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# VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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## LECTURE 26: CHURCH

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**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

**John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

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# *Module*

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## **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

**30 LECTURES**

***ROBERT D. McCURLEY M.Div.***

**21 CHAPTERS OLD TESTAMENT · 9 CHAPTERS NEW TESTAMENT**

### *Old Testament Lectures:*

1. Introduction
2. Creation
3. Fall
4. Noah
5. Abraham
6. Patriarchs I
7. Patriarchs II
8. Exodus
9. Sinai
10. Tabernacle
11. Sacrifices
12. Priesthood
13. Inheritance
14. David
15. Psalms
16. Solomon
17. Temple
18. Kingdom
19. Prophets
20. Exile
21. Restoration

### *New Testament Lectures:*

22. Incarnation
23. Atonement
24. Resurrection
25. Pentecost
- 26. Church**
27. Union
28. Application
29. Mission
30. Glory

## *Lecture 26*

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# CHURCH

*Lecture Theme:*

The Church is built on Jesus Christ, the chief corner stone, as a habitation of God through which he magnifies his glory to the whole world.

*Text:*

“And Jesus answered and said...I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:17–18).

### TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 26

Throughout history, great institutions have come and gone. We read of the rise and fall of one great nation after another. When they rise to their height of power, they seem invincible and even as if they will remain forever; but they may fall and disappear from the earth, only to be read about in history books. We could say the same about wildly successful businesses and companies as well as powerful and influential families with international influence and connections. They all follow the same course. Only one kingdom remains truly permanent and indestructible. Only one institution endures through all the ages, while everything else withers around it; and that is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said Himself in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” It endures throughout time and all of eternity. God reveals that the church is the central institution in the world, in history, and therefore, in our own understanding.

So, what is the nature of the church? Who are the members, and why is that so important? Why are the marks that distinguish the true church from false ones so important? How did Christ structure the government and oversight of the church? What are the purposes of the ordinance of church discipline? What benefits flow to members of the church? In this lecture, we will consider the development of the church on the heels of Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension, and the gift of the Spirit. We have seen throughout this course that God’s plan of redemption in history reveals His intention to save a people for Himself as a means of displaying His own glory. He has erected a kingdom in the world that serves as the habitation of God, so it is essential that we understand some of the salient features of how God designed the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The book of Acts provides us with God’s inspired record of the early history of the church. And, the New Testament epistles supply details of God’s instructions about the life and function of the church under the New Testament.

So, first of all, we'll consider the nature of the church, and this underlines really the importance of the church in the world. We have noted several times in earlier lectures the continuity between the Old Testament and New Testament. There is one people of God throughout history existing under two different administrations. Stephen refers to Old Testament Israel as the church in Acts 7:38, "This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us." Likewise, Paul refers to the New Testament church as the Israel of God and Jerusalem and Mount Zion. Part of the glory of the New Testament includes the expansion of the church to include a large proportion of Gentile believers, as we saw promised from the early chapters of Genesis and throughout the Old Testament.

God's purposes in history center on the redemption of a people for Himself. He is erecting a kingdom in this world for His own name and glory. Many of the Old Testament themes that we have previously considered find their culmination in the New Testament doctrine of the church. God provided His Son as the foundation upon which the church is built so that it might serve as the habitation of God. We sing about this in Psalm 118:22-23, "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD's doing; It is marvelous in our eyes." We read of the fulfillment of this in Ephesians 2:20-22. It speaks about the church as "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

God dwells in His church and He manifests His presence there. In I Corinthians 14:24-25, we see described the experience of an unbelieving visitor to the public worship of the church. It says, "there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth."

Not only is Christ the foundation, He is also the only head and King of His church as we will see more in a moment. The church exists for the display of Christ's glory. Colossians 1:18 says, "And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence." So, as we explore the New Testament theology of the church, we recognize that everything is connected to God's history of redemption and the magnifying of his glory. We cannot abandon the biblical doctrine of the church without impugning Christ's honor. The church is not a practical human convention. It is the divine institution established by God for the advance of His cause and the display of His glory in the world. And, He has blessed it; in Acts 2:47, the very early history of the church, it says, "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Consequently, the Bible does not permit believers to jettison or detach themselves from His visible and divinely appointed church.

