

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6

ECCLESIOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

10 Lectures



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Eschatology—The Doctrine of Last Things

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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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.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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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, decored [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 Jerusa-

lem” 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.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6 ~ Lecture 3

The Nature of the Church

Dear students, there are many different trees, as you know: oak tree, apple tree, pine tree, palm tree, etc. All these trees are different, 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. In this course, we want to think of the nature of the church. What do we mean by the nature of the church? What does the Bible say about the nature of the church?

The Twelve articles of Faith say, “I believe in the holy catholic church.” There are some challenges in explaining this particular part of the confession of the *Apostles’ Creed*. The first challenge is that this clause of the creed divides Christians. When you get to this clause of the creed, Roman Catholics and Protestants part ways as to what we mean when we say, “I believe in the holy catholic church.”

The Roman Catholics, when they profess this clause, mean that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true church, that it is holy because it produces saintly people, and is preserved from radical sin; it is catholic because it is worldwide in its spread; and it is the only place where the full faith is held in trust for all men. This is not what we want to profess when we say the *Apostles’ Creed* in the tradition of the Reformation. What do we mean when we say, “I believe in the holy catholic church”? We mean that we believe in the worldwide fellowship of believers and their children, whose Head is Jesus Christ. We believe that this worldwide fellowship is holy, because it’s consecrated to God. It’s set apart by his Spirit, even though it is imperfect in every manifestation. And we believe it is a “catholic” church because it embraces all true believers everywhere, apart from specific denominational affiliations. For Rome applies: Where the church is, there is Christ. But the Reformation applies the opposite: Where Christ is, is the church. In and through Christ, true believers are united in him, and with each other. And where the Word is preached and believed, Christ is gathering his church.

We confess that the church is holy, for the members of the church are made holy by the renewal of the Holy Spirit. The church is “catholic”, for the members of the church are gathered from among all nations and tongues. Like a shepherd gathers his scattered sheep, even so Jesus Christ gathers his elect from among all nations, renews them by his Spirit, and unites them to him-

self by a true and living faith, and to each other by brotherly love. When Jesus was told that his mother and relatives were looking for him, he said, “Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother and sister and mother”—Matthew 12, verses 48 through 50.

You can give short and long definitions describing the nature of the church. The church is the community of all true believers for all time. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* gives a beautiful definition: “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 shorter and the longer definition both understand the church to be made of all those who are truly saved. Ephesians 5, verse 25: “As Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” Paul uses the term “church” for all those whom Christ died to redeem. So that must not only include the true believers in the church of Ephesus, but all of God’s people, for all times, not only in the ages of the New testament, but also the age of the Old Testament.

We speak of “the catholic church,” but the word “catholic” does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but it means that we believe that the church is universal or international. God’s church of true believers is a worldwide church. Some of the church’s members are already in glory—this is the church triumphant. Others still fight the good fight of faith on earth—this is the church militant. But there is a holy unity between the church in heaven and the church on earth. The believers are one people called out of the world into a holy union with Christ. When we come together in the local congregation, we are united in Christ with all the saints in heaven and throughout the whole world, to worship God through the Spirit of Christ. “But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel”—Hebrews 12, verses 22–24. Later we want to go into this further when we think of the worship of the church. For the church triumphant worships God perfectly, while the church militant on earth still has many imperfections.

What is meant by the church being invisible? It does not mean that the members of the church are invisible like ghosts, or that the members come together to worship undercover in a phantom building. The church is invisible, in its true spiritual reality, in the fellowship of all genuine believers. The invisible church does not have a street address, GPS coordinates, or physical appearance. It is meant in the sense that only God can see who is truly saved. Surely, we cannot see the spiritual condition of people’s hearts. We do not know the inward man. We see who outwardly attend the church, and we can see outward marks of grace, as the fruit of the inward spiritual life. But we cannot examine what is in the heart. Only God knows the heart. This is what Paul says, “The Lord knoweth them that are his”—2 Timothy 2:19. We can easily be mistaken in our judgment, but God surely will not be mistaken.

Not everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord is known to him or saved by him—Matthew 7:21–23. Church membership is not defined by participating in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, for some who receive the sacraments are not in Christ. Think of Simon the sorcerer, whose heart was not right in the sight of God —Acts 8. Think of the people of Israel traveling in the desert. They were all under the cloud, all passed through the sea, they did all eat of the manna, and did all drink the

water from the rock, but with many of them, God was not well pleased—1 Corinthians, chapter 10.

We can say that the invisible church is the church as God sees it! In the days of the Reformation, Luther and Calvin used this argument over against the Roman Catholic teaching that the church is the one visible organization that descends from Peter and the other apostles through the bishop of Rome. The outward form, the organization of the Roman Catholic Church, was only a shell in the eyes of the Reformers, because it had departed from the true preaching of the gospel.

The church is invisible, because it is a people that worship in spirit and truth—John 4:20–24; a temple built with living, personal stones—1 Peter 2:5. The church is defined by eternal and invisible factors. God’s secret election and the internal work of the Holy Spirit are the two main factors of the invisible nature of the church. Of course, like we said, we can see the marks of election, and we can discern the fruit of the Spirit, but in essence, the church is invisible. The true church consists of the elect. The church is “a chosen generation”—1 Peter 2:9. Christ gave himself to redeem the elect long before any of them were born—Ephesians 4:5. Their names were “written in the book of life from the foundation of the world”—Revelation 17:8. The invisible church belongs to the triune God—to the Father and his eternal election; to the Son and his redeeming love; to the Holy Spirit and his regenerating work.

Invisible, but yet visible. The invisible church is the church as seen by God. The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it. In this sense, the visible church includes all who profess faith in Christ, and give evidence of their faith in their lives. When Paul writes his epistles, he writes to the visible church in Rome, in Corinth, in Ephesus, etc. Paul was certainly aware of the fact that all the people in these visible churches were not genuine believers. But Paul simply wrote to the entire church that met together in any one place. Therefore, we can say that the visible church is the group of people who come together each week to worship as a church and profess faith in Christ. The church becomes visible in its confession, in its offices, in the preaching of the gospel, in the operation of the sacraments, etc.

