Introduction

In a recent book on ecclesiology, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction*, Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger lament the fact that “people are into ‘Jesus’ and ‘spirituality’ today, but not ‘religion’ and ‘Church.’” Their proposed solution to this problem is, in part, an emphasis on two metaphors for the Church: the Church as mother and the Church as bride. They argue that, though the contemporary Church often plays the harlot just as Israel did in Hosea’s day, she does not lose her status as mother and bride. As mother, she “birthed the Bible under the guidance of the Spirit” and all “those who are born again are born into the Church.” Their proposed solution to this problem is, in part, an emphasis on two metaphors for the Church: the Church as mother and the Church as bride. They argue that, though the contemporary Church often plays the harlot just as Israel did in Hosea’s day, she does not lose her status as mother and bride. As mother, she “birthed the Bible under the guidance of the Spirit” and all “those who are born again are born into the Church.” As bride, she consists of “simultaneously spotted and spotless believers” who are making “preparations for the [eschatological] wedding banquet.” For Harper and Metzger, to know the Church as mother and bride exposes the disconnect between those who say they love Jesus while eschewing the Church. To love Jesus is to love the Church, his bride and our mother. This article will also argue in favor of an evangelical engagement with the maternal and nuptial metaphors for the Church, with one caveat: the two metaphors should be considered together and in the proper order.

Feminine Ecclesial Images: The Contemporary Scene

The Church as bride of Christ and mother of Christians forms an important tradition of ecclesiological reflection, particularly among evangelical, Roman Catholic, and feminist theologians. Given that bridal imagery for the Church is scattered throughout the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:21-33; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17), the Church as bride of Christ is a recognized ecclesial metaphor in contemporary evangelicalism. As such, there has been some, though limited, reflection on the nuptial image of the Church among evangelicals, most often in contexts that treat it as one of many ecclesial metaphors. Many evangelical books on ecclesiology, however, are virtually silent on the Church’s nuptiality. This lack of attention demonstrates that most evangelical theologians unconsciously agree with Paul Minear that “bride” belongs “in the category of minor ecclesial images.”

Theological reflection on the maternal metaphor for the Church, on the other hand, is almost nonexistent.
among evangelicals today. This neglect is not new. Writing in 1943, Roman Catholic theologian Joseph Plumble noted the indifference toward the Church’s motherhood in the Protestantism of his day: “[T]he notion of the maternity of the Church is wholly neglected in Protestant manuals of dogmatic theology.” This indifference has been a hallmark of evangelical ecclesiology since the time of the Reformation. While there is a general consensus in the validity of the Church as mother, both historically and biblically evangelicals have not produced serious theological reflection on it and often cite the motherhood of the Church simply as a “tip of the hat” to John Calvin, whose “église mère” was at the center of his ecclesiology.¹⁰

Roman Catholic theology, on the other hand, has increasingly employed these metaphors of the Church since Vatican II in an attempt to wed Mariology to ecclesiology as well as to respond to the challenges of those who insist that women be included in the priesthood. For Roman Catholic theologians, Mary is seen as the Church’s matriarch and exemplar. As Henri de Lubac states, “Mary is the ideal figure of the Church, the sacrament of it, and the mirror in which the whole Church is reflected. Everywhere the Church finds in her its type and model, its point of origin and perfection.”¹¹

In addition to de Lubac, Pope John Paul II and Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote extensively on the nuptial and maternal imagery of the Church in recent years, each of them invoking these metaphors in discussing practical questions of women’s ordination and male-female relationships in the family and in the Church. John Paul II, in particular, taught that the Church has both an apostolic-Petrine dimension and a Marian dimension and, of the two, the Marian dimension is more fundamental and more closely related to the main purpose of the Church, which is sanctification.¹² In her striving for holiness the Church seeks to follow in the footsteps of her most eminent member, Mary, the virgin bride who is fruitful as mother of all the faithful.¹³ In contrast to evangelicals, Roman Catholic theologians are more apt to treat these two feminine metaphors together and in contexts that extend beyond the traditional locus of ecclesiology.

