

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

STUDY GUIDE

Module 6:
**ECCLESIOLOGY—
THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH**

Lecture 3:
**THE NATURE OF THE
CHURCH**



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

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STUDY GUIDE

Module 6

Ecclesiology—the Doctrine of the Church

1. Introduction to Ecclesiology
2. What Does the Bible Say About the Church?
- 3. The Nature of the Church**
4. The Authority of the Church
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6. Church Offices
7. Church Discipline
8. The Worship of the Church and the Means of Grace
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Module 6:

Ecclesiology—The Doctrine of the Church

Lecture 3:

The Nature of the Church

Introduction

There are many different trees—oak trees, apple trees, pine trees, even palm trees. All these trees are different from one another, but by nature they are all trees, for they have roots, a stem or trunk, with supporting branches, and a top of leaves. Although trees may have many differences, you can say that they all have the same nature. Trees, as they grow, follow the rotation of the sun. And the roots of the tree often reflect a similar spread and growth below ground as the tree does above ground, creating a reflection. As above, so below. The tree is a beautiful example from creation for what we call *The Nature of the Church*. On the outside, churches may differ because of language, culture, and background, but in essence, the church is one in nature.

Theme: *The Nature of the Church.*

I. The Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the holy catholic church."

1. The Roman Catholic Church errs in how they understand this profession of faith:
 - a. They say the Roman Catholic Church is the only true church worldwide;
 - b. They say it is the only place where full faith is held in trust for all men;
 - c. They say, where the church is, there is Christ.
2. Reformed Christians understand this profession the way it was meant:
 - a. The church is the worldwide fellowship of believers and their children, regardless of denomination;
 - b. The only Head of the church is the Lord Jesus Christ;
 - c. The church is holy because it's consecrated to God, set apart by his Spirit, though it is imperfect;
 - d. "Catholic" means "universal"—it embraces all true believers everywhere;

- e. Where Christ is, is the church;
- f. True believers are united to Christ, and to each other;
- g. Where the Word of God is preached and believed, Christ is gathering his church.
- h. The church is holy, by the Holy Spirit.

Questions:

1. What is the error of the Roman Catholic Church in how they understand this clause in *The Apostles' Creed*: "I believe in the holy catholic church"?

2. What is the correct understanding of the clause in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the holy catholic church"? What does the word "catholic" mean?

3. What does it mean to say that the church is "catholic"? Why do Protestant and Reformed Christians say, "Where Christ is, is the church." What opposite profession does the Roman Catholic Church claim?

4. Why do we say that the church is holy?

II. The Nature of the Church

1. Short definition of the church:

- a. The church is the community of all true believers for all time.

2. Long definition of the church:

As summarized in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 25, paragraph 1:

“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.”

3. God’s church is a universal, world-wide church.

- a. The church triumphant—some believers are already in heaven.
- b. The church militant—believers fighting the good fight of faith on earth.
- c. There’s a holy unity between the church in heaven and the church on earth.

4. The church invisible.

- a. Made up of true believers.
- b. Only God sees it.
- c. Defined by eternal and invisible factors:
 - 1) God’s secret election, and the internal work of the Holy Spirit.

5. The church visible.

- a. As Christians on earth see it.
- b. Includes those who profess faith in Christ, but also includes unbelievers.

6. Errors in the distinction between the visible and invisible church.

- a. Some think spirituality is mystical, so we don’t need a visible church.
- b. Some think we can be saved by keeping the ordinances of the visible church.
- c. Some use the distinction to doubt and judge others in the church.
- d. Some think there are two different churches.

7. Connections between visible and invisible church.

- a. Wilhelms á Brakel’s comparison to the body and soul.
- b. The invisible church is hidden within the visible church.
- c. The visible church has a duty to guard against serious error and sin.

Questions

1. What is the shorter definition and the longer definition of “the church”? Which definition does the Apostle Paul use when he talks about the church?

2. Describe the unity that exists between the church in heaven and the church on earth?

3. What is the church invisible? How is it related to church membership on earth? How does it relate to the church in heaven?

4. What are the two main eternal and invisible factors that define the church?

5. What is the visible church? How is it addressed in the New Testament epistles?

6. What are the two errors of some who misunderstand the visible and invisible church? How would you respond to each of them?

7. The visible church will always include some unbelievers, but we should not misuse the distinction. Please give some examples of misusing this distinction.

8. Are the church visible and the church invisible two different churches? How did the Reformed Divine, Wilhelmus á Brakel explain the connection between the two?

9. If the church invisible is revealed on earth in and through the church visible, how is it that the church invisible has been sometimes more and sometimes less visible? In what ways is she more visible at times?

III. The Church Universal and Local

1. The nature of the church is universal.
 - a. The Old Testament church was limited to Israel and a few foreigners who joined themselves to Israel.
 - b. The New Testament church is commissioned by Christ to make disciples of all nations.
2. The church is also local: “The church of God which is at Corinth”—1 Corinthians 1:2.
3. Two errors to avoid:
 - a. Parochialism—focusing too much on the local church, and forgetting the universal church of God in the world.
 - b. Expansionism—focusing too much on the universal church and neglecting the local gathering.

Questions:

1. Explain how the nature of the church is universal?
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2. How do the New Testament epistles refer to local churches? How is it that we can speak of the church as being wherever a community of God's people are gathered together in his name?

3. Why do we make a distinction between the universal church and the local church? How do they relate to each other?

4. What two errors must the churches avoid in regard to the universal church and the local church? Why?

IV. The Marks of the Church

1. The pure preaching of the Word of God.
2. The pure administration of the sacraments.
 - a. Baptism and the Lord's Supper.
 - b. The Roman Catholic Church added five other sacraments.
3. The exercise of church discipline.
4. Using these three marks, the true church is distinguished from a false church.

Questions:

1. Please list and explain each of the three marks of the true church.
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2. Why is it important to use care and good judgment when applying the marks of the church?

3. How do the marks of the true church help us to discern the standing of the Roman Catholic Church? Does she manifest the three marks?

V. Self-Reflection

Meditate again on 1 Corinthians 1, verse 2: “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.”

In this passage, can you see how the universal invisible church is seen within the visible local church? How does this lecture impact your understanding of your local church in relation to the faithful churches of Jesus Christ around the world?
