

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

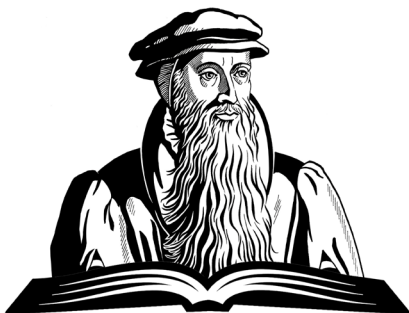
Module 6:

ECCLESIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Lecture 1

INTRODUCTION



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 6 ~ The Doctrine of the Church

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Module 6 ~ Lecture 1

Introduction

Dear students, with the church of all ages, we confess the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the holy catholic church." In the following courses, we want to study the doctrine of the church. The theological expression for the Doctrine of the Church is "Ecclesiology." This term is derived from two Greek words, "ekklesia" and "logia". Ekklesia means "congregation" or "assembly," and logia means "word" or "logic". The combination of these two words means "the study of the church." Ecclesiology is one of the major areas of study in Christian Systematic Theology, and investigates what the Bible teaches about the church, both universal—all believers in Christ, and local—local gatherings of believers in Christ. Ecclesiology is crucial to understanding God's purpose for believers in the world today.

So we want to make a beginning with this new locus, or theme, in our course on Christian doctrine. Thus far we have studied the chief themes of Systematic Theology. We started with the Doctrine of Revelation—how God reveals himself in nature and in Scripture. We studied the Doctrine of God—about God's nature, the Trinity, etc. We also worked on the Doctrines of Creation and Providence, the Doctrine of Christ, his Person and his work. The Doctrine of Salvation was also an important part of the Loci Communes that we studied. Now we have come to the next to the last topic, the Doctrine of the Church. After this, we round the bend and come to the Doctrine of Last Things. Now we want to share some thoughts about why to study Ecclesiology.

Why study Ecclesiology? In the first place, Ecclesiology is a neglected subject. Students often see the study of the church like a side dish, that Ecclesiology does not belong to the main course. The doctrine of God and of Christ, the doctrine of salvation and the covenant belong, in their thinking, to the main dishes. I agree that these subjects are very important, but we should realize that the doctrines of God and of Christ and of salvation, and all the other doctrines, are closely connected to the Doctrine of the Church. Ecclesiology needs our full attention, because we find the church throughout the whole Bible. You may say that the church is, from the beginning to the end of Scripture, a primary subject. There are so many Bible references to the church that it is even impossible to cover them in one course.

Secondly, Ecclesiology concerns God's work of election, regeneration, perseverance, yes, of all the graces of Christ. Neglecting the church as a work of the triune God makes us guilty of despising the wisdom which orders it, the goodness which influences it, and the authority which establishes it.

In the third place, Scriptural Ecclesiology serves the welfare of the church. The upbuilding of the church can only be achieved through the Biblical theology of the church. Many efforts in missions and evangelism came to an end because of a lack of Biblical vision about the church.

In the fourth place, Scriptural Ecclesiology equips men to serve the church. Also, the lessons about the church have the mission to prepare students to serve Christ and his church through Biblical, experiential, and practical ministry.

What is Ecclesiology all about? What is the church? What do we mean by “church”? Many people today understand the church to be a building. This is not the Biblical understanding of the church. The church is more than a building. It’s about the people who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The church is the most precious thing that God possesses in this world. The church is his temple, the bride of Christ, purchased by his own blood—Acts 20, verse 28.

This church transcends each local congregation of worshippers. A local church can die spiritually, like the congregation at Sardis (Revelation 3, verse 1), and Christ himself may remove its light—Revelation 2, verse 5. There are many sad sights of empty church buildings, where a church once met, or where formerly faithful churches have fallen into heresy. But Christ said that his church can never fail.

What makes the church a church? And why is the church necessary? And how can we recognize a true church? And what do we mean when we confess that the church is “catholic”? How should we think about church membership? And what is the purpose of the church? According to Scripture, the purposes of the church should be: first, teaching Biblical doctrine; secondly, providing a place of fellowship for believers; thirdly, observing the holy sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; and fourthly, praying.