A third use of these metaphors is made by feminist theologians. While not a monolithic group, feminists argue that, historically, feminine ecclesial metaphors have been used to support masculine language for God and inequality among men and women. In short, they argue that Scripture is a product of a male-dominated society that has projected its fallen social structure onto God and the Church, making deity masculine and the Church feminine. The gendered symbolism of the Bible, therefore, is problematic because it portrays God/men as initiators and the Church/women as responders. For example, Roman Catholic feminist theologian Susan Ross opines that the main problem with the nuptial metaphor is that “the relationship of bridegroom and bride is not an egalitarian relationship. This metaphor was used precisely because men and women were not equal.”¹⁵

Reformed feminist theologian Amy Plantiga Pauw argues similarly: “The images of the Church as mother and bride are not without their problems in the contemporary setting, not the least of them being their tendency to reinforce normatively masculine images for God.”¹⁶ Neither theologian, however, rejects the use of feminine metaphors for the Church. Rather, “in revised form, both of them can still contribute”¹⁷ to one’s ecclesiology so long as a “hermeneutics of suspicion”¹⁸ is used when handling the issue. Focusing on the bridal metaphor, Ross argues that though this image has a long and complex history, “it is intertwined with the tradition’s sexism” and must be used carefully so as to avoid feminine or masculine stereotypes.¹⁹ Pauw, on the other hand, believes that these feminine metaphors complement each other well and she is hopeful that they can bolster a “view of the Church in a context of religious pluralism.”²⁰

In short, the contemporary use of mother and bride as ecclesial metaphors varies greatly depending on one’s theological camp. Roman Catholics increasingly utilize maternal and nuptial metaphors in their theological formulations, while feminists do so only reluctantly and with much nuance. In contrast, evangelicals tend to assume the bridal image of the Church, without giving it much serious theological reflection, and neglect the maternal image, acknowledging its validity yet remaining nearly silent as to its significance.
MOTHER AND BRIDE: TWO ECCLESIAL METAPHORS THAT BELONG TOGETHER
Evangelicals should engage the maternal and nuptial metaphors for the Church since they are introduced by the biblical authors, considering them together and in the proper order. Specifically, it will be argued that, when juxtaposed, the ecclesial images of mother and bride present the Church in both her spatio-temporal and eschatological realities, yet the relationship between these images is paradoxical. The Church does not progress from bride to mother as one would expect given the pattern for women of marriage then motherhood; rather, she advances from earthly mother to heavenly bride. This notion is supported historically and biblically in three ways. First, the image of the Church as mother of believers describes the Church on earth in that she gives birth to the children of God and provides nourishment in the form of word and sacrament. Second, the image of the Church as bride describes the Church eagerly awaiting her eschatological state as United to her bridegroom, Jesus Christ. Though the Church’s eschatological dimension has been inaugurated in her founding and is experienced prophetically in this age, it is not experienced fully until the age to come. Third, the clear progression of these metaphors is from earthly mother to heavenly bride, and not vice versa. That is, the Church as a laboring and nurturing mother is on her way to becoming the perfect and glorious bride who is gathered to her bridegroom without any “spot or wrinkle” (Eph 5:27). 21