The Belgic Confession Article 27 says this, "We believe since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be ought to withdraw from it content to be by himself, but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it, maintaining the unity of the church, submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof, bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren according to the talents God has given them." That's a long quote, but it's a good summary from one of the historic reformed confessions about the importance of the church of the Lord Jesus.

Now, the word *church* in the Bible is used in a variety of ways, especially in the New Testament. Sometimes it's used in reference to the invisible church, other times to the visible church. Sometimes it refers to a local congregation, other times to the regional church. And, it also refers to elders sitting in a judicial capacity for church discipline. We need to define a few of these important points of theological terminology beginning with the distinction between the invisible and visible church.

We're not talking about two different churches. There's only one church. Rather, we are looking at the one church from two different angles. The invisible church refers to all of the elect for all of time. That, of course, is invisible; we can't see that. The visible church refers to all professing believers and their children, to whom are given the ministry and oracles and ordinances of God. While all within the visible church enjoy precious privileges, not all are necessarily born again. Far from it. We see this distinction throughout both the Old and New Testaments. For example, in Romans 2:28-29, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that

circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

Another phrase is the *catholic church* the word *catholic* means *universal*, so we’re not talking at all about the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches false doctrine. The universal church refers to the true church throughout the world. We have seen throughout our study the preeminence of Jesus Christ at the center of the nature of the church is the New Testament doctrine concerning the headship of Christ. Many passages refer to this. The head of the church is not, for example, the Pope of Rome, who is the usurper, an enemy of Christ. Christ is the only King and Head of the church and all authority, for all that we are to believe regarding doctrine, worship, church government, and the Christian life must be derived from His authority communicated to us in His Word.

The Bible supplies us with many pictures of the church, so I’ve compiled of a list of them to read off to you, but you’ll need to investigate them more fully yourself. Listen to some of the descriptions that God gives of the church in the New Testament. He describes it as a house and as a body. He describes it as our mother in Galatians 4:26, our mother, which is Jerusalem which is above. He describes the church as the people of God, as a building, as a kingdom, as the Israel of God, as Jerusalem, as Mount Zion, as the temple of God. He describes the church as a field, the habitation of God, the city of God, a flock, the bride of the Lord Jesus Christ, branches of the vine, and a community. That gives you some of the pictures that God has provided for us in His Word with regards to the church.

Let me also mention briefly the marks of the true church, which you’ll learn more about in your studies of systematic theology. The marks of the true church include three things: the faithful administration of the Word; secondly, the faithful administration of the sacraments; and thirdly, the faithful administration of church discipline. These are our marks that distinguish the true church from false ones, but recognize that faithfulness does not mean perfection. Westminster Confession chapter 25 paragraphs 4 and 5 speak to this. It can be more or less visible in history. It is always mixed with purity and error. Even the best churches have such a mixture. Some churches can so degenerate as to become no longer the church of Christ at all but rather, a synagogue of Satan.

Secondly, we’ll discuss the membership in the church. The necessity of membership in the church flows from what we have seen about the nature of the church. Some have insisted that church membership is nothing more than an extra biblical convention without any warrant in the Word of God, or that at the very least, the use of a communion roll, or membership roll, is a pragmatic concession that can be ignored. But, as we will see, being a Christian in the Scriptures included admission into a visible body with the ministry, doctrine, ordinances, discipline, organization, and authority entrusted to it by God. Consider the biblical warrant that we find in Acts and the epistles.

First of all, the members of the church were baptized and added, it says, to a local, visible church and required to be committed to it. We see that in a wide array of texts throughout Acts and in I Timothy. We also read of others who refused to join the church, such as Acts 5:13, and of course public profession of faith was mandatory. Even Jesus underlined this in Matthew 10:32–33. Secondly, the members of the church could be numbered or counted and were thus visible and distinct; whether counted on paper or on fingers does not matter.

Thirdly, there was a repeated New Testament distinction between those who were outside distinguished from those who were inside. That language is taken from Scripture like Colossians 4:5. Mere attendance at the public assembly did not qualify because the apostles even made the distinction in those gatherings. We saw that earlier in the quotation from I Corinthians 14:23. The household of faith is distinguished from the world, and membership in a household is basic to the whole concept.