The study of the church also includes the government of the church. What does the Bible say about the form of church government? The Bible teaches that church leadership consists of a plurality of elders along with a group of deacons, who serve as servants to the church. But it is not contrary to this plurality of elders to have one of these elders serving in a major pastoral role as a preacher of the gospel and pastor of the church.

Ecclesiology helps us to understand the role of the church and our role in the church. It teaches us about the ordinances of the church, how church leadership is to be chosen and structured, and how the church is to be doing in regards to believers—worship and discipleship, and unbelievers—ministry and evangelism. A Biblical understanding of Ecclesiology would go a long way to correct many of the common problems in churches today. Above all, we must understand that the church is the body of Christ, and that each of us has a specific function and role within that body. The Apostle Paul writes to the church of Corinth, “Let all things be done decently and in order”—1 Corinthians 14, verse 40.

In this lecture, we will study key verses on Ecclesiology, like Acts 2, verse 42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” We will see that studying the Doctrine of the Church is a practical study. Some people think that studying the church is a waste of time. Others raise objections like, “True spirituality is about Jesus and not about the church.” “Focusing on the church divides Christians.” But it’s true what is said, it is the most visible part of Christian theology, and it is vitally connected with every other part. A distorted church usually coincides with a distorted gospel.

We want to place the study of the church in connection with the other main topics of Systematic Theology. We cannot speak of the church separately from the Doctrine of God, and the Doctrine of Man, and the Doctrine of Christ, etc. The church father, Cyprian of Carthage, a third-century bishop, famously said, “No one can have God as Father who does not have the church as mother.” Symbolism of the church as mother was used throughout early church writings, continued into the medieval period, and was embraced by the Reformers. John Calvin

quotes Cyprian and refers to the motherhood of the church throughout his *Institutes*. The historic symbol of the church as mother is significant. We receive the gospel through the church, just as we receive life through our mother. The Word of God and the sacraments nourish and feed us, just as mothers nourish infants through their very bodies. The Apostle Paul uses the metaphor for the church as the “bride” or “mother”, through which the Spirit bears life to all the world. The church may be seen as the bride of Christ. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* also expresses these same Biblical principles about the church: “The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all”—chapter 25, paragraph 1.

The church is made up of believers. The first practical implication of Ecclesiology is seen in how we define the church. If the church is seen as simply a building, then this will promote an individualistic idea of Christianity, where believers occasionally gather in the building to do something. If the church is viewed as a social group, then the gospel can be easily lost, then focus is put on social activities and social causes. If the church is seen as controlled, governed by, and instituted by the state, then, as the state moves away from Biblical truth, so will the church, not to mention that the state leaders, often made up of unbelievers, will be making decisions in the church. However, if the definition of a church is Biblically based, the local church will seek to function according to God’s plan.

The church has a specific purpose. Another important doctrine in Ecclesiology that has very practical implications is that we think about the purpose of the church. If Christians think the purpose of the church is to bring in the kingdom, or to advance the kingdom already present, then there will be much focus on promoting social justice and “building a city and nation for Christ.” However, if the purpose of the church is aligned with Scripture, then it will see itself as the means of glorifying God into eternity: “Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end”—Ephesians 3, verse 21.

The means by which the church glorifies God are:

1. By proclaiming the truth of God’s Word, building up the church in the faith—Ephesians 4:13–16; Colossians 1:28; and 1 Timothy 3:15.
2. By instruction and teaching of the Word—2 Timothy 2:2; 3:16–17.
3. By fellowship—Acts 2:47 and 1 John 1:3.
4. By keeping the ordinances—Luke 22:19 and Acts 2:38–42.
5. By advancing and communicating the gospel to the entire world—Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8 and 2:42.

These are all very practical purposes that can be visibly seen in the church services each Sunday.