The Church as Mother of Believers
Evangelicals often dismiss the ecclesial image of mother because it is difficult to cite explicit biblical texts in support of it. Yet, at least three passages support the validity of this metaphor. First, Paul states in Galatians 4:26, “But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.” Here, as Hans Dieter Betz asserts, in reaching the conclusion that the heavenly Jerusalem is our mother, Paul takes up, no doubt polemically, a famous dictum of Jewish theology, ‘Jerusalem is our mother,’ and claims it for Christians and for the Church.22 The Church, then, is identified as the mother of believers. God is at work through the Church to bring about the new birth of his children among both Jews and Gentiles.
Second, the fact that the recipients of John’s second letter are “the elect lady and her children” (verses 1, 4-5) suggests the motherhood of the Church. Most commentators agree that John uses such terminology to identify a local Church and its members.23 If the Church is a “lady” (κυρί) who has children and those children are believers, then it naturally follows to recognize this as an example of the motherhood of the Church. In other words, John writes this letter to a local Church that he describes as a mother of believers.
Third, the episode of the woman and the dragon in Revelation 12 likely alludes to the maternity of the Church, or, more specifically, the maternity of the whole people of God, Israel and the Church.24 This woman gives birth to a male child, the promised Messiah, whom the dragon seeks to destroy (verses 4-5). When his efforts fail, the dragon makes “war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (verse 17). Most commentators identify the woman’s “offspring” as believers in Jesus throughout the ages since the founding of the Church. One’s eschatology is significant in how this text in interpreted; however, it is clear that the woman identified here is both mother to the Messiah, as Israel, and mother to believers in Jesus, as the Church. These three examples provide Scriptural support for the Church being identified and described as “mother.”

Historical Theology
Despite this evidence, the Church’s maternity is, admittedly, in nascent form throughout the New Testament writings. The ecclesial image of mother, however, has a long and rich tradition in the Church25 and much can be learned from a critical evaluation of how this metaphor has been used in the past. The image of the Church as mother has enjoyed prominence from the time of the early Church up through the Reformation. It has been one of the more familiar yet unique ecclesial images used throughout the history of Christian thought, despite appearing abruptly and inexplicably in the late second-century patristic literature.26 In fact, regarding this image, even “independent of Scripture citation … the full popular personification was ‘in the
air” well before the middle of the second century.”²⁷ Yet once the image was introduced, patristic writers consistently employed it as an expression characterizing the nature and function of the Church. In particular, the Church fathers, exemplified by Cyprian and Augustine, and the Reformers, particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, emphasized this metaphor in their ecclesiologies, though they developed it in various ways.

As stated in Cyprian’s famous dictum: “If one is to have God for Father, he must first have the Church for mother,”²⁸ patristic writers understood the Church’s motherhood as a natural extension of God’s paternity and an individual’s association with her as a requirement for salvation. In addition to Cyprian, Church fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen regularly spoke of the Church as mother. For them, “mother” was more than just a beautiful metaphor demonstrating the importance and necessity of the Church—though it certainly was that. This metaphor signified “life as we are born from her womb … identity as we are offspring of the bride of Christ … nourishment as from her hands we receive food and drink, the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁹ The popularity of this metaphor grew to such a degree that it extended beyond the bounds of theological treatises to Christian art, architecture, and poetry.³⁰

This image was also prevalent in the writings of Augustine, who was fond of speaking of the two parents of believers: Father God and Mother Church. “We all had our fathers and mothers on earth, of whom we were born to a life of toil and ultimately death; we have found other parents, God our Father and the Church our mother, of whom we may be born to eternal life.”³¹ Augustine also expanded beyond the views of many of the earliest Church fathers as he stressed the virginity of this mother and her imitation of Mary: “She is a virgin, and she also brings forth children. She imitates Mary, who gave birth to the Lord. Did not the holy Mary bring forth her child and remain a virgin? So, too, the Church brings forth children and is a virgin.”³²

The maternal metaphor for the Church continued in force through the Middle Ages up to the sixteenth-century Reformers. In 1518, Luther advised believers to confide their doubts to the Church, “like a child who entrusts himself to his mother’s breast.”³³ In his Treatise on Good Works he states, “The second work of this command [honor thy father and mother] is to obey our spiritual mother, the holy Christian Church.”³⁴ Calvin expounds on the image of mother to an even greater degree than Luther. For him it is clear: outside the Church there is no hope for either forgiveness of sins or for salvation. “There is no other way to enter 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 [we put] off mortal flesh.”³⁵ Calvin speaks here explicitly of the visible Church on earth, and he repeatedly uses the image of mother to impress this reality on the minds of his readers. For the early Church fathers, the image of mother was one of the most common ways to identify and describe the Church. This changed after the Reformation as Protestants and evangelicals began to use the term less frequently.

