Elsewhere Paul refers to his encounter with the risen Christ as an untimely birth (ἔκτρωμα, 1 Cor

[12]Eva Maria Lassen, "The Use of the Father Image in Imperial Propaganda and 1 Corinthians 4:14-21," *Tyndale Bulletin* 42 (1991), 136; Boykin Sanders, "Imitating Paul: 1 Cor 4:16," *HTR* 74 (1981): 356; Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 100.

[13]His opening description of his apostleship as "not from humans not through humans but through Jesus Christ" (v. 1) reinforces the same claim. Paul's apostleship is the result of supernatural calling, not natural means.

15:8). Paul's emphasis is not on the physical birth, but on the calling of God which is fulfilled in his life when he is born in Christ. Moreover, the grace which calls Paul also directs him into service of the Gentiles. Paul, like the prophets Isaiah (Isa 49:1-6) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-5), is set apart from the womb for ministry. Thus, Paul's story is best understood against the background of prophetic call narratives. Recent scholarship also has suggested that the inclusion of his autobiography in the letter to the Galatians is not incidental to the purpose of his ministry. According to John M. G. Barclay, Paul "weaves his story into that of his churches (Gal 4:12-19) and into the story of Israel (Rom 9-11)."[14] Paul references his birth not for its historical value, but for the purpose of fulfilling his calling to proclaim the gospel of God's faithful act of redemption through Christ.

Paul's autobiography highlights two key points pertinent to our discussion about new birth. First, Paul, who is born by God's miraculous grace and calling, is not born for himself but for others; his life is to be lived in service to others. This is an individual birth for the purpose of creating Gentile communities though the gospel message. Second, whereas "new birth" is sometimes described as a position to be attained, Paul's account of his "miraculous" birth by God's calling is not a static identity; it is calling to ministry. Paul is called by God even before birth in order to preach Jesus among the Gentiles. To use etic terminology, Paul's account of his birth is a call narrative, not a conversion narrative. The same could be said concerning the birth of Paul's sons Onesimus and Timothy. Like Paul, their conversions are individual "birth narratives," but their births are also callings that carry the corresponding responsibility of serving Gentile churches.

C. Communities in labor together

Finally, Paul uses the metaphor of birthing in Romans 8. Paul did not birth the Roman congregations, nor has he yet been to visit Rome. The image of birthing is thus slightly different in Romans than in Paul's other letters. In Rom 8, Paul describes not only a corporate birth, but he also envisions multiple entities in labor together toward the same common

[14]John M. G. Barclay, "Paul's Story: Theology as Witness," *in Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Lousiville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 133-56 (quotation on pg. 135); cf. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Galatians 1 & 2: Autobiography as Paradigm," *NovT* 28 (1986): 318; G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

goal. All creation is the subject of the birth pangs, and "we" believers groan alongside the creations birth pangs. The new element of multiple people giving birth together is a surprising addition to the birthing motif. With the shift in subject from Paul to all creation, the Christian community also is challenged to recognize its present role alongside and within creation.

In Rom 8, the whole creation groans and is in labor. According to Rom 8:32, the whole creation groans together (συστενάζω) and is in labor (ὠδίνω). The verb ὠδίνω ("be in labor") in v. 22 is the same verb that Paul uses in Gal 4:19 to describe his birthing of the Galatians. Elsewhere in Paul's letters the other verb συστενάζω ("groan together") refers to eschatological expectation (e.g., 2 Cor 5:2, 4); here eschatological expectation is portrayed by the metaphor of birthing and the groans refer to the sounds accompanying birth pains.[15] The subject of both verbs is the whole creation. To whom does Paul refer when he says the *whole* creation? "The creation" is clearly a collective noun in Romans. That Paul refers to the whole creation (πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις) confirms that this is a corporate entity in labor. Paul in Rom 1 described both human and non-human creation. He specifically mentions four groups of created beings: humans, birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures (1:23). Given the considerable verbal parallels between Rom 1 and Rom 8 and that humans are part of the created order in Rom 1, humans should also be viewed as part of the creation in Rom 8.[16] Contrary to those who might suggest that all creation in Rom 8 excludes human beings, Paul recognizes humans as part of the created ordered. Thus, Paul envisions the whole created world—human and non-human—participating in the act of birthing.

Paul, however, seems to contrast the whole creation who groans with another collective entity that he refers to as we. What then is the relationship between "the whole creation—human and non-human" and "we" in Rom 8? The whole creation stands in tension with "we," whom Paul claims already have the first fruits of the Spirit. Creation in Romans in not the glorious "new creation," but it is the creation which has rejected God and which currently lives in the old age of alienation and separation from

[15]Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996), 518.

[16]Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 54-55, 182-83. See also her review of recent scholarship on this point and her decisive refutation of those who would exclude humans from the whole creation in Rom 8.

God's will. The brokenness of the creation in chapter 1 is readily apparent given that creation—both human and nonhuman—is worshipping itself and not the Creator (1:25). So, also the creation as described in Rom 8 is the old creation, not the new. Paul, in Rom 8, contrasts the present suffering of creation with future glory (v. 18). He describes creation as groaning and suffering (vv. 18, 22). The creation in Rom 8 hopes; and Paul clarifies that hope involves contrasting the future which is not seen with the present. The creation which hopes is still looking for redemption in the future. Thus, the humans who are part of creation in Rom 8 groan and suffer at the present time like a woman in labor; creation in Romans does not refer to the glorious, future creation but to the present creation, in slavery, subjected against its will and hoping for the future glorious revelation of the children of God (vv. 20-21). Paul further seems to distinguish both human and nonhuman creation from "we," whom he describes as having the first fruits of the Spirit (8:23). Four times in Rom 8:23, Paul includes pronouns that underscore "we" as a distinct entity (αὐτοί, ἡμεῖς καὶ αὐτοί, ἐν ἑαυτοῖς) in contrast to the whole creation described in the previous verses. By claiming that "we" possess the first fruits of the Spirit, Paul places "we" apart from the old-age creation. As opposed to the old creation, "we" are those who are already experiencing the initial in-breaking of the new age. A Wesleyan way of paraphrasing Paul might be that "we" refers to those who have experienced new birth in the midst of the broken world of this present age.

When creation in Rom 8 is recognized as the unredeemed, broken reality of the present time and "we" are determined to be a distinct entity, Paul's insistence that "we—who have the first fruits of the Spirit—groan and eagerly expect alongside the old creation is provocative. Paul never explicitly states that "we" are in labor. But he repeats the other verb in v. 22 and v. 23—just as creation groans (συστενάζω, v. 22) so too we groan (στενάζω, v. 23). Paul also uses the same verb ἀποδέχομαι ("wait expectantly," 8:19, 23) for both creation and "we." We, who already are children via the Spirit, stand alongside the rest of unredeemed creation, and we groan and we hope along with creation for God's redemption of our corporate, created body. The whole thing is very odd. And it becomes odder when one realizes that the thing which the creation is eagerly awaiting is the revelation of the children of God. Who is that if not "we—who have the first fruits of the Spirit" but of whom Paul says also participate in this eager expecting? Susan Eastman has argued that "we" hope for the revelation of more children of God who are not yet a part of the "we": among

those she names Israelites who have not yet professed Christ.[17] Hers is a beautiful vision of the future—children of God both Jew and Greek together; moreover, her claim fits well with the direction Paul's argument is about to take in Rom 9-11. Certainly, Jews are included, yet Paul's words if taken seriously suggest that he thinks Christians ought to hope for the eventual redemption of the whole creation—all human and non-human creatures. Paul hopes that in the future none will be lost, but all creation will be saved.

