

Our Mother

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We owe our mothers more than we know. We can even say that in a way, it was our mother's love and care that made us human. Of course, it was God who literally made us human by giving us a human spirit. But our mothers made us human in that they were primarily the ones who developed the human potential that we were born with. It is obvious, of course, that if they didn't feed us, we would not have developed into adults. But they did much more.

First, they taught us words. We learned our language from our mothers and without words and language we would not be properly human. After all, God did not create Adam as a brute. Adam could understand God's words and speak to God from the time he was created. Language, then, is part of what it means for us to be "man" in the image of God. People who, for one reason or another, cannot talk and can never learn to talk do not cease to be human for that reason. But their humanity is undeveloped and defective. So is yours and so is mine. Because of the sin of Adam, none of his descendents are fully and properly what man was supposed to be as the image of God. But I am straying from my subject. Our mothers taught us to speak and by doing so introduced us to the world of human fellowship. Take away the ability to hear and speak, to have fellowship with other people and with God, and our lives are hard indeed.

Our mothers also taught us love. They did not give us a lecture on love every time they changed our diapers, but they poured out their love upon us in their care for us. Love was in their eyes and touch. Love was in the way they spoke to us, as well as what they said. Love was in their anger no less than their smile.

Our mothers were our first ethical teachers. They taught us right and wrong and that wrong deeds bring disapproval and pain. Not just the pain of punishment, but pain to those we love, for our folly and evil obviously grieved them. Related to ethics, but not quite the same is manners. We learned our manners first from our mothers and if we didn't learn them well, it is probably more our fault than theirs.

This is only the beginning. We learned more from our mothers than we can actually fill out. There is much that is more subtle than we noticed, though the impact of their teaching continues throughout our lives and even among the things we have never taken note of, there are habits and attitudes that we will pass on to the generation after us. Of course, there are also things that we learned once that we have now forgotten.

But this essay is not really about mothers. I have only mentioned mothers in order to talk about the Church — what the Church does mean and what the church is supposed to mean to a Christian. It is not common to speak of the Church as a mother, but the Bible does use that language and it is important for us to consider it. The apostle Paul speaks of the "Jerusalem which is above" and says that it is "the mother of us all" (Gal. 4:26). We know from the book of Revelation that the Jerusalem above is the city of God, the city in which the whole Church, the whole family of God dwells. But we are not there yet. How does the city of God and the perfect Church relate to us now? She relates to us through local churches, imperfect manifestations of the mother above.

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Most people reading this essay will be old enough to know that their mothers made mistakes. We don't think they were perfect. But that does not diminish our respect or love for them, nor does it mean that they were less necessary for our life and development. So it is with the local churches that represent our mother in heaven.

The local church does for us what our mothers did for us. They feed us the word of God. They teach us how to speak and think as Christians. They introduce us into the fellowship of the saints and more importantly into fellowship with God. However inadequate our local churches may be – and they are all imperfect – they are still necessary for us. God dwells in the local church and manifests Himself through her. We cannot have true fellowship with God as Christian hermits, cutting ourselves off from the rest of His children because we think they are not worthy.

The Church is essential to the Christian life because God is a Triune God. God is three who are one, a society of covenantal love. For us to be truly human, we must also be in the covenantal society of love that the Holy Spirit indwells and draws unto God. The Father loves the Church because it is His daughter. If we despise or mistreat the daughter, the Father will surely be angry. The Son loves the Church because she is His bride. If we insult the wife, we make the husband our enemy. The Spirit loves the Church because she is His temple and dwelling place. We treat the temple with respect because we honor the Lord of the temple.

No doubt there are some mothers that are better than others. In the case of our human mothers, we have no choice. God gave us our mothers and we have an obligation to love them. We have been born in debt to them and we can never wholly pay them back. In the case of the local churches that represent our mother above – the bride of Jesus and the temple of the Spirit – we can choose and change mothers. But we cannot really honor God by rejecting churches altogether and when we are given the responsibility to choose, we ought to choose a local church that honors our heavenly Father.