What Does This Metaphor Mean?
While there is no uniform understanding of the Church as mother or what the metaphor signifies, several common themes emerge. First, new birth and baptism are intrinsic to the Church’s maternal function. Cyprian, for example, believed that baptism apart from the one true Church was ineffectual and took place in “spurious and unhallowed water,” while the baptismal water of Mother Church was, like her, “faithful and unpolluted.”³⁶ The practice of baptism ritually enacts the miracle of new birth. In this ritual, the Church acts as spiritual mother from whom newly born children (symbolically) emerge.³⁷ Baptism, then, is a sort of “birthing” of new believers into the covenant community in that it serves as the entry point to the Church.

Also intrinsic to the Church’s motherhood is the nourishment she provides her children in the form of Scripture, doctrine, and the Lord’s Supper. The Church does not just give birth to the children of God and allow them to stagnate in immaturity or die as newborns; rather, as mother, she sustains their lives, providing them nourishment in relation to the gospel. She feeds her children the gospel, with courses of preaching Scripture and teaching right doctrine, and celebrating
the Lord’s Supper. Similarly, as mother she is the repository of the Christian faith and of the Holy Spirit. She is the repository of the Christian faith in that access to salvation comes about through the gospel that has been entrusted to her. She is the repository of the Holy Spirit who unceasingly labors to deliver her children to the life of the Spirit. As mother, the Church provides spiritual nourishment and life for her children so that they might grow “to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” and not be “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:13-14).

Conversely, the maternal image of the Church serves as a reminder that separation from the Church is separation from one’s life-giving mother, resulting in either malnourishment or death. Many symbolically emerge from her in baptism, are nurtured by her in the preaching of the word and the partaking of the Lord’s Supper, yet reject her in the end. This tragedy serves as a reminder that the image of the Church as mother is a picture of the visible Church on earth: she births and nurtures many who forsake her motherhood and ultimately deny the Christian faith. Those who forsake her are not like newborn infants who long for her pure spiritual milk (1 Pet 2:2); rather, they lash out against her and deny her authority, which is akin to rebelling against one’s own mother.\(^{38}\)

The motherhood of the Church also calls attention to the paternity of God and the fraternity that believers have with one another. The Church is not autonomous with respect to her origin and continued existence; indeed, she “is mother only insofar as she continually refers to the Father.”\(^{39}\) The Christian, then, introduced into Mother Church through the initial rite of baptism (symbolizing the new birth that results in being made a child of God) can “continually turn to his Father who is in heaven.”\(^{40}\) Furthermore, the motherhood of the Church points to the fact that all those born of her share a common identity. Her children are equally loved by the Father and adopted into his family, having been qualified by him “to share in the inheritance of the saints” (Col 1:12). The maternal ecclesial image is thus arguably “a way of countering elitist divisions in the community and promoting the sense of the Church as a birthing and nurturing institution.”\(^{41}\) In this way, the themes of divine paternity and the “sonship” of believers cross paths with the motherhood of the Church. Taken as a whole, in the triumvirate themes of divine paternity, ecclesial maternity, and Christian fraternity, we encounter “the fulfilled form (figure) of the natural relationships of father, mother, and child.”\(^{42}\) In other words, believers are in union with Christ, sons and daughters of God the Father, and brothers and sisters of one family, the Church.

The image of the Church as mother is a picture of the visible Church on earth. She gives birth to children as symbolically represented by baptism. She nurtures her children through the ministry of the word and the Lord’s Supper. In her, we are reminded that God is our Father and that we are brothers and sisters with one another. A relationship with her is so necessary that to separate oneself from the Church is to be spiritually malnourished and, perhaps even, spiritually dead.