Some people think that true spirituality is so mystical that we really do not need the visible church, with its creeds, and confessions, and its forms of worship, so long as we follow what God says in our hearts. Other people put so much emphasis on the visible church, with its ordinances, that they think receiving Baptism, attending church, and taking the Lord’s Supper virtually guarantees their salvation, unless they do something really bad. Reformed Christianity, in contrast to these extremes, does not separate the life of the visible church and the invisible work of the Spirit, but emphasizes both as crucial to knowing and pleasing God.

The visible church in the world will always include some unbelievers. The Lord Jesus spoke of good and bad fish in the net—Matthew 13:48, and of the threshing floor with wheat and chaff—Matthew 3:12. The church father, Augustine, often used the Biblical example of the floor with wheat and chaff for the church in its visible existence. Jesus also warned, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?”—Matthew 7:15–16.

We should not misuse the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. This can easily occur when we begin to doubt one another, and to judge one another’s spiritual state before God. Calvin warned against this danger, for it will confuse the church. He said that we must make a “charitable judgment,” whereby we recognize as members of the church all who “by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us.” People cannot be excluded from the visible church, until by public sin they bring themselves under the discipline of the church. At the same time, the church cannot accept those as members

of the church, who by profession of life clearly show themselves to be outside of the true church of Christ.

Sometimes people find the distinction of visible and invisible church confusing. Are we talking about two different churches? By no means. Perhaps this analogy would help. An old Dutch divine, Wilhelmus à Brakel, compared it to the soul and body of man. We recognize that human beings have an invisible aspect, and a visible aspect to their lives. The soul is hidden with the body, but we do not divide the soul and body of a living man. We do not expect people to walk around as souls without bodies. Nor do we say that a body without a soul is really a man. It's just a corpse. In the same way, we recognize that the church has an invisible aspect and a visible aspect. The invisible church is hidden within the visible, but we do not divide them into two churches. The claim to be part of the invisible church, while having nothing to do with the visible church, is as impossible as spirits walking around without bodies, and almost as frightening. On the other hand, a church without a vital union with Christ by the Holy Spirit is not a true church. It is an institutional corpse. The visible church has a responsibility to exclude from its membership those who embrace serious error or sin, and refuse to repent.

In conclusion, we can say that the invisible church shows itself on earth in and through the visible church. We also have to remark that the church has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. This means that the true church passes through times of darkness, weakness, or persecution, when it is largely hidden. We think of Elijah crying out, "I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away"—1 Kings 19:10. The official church of Israel had given itself over to idolatry, yet God had preserved seven thousand faithful worshipers, a hundred of whom were hiding in a cave—1 Kings 19:18 and 18:4.

Let's think about universal and local. To the nature of the church, we can also add that the church is universal. The meaning of universal is that the visible church is worldwide, is not confined to one nation. Adam and Eve were the first members of the church. The church continued in the line of Seth. From the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God's visible church consisted of Israel and those few foreigners such as Rahab and Ruth, who were joined to Israel. The risen Christ commissioned his servants to make disciples of all nations—Matthew 28:19, and this they did by planting churches in many lands—Acts 14:23.

The New Testament teaches us that a house church is called "the church"—Romans 16:5—"Likewise greet the church that is in their house." The church in an entire city is also called "the church" in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 2: "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth." The church in a region is referred to as "the church"—Acts 9:31—"Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria." Some translations have the plural "churches" but the singular reading "'the church'" is far preferable, as can be found in some manuscripts. Finally, the church throughout the entire world can be referred to as "the church"—Ephesians 5, verse 25, "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it."

We may conclude that the group of God's people, considered at any level, from local to universal, may rightly be called "the church." We should not make the mistake that only a local meeting of believers in a house, or any other building, or outside in the open can be called "the church". The nature of the church is universal. Wherever a community of God's people are gathered together in his name, on local or city level, on country or universal level, we can rightly speak of "the church".

Why do we speak of the universal church and the local church? The matter implies more than you think at first sight. We learn from the Apostle Paul that we should have a loving heart for the local church, and for the universal church. Listen to what he says at the opening of the first letter

to the Corinthians. He mentions both the local and the universal church, “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.” First he makes mention of the church universal, “the church of God.” Then he mentions the local church, “which is at Corinth.” This is a balanced presentation of the church of God.

It reminds us that whenever we think of the church, we must avoid two errors:

(1) Parochialism—focusing too much on the local church, one can forget the larger work of God in the world. In this, the local church blocks out a vision of the larger perspective of the universal church and the growth of God’s kingdom.

(2) And in the second place, Expansionism—focusing too much on the universal church, one can neglect the importance of the local gathering. In this, the kingdom of God engulfs the church.

Corrective to both of these extremes, we can see in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 2 how the local and universal church intersect. In the coherence between local and universal, there is great potential for fruitful reflection. In conclusion, you see that the universal church is full of unique local churches, and that local churches are a part of the larger body of the universal church.

Let’s think of the marks of the church. In addition to the marks we have mentioned, which refer to the essence of the church, its revelation is characterized by special marks. *The Belgic Confession of Faith*, article 29, mentions three marks, by which the church in its revelation is characterized. First, if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached in it. Secondly, if the pure administration of the sacraments, as instructed by Christ, is maintained by it. And thirdly, if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin. By these marks, the true church can be distinguished from the false. These marks are important because even sects, which are in the world, assume to themselves the name of the church.

To make the distinction between true and false, we must use these marks as a touchstone. But we should also be careful in our judgment. Otherwise we reject the church for her defects as though she were a false church. As the sanctification of God’s children is imperfect in this life, so there remain many defects in the visible church, especially in times of decline. Even in the wicked days of Elijah, the church of God remained in Israel, as also at the times of Christ sojourning on earth. Church history shows us that the church has had times of remarkable growth, and also of deep decline, yet it remained the church of God. Because in times of decline, the true church will seek for a work of restoration and ongoing reformation. Her defects do not make her a false church, for a false church will make no efforts in attempting a reformation

In the days of the Reformation, Calvin and Luther intended to reform the church. They did not intend to establish a new church. No, they wanted to return to the Word of God, and called the church to loose itself from the abominable Romish idolatry. Instead of listening to this call for reformation, the Church of Rome continued practicing false doctrine. She even called on the worldly authorities to tyrannize and destroy all those who profess the truth of the Reformation. When we use the test of the three marks, we must honestly say that the Church of Rome is a false church. This does not exclude the possibility that Romish people can be converted.