Fourthly, there was a distinction between those who were under the rule and oversight of the elders, who were responsible to know and care for them. Elders do not have authority over any and all persons. In fact, you’ll see language, for example, in I Peter 5:3, that literally means that folk are assigned by lot, or you think of Acts 20:28–29 where the elders are told to “take heed to the flock.” That means knowing whether one is being attacked by wolves or not. Hebrews 13:17 shows that the elders are held accountable for specific saints entrusted to their oversight.

Fifthly, church discipline involved being taken away from among you, to use the language of I Corinthians 5:2 and Matthew 18. Well, this would be impossible if there was no distinct membership, and of course those who repented could also be reinstated. Sixthly, members traveling to areas where they would be unknown were

given letters of reference and commendation. We see this all throughout the New Testament. Seventhly, the biblical titles of the church would not make sense without membership in Christ's visible church. You think of some of the things he mentioned earlier like the church being a house, a body, building, family, a kingdom, the city, a flock, and so on. Eighthly, the church has a responsibility to verify or falsify the credibility of a person's claims to be a Christian. The man in I Corinthians 5 thought he was a Christian and was not. I John makes reference to this principal as well.

Lastly, under this point, we stated at the beginning of this lecture that the church consists of professing Christians and their children. This flows from the household principle we have observed throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament. You will notice the reference to household baptisms in the New Testament paralleling the pattern of circumcision in the Old Testament. Both baptism and circumcision share the same significance and meaning which includes, among other things, incorporation into the visible people of God. Both are a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace, which accompany the promise to believers and their children. Just as the Lord's Supper replaces Passover, so baptism replaces circumcision. Neither circumcision nor baptism presume that the child, for example, is regenerated, but it does seal the promise and reflect the substantial privileges of membership in the visible church. A thorough exposition of the biblical doctrine of infant baptism is really beyond the scope and time we have in this lecture.

Thirdly, the government of the church. God has appointed different structures of authority in the world, each with its own symbol of authority. You think of the state. The Bible says the sword is given to the state, but to the church keys are given, and in the family the rod is given. We are concerned in this lecture with the church in light of the development of the history of redemption. Christ's kingship is displayed in this government of His church. Just as with the ordinances of worship, the structure and/or organization of the church is not left open to human innovation and creativity. Christ as Head of the church, has appointed a specific church government, and we are not free to depart from His appointment. All of the authority lies with Christ, the King. This can be seen in considering what the Bible says about the authority of church power itself.

What authority does the church have? Well, we recognize first of all, the source of authority is found in Christ alone as Head of the church, and that the standard of authority is Scripture alone, not the church or its traditions. But, think about the nature of this church power. It is declarative, not legislative, so the church is to uphold God's Word, declaring that Word, and not fabricating new ordinances, doctrines, or rules.

Secondly, it is ministerial, not magisterial. It is given for serving the flock, not lording over them. It is also spiritual, not physical. The church is given the keys, not the sword. So, the church's power is not discretionary. The church is to consult Scripture, and it is not left to the freedom of choice or judgment in matters of faith and doctrine. Within these parameters, the exercise of church authority under Christ reflects real power. It is the power of Christ mediated through the representatives Christ has ordained to serve Him. It is, however, derived power from Christ, not inherent power residing in the church itself or its officers.

All of this brings us to the question of what Christ, the Head, appointed and sanctioned for church government. He has ordained a specific church government for His people through which His authority is exercised. We're obligated to submit and follow the pattern He has instituted in the Scriptures. So, think for example of the officers He has appointed in church government. Qualifications for church office were given so that, as Scripture says, "thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." That's I Timothy 3:15. After the expiration of the offices of apostles and prophets, the Lord appointed three primary offices to continue until the end of the age.

First of all, ministers or pastors. Christ calls ministers to the primary responsibility of preaching, teaching, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Their office includes that of a preaching elder who shares with the ruling elders the responsibility of government, shepherding and overseeing the flock. But, the minister has a distinct calling, a distinct ordination, and distinct gifts connected to the ministry of the Word.

Secondly, we have elders. Christ calls ruling elders to serve as overseers and shepherding the flock of God. The terms *bishop* or *overseer* and *elder* do not refer to two separate offices but are synonymous for the same office. In fact, they are used interchangeably in the New Testament. You can consult Titus 1:5-7 and Philippians 1:1 and elsewhere. The Bible specifies a plurality of elders in each congregation, and both ministers and elders serve with

complete equality in matters related to governing, ruling, and overseeing the flock. They also have authority to exercise church discipline and resolve conflicts with the authority of Christ. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.”