**The Church as Bride of Christ**

The importance of the bridal image to ecclesiology has been of some debate. As stated earlier, Paul Minear in his well-known book, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, is of the opinion that this image is a minor one.\(^{43}\) Richard of St. Victor, on the other hand, judged that “nuptial symbolism is without doubt that which best expresses the inmost nature and destiny of the Church.”\(^{44}\) Regardless of its importance in relation to other ecclesial metaphors, the appearance of nuptial imagery throughout the New Testament “demonstrates its currency in the early Church and the readiness with which it was appropriated.”\(^{45}\) Richard Batey cites the varied sources of New Testament nuptial imagery, most of them alluding to or explicitly referencing the Church.\(^{46}\) One thing is clear after a brief survey of these passages: the Church is the bride of Christ. Of course, the New Testament authors did not write in a vacuum. Nuptial imagery is rooted in the Old Testament, particularly in Hosea, where Israel is pictured as the spouse of Yahweh (Hos 2:2, 14-20; 12:12).

Historically, the image of bride has been a prominent force in the development of ecclesiology. In the early Church, this image conveyed the purity of the
true Church (as opposed to the heretical one), the love and intimacy between Christ and the Church, and the Church as an eschatological reality. Awareness of the metaphor’s ecclesiological importance started with Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria. Unfortunately, the allegorical method of interpretation by Hippolytus and Origen spun this metaphor in an unhealthy direction where the focus became the Song of Songs instead of appropriate New Testament texts. For the most part, this allegorical interpretation reigned through the Middle Ages up until the time of the Reformation. The Reformers themselves, however, were slow to expound on the nuptial image, with the exception of Martin Luther in his polemics against the Roman Catholic Church.

### What Does This Metaphor Mean?

The most important aspect of the nuptial metaphor is that it brings to ecclesiology an eschatological perspective, placing the Church beyond the limits of time to assume the dimensions of eternity itself. The metaphor of the bride of Christ describes the Church in her eschatological state and calls attention to the need for ecclesiology to think in eschatological and not simply spatio-temporal terms. This image, therefore, becomes “a metaphor of hope for the future,” a bride awaiting her future wedding. This eschatological dimension would not be true if the Church were simply pictured as the “wife” or “spouse” of Christ. That the Church is pictured as a bride awaiting her bridegroom highlights an important eschatological reality. The eschatological dimension of this metaphor is further on display in the already/not yet tension currently true of the Church as she lives between the times. In one sense, the Church as bride is entirely holy and unfailing, sanctified and cleansed by the word (Eph 5:26). In another sense, the frailty and fallenness of this bride is continually manifested in her spiritual adultery, requiring that her bridegroom, Jesus Christ, continually liberate her from her whoring ways and purify her by his union. Though a saint, she remains a sinner and cannot purify herself. The image of the Church as the bride of Jesus Christ, therefore, is a picture of the invisible Church on earth awaiting her future home in heaven: only true believers—as opposed to all professing believers or Church members—will be united to the bridegroom. On that day, the Church will make herself ready by clothing herself in fine linen, which is “the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev 19:7-8). The nuptial metaphor also emphasizes the close connection of Christ with the Church and the unity that believers have with one another. As Ernst Best has opined, the nuptial metaphor takes us “further into the relationship of Christ and the Church than any other” New Testament image. Indeed, this metaphor is predominately “a symbol of the lordship of Christ over the Church,” emphasizing “the necessary dependence of the Church upon Christ.” As Lord, Christ has authority over the Church, and the Church, by nature of Christ’s lordship, is dependent on him. At the same time, the nuptial metaphor maintains a clear distinction between Christ and the Church. As such, it complements the Pauline metaphors of the Church as the Body of Christ and Christ as the Church’s head. This image also serves as a reminder that the Church is Christ’s betrothed and her purpose and fulfillment are reached through devotion to him who betrothed her. As Batey observes:

> Christ exemplifies the masculine qualities of active love; he has initiated the betrothal and provided for the Church’s life; his elective love continues to protect the Church from meaninglessness and despair. The Church as a Bride must respond with submission, loyalty, and dedication—looking to him for the power to understand her origin, define her purpose, and insure her future.

