

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

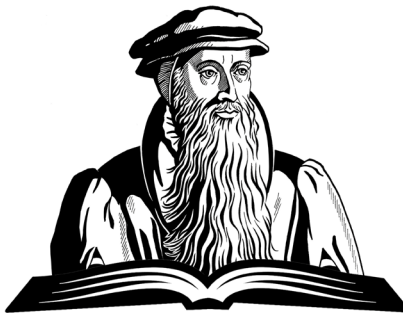
*Module 6:*

**ECCLESIOLOGY—**

**THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH**

*Lecture 2*

**WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY  
ABOUT THE CHURCH?**



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

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Rev. Walter Harinck is minister of the gospel in the Gereformeerde Gemeente (Netherlands Reformed Church) in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

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### *Module 6 ~ The Doctrine of the Church*

1. Introduction
2. **What Does the Bible Say About the Church?**
3. The Nature of the Church
4. The Authority of the Church
5. The Government of the Church
6. *Coming Soon*
7. *Coming Soon*
8. *Coming Soon*
9. *Coming Soon*
10. *Coming Soon*

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## *Module 6 ~ Lecture 2*

# What Does the Bible Say About the Church?

Dear students, in our day and age we know how important correct data is. Correct data gives the necessary input for decision making. Without the correct information, the picture that we have of the situation will be mistaken. You will agree that this will have serious consequences. Ecclesiology is the study of the Christian church, as we find it in the Bible. The data from Scripture is the input for this systematic study. Without the inspired Word of God as our main and most important source, we will have misconceptions about the church.

In this lecture, we want to trace the lines of the formation, the preservation, and the development of the church of God, throughout the history of the Old and the New Testaments. The Bible shows us the beauty of God's gracious work in his church in this world, in the past and in the present. The Bible deals with man, not only as a solitary unit in his relation to God, but also as a member of a spiritual society, gathered together in the name of Jesus. It is not only about doctrines that have to be believed, and precepts that have to be obeyed by individual Christians, but all the doctrines and precepts of the Bible are designed for a society of believing and God-fearing people. It is not an accidental or voluntary union, but it is designed and appointed by God from the beginning. It is highly important to lay down at the outset the Scriptural principles of the nature and the character of the church.

The Old Testament development of the church. In the first place, the church of the seed. From the beginning, the Bible speaks about the church of God. Right after the fall of man, God came with a significant promise. It's recorded for us, in Genesis 3, verse 15: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." This promise is often called the maternal promise. God promised to build his church through the seed of the woman, that sometime during the course of world history, there would be a unique man-child Redeemer, born of a woman into the world, and that child will crush the head of Satan. We know from Scripture that this promise is fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ. So from the beginning, God realizes his covenant plan, and begins to build his church in seed form.

Christ was promised to Adam and Eve with saving power, so that they believed in him. Adam testified of his faith when he changed the name of his wife and called her Eve, because she, carrying the promise of Christ, according to the flesh, was the mother of all living. At the birth of Cain, Eve herself rejoiced, saying, "I have gotten a man from the LORD." Adam and Eve were the first members of the church, which the Lord maintains from generation to generation, and it shall be preserved to the end. Before the fall, there was no church. Man was created after the image of God and was in immediate communion with his Creator.

The church is, by grace, established in the beginning by God, immediately after the fall. God

realized his promise in the descendants of Adam and Eve. From the beginning, we see two lines—the generation of Cain and of Seth. The true church was found in Seth’s lineage. The first form of God’s covenant church is the individual, particular form, with Adam in the line of Seth. We read of them in Genesis 4, verse 26: “Then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.” This can be explained as the first Bible reference of church worship, of a coming together of those who feared the Lord, to call upon his name.