Paul's view of the future redemption of all creation is quite amazing. Personally, though, I find myself drawn to the present and the image of "we" standing on this side of Paul's already/not-yet eschatology. By virtue of our adoption—Paul claims in 8:16 that we are already children of God. "We" belong to the future age. Yet, Paul here envisions us—the children of God—as part of the creation that is not yet. Given the tendency in Christian history toward triumphalism, Paul's metaphor calls for humility. We too—who have the first fruits of the Spirit—we groan and we wait. Our new birth and adoption do not exempt us from the present suffering of creation. Instead, we are called to go even more deeply into solidarity with the present groaning of a world still waiting for God's eschatological salvation. New birth in this case is not removal from the troubles of this world, but more empathetic engagement with those who suffer.

III. Implications for Wesleyan conversation about new birth

What, then, do Paul's birthing metaphors have to contribute to a Wesleyan conversation about "new birth"? My hope is to offer out three possible suggestions for reframing the conversation about new birth by drawing attention to Paul's birthing metaphors as they highlight key Wesleyan themes which perhaps were only indirectly addressed in Wesley's sermons on the topic of new birth ("The Marks of the New Birth" [18] and "The New Birth" [45]) and thus may have been underutilized in the subsequent scholarly conversation. Here are the three avenues for further discussion that I perceive arising from Paul's birthing metaphors that would perhaps connect to the larger Wesleyan tradition: 1) that new birth is not exclusively (perhaps not predominantly) an individual experience, 2) that the conversation about new birth would be enriched by greater emphasis

[17]Susan Eastman, "Whose Apocalypse? The Identity of the Sons of God in Romans 8:19," *JBL* 121 (2002): 266.

on calling (not just conversion), and 3) that we heed Paul's warning not to let our "new birth" status to cause us to be arrogant about the current situation of the created world of which we continue to be a part.

First, new birth is not exclusively (perhaps not predominantly) an individual experience. Wesley himself as well as the Wesleyan tradition has always emphasized the importance of community for faithful Christian living. Despite frequently using the first person plural "we" in his sermons on "new birth," Wesley's emphasis on "internal transformation" makes it easy to fall into the trap of separating the experience of new birth from the importance of Christian community. Attention to Paul's birthing metaphors places the question of communal experience of faith front-and-center. Paul begets communities (Corinthians; cf. Thessalonians). Paul is in the process of birthing the Galatians as a corporate identity. Paul thinks that new birth results not in a bunch of individual Christians, but in a Christian community, in the church. Paul calls us to consider again the context of "church" (not the individual) as the proper *sitz en leben* for any conversation about "new birth."

Second, the conversation about new birth would be enriched by greater emphasis on calling (not just conversion). Paul does speak of individual births, but never apart from their calling to serve the community. Paul himself was called by God from before his birth to be a minister to the Gentiles. Likewise, Paul refers to Onesimus and Timothy as his sons, whom he beget. As sons, Paul expects them to be in service to Pauline communities. Paul understands new birth not as status, but as calling. Once again, Wesleyans have a rich history of emphasis on living out the faith in service to one another. To emphasize "new birth" not as something to be grasped but as a way of life would be in keeping with our tradition and its values. Paul's examples of individuals born to serve invite us as Wesleyans to frame our conversation about new birth around the topic of calling, not conversion.

Third, Paul's metaphor of the creation and us groaning in Rom 8 should serve as a warning against arrogance. As the first fruits of the Spirit, Paul envisions our calling as that of standing in deepest solidarity with a suffering creation and hoping for the redemption of the corporate body of creation. There is a great temptation when discussing "new birth" to divide the world between those who have been born again and those who have not. Yet, Paul insists that to be born again is a calling to live with and for the world. Parts of the Wesleyan tradition have always stood in solidarity with those who suffer. What avenues for conversation would

be opened up if "new birth" were pursued first and foremost as a calling to solidarity with the broken world, not an escape from it? Paul's birthing image in Rom 8 invites us to consider that the moment when we stand in solidarity with a suffering world is perhaps the moment at which we are living out most faithfully our "new birth."

Perhaps, then, even if Paul didn't use the phrase "new birth," by looking back at Paul's birthing imagery, we discover different yet exciting ways of framing Wesleyan questions about "new birth" and maybe even new avenues for moving forward with conversations that shed light on what it means to be Wesleyan.