According to Batey, the Church’s status as bride defines who she is and how she ought to live. As bride, she actively serves her bridegroom, not out of sheer duty but out of delight that she is his bride, a picture of the tension between free grace and the radical demands of the gospel. The nuptiality of the Church, therefore, helps protect her from both laxness and legalism.

The image of the Church as bride is a picture of the Church awaiting her eschatological state, which has
been inaugurated in her founding and is experienced proleptically in this age. This state is not experienced fully until the age to come when the Church is fully united to Jesus Christ, her bridegroom, in the new heavens and the new earth. Though she is a spiritual whore, she is also pure because she has been washed clean “in the blood of the lamb” (Rev 7:14). This reality gives believers great hope. The image of bride also reminds the Church that they are cherished by Christ and find their corporate identity in him.

The Church as Both Mother and Bride

These two feminine ecclesial images belong together. Juxtaposing these images creates a paradoxical yet complementary relationship that is demonstrated in three ways. First, the maternal image describes the visible Church on earth, while the nuptial image describes the invisible Church awaiting her eschatological state. This distinction between the visible and invisible Church is attributed to Augustine—whose ecclesiology at this point was shaped by the Donatist schism—and more fully developed by Calvin in opposition to the Roman Catholic teaching that the Church is the one visible organization that has descended from the apostles in a continual line of succession.

For Calvin, the Church is primarily a visible community of believers as signified by the image of mother. In fact, it was in the context of his discussion of the Church as “the mother of the faithful through whom one has rebirth and salvation” that Calvin first used the expression “visible Church” in a positive sense. The maternal image describes the visible Church; she is a “mixed assembly,” yet remains the exclusive site of God’s covenantal blessings in Christ. The motherhood of the Church reflects the “social and visible Church existing in the world,” whose function is to bear and nourish believers until the parousia.

Second, the maternal image is a description of the Church’s spatio-temporal reality, while the nuptial image describes her eschatological glory. The maternal image is a description of the Church’s spatio-temporal existence on earth where she seeks to fulfill her mission until the parousia (Matt 28:18-20). The image portrays the Church as assembled in an historic reality (situated in space and time) to do the work of the ministry (Eph 4:12), namely, to live out the gospel in a particular time-and-space-bound culture.

Conversely, the metaphor of the Church as the bride of Christ emphasizes the eschatological nature of the Church. In 2 Corinthians 11:1-4, for example, Paul addresses the Corinthian community as a “pure virgin” whom he, as father of the bride, has betrothed exclusively to one husband, Jesus Christ, in order to present her to him at the second coming. For Paul, the betrothal was a past fact brought about by faith in Jesus Christ that will not be constituted until the eschaton. The Church, therefore, is the eschatological community that experiences in Christ the beginning of the new age, awaiting a future consummation, which “will not be the manifestation and glorification of a perfection already achieved in the Church, but radical cleansing and transformation.”

To conceptualize the Church as the bride of Christ and the mother of believers is to maintain a tension ubiquitous in the New Testament. The Church lives between the times, where she experiences through faith
the presence of her Lord in a spatio-temporal setting and yet longs for a future consummation. She finds pleasure and purpose, delight and design in both the realization and anticipation of her Lord. The tension maintained by the nuptial and maternal metaphors does justice to both the here-and-now and eschatological realities of the Church.