When we move on to the next chapters of Genesis, we see the fast decay of the first world. Only eight are to be found in the ark during the flood that destroyed the whole human race. In the ark built by Noah, we may also see a picture of the church. Hebrews 11, verse 7 says, “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.” And Peter, in 1 Peter 3, verses 20 and 21 says, “When once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us.” Therefore, “We most constantly believe that God preserved, instructed, multiplied, honoured, decorated [adorned], and from death called to life his Kirk in all ages, from Adam, till the coming of Christ Jesus in the flesh” (*The Scots Confession of Faith of 1560*, chapter 5).

In the second place, the church of Abraham’s tent. God called Abraham, and made his covenant with Abraham and his seed. Genesis 17, verse 7 says, “I will establish my covenant between me and thee...to be a God unto thee.” This is the beginning of the patriarchal period of God’s covenant. True religion was again on the point of dying out, but God separated unto himself the family of Abraham. In the tents of the patriarchs was found the fear of the Lord. Again and again, we read that they built an altar at the place where they pitched their tents. God also gave to Abraham and his seed a sign and seal of the covenant—every man-child among them had to be circumcised.

You see that the development of the church follows the order of the different dispensations of the covenant of grace. Up to the time of Moses, the fear of the Lord was kept alive in the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The spiritual blessings also became more apparent than they were before, such as the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Spirit. We distinguish two sides to the blessings that came to Abraham and his seed. On the one hand, the temporal blessings, such as the land of Canaan, numerous offspring, and victory over their enemies; and on the other hand, spiritual blessings served to symbolize and typify spiritual and heavenly things. The spiritual promises are not realized in the natural descendants of Abraham as such, but only in those who also follow in the footsteps of Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

In the third place, the church of the tent and the temple. In the Mosaic period, after the exodus, the people of Israel came together around the tent of the tabernacle. They were enriched with the ceremonial law, in which the religion of the nation could find expression. The gospel of redemption was shown in the service of the priests and the Levites. All the offerings pointed to Christ and his redemptive work. Besides circumcision, another Old Testament sacrament was now practiced in Israel—the sacrament of Passover showed Israel that “without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22).

In the promised land, we see that the church had no independent organization, but had its organized existence in the state. Israel was a state church. Jerusalem and the temple functioned as the religious center. Foreigners could enter into the church only by joining the nation. There was a strong separation between the people of Israel and the Gentiles—the heathen nations. The people



of Israel were brought in a special covenant relationship with the Lord. Like we read in Deuteronomy 14, verse 2, “For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth.” The covenant privileges brought obligations upon the people of Israel. Moses and the prophets had to remind the people of Israel again and again that they were a people blessed by the Lord and called to serve the Lord. Like in Leviticus 20, verse 26: “And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.”

In the Old Testament prophecies, you see also another aspect becoming more and more clear. God’s church will not only be among the people of Israel, but also among the nations: “And many nations shall be joined to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto thee” (Zechariah 2:11). Already in the covenant promise to Abraham, we learn that God had an eye on the nations of the world: “And in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

Summarizing the Old Testament view of the church, we see that God called a people out of the mass of mankind to belong to him, as their covenant God—the line of the woman, the seed of Abraham, the assembly around the tabernacle, the flock of David, the remnant of God. God highly privileged them with his self-revelation, came to them with his promises and commands, and called them to fellowship with him as his people. Within this visible church, were those who persisted in unbelief and impenitence, but also those who feared the Lord and enjoyed his lovingkindness. The mercy God showed through the generations was based on the work of the coming Messiah, whom God increasingly revealed as the hope of the church. His coming would lead the church to be a blessing to the nations and witness of God’s glory in their midst. The period after they were led into exile was preparative for that New Testament age of the church.

Old Testament terms for the church. In the Old Testament, two terms are important for the church: “qahal” and “eda”. Qahal has the meaning of “assembly”. It is derived from a Hebrew word meaning to call, to call together, to assemble. It is related to a word that we read in Genesis 3, verse 8 and 10. The Lord comes into the Garden of Eden after the fall and called Adam and Eve with an audible, loud voice. So the qahal is the whole body of a people called together for a special purpose. We learn from this Bible word that the church means an assembly gathered by a general, public, audible call, or for the purpose of being publicly addressed. This is beautifully seen when the tents of the people of Israel are assembled around the tent of tabernacle in the desert. The congregation gathers around the Lord—he is in the middle. The Lord reveals himself in the midst of the people of Israel.