Let’s now look closer at the marks of the true church. First one, the pure preaching of the Word of God. The church is born of the Word of God, as out of living seed—James 1:18 and 1 Peter 1:23, and in its manifestation, it is built upon God’s holy testimony. “And are 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”—Ephesians 2, verses 20 and 21. Of the church in Jerusalem it is written, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’

doctrine”—Acts 2:42. Because of the purity of the doctrine out of which it lives, the church is called “the pillar and ground of the truth”—1 Timothy 3:15. She is distinguished from the false church by pure preaching: “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed”—2 John 1:9–10.

Second, the pure administration of the sacraments. This second mark is closely related to the pure preaching of the gospel. The Word of God comes in the first place. The preaching of the gospel should have dominion in the church. The sacraments are a visible gospel, added to the Word of God. With the sacraments, we of course mean the sacraments as instituted by Christ—Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The Church of Rome added five other sacraments, namely: penance, confirmation, ordination of priest, extreme unction, and marriage.

Third mark, the exercise of church discipline. Word and sacraments cannot be kept pure, unless discipline is maintained through the right use of the keys that Christ has given his church. In the next lessons, we will make a more thorough study of the keys of the kingdom. By the three marks mentioned, Word, sacraments and discipline, the true church is known and is distinguished from a false church. Whatever the true church may experience—decay, persecution, etc.—she shall always be known by them, because the Lord shall be with her, “even unto the end of the world”—Matthew 28, verse 20.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6 ~ Lecture 4

The Authority of the Church

Dear students, in this module, we want to study about the authority of the church. Does the church of God have authority? Is there any power of the church? If we compare powerful governments of the world, and other business and educational organizations that have great influence, and then consider our local churches, or even our denominational churches, the church may seem weak and ineffective. When we think of the rapid growth of evil in society, we may wonder if the church has power to make any changes at all. In former days, the church had great influence. Think of the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, the Church of England in previous centuries, and the days of the Reformation of John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland. Also in New England, in the days of the pilgrim fathers, the church had great influence in civil legislation and lawmaking. The power or authority of the church is not man-given, but God-given. In this lecture, we want to study the spiritual authority of the church. You may say that the power of the church is its God-given authority to carry on spiritual warfare, proclaim the gospel, and exercise church discipline.

All authority is rooted in God, who is the author of all that is. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God”—Romans 13, verse 1. The model of the power of the church is definitely not political, sociological, or structural, but one of what the Bible calls “koinonia”—fellowship or communion of loving service in the truth of Christ. Whatever authority the church possesses is always and only for the sake of promoting this koinonia. This fellowship or communion is in Christ and through him, with all the saints.

Christ, as the King of kings and the Lord of lords, has the royal position in the church. Psalm 2, verse 6 says, that the Lord is King of Zion. The living Christ performs a royal work. He rules by his Word and Spirit. He gives his church his authoritative Word. By grace, he also brings sinners, as members of his church, into submission to that Word. *The Heidelberg Catechism* confesses this, in Lord’s Day 48, question 123, about the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come means rule us so by thy Word and Spirit, that we may submit ourselves more and more to thee.” Christ also rules with his Word and Spirit in his church through his appointed office-bearers. The church receives its power from Christ through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the first principle of the power of the church is that the power of the church is a heavenly and a spiritual power. Authority and power which are detached from the holiness of Jesus Christ are not Christian authority. When churches seek to enforce power through exploitation, manipulation, or unfair competition, they place themselves above the grace of the Holy Spirit, and so are not real Christian authority and power.

The power of the church is related to the nature of the church. It comes into being by God’s

grace, calling sinners to conversion. Authority can only be exercised in ways which respect this character of the church. Therefore, authority and power always exists in the service of the kingdom of God. This is for his glory, and the salvation of sinners. So the church in itself is not the goal of its authority. It has to be used to promote and facilitate the calling of the church.

The authority of the church is not on the shoulders of a single church leader, preacher, or believer. It belongs to the church as the body of Christ. God delegates his authority to his church through the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the living Head of his church. In the next lecture, we will see how this is worked out in practice, through the offices in the church. For now, we stress that the authority of the church is spiritual, and has to be used for God's glory and the extension of God's kingdom.

What are the principal forms of power in the church? Different answers are given to this question. Some may answer that the power of the church is exercised by the pope, the bishops, councils, synods, ministers, elders, theological societies, etc. Or you can point out that the church exercises power by teaching the Bible and the doctrine of the Bible, giving Christian counseling, raising and spending money, erecting church buildings, assigning personnel, and so forth.

How is power acquired in the church? Some churches will say that power is acquired by appointment. Others will say it's by election, ordination, and installation. Still others may answer that power in the church comes spontaneously through a special gift of the Holy Spirit. Some may also point to character or gifts of leadership.

How is power exercised? Some will answer that the power of the church is exercised through the preaching of the gospel, and the administration of the sacraments. Others will stress the work of missions and evangelization. The answer could also be given that the church exercises power through admonition and measures of church discipline.

How is power evaluated? This also depends. Some churches make power accountable to others like a consistory or presbytery, a classis or a synod. Papal power is a power without accountability.

What are the pitfalls of power and or its typical abuses? It is sad to say, but abuse of power also occurs in the church. It will not be difficult to draw up a list of church abuse. Therefore, a system of church government is needed to guarantee checks and balances.

Five principles for the authority of the church can be given:

1. God is the only Lawgiver—James 4:12.
2. One may neither add nor subtract from Scripture—Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18–19.
3. The Lord Jesus rejects human commandments and institutions—Matthew 15:9.
4. It is the calling of ministers to teach all that the Lord has commanded them in his Word—Matthew 28:19–20.
5. Every member must be watchful against becoming a servant of men, not allowing himself to be brought under the dominion of anyone—Galatians 5:1; 1 Corinthians 7:23.

Let's now think of the keys of the kingdom. The expression "the keys of the kingdom" only occurs once in the Bible, in Matthew 16, verse 19: "And I will give unto thee 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." Some other portions of Scripture are also useful to be mentioned. We read in Revelation 3 verse 7, that the Lord Jesus is the only one who has authority in the church to open and to close: "He that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth." This authority is also one of administration, and is used as such upon the command and on behalf of the Lord Jesus. "And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder"—Isaiah 22, verse 22.