Third, these two feminine metaphors have different foci: the image of the Church as mother focuses on the Church as a birthing and nurturing institution, while the nuptial image focuses on the Church's relationship to Jesus Christ. The Church's maternal functions of birthing believers and nurturing them in Scripture, doctrine, and at the Lord's Table have a rich history in the life of the Church. Augustine illustrates the importance of these maternal functions when he urges young converts: “Behold the womb of Mother Church: see how she groans and is in travail to bring you forth and guide you on into the light of faith.” Likewise, Luther employs the maternal image when he compares the Church to the mother who births a baby and nurtures him to manhood: “The Church namely teaches, cherishes us warmly, carries us in her womb and lap and arms, shapes us and makes us perfect according to the form of Christ until we grow to become perfect men.”

Similarly, Calvin views the Church as a birthing and nurturing institution: “The Church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith.” Traditionally, therefore, the maternal image has been employed to denote the Church's birthing and nurturing functions.

Conversely, the metaphor of the Church as bride denotes the intimacy and permanence of the union of Christ and the Church. Claude Welch observes that this metaphor “may lead us to the heart of the mystery of the Church's being” in that it “defines the nature of that present union by referring to a union which is to be.” Paradoxically, the bridegroom both loves the bride in spite of her sin and purifies her by taking her sin on himself, which is why Augustine can opine: “When was she [the bride] loved? When she was still in all her ugliness. He obliterated her ugliness and gave her beauty.”

It is by identifying himself with this ugliness of sin that Christ, who became “without form or majesty” (Isa 53:2), brings about the transformation of the bride.

CONCLUSION

These two feminine metaphors offer a complementary vision of the Church and, therefore, are best examined in light of one another. On the one hand, the maternal image describes the visible Church in her spatio-temporal reality; on the other hand, the nuptial metaphor describes the invisible Church anticipating her eschatological state. The motherhood of the Church depicts her as a birthing and nurturing institution, giving rise to many “sons of God” (Gal 3:26), while the nuptiality of the Church portrays her union with her bridegroom. When juxtaposed, these metaphors also protect against lacunae in developing one’s ecclesiology, the maternal image guarding against too strong an eschatological reading and proud triumphalism, and the nuptial image shielding against a neglect of eschatology and the contemporary preoccupation with the Church’s faults. These two ecclesial images have a lot to offer the contemporary Church and evangelicals would be wise to engage them and do so together.

ENDNOTES

1 Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 11. Within the past few years, books on a popular level that explore why believers and unbelievers alike are turned off by the Church but love Jesus have become commonplace.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 12.

4 Evangelicals who incorporate this metaphor as part of a general discussion of ecclesial metaphors include Earl D. Radmacher, The Nature of the Church (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1996), 241-56; Robert L. Saucy, The Church in God’s Program, Handbook of Bible Doctrine (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 44-49.

5 E.g., Edmund Clowney, The Church, ed. Gerald Bray, Contours of Christian Theology (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1995); John S. Hammett, Biblical Foun-
For the central role that Calvin’s view of the Church as mother played in his ecclesiology, see Léopold Schümmer, *L’Ecclesiologie de Calvin à la lumière de l’Ecclesia Mater: son apport aux recherches écclésiologiques tendant à exprimer l’unité en voie de manifestation*, Zürcher Beiträge zur Reformationsgeschichte 11 (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 1981).

For example, in his chapter on the nurture provided by the Church, a topic that could easily elicit references to the maternal image of the Church, Edmund Clowney neglects any such discussion, opting instead to address the nurture that the Trinity provides individual believers and the nurture of children in homes and in Christian schools. See Clowney, *The Church*, 149-54.

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For example, in statements regarding the question of women’s ordination, Pope John Paul II argues that male presiders are needed at the Eucharist in order to symbolize Christ as the Church’s bridegroom. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 25-26.

Ibid., 27.


Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 111. Ross is even more explicit when she objects that the nuptial metaphor for the Church “is seriously problematic” because “it assumes that women possess an essentially ‘material’ or ‘receptive’ nature and that relations between men and women are to be understood as asymmetrically complementary” (114).


