

The Church is a Mother

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[0 : 0 0] Tonight we're going to continue our short series looking at the church. That series is called The Church in Pictures and the reason it's called that is because the New Testament uses various different pictures to help teach us what the church is and what the church should be doing. Here is our list, we looked at the church as a pillar, we looked at it as a farm. Last week we said that the church is a body. Tonight we're going to look at the church as a mother and next week we'll conclude by looking at the church as a bride. Now the first three of these are fairly familiar. Even if we might not necessarily call the church a farm very often we're definitely familiar with the agricultural image and the idea of Paul planting and Apollos watering and God giving the increase is one that we're familiar with. Same with the body, that's one of the most common images for the church and the idea of the church as a pillar, as a building, standing on a foundation again is fairly familiar. So far we've been dealing with stuff that's fairly well known and fairly well used. This week we come to what is probably, I think definitely the least used of all our pictures, the church as mother. We hardly ever speak like that, certainly in our church contexts we tend not to but it wasn't always the case. Long ago it was very common to talk about the church as mother. In the early centuries of Christianity that was one of, that was a very prominent theme. There was a theologian in North Africa called

Cyprian who lived in the third century. He very famously said, you cannot have God as father unless you have the church as mother. And other theologians in the same era, men like Augustine, also spoke of the church as mother. Today we don't really do it and it almost sounds a wee bit dodgy. We think, well it seems a bit unorthodox, it seems a bit unreformed and definitely seems a bit unpresbyterian to use that kind of language. Is that true? Well here's an interesting quote that I'm going to read to you. It's a little bit long but it's worth listening to. I will begin with the church. So this is somebody writing about the church. 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 whom he is a father the church must also be a mother. Let us learn from her the single 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 conceives 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. Who said that? I think some of you will know John Calvin. So that means that the church as mother is a Calvinist doctrine.

So all you Calvinists we need to reclaim this truth. Of course the most important question is not did John Calvin say it the most important question is is this image biblical and I think the answer to that question is yes and in order to see that I want us to turn back to 2nd John particularly to the opening verses to the elect lady and her children whom I love in truth. So this letter is addressed to the elect lady and her children now at first sight that might sound as though it's written to a woman but a closer look tells us that that is very unlikely and there's a few reasons for this. First of all to say the elect lady and her children is a very odd way to greet somebody if it was just written to an individual person. That's reinforced by the fact that if you turn over to 3rd John it is written to an individual and John just uses that person's name and so it seems a bit strange that he wouldn't do that here.

The content of the letter which we read especially the commands to love one another seem much more fitting as a command to a group. You don't often have two people saying we must love one another whereas as a group that would be much more common language but perhaps most significantly of all when the letter moves on to give commands in verses six, eight and ten in English we don't see this so clearly but when it says you that is plural in the original language and so for these reasons and it's I think in my own view anyway almost certain that the elect lady is a local congregation and her children are the members thereof and the implication of that is in that first sentence we have the image of a church as a woman with children in other words the church as a mother and even if even if this was written to an individual woman which I don't think it is but even if it was in the rest of the New Testament there are numerous other references to the church which use strong maternal language but what I want us to ask is what does that image of the church as mother teach us about the nature and functioning of the church and so we're going to explore together tonight and to do so we're going to use we're going to focus primarily on the content of 2nd John but we'll also I think try to complement that with some wider examples from the New Testament but I want us to start here in this letter that's in front of us and if you look at that letter you will see that there's two great themes in this episode truth and love you can see that in the heading in the ESV and it stands out very clearly as we read it and I want to focus on these two themes because they powerfully capture what lies at the heart of the church's role as mother and we're going to use them as our two headings tonight so first of all truth in terms of the church's role as a mother in verse 4 John gives a beautiful description of what our goal should be as Christians he says I rejoice greatly to find that some of your children are walking in the truth and that phrase walking in the truth is just a brilliant goal for us to have that's God's objective for us as his people and we don't need to really remind ourselves that truth is such an incredibly important thing in life we need to have knowledge that's reliable real and trustworthy whether that's in terms of our health whether it's in terms of being educated whether it's in terms of how our country is run we need the truth in the chaos of a broken fallen world we desperately need to know the truth but God's goal is not simply that we would know it it's that we would walk in it in other words that we actually live out the truth in our lives and if you think about it truth lies at the heart of the role of a mother it's essential to mothering a mother needs to learn the truth about their child their health their needs their concerns their fears their strengths their weaknesses and likewise a mother needs to teach the truth to their child even the most basic things like what a smile means or what different colors are or what sounds animals make it's a mother who teaches these things and as she does so she is simply handing the truth to her child and in many ways that goal of walking in the truth lies at the very heart of what a mother would want for

their child because one of the biggest fears that a mother has is that their child will be led astray by lies and that can happen so easily children can wander off down a path that's paved with lies we see it in so many different ways that a child might think that education is pointless they might think that violence is acceptable that bullying is funny that drugs are cool that sex is casual these are lies and I have no doubt that every mother in here and every mother I know desperately wants their children to steer clear of these lies and instead to walk in the truth so truth is at the heart of a mother's role and in exactly the same way truth lies at the heart of the church's role as mother as well and in order to think about that and I wanted to set set out four stages of motherhoodness or whatever you would call it four stages of what a mother seeks to do which of course correspond to four stages of the journey that we undertake when we we become Christians these are the four stages birth growth maturity and motherhood and I explain these one by one we start with birth in other words we start at the beginning and you'll see that when John opens his letter he emphasizes the fact that that at the foundation at the core at the start of our identity as Christians is the truth he speaks about that the elect lady and her children whom I love in truth not only I but all who know the truth because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever for this congregation for John for all other believers the key thing is that they know the truth and of course the Gospel's message is that the truth is Jesus Christ that's a foundational claim of

[11 : 01] Christianity that Jesus is the truth not simply that he tells the truth but that he is the truth he's the truth about God the one in whom God is revealed he's the truth about humanity he is everything that a human is meant to be what's what's the perfect example of a true human Jesus he's the truth about the universe he's the one through whom it's created he's the one in whom it's all held together he's the one in whom it all makes sense and he is the truth about salvation in him and in him alone you and I can be saved and it's that message of truth that lies at the heart of everything that a church does it's that message of truth that brings people into the church we can almost say I think we can say it's that message of truth that births us into a new life and which brings us into the church as children and the reason we can say that is because Peter makes it very explicit in his first epistle he speaks about our purification he commands us to love one another then picking up in verse 23 says since you have been born again not of perishable seed but of imperishable how did that happen through the living and abiding word of God so there he's emphasizing that great New Testament truth that the process of becoming a Christian is described as being born again that's because becoming a Christian is a transition from spiritual death into spiritual life as we just read Peter says you're born again through the living word and then he says in the last line there and this word is the good news that was preached to you so somebody becomes a Christian through the new birth that new birth takes place because of the word the truth and that truth is preached who preaches it the church and so there's a key link between the new birth and the role of the church the church brings about a birth the church is another at the heart of the church's job is to proclaim this truth so that new life can come so that children can be born it's so important to remember that that that and sometimes we can people can talk about kind of the church like a mother church and we can talk about people as children of the church because they're loyal to it or because they're involved in it or because they like it in their community or because their granny went there or because for some other reason they feel attached to it and they kind of feel that that's their mother church that they're attached to but that's not true children are not born into the church through loyalty to a denomination or through attendance or through involvement or through activities or through attractions children are born into the church through the truth and so if we want our church to have more births more conversions what do we need to do we need to keep preaching the truth after truth there is growth when we come to faith in Jesus we are like infants so just when a human is born they are an infant when a

Christian is born again they are an infant from there they need to grow Peter Paul and the writers to the Hebrews all capture that by using the language of milk to describe the thing that we need for our nourishment and growth here's Peter's example like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation and that milk comes through the mother church the church teaches us the truth in Jesus and that is a nourishment that feeds us and builds us up and there's two key ways in which the church does that one is through the word the other is through the sacraments so in terms of God's word we are fed spiritual food from the words of the Bible Jesus himself made that very clear when he quoted

Deuteronomy 8:3 to say man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. God's truth is the food that we need to help us grow. Paul echoes that in Ephesians 4. Look at what he says there. You can see a direct connection speaking the truth in love. We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head. The mother church feeds 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 the Lord's supper. And this is maybe something that we can easily forget. The sacraments they function as signs and as seals. That means that the sacraments point us to the truth just like a sign points you to something. Tells you where something is or what something is. It points to something else. So the sacraments function as signs pointing us to a reality. And the sacraments also seal that truth. They're like an official stamp of authentication. An outward confirmation of the inward reality of God's covenant promises in our lives. The sacraments aren't the truth in and of themselves. So baptism doesn't cleanse anyone from sin. And the Lord's supper doesn't offer Jesus's body and blood as a sacrifice. Instead the sacraments complement these truths and there are means through which God helps us to grow. If you like we could say that the word tells us the truth. The sacraments show us the truth. And who is it who provides both of these things? The church. That's where you get them. The church baptizes new members. And that baptism teaches us about new life in Jesus. About God's promise to cleanse us. And about the reality of our union with Christ through faith. And that new life. Whether it's a conversion later in life or whether it's a child born into a believing family. Is brought under the mothering care of the church. Through baptism the church celebrates the Lord's supper. The mother church provides the meal. The bread and the wine we eat and drink together. We're reminded of all that Jesus has done. We proclaim to the world that we're his. We're nourished by his presence. And we celebrate together as a family. And both of these things. The word and the sacraments. These two great marks of a true church. Remind us that at the heart of the church's role is a commitment to feed people. A commitment to feed people the truth. And for all of us living in 2019 that stands in glorious contrast to a world that is constantly feeding us lies. In a world of fake news. In a world of spin. In a world of relativism. Wouldn't it be brilliant if everyone in Edinburgh knew that they could walk into this building and be fed with the truth. After growth we have maturity. That's the goal of growth. To come into maturity. That's true physically and to spiritually. Just as a mother wants to raise their child into adulthood. So to the church wants to bring infant believers into maturity in Christ. What does maturity look like? What does Christian

maturity look like? Well at the heart of it is a firm commitment to the truth in Jesus. John emphasizes that in his letter by warning us against false teaching. Paul makes it equally clear in Ephesians 4. I won't read it all but you'll see there in the middle that he describes mature manhood growing into the knowledge of the Son of God so that we may no longer be tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine. And a mature Christian is one who stands strong in the truth. They are not swayed to and fro by false teaching. And it's the role of church leaders in the mother church to bring us to maturity. To help us be those who stand firm in the truth. And do not wonder if you watch a mother go out to the meadows on a really busy afternoon like today. And one thing that that mother will do is not let their child wander off. And our role as a church is to do the same. This need for growth and maturity is a great reminder that as mother the church is a sustainer of life. Just as a mother to a child depends on their mother for sustenance. So too we do depend on the church to feed us. To nourish us. And to bring us to maturity. That's why the church's role is so important. That's why when the church fails in that role it is so unbelievably damaging. God has made things so that we need one another. We need the church. It is our source of life. In other words if your church is your mother please don't ever cut yourself off from that. Don't ever ever be that person who thinks yeah I'm a Christian but I don't need to go to church. That's it's a theological tragedy to think like that.

God is calling us to be together together as a family God is calling us under his care as part of his church Christian maturity is never something that we achieve in isolation it's something that we achieve together so we have birth growth maturity finally we have motherhood so we have this journey the mother church births children through proclaiming the truth that helps children to grow it brings them to maturity and eventually the mother church mothers us into motherhood now what do I mean by that well basically what I mean is that the goal of the next generation is that they would come up and bring the truth to the generations to come in other words that these infants would grow to become the mother church for the people who are yet unborn that's the goal that we will be nurtured into that role ourselves and at the heart of this lies the truth we're born again through the truth we are to grow and walk in the truth we want to stand mature and firm in that truth we want to bring and mother others into that truth that is the kind of mother church that we need to be at the heart of the church's role as mother is the truth in

[23 : 56] Jesus Christ but alongside that we have the other great emphasis of second John which we'll look at a little more briefly and that is love all of John's writings in his letters are saturated with love and this is no exception I ask you dear lady not as though I were writing you a new commandment but the one we have 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 from the beginning so that you should walk in it love as you know as you all know lies at the heart of motherhood a mother loves her children a mother wants her children to love one another she hates to see her children fighting or distressed or in trouble and if that's true of mothers it must also be true of the mother church and I'm going to say four very brief things the first is unity in writing this letter John addresses the church as the elect lady and then he refers to his own congregation at the end as the your elect sister a great reminder that the church across nations shares a common identity as God's chosen precious people and that common identity is emphasized by the picture of the church as a mother we are all the church the mother church's children and one of the amazing things about mothers is that they don't have favorites instead each child is loved and valued equally and that's an incredibly important thing to remember in the church that we don't have favorites the church must never be a place of elitist divisions or of a hierarchy of social acceptance or of cliques in the same way the church must be a place that never sees infighting or hostility these things are unacceptable as children in the mother church we share a common identity we belong together we're united a united family to use fancy words as Christians we enjoy divine paternity ecclesial maternity and Christian fraternity which simply means

God is our father the church is our mother and we are all brothers and sisters there's a unity in the mother church secondly there is care as we'd expect the Bible describes mothering in terms of showing incredible care kindness and gentleness a mother holds her child close a mother keeps her child warm a mother cares for her young and the church as mother should be exactly the same Paul speaks in these very terms when writing to the Thessalonians he says we were gentle among you like a nursing mother taking care of her own children now that's the kind of phrase that's easy to whist through and not think about there's a test there's a great test for everything the free church does there's a test for everything I do can I look back at the last week and say in everything I did I was like a gentle mother nursing her children it's a big challenge in a world that defaults to hostility and criticism and coupled to that is the fact that a mother will care even when no one else does and in a city and in a country where people's lives are broken and ruined by all the horribleness of sin when people are isolated when people feel worthless when they loathe themselves God grant that when they come into this mother church they find a mother who cares even if no one else does thirdly we have protection the Bible associates the image of motherhood with protection the greatest example of that is Jesus himself he said oh Jerusalem

Jerusalem the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it how often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathered her brood under her wings and you are not willing a beautiful picture of a mother hens protection it's a great reminder that the church as mother must protect her children and sometimes of course that involves warning them John does that in this letter he warns his readers to avoid certain dangerous teachers he's trying to instruct them and that warning that instruction sometimes may even require discipline every mother in here knows that you need to discipline your children to keep them safe and the church has that same role not in a harsh punishing way but in a protective way the mother church protects those who are under her care it is a horrible tragedy to see a mother who doesn't care if her children get hurt and God forbid that that is ever through of us as a church instead we want to develop a protective instinct for one another and that level of protection and instinct should reach the point where we don't care what other people think of us and I remember when John was young he was attending swimming lessons I'm going to use my poor wife as an illustration she's not here we were at swimming lessons and John was learning to swim early days when swimming was not confident was not he was not that confident at swimming and we were in a viewing gallery looking out over the swimming pool and they were kind of swimming across this little patch in the pool not making any enormous amount of progress and they'd swam out to the middle bit where there was a rope and they were swimming back the class and we were up in a viewing gallery so if you can imagine a bit like this church if you imagine this is the swimming pool we were up there watching and the instructor was just talking to a colleague and just behind them she said swim across and then she was just talking away to the person behind it while they were swimming across one of the pupils was really struggling and wasn't getting on very well and in order to get across he thought it would be a great idea to grab onto John's leg and hitch a lift so we John was swimming and this other boy grabbed the leg and of course that meant that two children were not swimming anymore and they were both starting to fumble now now all of you in here who know my wife will know that she's probably the quietest person in this congregation when that happened she shouted straight away at the lifeguard full of people but she shouted so that lifeguard saw what was happening and immediately the lifeguard dealt with the situation she didn't think twice for a second that everyone was watching her or that shouting in a swimming pool is a social faux pas in Scotland may that be true of us as a church that we don't care what the world thinks of us that we don't care that our models are different to the models that everyone else has been fed and that we don't care that sometimes we might have to be the ones to stick our neck out and shout in order to protect one of our precious children and by that I don't mean just the young ones I mean you the mother church protects her children so we have

unity care protection finally we have pain the great point here is that church should be painful now I don't mean painful in the sense that when you look at the intimation sheet and see Thomas Davis is preaching and not pain in that sense nor do I mean painfully dull I think you know what I mean I mean painfully devoted to our children and the reason we can use that heading pain is because Paul speaks like that when he addresses the Galatians he says that he is in the anguish of childbirth for them and it's a great reminder that there should be a lot of pain in the church pain when we see each other struggle pain when people wander away pain when sin ruthlessly crushes the communities around us pain when we're separated from each other pain when there's hurt and conflict and hostility in the church pain when there are people who still refuse to trust in Jesus and for anyone who's not yet a Christian you are a pain not in the way we often use that phrase like you're an inconvenience you're a pain I absolutely don't mean it in that way at all I mean you are a source of agony a source of sorrow because we long for you to come to faith in Jesus as well as Mother Church our love for one another should be so great that we are full of good holy loving pain so these two themes truth and love should be at the core of everything that we do and in many ways all of these things actually fit together because our common birth into the church means that we are united our growth as Christians is achieved through the care and nourishment of the church our maturity is maintained through protection through watching ourselves and through watching over one another and the motherhood of longing to see others born brings with it pain this is the new humanity that

Jesus is calling us into this is what we need to be as a church we want to be a mother church that is utterly obsessed with truth and love but there's one final thing we must emphasize from this image as the church's mother when we are talking about motherhood and you're talking about something that's utterly essential for the continuation of the human race yes it's just there everywhere that means when we talk about being this kind of church we are not talking about trying to be successful we are not dealing with a matter of a good reputation we are talking about spiritual survival the mother church is needed to save a world from destruction let's go for it together

[37 : 01] Amen Father we thank you for your church and we pray that we as a congregation and as part of the one church of Jesus Christ we pray that we'd be a good mother that we will be united that we'd be caring that we will be protective and that our love would be so great that it would cause us pain may that be true of everything that we do as individuals as a curcession as a congregation as a denomination as the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