We use keys to open and close doors. The Lord Jesus uses the example of a key for the authority to preach the gospel of Christ, and thus to open the door of the kingdom of heaven and allow people to enter. Peter used this authority of preaching the gospel at Pentecost. But the other apostles also were given the authority in a primary sense, for they were also the writers of the Gospels of the New Testament. The ministers of the Word have the key in a secondary sense, for they are called by God and ordained by the church to proclaim the gospel. A faithful preacher is called to use the Word key to open and to shut the door of God's kingdom. This does not mean that the preacher of the Word has the right to pass judgment upon each of his hearers, nor tell them personally who shall and who shall not be saved. But in the preaching of God's testimony, he must show for whom the heavenly kingdom is opened and for whom it is shut. Thus the church has power either to include or exclude from the church.

It is beautifully stated in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, question and answer 84: "How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel?" Then the answer: "According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed, when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life, and in the life to come." The Holy Spirit gives testimony to this faithful preaching. He shall exclude those whom God's Word excludes, but he will also open the kingdom of heaven to all that are included by the Word.

In addition to the Word key, there is also another key. The Lord Jesus speaks, in Matthew 16, verse 19, in plural, "keys". The second key is the authority to exercise discipline within the church. Jesus completes his speaking of the keys with a statement about "binding" and "loosing". This means placing under church discipline, and releasing from church discipline. See also Matthew 18, verse 17. This binding and loosing also fits in the context of Matthew 16. After promising to build his church—verse 18—Jesus gives the keys to Peter and the other disciples. In Matthew 18, verse 17, we read that this authority was given to the church as a whole. The authority, with respects to church discipline, is not unlimited. It will only be effective against true sin—sin as defined in God's Word, and discovered by God's holy law. The authority to define what's right and wrong belongs to God alone. The church can only declare and teach what God has already commanded in his Word. Therefore the discipline key must be used in accordance with the standards of Scripture.

Let us now also listen to the teaching of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, question and answer 85, about this second key: "How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?" And the answer: "According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ. They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment." Later in this course, we will go deeper into the purpose and procedures of church discipline. For now, we have seen that the use of both keys belongs to the authority of the church given unto her by Jesus himself.

Let's now think of the relationship between the church and the state. The use of the keys of the kingdom has to do with the authority the church has in her own circle. But how does the authority

of the church relate to the authority of the government of state? Does the church have the right to use physical force, like weapons and armies, to carry out its mission? And on the other hand, does a civil government have the right to rule within the church? What does the Bible say of the relationship between the church and the civil magistrates? Scripture indicates that the church should never carry the sword for its purpose in the new covenant age. This was a dreadful mistake made in the Crusades, when the church sponsored armies to reclaim the land of Israel.

Some examples from Scripture. The Lord Jesus said, when he stood before Pontius Pilate, a Roman ruler—John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.” The church has the power of keys, not the power of the sword to exercise law and order. The church is called to fight a spiritual battle with the sword of the Word of God, like the Apostle Paul says, “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal”—are not worldly—2 Corinthians 10:4. When the Samaritan village would not receive Jesus, James and John wanted to ask for fire from heaven, but Jesus rebuked them for even making that suggestion, in Luke chapter 9. Jesus also clearly respected the civil government, even the Roman emperor: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s”—Matthew 22:21.

God gave the civil government the right of the sword—Roman 13, verses 1–7. The authorities are called to govern according to the two tables of the law. This means that they not only have to protect the weak, take care of the needy, and punish robbers and murderers, but also to protect the true church of God, and even to promote true religion, in serving the Lord and obeying God’s commandments. Civil authorities should be the nursing fathers and the nursing mothers of the church, like in the example of the godly kings of Israel. God holds all societies and cultures responsible for obeying his moral standards, and often in the Old Testament, God’s prophets pronounced judgment not only upon the people of Israel, but also upon immoral pagan societies, even though they did not have his written law—Deuteronomy 9:5; Ezekiel 25–32, Jonah, etc. Even civil governments are sent by God “to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right”—1 Peter 2, verse 14.

The authority relationship between church and state is often explained with the Latin words “in sacris” and “circa sacra”. This means that the magistrates do not have power in sacred things but they may have power with regard to sacred things. In other words, not power in the church, but power about the church. Churches of the Reformation have always explained this as the calling of the government to provide for and promote true religion.

It’s evident that the Reformation speaks of such a state government as like a Christian, making a profession of the true religion. For the advancement and the promotion of true religion can only be done by a Christian government. The ideal of a Christian church and a Christian government under the sole headship of Christ wasn’t even reached in Geneva by Calvin, or in New England by the Puritans. They may have come close to the Biblical principles, but it didn’t last.

These limitations between church and state are different from the viewpoint of the Roman Catholic Church. In ages past, the church of Rome had sometimes greater authority than the civil government. Also the Church of England has a narrow relationship with the Queen and parliament. Looking to Muslim countries today, and many Hindu and Buddhist countries, you see examples of state-forced religion. It is a great blessing of the Lord to live in a country where freedom of religion is granted. We should continue to pray for all those who experience affliction and persecution in the name of Jesus Christ. The Christian faith is able to stand on its own feet and compete in the

present world in any society and in any culture, even when the freedom to profess the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is prohibited, because Jesus is the supreme Head and authority of his church, and he gives his strength in our weakness.

The church has the duty to pray for kings and all that are in authority—1 Timothy 2:1–2, to honour their persons, to pay taxes, and to yield them a conscientious subjection and obedience in all their lawful commands. In short, to follow the example of Christ. The church also has the duty to attempt to bring positive moral influence on government and society. It is right for the church to speak out against developments that are inconsistent with Biblical standards of morality.

How does the church then relate to the world? God’s authority is no longer recognized and obeyed, since our fall in Adam—Genesis chapter 3. The devil, the world, and men’s sinful flesh are the enemies fighting against God’s authority. The devil is a murderer from the beginning, who from the moment the promise of the seed of the woman was given—Genesis 3:15, has with evil hatred opposed it and all those who believe in it. He does all in his power to torment them, and if it were possible, to prevent them from coming to Christ. And if they have come, he strives to draw them away from him, thereby obscuring the glory of the church. Against this, the church puts itself in order of battle, battling these enemies with spiritual weapons, as described in Ephesians 6, verses 11–18.