Pauw, “The Church as Mother and Bride in the Reformed Tradition,” 134.


Ibid.

Pauw, “The Church as Mother and Bride in the Reformed Tradition,” 134.

I am indebted to Amy Plantiga Pauw for influence on this aspect of my argument in her work, “The Graced Infirmitry of the Church,” 200; idem., “The Church as Mother and Bride in the Reformed Tradition,” 134.


Daniel L. Akin, 1, 2, 3 John, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 38:219-20.


In particular, the rich history of the maternal image has been compiled and evaluated by Plumbe, *Mater Ecclesia*, and de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*.

Commenting on its early patristic roots, Monica Miller explains that the term “mother” as applied to the Church occurs with “great frequency and spontaneity ... [indicating] that the practice had entered the mainstream of tradition well before the close of the second century.” Monica Migliorino Miller, *Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church* (Scranton, NJ: University of Scranton Press, 1995), 142; cf. Joseph C. Plumbe, “Ecclesia Mater,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 70 (1939): 536-37.
27 Plumbe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 9. Similarly, Plumbe remarks that the idea of the Church as mother is “commonplace with patristic writers everywhere” (47).
37 Feminist theologian Robin Jenson comments on how the early Church fathers connected baptism and the maternal function of the Church: “In [baptism], the Church was the spiritual mother—at once both fecund and virginal—from whose impregnated womb (a baptismal font) her children emerged.” Jensen, “Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna,” 137.
40 Ibid.
47 For Origen’s view of the nuptial motif in the Song of Songs, see Christopher J. King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom’s Perfect Marriage-Song*, Oxford Theological Monographs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-7, 14-17, 110-12, 217-18.
50 De Lubac underscores this point: “The Bride of Christ
cannot be degraded; pure and uncorrupted, she knows
one dwelling alone and keeps in chastity and modesty
the sanctity of one hearth." De Lubac, The Splendor of
the Church, 112.
51Best, One Body in Christ, 179.
53Brian P. Flanagan, “The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors
55John Piper, This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of
57John Piper, This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of
58Ibid., IV.1.2.
59Vel-Matti Kärkkäinen, An Introduction to Ecclesiology:
Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives (Down-
ers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 51.
60Calvin explicitly links the concept of the visible
Church with the maternal metaphor: “But because it
is now our intention to discuss the visible Church, let
us learn even from the simple title ‘mother’ how use-
ful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know
her.” Calvin, Institutes, IV.1.4.
61Horton, People and Place, 194.
62De Lubac, The Motherhood of the Church, 155.
63González, A History of Christian Thought, 2:162
64For an eschatological reading of the bridal imagery of
the Church, see Annette Merz, “Why Did the Pure
Bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2) Become a Wedded Wife
(Eph. 5:22-23)? Theses about the Intertextual Trans-
formation of an Ecclesiological Metaphor,” Journal
Richard Batey, “Paul’s Bride Image: A Symbol of Real-
65For Claude Chavasse, the marriage between Christ
and his bride has already occurred. Thus, he denies
that the nuptial metaphor for the Church is funda-
mentally eschatological. Claude Chavasse, The Bride of
Christ: An Enquiry into the Nuptial Element in Early
Christianity (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), 222-29.
66Claude Welch, The Reality of the Church (New York:
Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 135.
68Ibid.
69Augustine, Sermon 216.7, as cited in de Lubac, Chris-
tian Faith, 104.
70Martin Luther, Weimarer Ausgabe 10:1.2; 366, 18-34,
as cited in Kärkkäinen, An Introduction to Ecclesiology,
48.
71Calvin, Institutes, IV.1.1.
72Welch, The Reality of the Church, 133-34.
73Augustine. Expositions of the Psalms: 33-50 (Vol. 2),
vol. 16 of The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation