



Mother church

***‘Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her;
that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance.’***

(Isaiah 66:10-11)

The image of the church as the mother of Christians is perhaps not now easily recognised as relevant compared to the time of Isaiah, or even in apostolic times. After all, Israel was a covenant community, a people and nation in covenant with God, making the concept of the united theocracy as a mother to believers meaningfully appropriate, compared to our situation where we find a multitude of denominations, many with their own distinctive features and often living in stark isolation from others.

Certainly the concept of the church as the mother of believers is open to distortion and misapplication, such as in Roman Catholic tradition where the authority and teaching of the church have practically been placed on a level with that of Scripture. Yet the biblical emphasis on the church being the mother of believers, in passages like Isaiah 66:7-11, is of permanent significance and encloses much valuable teaching for every generation of Christians. In circumstances of the church’s fragmentation into so many denominations, it serves as a reminder of the essential unity and wholeness of Christ’s redeemed people across denominational divides.

Cyprian of Carthage (ca 251) stated, *‘He cannot have God as a father who does not have the Church as a mother.’* In his *Institutes of Religion*, the Reformer John Calvin wrote, ‘

Because it is our intention now to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title “mother” how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels ... Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah 37:32 and Joel 2:32 testify.’

A caring mother

The first thought in addressing the biblical data here is that we are confronted with *the ideal of the church as a caring mother*. Calvin’s statement quoted above refers to the ‘visible church’, meaning the church as we see it, made up of professing believers, rather than the church as God sees it, the church ‘invisible’, made up of all who are His elect people. Most people will associate the word ‘mother’ with loving care. If we are honest we (especially fathers!) will confess that it is mothers who teach children to speak, how to behave, the difference between right and wrong, how to make choices in life and many other things besides. The bond between a mother and child is special and strong, beginning in the womb and carried through into adulthood.

Bearing and giving birth, in a spiritual sense, is true of the church also. It is not, of course, that the church converts, justifies or sanctifies sinners; only God can do that. But it is within the church, in the sense of being incorporated into the body of the church, that these great spiritual developments take place. This is why Calvin was so emphatic that

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until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels ... Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.'

Even if someone who has never had any part in the church is converted, whether at home or on the bus or wherever, that person is immediately incorporated into the church by the very fact of conversion and will be added to the membership of the visible church somewhere by baptism. It is quite contrary to the operation of God's grace when anyone claims that they have become a Christian but prefer to be a Christian at home or on the beach rather than with the fellowship of God's professing people.

This is why it is so important to remember that evangelism is not just about conversions; it's about having people incorporated into Christ's church, having them come under the loving care of a spiritual mother. Getting people to 'come to church' is obviously a good thing, but 'becoming part of the church' is really what matters. Whether that will be in a congregation meeting in a house, a cathedral or a traditional church building is not the point. The church is not the building but the people. Wherever God's people are engaged in biblical worship, preaching, the sacraments, fellowship, and discipline, His church exists, and a fundamental aspect of its existence is to mother the children of God. Our aim is to bring people under that mothering care.

Loving mother church

The second main feature of this passage is the emphasis on *the attitude of the children under the mother's care*. Isaiah is addressing in particular those who love Jerusalem and were at that time mourning for her. A loving mother deserves gratitude, respect and love in return. The church requires no less from her children. In our love for the church we defend her reputation, protect her interests, and uphold her authority, as children would do for a natural mother. This is not simply a matter of us loving our own denomination. We are to do that, certainly, but ultimately we belong to the church, not to a denomination. Our love for the church, then, goes out beyond the borders of the Free Church or whichever denomination we belong to.

But we are also to mourn over the church when she is seriously ill. Isaiah had to contend against massive decline among the covenant people of God in his day. Mother was seriously ill, which is why Isaiah speaks here particularly to those who love her and mourn for her. We do not have to look very far to find evidence of our mother being ill today. Whenever we know of doctrinal defection, failures of discipline, sins welcomed as acceptable conduct, divisions, dissension, and strife, our mother is seriously ill! Along with this (maybe even because of this!) we are very aware of the ineffectuality and weakness of the church in the face of the world. But how bothered are we? Concerned, yes, but enough to make us *mourn*? It should be so if we love her as we should. We need to feel the pain of this and so mourn as we would over our natural mother were she seriously ill! Look at how Psalm 102 begins with a description of the psalmist's personal anguish and pain and how he goes on to reveal that his grief is caused by concern over Zion. Though she was lying in ruins of rubbish and stones, even these are precious to him. But he longs for restoration and looks forward to God's building up of Zion, when He shall reveal himself in His glory. This is mourning and longing constrained by nothing less than love for God and His church.

But even though Isaiah shows they have cause to mourn, he also calls them to rejoice with Jerusalem! It seems something of a contradiction to be mourning and rejoicing at the same time. Isaiah is certainly carrying us toward the New Testament age in these details; yet the principle of rejoicing over our belonging to the church is relevant always. We are to *enjoy* the privileges God has given us in belonging to His church even in times of decline. Verses 12-14 expand on this by giving the reason why they can rejoice; God is going to fill the church with His peace and it will flow out from her. This has been fulfilled in Christ and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the church since Pentecost. We in the church have access to this peace and to the abundant comforts contained in it. We can drink it abundantly in the Word and sacraments, what Isaiah called being '*nursed and satisfied from the consoling breast*' of our mother, the church.

We are often too easily distracted from the core elements that ought always to make us rejoice – the preaching of the gospel, biblical worship, the fellowship of God's people, the supremacy of the

gospel and God's unchangeable promises for His church. Isaiah sees this rejoicing as the way to being '*nursed and satisfied*' so as to come to '*drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance*'. We often do not get comfort from the gospel because we are so preoccupied with our immediate circumstances that we fail to take advantage of the abundance God has deposited in His church.

This image, then, of 'mother church' should constrain us to think that as members of the visible church, children of this spiritual mother, we should all be fully involved in and committed to the whole life of this church on earth while looking forward to the future glory of the church that God has in store.

'The Lord has remembered us; he will bless us; he will bless the house of Israel; he will bless the house of Aaron; he will bless those who fear the Lord, both the small and the great.'

(Psalm 115:12-13)

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