The world uses physical weapons against the church, inflicts damage to property, scorns and taunts the reputation of the godly, and uses fire and sword against them. Behind all this, stands Satan, God’s opponent and the adversary of God’s church. The enemies will do everything to draw believers away from the faith and the practice of godliness.

The church seeks the salvation of the world. To this end, the church does not use physical weapons, which as a church she does not even possess. Rather she uses the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, the totality of her confession, a sanctified life, a vigorous protection of the truth, and a steadfast patience to endure everything for Christ’s sake. Like Paul says to Timothy, “Fight the good fight of faith”—1 Timothy 6:12.

In this spiritual warfare, the church is called to loving service. The church is not to stand above the world, but kneel down to serve in the midst of the miseries of this world—Galatians 6:10. The church is to serve even its enemies—Luke 6:33–35. The church is to love its neighbors with true, self-denying love, by the grace of Christ—Luke 10:29–37. The church is called then to be involved in ministering help to those in need, in the local community, the land, and internationally.

Careful involvement is also needed. While the church is not of the world, the church is still in the world, and to be engaged in the world. The church is part of society, and through involvement in society, it is to seek its good—Matthew 5, verse 13: “Ye are the salt of the earth.” The church has a restraining effect on sin in the workplace, in school, society, and government. We have to display the blessedness of belonging to the Lord, the loveliness of God’s laws, the wonder of his grace, the richness of his provision, the holiness of his word. The commission of Christ as the King and the Head of the church is also important.

We have considered the authority of the church. Now, as we come to the close of this topic, we need to make the circle round. I mean that we have to close where we began. All the authority the church has comes from Christ, like we read in Matthew 28, verses 18 through 20: “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6 ~ Lecture 5

The Government of the Church

Dear students, in this module, we want to study Church Government. Throughout his entire ministry, the Apostle Paul, was careful to institute proper organization in the churches he established. He saw the need for gospel order. This included the appointment of elders and deacons, which was an important factor in the spiritual growth of the new converts. It was also a safeguard against error and fanaticism, and promoted unity among the believers. In place after place, Paul diligently instructed and aided the churches in the establishment of proper order. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “Let all things be done decently and in order”—1 Corinthians 14, verse 40. In fact, Paul thought organization was so important, that a short time after he had been stoned in Lystra, he returned to organize the churches. He saw that gospel order, which included the appointment of elders and deacons, was an important factor in the spiritual growth of the new converts. It was also a safeguard against error and fanaticism, and promoted unity among the believers. In place after place, Paul diligently instructed and aided churches in the establishment of proper order. Regarding the work in Crete, Paul instructed Titus to “set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee”—Titus 1, verse 5. Inspiration shows that the appointment of elders and deacons was a fundamental element of the gospel order that Paul established in the churches. A group of believers that simply gathers together for meetings with no officers selected as elders and deacons, is not a properly organized church.

In this lecture, we will study the manner in which a church needs to be properly organized. What are the offices in the church? Which model of church organization is most Biblical? How does the authority of Christ relate to the authority of office-bearers in the church? Important questions like these require our attention.

There are different types of church government. Let us first look at different types of church government. Today we have many different forms of church government. The Roman Catholic Church has a worldwide government under the authority of the Pope. Episcopalian churches, like the Church of England, and Methodist churches have bishops with regional authority, and archbishops with national authority. Presbyterian churches grant regional authority to presbyteries or consistories, and national authority to general assemblies or synods. On the other hand, Baptist churches and many other independent churches have no final governing authority beyond the local congregation, and affiliation with other churches is on a voluntary basis. Looking at local churches, you also see many differences. Baptists often have a single pastor with a board of deacons, but some have a board of elders as well. Presbyterians have a board of elders, and Episcopalians have a vestry.

Let us list the different systems in a systematic way. Forms of church government can be

broken down into three large categories, which are termed Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Congregational. Let's mention the main features of these different forms.

The Episcopalian forms have a government by church officers, known as, the priesthood. The final authority for decision making is outside the local church. The Presbyterian forms have a government by elders, who have authority over their local churches. Some may also have authority through the presbytery, as delegates of the general assembly over churches in a region, and the denomination as a whole. The Congregational forms of church government have final governing authority resting with the members of the local congregation, although various degrees of self-rule are given to pastors, elders, preachers, boards and types of denominational affiliation.

Let's examine each of these forms of church government. In the first place, Episcopalian. Episcopalians hold that the authority in the church has been entrusted by Christ to an independent order of bishops, as the successors of the apostles. The community of believers has no share in the government of the church. Organizationally, you can say that the authority is top-down. The archbishop has authority over many bishops. They in turn have authority over a "diocese"—this is a church under the authority of a bishop. The officer in charge of a local church is a "rector", or a "vicar", who is the assistant of the rector. Archbishops, bishops and rectors are all priests. They have been ordained in this office according to rules of the episcopalian priesthood.

The present Roman Catholic system is closely related to the Episcopalian form. It recognizes not only successors of the apostles in the bishops, but also a successor of Peter, who has the primacy among the apostles. The Pope is honored as the infallible head of the church. As the representative of Christ, he has the right to determine and regulate the doctrine, the worship, and the government of the church.

The argument for the system of the Episcopalians is not found in the New Testament, but that it is a natural outgrowth of the development of the church which began in the New Testament. Another argument is that this system is not forbidden by the New Testament. So they see episcopacy spring from the church itself in a natural way. The present priesthood stands in line of succession. The apostles are the first link of the chain. And from generation to generation of priests, the authority is passed on. Often they refer to the New Testament passages in which the term "episkopos" is used. This Greek word can be translated as "overseer" or "bishop". But this argument is weak, because the word "episkopos" means quite clearly to be another term for elders in New Testament uses. When Paul has called to him the elders of the church at Ephesus, he says to them, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers (episkopos), to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood"—Acts 20, verse 28. So Paul quite readily refers to these elders as overseers or bishops. It is recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament, the same officer in the church is called indifferently "bishop" (episkopos) and "elder" (presbyteros). We should also remember the argument that Jesus did not leave one of his disciples with superior authority over the others. Although some of them, like James and Peter and later Paul, had prominence among the group, but they did not have greater authority than others. Peter was even rebuked by Paul in Antioch—Galatians 2, verse 11.