The third office is that of deacons. Deacons were appointed for the purpose of tending to the practical works of mercy and compassion. This would include the physical material and financial care of widows and orphans and others in need within the church. In tending to these practical needs, they thereby free the elders to focus their attention to spiritual matters.

In all three offices, like all positions of authority, they're given for the sake and benefit of those committed to their care and not for their own self-gratification. This places the proper emphasis on being servants of the people. So, we have these three offices of minister, elder, and deacon. And, the Bible specifies the qualifications for these offices in places like I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and elsewhere. In addition, there is a privilege of appeal to higher assemblies of elders and the right of government by them. You see this expressed in Acts 15.

So, at the local level you have perhaps a minister and a group of ruling elders, and they form what we call a *session* or *consistory*, elders of the local congregation. But then, you'll have various local congregations that are brought together under one overseeing body, where the ministers and elders from those local churches come together and form what we call a *Presbytery* or *Classis*. And then, beyond that, you have what's called a Synod or General Assembly, the highest level, and this includes all the elders and ministers from all the presbyteries in a given denomination. So, there are these structures that God's given; and all of the structures are given for the benefit of the Lord's people.

Fourthly, and lastly, we need to speak about the divine ordinance of church discipline, which is one function of church government and, as we noted earlier, one of the marks of the true church. Discipline generally displays God's love to His people within the Christian life. What we call church discipline, or censures, is only one biblical example of that broader concept of discipline. Church discipline is the exercise of the authority that Christ committed to His visible church for the preservation of its purity, peace, and good order. The word *discipline* comes from the same root word as *disciple*. It is a means of training the Lord's people. Church censures apply to all members of the visible church, and it pertains to any serious or scandalous offense in the doctrine and practice of a member that is contrary to the Word of God. Faithful and loving church discipline is indispensable to a healthy church just as it is to a healthy family. Love is the motivation behind godly church discipline.

We spoke earlier about the keys of the kingdom. In the faithful exercise of these keys, whatever is bound or loosed on earth is ratified in heaven by God Himself. It is the authority of Christ vested in the church, and therefore it is done in the name of Christ and with the power of Christ as we see in I Corinthians 5:4–5. The special presence of Christ is with His church when they act as a church for the purpose of discipline. The elders are charged with this duty before Christ and His elect angels, we see in I Timothy 5. But, God Himself is the One exercising the discipline through these appointed censures.

What is the purpose of church discipline? Let me give you a quick summary with a few passages. Galatians 6:1 tells us that one purpose is the restoration or recovery of an erring brother. Secondly, I Timothy 5:20 tells us that discipline also has the purpose of deterring others from like sin. I Timothy 1:20 tells us that it is a means of correcting the offender. I Corinthians 5:7 tells us that there is a purpose in purging the leaven from the lump. In that same chapter, verses 9–13, we learn that it is for the purpose of vindicating the honor of Christ and gospel profession. And, as we see in I Corinthians 11 and elsewhere, it has the purpose of preventing God's wrath on the church. So, the ordinance of church discipline is also an important function within the New Testament legislation that God has given to us.

Well, in summary, from even the brief points that we have considered together, the substantial benefits of the church should be obvious. Let me summarize just a few of them. The church is given the public means of grace, those appointed means that God has given to convey His grace. So, that would include the Word read, sung, or preached. It would include the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and prayer. Another one of the benefits is the public corporate assembly of God's people for worship. Indeed, this is the centerpiece. The public worship of God is the pivotal force in framing the piety of God's people. The number one priority in our life should be the public assembly of God's people for worship. Another benefit is the shepherding that takes place,

the oversight, the nurture, the accountability and care that the flock and sheep of God receive. We also have mutual exhortation. So, think of throughout the New Testament all of those “one another” passages, passages that use the language “one another” in the way in which the body is to operate together. Think of the diversity of gifts within the church among the Lord’s people, the contribution that each member plays in building up of the whole body. And, there is, of course, participation in taking the gospel to the world.

In conclusion, we have seen that the church is built on Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone, as the habitation of God through which He spreads His glory to the whole world. In the next lecture, we will turn our attention to consider the place of union with Christ within New Testament theology.