It is used for the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, and at the dedication of the temple (Deuteronomy 5:22 and 1 Kings 8:22). We find the usage of the word qahal also in Ezra 10, verse 1: “Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.” It is also used by way of antithesis. The believer keeps away from the “assembly of evil doers” (Psalm 26:5): “I have hated the congregation of evil doers; and will not sit with the wicked.”

The second main word for the congregation of the people of Israel in the Old Testament is “eda”. This word can best be translated with “congregation”. The root of the word means to meet at an appointed time or place, to come together by appointment. A very common phrase in that connection is “tabernacle of the congregation” or “tent of meeting.” This is God’s appointed place of meeting with his people.

After the period of the exile, we see that the congregation comes together in the synagogue. The word synagogue (Greek) also means “congregation”—the assembled people gathered together in the synagogue, the building as a house of prayer and meditation.

Let’s go to the New Testament developments of the church. The New Testament, even more than the Old Testament, shows that the church is the display of the grace of the triune God, and the means through which he gives his grace, all to his glory. The New Testament church is established by God with the coming of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the ministry of the apostles.

Let’s look at some New Testament terms. In the New Testament, we also find two terms that are used for the church. The Greek word “kuriake”, a secular word, received a sacred use in the New Testament. The English word “church” and the Dutch word “kerk” are derived from the Greek word “kuriake”. The term means “belonging to the Lord,” or “related to the Lord.” It is used in Revelation 1, verse 10, “the Lord’s Day”, the day that belongs to the Lord. It is also used for the expression “the Lord’s Supper”, the table or the meal that belongs to the Lord. The early Christians used this word to describe the gathering place of the Christian assembly. Later this term was adopted, and from the Middle Ages, it is applied not only for the place but also for the people that come together in the name of the Lord.

The term “ecclesia”—congregation—is the major New Testament term for the church. The root of the verb means “to call out” (ec = out, and clesia = call). In common Greek, it refers to a gathering of citizens called out of their homes to some public place or an assembly gathered at a public place for deliberation. In Acts, you read of lawful assembly (Acts 19:32, 39, 40). In Scripture, ecclesia most often refers to “the gathering of those who are disciples of Christ.” Ecclesia refers not only to the actual meetings, but to the people of God whether “actually or potentially assembled.”

It is remarkable that the word “ecclesia” is only used once in the Gospels. Only in Matthew 16, verse 18, and chapter 18, verse 17. Some even doubt if Jesus used these words. They have the opinion that Jesus did not use the word “ecclesia”, and even that Jesus is not the founder of the New Testament church, because he only proclaimed the kingdom of God. But without Jesus, there would be no church, for Jesus himself and his work are the foundation of the church. We also have no reason to doubt the authenticity of the texts from Matthew. There is no contrast between the kingdom of God and the church, because we see from the gospel that the kingdom Jesus proclaimed is not only related to a coming kingdom, but that his kingdom is now present in the hearts of all who believe in him. Later in this course, we plan to study more about the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God. For now, it is enough to realize that the fact that Jesus did not use the word “ecclesia” frequently, is no reason for us to doubt that he is not the founder of the New Testament church.

The word “ecclesia” is often used in the book of Acts, and in the epistles of the apostles. It is used for the “local body of professing Christians” in any town or village (Acts 5:11): “And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.” (Acts 11:22): “Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem.”

It is also used in the plural. For example, in Acts 15, verse 41, “And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.” So it is good to realize that the term “church” was not limited to a single congregation meeting in one building. There is strong evidence for assuming that a plurality of congregations, meeting for worship in separate houses, but connected together under one ecclesiastical order, was designated by the general term of “a church”. Think of the

many converts at Jerusalem, who are spoken of under the general name of “the church of Jerusalem” and “the churches in Asia,” who must have consisted of more than one congregation in a city.