We see the wisdom of Christ in guarding his church against the abuse of power. Just as Jesus appointed a plurality of apostles to have ultimate authority in the early church, so the apostles always appointed a plurality of elders in every church, never leaving only one with governing authority. We also find no reference in the New Testament for a physical continuity of ordination to establish a chain of successors of the apostles. For example, in Acts 13, verse 3, it was not the

Jerusalem apostles who ordained Paul and Barnabas, but people in the church at Antioch who laid hands on them and sent them out. And Timothy was ordained by a council of elders—1 Timothy 4, verse 14.

In conclusion, we must say that the Episcopalian government of the church is a deviation from New Testament standards, and a result of human argumentation, because the apostles established a system of elected local elders from the beginning of the New Testament.

Let's look at the Presbyterian system. The Presbyterian system is based on the Biblical principle of eldership. The name of the system is derived from the presbyter (elder) or presbytery (assembly of elders). In the Reformed system of church government, the body of elders plays an important role. The general principles are found in Scripture, while many of the details are determined by human wisdom and experience.

The elders must be called by Christ internally, like we read in 1 Timothy 3, verse 1: "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." And 1 Peter 5, verse 2 says, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind." When the Lord calls one to serve the church as an elder, he will give you a desire, and he will make you willing! Besides the internal call, there is the need for the external call through God's church: "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee"—Titus 1, verse 5. Rather than a single office-bearer (minister or elder), a plurality of elders should govern the church. The apostles ordained elders in each local church—Acts 14:23. From Miletus, Paul "sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church"—Acts 20:17.

So the authority to govern in the Presbyterian system, is not vested on any one person, but is committed by the Lord, through the church, to the elders jointly. Christ's desire to rule through a plurality of elders is an expression of his wisdom and goodness. The correlate is that members are to submit to the yoke of Christ, and to the lawful government of the church: "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"—Hebrews 13, verse 17.

Let's focus on some principles, and focus more on the fundamental principles of the Reformed or Presbyterian system of church government. In the first place, Christ is the Head of the church and the source of all its authority. Christ is the Head of the church in a twofold sense. He is the Head of the church in an organic sense. The church is the body to which he stands in vital and organic relationship. Head and body are closely related. Our body cannot function without the head, and the head cannot function without the body. This close relationship resembles the precious truth of Christ, as the Head of his church. Without him, we can do nothing. Christ fills the body of his church with life and controls by his Spirit.

Many texts speak of this close relationship. Ephesians 1, verse 10 and 22, "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him;" and, "And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church." Also, Colossians 1, verse 18: "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."

He is also the head of the church in the sense that he is its King, who has authority and rule over it—1 Corinthians 12, verse 5: "And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord." Ephesians 4, verses 4 and 5, and 11 and 12: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are

called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism...and he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”

In this capacity Christ established the church, made provision for its ordinances, instituted its offices, and clothed its officers with authority, and is ever present in the church, speaking and acting through its officers. It may be stated that the headship of Christ is the heart of the Reformed or Presbyterian system. This is also related to the three offices in the church, the pastors or ministers of the Word, the elders, and the deacons. We will study that in the next session.

In the second place, Christ exercises his authority by means of the Word. Christ rules his church by the Spirit, and by the Word of God. God gave us his precious Word as the standard for authority in the church. Not the word of a human being, but the Word of the living God is the law of rule for the church. All believers are unconditionally bound to obey the Word of God. It is the Word of the King of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ, that must be obeyed by all. Therefore all those who rule in the church must submit to the control of his Word.

In the third place, Christ, as King, endowed his church with power. Christ gives the power to rule the church. From him is the strength that is necessary for carrying on the work which he entrusted to do. All believers have their gracious share of the power of Christ through the saving work of the Holy Spirit, but Christ bestows a special measure of it upon the officers of his church. They are not servants of the people in the first place, but servants of Christ! Their authority is not delegated to them by the members of the church, but is from Christ, the Head of the church.

In the fourth place, the ruling power resides primarily in the local church. Local consistories are in charge of the congregation. From local consistories, authority can be passed on to classes and synods. Every local church has a certain measure of autonomy or independence, but this is naturally restricted in various ways, as soon as it is affiliated with other local churches. The interest of local churches should always come first. In the second place, there is the interest of the church in general as a denomination.

Fifthly, the broader power of the church. The Presbyterian system makes it possible for the primary authority to stay with the local church, and that assemblies, classis, and synods, can function as broader power of the church. Delegates of local congregations gathering together makes the bond between the congregations visible and enables them to function. A Scriptural precedent for such gatherings is in Acts chapter 15, which has been called the most important meeting ever held in the history of Christianity. In this system, all agree that the authority of the broader assembly does not rob the local congregation of its authority. Classical and synodical gatherings may only function regarding ecclesiastical matters which cannot be resolved on the local level, in an ecclesiastical manner, according to an agreed order.

There are two basic views about the authority of assemblies in Reformed church governance. Some say they have inherent authority, as an ecclesiastical gathering of office-bearers. Others say they have authority, by virtue of their delegation from the churches. The decisions of a synodical body are binding, inasmuch as they are made in accordance with the covenanted order, called Church Order, by which the member churches have bound themselves, and are to be submitted to, as long as they are not demonstrated to be—not merely felt to be—contrary to the precepts, principles, or precedents of Scripture by the due process of appeal.

In the sixth place, theological bases for federative unity. The Presbyterian system has an eye for the unity of the church, through an affiliation of local churches, in a regional and national denomination, organized in classis and synods. Three strong arguments can be seen from Scripture

to organize the church in this manner:

1. Christological—The church is one in Christ, and therefore should show its oneness by bonding together. The unity of John chapter 17 is a spiritual unity that should show itself visibly so that the world may see it. This oneness of the church does not fit with independency.

2. Pneumatological—The Holy Spirit gives gifts to each member of the church—Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, 12, 14–26, to be used for the good of others—1 Corinthians 14:19. The Spirit’s gifts are not to promote self-sufficiency, but mutual dependency, not only within the local congregation, but also among congregations. These gifts include the governance and ministry in the church. This mutual dependence should then function in every aspect of church life, including church government.