The Bible teaches God’s sovereign election of all who will be saved by Christ. God is sovereign in salvation and “worketh all things after the council of his own will”—Ephesians 1, verse 11. All of God’s redemptive purposes center in Christ. Believers have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world—Ephesians 1, verse 4. The elect are predestinated to be gathered together in Christ—Ephesians 1, verse 10. Sinners must be united to Christ to be the body of Christ. By nature, the elect are without Christ, although they may belong to the visible gathering of the church—Ephesians 2, verse 3. The Lord Jesus Christ gathers the sheep given to him into his fold. Through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, sinners are united with Christ by faith. Therefore we may describe the church as a gathered people and “a chosen generation”—1 Peter 2, verse 9. In that way of the elect being gathered by the Good Shepherd, they become living

members of the church.

Church and election also implies that the circle of election is not identical with the circle of the gathered church. We see from Scripture and in actual church life, that hypocrites can be found in the visible church. Election should also be seen as the foundation of Christ's church-gathering work. Without God's grace of election, there can be no church at all. Election also guarantees the church militant will be the church triumphant. I hope you see that the Doctrine of Election is of great comfort.

Elect from ev'ry nation,
yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation,
one Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy name she blesses,
partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
with ev'ry grace endued.
—sings the beautiful hymn, “The Church's One Foundation”

As an introduction to this theme, I would like to ask your attention for what the Lord Jesus himself says about the church, in Matthew 16, verse 18, “And upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” These words have been wrongly used by the Roman Catholic Church, teaching that our Lord conferred onto Peter the first place of honor and jurisdiction in the government of his whole church, and that same spiritual authority has always resided in the popes or bishops of Rome as being the successors of Peter.

It's important to know that the Lord Jesus uses two Greek words, which, though not identical, are closely related in meaning. What he said was, “You are PETROS, and upon this PETRA I will build my church.” Peter—PETROS— means “rock”. So not “on Peter,” but, “on this rock” I will build my church. It's like a play on words. If Jesus wanted to say that he builds his church on Peter, then he would have said, “and on you I will build my church.” Just like in verse 19, where he means Peter and the other disciples, “And I will give unto thee”—unto you—“the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” An erring, fallible child of Adam cannot be the foundation of the church of God. Not on Peter, not on Paul, or any other apostle or saint, but, verse 18—“upon this rock I will build my church.” Here Jesus no longer speaks of the person, but of the matter. The true meaning of “rock” appears to be the truth of Jesus Messiahship and Divinity, which Peter had just confessed—Matthew 16, verse 16, “And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Christ is the Rock on which the church is built. No other rock can carry the great weight of men's sins and iniquities. No other foundation fits the need of fallen sinners—1 Corinthians 3, verse 11: “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” In the primary, or basic, sense of the term, there is only one foundation, and that foundation is not Peter, but Jesus Christ himself.

In the secondary sense, it is illegitimate to speak of the apostles, including Peter, as the church's foundation, for these men were always pointing away from themselves to Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior. Scripture itself uses this secondary sense, for instance, in Ephesians 2, verse 20: “And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.” In this connection, emphasis should also be placed on the fact that Jesus

speaks of himself, not of Peter, as the builder and owner of the church. He says, “I will build my church”—Matthew 16, verse 18.

The figure of a building to represent the church can often be found in the Bible. It is striking that Peter himself uses the same picture for the church in his epistle—1 Peter 2, verses 4 and 5: “To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”

It is a great comfort that Jesus considers this church his very own. Did he not come from heaven in order to purchase his church “with his own blood”—Acts 20, verse 28? “My church”—he is the Lord of the congregation of God’s worshipers, the King of the true Israel—Philippians 3, verse 3. Christ builds the church by his power, and he promises that Satan will never overthrow it. For Jesus continued his speaking about the church, saying, “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”—Matthew 16, verse 18. “The gates of hell” represents Satan and his legions, as it were, storming out of hell’s gates in order to attack and destroy the church. But Christ promises victory for his church militant. The enemies of the church shall not overpower the church he will build. There are many forces of evil looking for the destruction of the church. Think of persecution, false doctrine, lukewarmness of believers, conformity unto the lifestyle of the present world, etc. The enemies have many arrows on their bow, but Christ, as promised, will build and protect his church.

Let’s have this in mind, as we begin to study Ecclesiology. A true study of the church means being the church for Christ’s sake.