

The Church is a Mother

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Well, in our evening services we're doing a short study on the church and our study is called Pictures of the Church and as we go through the study we are looking at five images that the New Testament gives us for the church. There are many of these images in the New Testament but we're just focusing on five. We've looked at the church as a pillar, we've looked at the church as a farm, we've looked at the church as a body. Tonight we are looking at the church as a mother. Now last time we were looking at the body and that's probably the most well known image for the church. It's something that we see several times in the New Testament and it's really obvious to think, well you know the church is full of different parts, full of different people, they're all different, they all serve their purpose but they're all united as one body. The body image is so helpful, so clear and it's so well known and frequently used. This week however we are coming to possibly the least well known and least used of the images. The church is a mother. Now it wasn't always like that because in the early church it was very, very common to refer to the church as a mother. There was a theologian in North Africa in the third century who was called

Cyprian and he famously said, you cannot have God as father unless you have the church as mother. And other early theologians like Augustine also spoke of the church using this image of a mother. Today we hardly ever do that. We don't tend to speak in those terms and it can almost sound a wee bit dodgy to us. So I'm pretty sure that when you look at that list you think, yeah first one that's fine, family that's fine, body that's fine, mother. Not sure about that. It seems a wee bit unorthodox, unreformed, un-prisputarian to use that kind of language. But is that through? Well here is an interesting quote that I'm going to read to you. I will begin with the church into whose bosom God is pleased to collect his children. Not only that by her aid and ministry they may be nourished so long as they are babes and children, but may also be guided by her maternal care until they grow up to manhood and finally attain to the perfection of faith. What God has thus joined let not man put asunder to those to whom he is a father the church must also be a mother. Let us learn from her single title of mother how useful, may how necessary the knowledge of her is since there's no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourishes us at her breasts and in short keep us under her charge and government. Does anybody know who said that? John Calvin. John Calvin.

The church as a mother is a Calvinist doctrine. But the most important question is not did John Calvin say it, the most important question is does the Bible say it? And I think the answer to that question is yes. And to see that we need to go back to the passage we read from 2 John. There we have verses 1 to 3 to the elect, to the elder, to the elect lady and her children whom I love in truth. Now as you can see the letter is addressed to the elect lady and her children. Now when you first read that you might think oh well John is writing to a woman, just a woman who doesn't have a name. But if we look a wee bit closer we'll see that that's very, very unlikely and there's a few reasons for that.

First of all it's a very odd way for John to address an individual especially because if he goes to the next letter to 3 John when John was writing to an individual he just used their name. So if he was writing to an individual just now you would think he would have just used their name because in 3 John he writes to the beloved Gaius and just uses their name. The content of the letter especially the commandments to love one another seem much more fitting as a command to a group rather than to individuals. And perhaps most significantly of all is that when John gives commands in verses 6, 8 and 10 he uses the plural form of the word you. So in English we've got you and you singular and plural they look exactly the same but in Greek it's different and so you can tell that he is referring to a group of people when he uses the form you in his commandment. So the phrase to the elect lady is clearly referring to a group of people. In other words it's referring to a local

congregation and the children are the members thereof. And the implication of that is that here if you think about it we have an image of a church as a woman with children. In other words the church is a mother. And alongside that as we'll see there are several other New Testament references that use maternal language in reference to the life and work of the church. And the key question we want to ask is what does that image teach us about the nature and functioning of the church? If we're supposed to be a mother as a church what exactly does that mean? Well that's what I want us to look at tonight. We'll focus mainly on 2nd John but we will dip into other places from the New Testament to explore things further. You may have noticed that as we read the passage there are 2 key themes that come up that are prominent in this letter and the themes are truth and love. These 2 words come up again and again in this letter and these 2 themes I think powerfully capture what lies at the heart of the church's mother role. And so we're going to use them as our 2 headings tonight as we dig into this a little bit further. So first of all I want you to think a little bit about truth. John gives us a beautiful description in verse 4 of what our goal as Christians should be.

He says I rejoice greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth just as we were commanded by the Father. So that walking in the truth that's God's objective for us as His children and it's a fantastic goal for us to have. Truth is such an important thing in life and to have that knowledge that's real, that's reliable, that's trustworthy is so important for every single one of us. In the chaos of a fallen, broken, deceptive world we desperately need to know the truth. But of course God's goal is not just that we know it, His goal is that we actually walk in it. In other words that it actually shapes the way we live our lives. And if you think about it, truth is essential in terms of mothering.

[8 : 00] So if you're a mother and this applies to our Father and not always through but especially in terms of our mother you need to know the truth about your child so you need to learn about them don't you? You need to learn about them so that you can look after them in terms of their health, in terms of their concerns, their fears, their sense, their weaknesses.

A mother needs to learn the truth about their children. But at the same time a mother also needs to teach the truth to their children. So you have truth coming one way from the child to the mother when you learn about how to look after this child. At the same time a mother's job is to teach the truth. The truth about all sorts of things, about how to smile, about how to talk, about what the different colours are called, about what noises animals make, all the extraordinary things that the baby is going to discover in this world. As a mother teaches those things she is simply handing out the truth. So this goal to be walking in the truth really does lie at the heart of what a mother wants for their child. And of course the reverse of that is the fact that one of the biggest fears that a mother would have for their child would be that they would be led astray by lies. And that can happen very easily. Children can easily wander off down a path that's paved with lies. So a child might easily think that education is pointless, that violence is acceptable, that bullying is funny, that drugs are cool, that sex is casual. These are all lies. And thousands of children have been led astray by them. And I've got no doubt that every mother in Carlyway desperately wants their children to steer clear of lies and instead to walk in the truth. So truth is at the heart of a mother's role. In exactly the same way truth is at the heart of our role as a mother church. In fact at each stage the mother church is seeking to raise her children in truth. And so I want us to just highlight four stages of that kind of growth that a child in the church would go through. And each of them are related to truth in very important ways. So where does it all start? It starts with birth. If you look again at verses one and two you will see that truth is foundational to our identity as Christians. What makes someone a Christian? It's the fact that they know and believe the truth about Jesus. You see that in verses one and two. And he says to my love in truth not only I but those all those who know the truth because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever. For John, for this communication and for all other believers a key thing is that they know the truth. And of course the truth according to Christianity is Jesus Christ. That's a foundational claim of the Christian Gospel that Jesus is the truth. So he's the truth about God. He's the one in whom and through whom God is revealed. He's the truth about humanity. He's everything that a human is meant to be. He's the truth about the universe. He's the one through whom it was all created.

He's the one who sustains it all. And he's the truth about salvation in him and in him alone you and I can be saved. And that is the message that defines Christianity and that is the message that brings people into the church. In other words it's a message of truth that causes our birth into new life as

disciples of Jesus as children of God. And this is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament. If we look at Peter he says the same thing. In fact he says it even more clearly. He says having purified your souls by the obedience to the truth for a sincerely brotherly love, brotherly love, sorry, love for another earnestly from a pure heart since you have been born again not of a perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and abiding word of God. For all flesh is like grass and all is glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, the flower falls but the word of the Lord remains forever and this word is the good news that was preached to you. So here we see one of the several occasions where the Bible describes the process of becoming a Christian in terms of being born again. And the reason the Bible uses that language is because becoming a Christian is a transition from spiritual death to spiritual life. But if you look at what Peter says, he says that we are born again, you can see that in verse 23, born again through the living and abiding word of God. And that word is what's preached to you as you can see at the end of the paragraph. So it's the truth in Jesus that brings about a new birth. That truth is preached. Who preaches it? The church. And so it all makes perfect sense like any birth, the body through which the birth happens is the mother. That's why at the heart of the church's job is to proclaim the truth so that new life can come, so that new children can be born. The mother church gives birth to new children through proclaiming the truth about Jesus. And that's a great reminder that children are not born into the church through loyalty to a denomination or to adherence to traditions or to regular through regular attendance or through new activities or through various attractions.

People are born through the truth. Now we long to see more births here in Carlway.

We're desperate to see new births of people coming to faith. How are we going to get more people to keep proclaiming the truth? But after birth, there's growth. So when we come to faith in Jesus, we're like infants and from there we need to grow. And Peter, Paul, the writer to the Hebrews all use the language of milk to describe this need for malnourishment and growth. You can see that, for example, in 1 Peter 2. The mother church nurtures her children so that we can grow. And the way that she nurtures them and does that is through teaching the truth in Jesus. And there's two key means through which the church does that, through the word and through the sacraments. So God's word, as Christians, our spiritual food, our nourishment is the truth that God speaks in his word. Jesus made that very clear as we saw this morning when he said, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. God's word, God's truth is the food that we need in order to help us grow. Paul makes this explicit as well in Ephesians chapter four. [15 : 57] He talks about speaking the truth in love. We will grow up in every way into him who is the head. So as a mother, it's the church's role to provide that food for us. That's why teaching from God's word through preaching, through singing, through Bible study, through speaking to one another in groups or one to ones, that's why all of that's at the heart of what we do. And that's why John emphasizes the importance of true teaching to the church that he's writing to. You see that in 1 9. He says, everybody goes in the head and does not abide in his teaching, does not have God. He's warning people against false teachers because the mother church must feed the truth of God's word to her children so that they can grow. But the mother church also feeds the truth to her children through the sacraments, through baptism and through the Lord's supper. Now the sacraments function as signs and seals.

So that means that the sacraments point us to the truth, just like a sign points you towards a reality. And it also means that the sacraments seal that truth. They're like an official stamp of authentication. It's an outward confirmation of an inward reality pointing us to all of God's covenant promises being outward in our lives. Now that means that the sacraments aren't the truth in and of themselves. So baptism doesn't cleanse us from sin and unite us to Christ. Neither does the Lord's supper offer the body and blood of Jesus as a sacrifice for our sins. Instead, the sacraments compliment the truth and are a means through which God graciously helps us to grow. So we could say it like this, that the word tells us the truth. The sacraments show us the truth. And who provides both of these things? The church as mother. So the church baptises new members. This baptism teaches us about the new life that we have in Christ, about God's promise to cleanse us and about the reality of our union with Christ through faith. And a new life, whether it's a conversion related in life or a child born into a believing family, is brought under the mothering care of the church through baptism. And the church shares the Lord's supper. It's the mother church that provides the meal, the bread and the wine. And as we drink and eat together, we're reminded of everything that Jesus has done for us. To proclaim to the

world that we are His, we're nourished by His presence among us by His spirit and we celebrate together as a family. The sacraments are a means by which the church mothers us into a greater knowledge of the truth. And these two great marks of the church, the word and the sacraments remind us that at the heart of the church's role is to feed people, is to feed people the truth. Now that stands in glorious contrast to a world that is constantly feeding us lies. How many times have you been fed lies last week or the last month or the last year, whether it's through some nonsense that you read on Facebook or some politician that put a spin on something or whether a news article that exaggerated or misrepresented what happened or through somebody, even a colleague or a friend, telling you something that you then discovered was actually untrue. The church is to stand in total contrast to all of that nonsense. Would it be a place where people can come and be fed with the truth? That growth then should lead on to maturity. That's the goal, both physically and spiritually. Just as a mother wants to bring her children into adulthood, so too the church seeks to bring believers, bring infant believers into maturity in Christ.

Now the heart of that maturity is a firm commitment to the truth in Jesus. What's the sign of a mature Christian? Somebody who is walking in the truth. Someone who understands God's word more and more and someone who applies that truth to their lives. That truth is so important for maturity and that's why John warns us against false teaching. Paul does exactly the same thing that's going to be Ephesians 4. He says, he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for works in ministry for the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine. A mature Christian is one who's not tossed to and fro by false teaching. Instead they're stable and committed to God's truth and it's the role of the leaders in the mother church to bring us to maturity so that we're standing firm in the truth of Jesus. And it's a great reminder as well that just as a child will grow and have wobbles along the way and a mother will call them back, that's exactly what our role in church is, especially for us as leaders. That if somebody wonders or wobbles or drifts, we don't just think, oh well they can just clear off, we call them back and bring them back to the truth just as a mother would call a wandering child back. All of this is reminding us that this need for growth and maturity demonstrates that the church as mother is a sustainer of life. So just like a child depends on their mother for sustenance, so too we as Christians depend on the church to feed us, to nourish us and to bring us to maturity. In other words, if the church is your mother then don't ever, ever cut yourself off from her. Instead every week we need to keep coming to be fed on God's truth in order to grow. If we cut ourselves off, we're going to starve. And that's why it's utterly unthinkable to say, I'm a Christian but I don't need to go to church. That's just impossible in terms of the biblical view of both the Christian and of the church. And that's because Christian maturity is only ever something that we can achieve together.

We stand as a community built on the truth in Jesus. So you see the truth is central to all these stages, from birth to growth to maturity so we're born through the truth, proclaiming the gospel, we grow as we're fed with the truth. Maturity is defined in terms of our knowledge and understanding and application of that truth. But there's one final stage we want to reach. The mother church raises us from birth to growth to maturity, but eventually we want the mother church to mother us into motherhood. The mother church mothers us into motherhood. In other words, the mother church raises up the next generation of mothers who are going to bring the truth to those who are yet unborn. And so we're born again through the truth. We're walking in the truth as we grow. We're standing mature in the truth and we want to bring others into the truth. That is the kind of mother church that we want to be. That is the kind of mother church that Scotland desperately needs. And at the heart of it all is the truth that we have revealed to us in God's Word. That is why the Bible has to be central to everything that we do as a church and central to everything that you do as Christians. As you go through this week of your life, as you think about what you want to achieve in the next year, what God says in His Word has to be the very foundation of all that we do. But the other great emphasis of Second John is love. We see that in verses 5 through 6. And now I ask you dear lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment but one we've had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment just as you've heard it from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. I don't need to tell you that love lies at the heart of motherhood. And mother loves her children, and mother wants her children to love one another, and mother hates to see her

children fighting.

[26 : 12] And if that's true of mothers, it must also be true of the mother church. And I just want to briefly mention four things that connect to this, and these are very brief. The first is unity. John addresses this church as the elect lady. He then refers to his own congregation as your elect sister. And so it's a great reminder that the church across the nations, across history, shares a common identity as God's chosen people. And that common identity is further emphasized by the church as mother. One of the amazing things about mothers is that they don't have favorites. Mothers, grannies, aunties, they don't have favorites. Each child is loved and valued equally. And that's reminding us that if the church is a mother, then it must never ever harbour cliques or elitist divisions or separations or anything like that. In the same way, there's to be no infighting, no sibling rivalry or conflict. As children in the mother church, we have a common identity. We belong together. We are a united family.

As Christians, we enjoy divine paternity, ecclesial maternity, and Christian fraternity.

In other words, God is our father, the church is our mother, and we are all brothers and sisters.

Second thing is care. As we'd expect, the Bible describes mothering in terms of showing deep care, kindness, and gentleness. We have the beautiful image of that in the call to worship at the start from Isaiah 66. You have the image of God's people, of Jerusalem, like a child being bounced on their mother's knee. And so you can all imagine a mother holding their child close, keeping the child warm, lovingly caring for her young. The church as a mother should be doing exactly the same. Paul speaks in those terms. In Thessalonians, he says, we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

And right there is a huge test for everything that we ever do as a church. Can I say to everyone that I've dealt with in the past month or year, I was gentle with you, like a nursing mother taking care of her children. Could somebody walk into our church meetings, a Deacons Court, or a wider Presbytery meeting, or whatever, and say, you know what, everybody in there was like a nursing mother taking care of their own children. And when you think of all the grief and hassle that you can get at work or in the community, or even within your family, this is where the church should be so different. Because a mother will care even when everyone else doesn't. And that's what we want to be the case for us here, that people in Calais could look at our churches, both congregations, and think, well, there's a place where people will care, even if no one else does.

Third thing is protection. The Bible also associates the image of motherhood with protection. The greatest example of that is Jesus himself. When he said, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that killed the prophets and stoned those who were sent to it, how often had I gathered your children together as I hen gathered her brood under her wings and you were not willing.

[30 : 14] Jesus himself compares himself to a mother in terms of the care and protection he wants to extend to his children. It's a great reminder that the church as a mother must protect her children. Sometimes that involves warning them. And John does that in this letter. He warns people against false teaching. Sometimes it involves instruction. As you protect your children, you need to educate them. Sometimes it can even require discipline. Not in a harsh punishing way, but in a protective way. The mother church must protect her children. And it's an awful tragedy if you ever see a mother who doesn't care if her children get hurt.

God forbid that that would ever be through of us as a church. Instead, we want to always have a protective instinct for one another. One that doesn't care what other people think, one that just wants to make sure that we are all okay, that we're looking after one another.

That's why one of the best things that you can ever do for somebody else in this congregation is say to them, are you okay? Whether that's through a text or a phone call or going for a walk together or through having a coffee together to meet one another and to actually ask one another, are you okay? How can I pray for you? How can I support you? How can I help you? How can we uphold and support one another? If the church is a mother, we should be protecting one another in every way that we can. And if you think about a mother hen, you know, if one of the chicks was hurt or in trouble, that's the one you would protect the most.

It has to be the same with us. The one who's struggling, who's weak, who's stumbling, is the one who at that moment will need the most protection from another church. So we see that in terms of love, the church is united, the church shows care, the church needs to give protection, but there's one more thing. As a mother church, there should be a lot of pain. Church should be painful. Now you probably see this as well, Thomas, yes, your sermons are pretty painful in every way. I don't

mean that at all. What I mean is in terms of being painfully devoted to her children. Paul speaks like that when he tells the Galatians that he's in the anguish of childbirth for them. There should be a lot of pain in church, pain when we see other people struggle, pain when people who used to come to church have wandered away, pain when sin ruthlessly crushes people in our community, pain when we are separated from one another, pain when there's heart and conflict in the church, pain when there's gossip, pain when there's people who still have not put their trust in Jesus, pain when there's people who are still on the path to hell. That's a reminder that for anybody here who's not yet a Christian, you are an absolute pain, not in the sense of being a nuisance, but in the sense of the fact that we just long to see you come to faith, we long for that and we worry about it. We worry about the fact that the message doesn't seem to be getting through, that people aren't willing to take that next step. We worry about what that's going to happen, what's going to happen to you and what's going to happen forever. We worry it's a sort of sorrow of distress of pain because we want you to be safe in Jesus's arms on the day you die and for all eternity. Until we see you say yes, I love the Lord and I trust in Him, I've got tons to learn and I don't know very much but I know that I trust in Jesus until we see that day we are in pain. As a mother church, our love for one another should be so great that we are full of good, holy, loving, God honouring pain. As a mother church, these two great themes, truth and love, should be at the heart of all that we do. When we look at it like that, we can actually see that it all fits together so perfectly because when we're born again, we're instantly united together as a family. As we grow in faith, we do that through caring for one another.

Our maturity depends on our readiness to protect one another and to avoid pitfalls and errors and if we are going to attain to motherhood ourselves and see more people come to faith, that's going to take a lot of pain. Pain in prayer, pain in outreach, pain in longing to see people come to faith. This is what we need to be as a church. This is why the image of the mother is such a brilliant image for what we need to be as a church. We want to be obsessed with truth and love. We want to see people going from birth to growth, to maturity, to motherhood. We want to see unity, care, protection and pain increasing all the more. But the last thing I want to say is this and it's maybe the most important thing of all. The image of the church as a mother tells us something incredibly important. [36 : 56] Motherhood is not a matter of success ultimately. So when we think about church, we think about success. We think about churches thriving, loads of new members, everything going really well. So often we're obsessed with success in terms of church. The Bible has no interest in that kind of success at a superficial level in that regard because the image of a mother has got nothing to do with success. The image of a mother is about survival. The minute there's no mothers in the world, the human race is extinct. The minute there's no mother churches, Christianity is finished, is absolutely essential for the work of the gospel. We benefit from being the children of a wonderful mother generation in the church before us.

Who God raised up and used to bring us all here tonight and who nourished us and helped us over the years. It's a generation out there, it's a generation unborn that we need to mother ourselves. May God help us to do that job with all our might. Amen.

Let's pray. Father we thank you for the church that you have established and that you're building through your son, our Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray that all the beauty, kindness, care, gentleness, commitment of mother will be true of us as a church. For one another and for the community around us, we pray that we would be utterly obsessed with truth and with love. We pray that we would be a mother church through whom you do great and wonderful things. Amen.