3. Federal—A federative bond is more than simply formal and administrative. It is rooted in the one covenant of grace. Because of God’s covenant, churches are to seek each other out to support and serve each other, as a way of expressing oneness of faith that rises above local situations.

In conclusion, we can express that the Reformed system seeks to discern and apply the principles of church government in Scripture. In doing so, they maintain both the sole headship of Christ in the church, the office of all believers, and the institution of ecclesiastical offices through which Christ works in the church. They avoid the tyranny of the whims of the members, and the tyranny of the individual leader. They recognize both the autonomy of the local congregation, and the importance of having a federative bond with other congregations. This method of church government facilitates the edification of the church, and safeguards against many ills.

The third system, Congregational—the last, and the third type of organizing the authority in the church is called the Congregational type. This is also called the system of Independency. In this system, each local church or congregation is regarded as a complete church, independent of every other. The governing power rests exclusively with the members of the church. Officers have to function according to the authority of the general church meeting. The power they have is not other than that which is delegated to them by the members of the church.

There are some variations on this type of Independent church government. Let’s just mention the different varieties, such as, a single elder or single pastor has the authority, or plural elders govern the local church, or a corporate board rules the church, etc. Some churches, particularly very new churches with a charismatic background, or extreme pietistic tendencies, function as a church with no government but the Holy Spirit. In this case, the church would deny that any form of government is needed, it would depend on all the members of the congregation being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in their own lives, and decisions would generally be made by consensus. This form of government never lasts very long. Not only is it unfaithful to the New Testament pattern of designated elders with governing authority in the church, but it is also subject to much abuse, because subjective feelings rather than wisdom and reason prevail in the decision-making process.

Some final conclusions. It must be clear that the form of church government adopted by a church is not a major point of doctrine. Through the ages, Christians have lived comfortably and ministered very effectively within several different kinds of systems. In practice, we see that different types of church government systems seem to work fairly well. Nevertheless, a church can be more pure or less pure in the point of church government. We believe that the Presbyterian or Reformed system comes closest to the principles of church government found in Scripture.

The Reformed confessions have stressed that church government must be based on Scripture. *The Belgic Confession of Faith*, article 30 says, “We believe that this true church ought to be

governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word;" and article 32: "We also believe that although it is useful and good for those who govern the churches to establish and set up a certain order among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, they ought always to guard against deviating from what Christ, our only Master, has ordained for us." Reformed theology stresses all church government must be based on Biblical principles, while recognizing specific methods and procedures may vary depending on time, place, and culture.

This lecture on church government brings us to the following topic about the Offices in the Church. You are kindly invited to follow this next lecture. May God bless you.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6 ~ Lecture 6 **Church Offices**

Dear students, in this module, we want to study Church Offices. In the beginning, Jesus had twelve disciples. At the day of Pentecost, we read about one hundred and twenty followers of Jesus being together in unity and prayer. That was the beginning of the New Testament church. From Jerusalem, they went out and established churches first among the Jews, and later among the Greeks and the Romans. There was a rapid growth through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. In the beginning, the twelve apostles did all the leadership work in the church. But then, in Acts 6, we read about problems! Yes, the Bible shows us that also the growing church in Jerusalem, under the leadership of the apostles, had problems.

The apostles saw the need for helpers in the church: “Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business”—Acts 6:3. They chose seven men who were full of faith and the Holy Spirit. So to keep things organized in the church, the apostles prayed for helpers, and the Lord provided men to serve the church beside the apostles. They wanted all things to be done in order, and that no one was left out. The men that were chosen were the first deacons of the church. When you continue to read in the book of Acts, you see that a pattern is set for appointing elders and deacons in the church. In this lecture, we want to further study the offices in the church. In specific, we study the special offices in the church. That makes us to think about pastors, elders, and deacons. These special offices are to be distinguished from what is called “the priesthood of all believers.” All true believers are united with Christ, and share in his anointing to be a Prophet, Priest and King. Just one text among the many that can serve here as a proof is 1 Peter 2:9—“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

Yet, certain members, by grace, have special gifts and receive a special calling to serve the church in the way of official ordination as office bearers. Thinking of the special offices in the church—pastors, elders and deacons—we believe that the Bible teaches us that these offices are exclusively open for male members. This viewpoint is generally stated in 1 Corinthians 11, verse 3—“I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” This male headship has implications for how the church functions as well. Already in the Old Testament, God appointed men as prophets, priests, and kings, though in extreme circumstances, there are rare exceptions such as Huldah and Deborah. This is continued in the New Testament, where all the apostles were men. The qualifications for elders and deacons include that they be the “husband of one wife” presupposing they are men.

Where should the study of offices in the church begin? The book of Acts gives beautiful in-

struction. But we need to make the start really from the beginning. The offices in the church have to do with two key figures in the Bible—Adam and Christ. Adam was God’s image-bearer, who was appointed by God to a position of responsibility. In other words, he was God’s office-bearer. God appointed him to rule as king over creation under God. Psalm 8, verses 5–6: “Thou hast...crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands.” He was to be a means through which God exercised his kingship in the earth. God also appointed Adam to be a prophet, to know Him and speak His word in His creation. For example, Adam was to name all the animals. In that activity, God, who knew exactly what each animal was, used Adam as a prophet to give to each its fitting name. God also appointed Adam to be a priest, to offer himself as a sacrifice of perfect consecration to God, delighting in holiness. We could say Adam was God’s office-bearer in royal righteousness, in prophetic knowledge, and priestly holiness.

Adam fell. He forsook the duties of his office and disqualified himself from having that office. No longer was he a king under God, but a rebel against God! No longer was he a prophet to proclaim His praises, but became a child of the father of lies. No longer was he consecrated to God, but was so defiled with sin that he ran and hid himself in the bushes when the Holy Creator came. God lost his office-bearer. When Adam fell, God did not do away with mankind. He still appointed men as office-bearers including prophets, priests, and kings. God set these apart for their respective offices through anointing. This act pointed to the filling of the Holy Spirit, who equips to the task. Yet all these office-bearers remained deficient. They pointed to the one great Office-Bearer to come! He would not be an anointed one, but “the” Christ—the only One who was filled with a perfect holiness, righteousness and knowledge; the One who honored God and perfectly did His will; the only One who would be able to restore fallen sinners back to God.