It can also have the significance of the universal church of professing Christians throughout the whole world, or a wide area. In Ephesians 1:22, we read that Christ is “the head over all things to the church, which is his body.” Finally, it can have the use of “the elect church, made up of all the elect throughout the ages past, present, and coming, who are or will yet be glorified with Christ” (Ephesians 5:25–27).

In conclusion, we can say that “ecclesia” is not a quantitative, but a qualitative concept. The church is not like an association with different departments. A congregation can be small, but she isn’t any less a the true church of Christ (Revelation 3:8). The church is in all places where Christ gathers his church. The relationship to Christ is decisive for the universal and local church.

The book of Acts is very important for the Doctrine of the Church. The fact that the book begins with Pentecost demonstrates that Christ gathers and fills his church by his Spirit. Although the day of Pentecost is very fundamental for the church, it is not the birthday of the New Testament church, as some will say. The church already existed in Jerusalem before Pentecost. There was a congregation gathered together in the upper room, like we read in Acts chapter 1. Through the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, they were equipped to fulfill their calling in the world. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they became a witnessing church.

A characteristic of the church in the book of Acts is that “they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). It shows us that the church is grounded in the work and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. The rest of the book of Acts shows that the Holy Spirit filled men, and sent them to preach (Act 9:17 and 13:1–2), and came upon the Gentiles (Act 10:44). The Gospel goes from Jerusalem to Rome. And despite severe persecution and enmity from the side of Jews and Gentiles, the church continues to grow. It can be summarized by two statements: “But the word of God grew and multiplied,” and, “So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed” (Acts 12, verse 24; and 19, verse 20).

Let’s now look at the epistles. If the contours of the New Testament church begin to appear in the Gospels, and are exemplified in Acts, they are further explained in the epistles. The letters of the apostles are aiming at the upbuilding of the churches, especially their spiritual growth in knowledge and faith (Ephesians 2:21, 4:15, 1 Peter 2:2). It is all about the work of God in and through his church. Over and over again, this is confessed and prayed for. The Lord makes use of men for the upbuilding of his church. He calls and equips them in his service. The spiritual gifts, charisma, and the offices in the church are gifts of the same Spirit and serve together in a harmonious way, in which an official ordination cannot be missed.

In the epistles of the apostles, we find a rich variety of descriptions of the church in the New Testament. Each brings out an aspect of what the church is. Examples include “temple of God” (1 Corinthians 3:16); “holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:21); “the body of Christ” (Ephesians 1:22–23 and Colossians 1:18); “the kingdom of his dear Son” (Colossians 1:13); “the house of God” (Hebrews 10:21 and 1 Peter 4:17); “city of the living God” and “the heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22); “Jerusalem” (Galatians 4:26 and Revelation 21:10); “the bride, the Lamb’s wife” (Revelation 21:9); and “the branches” (Romans 11:17), etc.

Let’s jump into a conclusion. In the first place, the church originates from God. In the second place, the church gathered first from the people of Israel, and after that from the people of Israel and the nations. Thirdly, the church of the New Testament is closely related to the kingdom of God that did come and still has to come. The church lives on the gifts of God’s kingdom and expects



the coming of God's kingdom. Fourthly, the church carries different names to teach us that she is the work of the triune God. We see the work of God the Father—the church is called the people of God; the work of God the Son—the body of Christ; and the work of God the Holy Spirit—the temple of the Spirit. In the fifth place, the church is governed by Christ through his Spirit and through God's Word. In sixth place, the communion with Christ is a communion through the Holy Spirit, and from it flows the communion of the saints—the members of the church. Seventhly, the church is served by offices ordained by God, and is called to serve God, and to live as a holy people, to gain others for his duty.