Jesus’ official title, “Christ,” reveals he is the anointed office-bearer. Isaiah 61 contains the prophetic words: “The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek...to proclaim liberty to the captives...to comfort all that mourn.” After reading this passage in Nazareth, Jesus could say: “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears”—Luke 4, verse 21. All these three aspects of his mediatorial office work harmoniously together in the salvation, preservation, and glorification of his church. Christ is the supreme office-bearer, but how does he relate as such to the offices in the church?

They are appointed by Christ. Christ directly appointed office-bearers. The first were the apostles. He chose twelve disciples, appointed them as apostles, and equipped them with his Spirit. He gave them authority and commissioned them. The apostles were unique office-bearers in the church, because Christ used them to lay the foundation of the New Testament church. The apostles were office-bearers in four special ways. Jesus appointed them by special commission. They were, in a special sense, “apostolic”—directly “chosen” by Christ and “sent out” by him. We read in John 20, verse 21: “Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.”

Jesus appointed them as special witnesses. They had walked with Christ. They also were eye witnesses of the risen Christ. After Pentecost, Paul also was included among these apostolic witnesses of the risen Lord. Think of 1 Corinthians 9, and 15. Jesus appointed them with special authority. They received special inspiration of the Holy Spirit to speak and write God’s holy Word. And to verify their authority as messengers of the Lord, they were enabled to do miraculous “signs and wonders,” as confirming signs of an apostle—2 Corinthians 12, verse 12. Jesus appointed them for a special task. The apostles were specially qualified, so that they could lay the foundation of apostolic teaching for the church of all ages. So we must understand that Jesus called the

apostles for special purposes. On the other hand, the calling of the apostles shows us the Biblical pattern of the calling by the Lord for special offices in the church.

Other special offices in the New Testament. Well, the New Testament also speaks of other special offices in the church. During the initial growth and spread of the church, it pleased the Lord to use special gifts and functions in the church, like Ephesians 4, verse 11 records: “He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.” Special gifts characterized the functions of some of the New Testament prophets and evangelists. They were closely associated with the signs of the ministry of the apostles. It is questionable whether these were distinct offices. Special measures of these gifts may have been manifested in association with the ministry of the apostles.

Some exceptional prophets mentioned in the New Testament were especially gifted by the Holy Spirit to speak revelations from God, even predicting future events. These special gifts of prophesying were used by the Holy Spirit for the edification, admonition, encouragement, and instruction of believers. God gave these special gifts in the beginning of the New Testament period for the establishment of the church. Besides prophets, there were also some evangelists, such as Philip, and Mark, and Timothy, and Titus. These men are recognized as having a special function as assistants of the apostles, but their labors, including preaching, baptizing, ordaining elders, and exercising discipline, did not differ much from ordained missionaries of post-apostolic times. And thus the special character of this office is still debated.

What are the characteristics of an ecclesiastical office? And what is the distinct position of office-bearers in relation to the church? Scripture distinguishes between the office-bearers and the body. Like we saw in Ephesians 4. Scripture speaks of apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers in distinction from the saints. In the letter to the Philippians 1, verse 1, Paul addresses his epistle to “all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” The elders and deacons are not just especially-gifted saints, but in an office that distinguishes them from the saints.

The ecclesiastical office exists in and for the body of Christ. The office does not have an on-going succession via the person of the office-bearer. The right of ordination does not belong to a minister or elder independent of the congregation. The offices have an abiding existence only in organic relationship to the body of believers. Christ gives the gifts of office to the body, or the institute of church. This means that the offices of the church cannot exist separate from the church!

Office-bearers are not just recognized by the congregation but appointed by Christ. Ephesians 4 makes clear that the ascended Christ gives them to the church as his gifts. There is a line directly from Christ as the exalted head of the church. He exercises his office through these office-bearers. He appoints and anoints men for these offices. He appoints by the internal call, which he correlates with providential openings, and the external call by the church. “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”

In appointing the officers, the church is led by the Spirit of Christ. We see this, for example, in Acts 13, verse 2: “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.” Christ also anoints or ordains through the church, and qualifies with gifts and graces through His Holy Spirit. Therefore, no one may, by his own initiative, impose himself upon the church as an office-bearer.

Office-bearers stand in Christ’s place. From mount Olive, Christ ascended into heaven. On the day of Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit as “the other Comforter,” who will abide with the

church forever. In his lovingkindness, Christ gives the offices in his church. Through the Holy Spirit, he calls men to serve the church. We learn from 2 Corinthians 5, verses 19–20, that office-bearers stand in Christ’s place. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”

The preachers of the gospel are called “ambassadors for Christ.” An ambassador represents the government who sent him. He does not speak of himself, but he speaks on the authority of the king by which he is sent. In the same way, office-bearers in the church act on Christ’s behalf—in the place of Christ. This means they are directly accountable to Christ for whom they carry out his commission and come with his authority.

Christian office is initiated by the will of Christ. As Lord of the church, Christ commits the administration of his own office to men for the gathering and edifying of his church. Christian office is to be exercised according to the example of Christ. Christ gave us his great example of service to the church. He fully gave himself and exercised love and truth to the fullest measure. When you serve the church, you should have the desire to be like Christ.

Paul calls himself the servant of Jesus Christ—Philippians 1, verse 1. The spirit of service is essential for the office and is directly contradicted by the carnal motive for power, fame, wealth, or honor. To reflect the authority of Christ, the office-bearer needs this spirit of humility, meekness, and the willingness “not to be ministered unto but to minister”—Matthew 20, verse 28.

The Christian office is also called “apostolic” stewardship. The Greek word for “apostle” means “to be sent out.” According to Hebrews 3, verse 1–2, Christ is the “Apostle and High Priest of our profession....who was faithful to him that appointed him.” So also, office-bearers are divinely sent! “How shall they preach, except they be sent?” And Peter states: “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” Let us also remember the well-known statement of John Calvin: “Although God can accomplish the work without us, he engages us, puny people, as helpers and makes use of us as instruments.”

We recognize three ordinary offices in the church. These three offices are closely connected, on the one hand, to the offices of Christ as the great Prophet, the One and only High Priest and the eternal King; and on the other hand, to the calling of the church, to teach the truth according to the Scriptures, to rule or govern according to the ordinances of Christ, and to show mercy in material and physical needs. If Christ, the Prophet, Priest, and King, gives his church authority to teach, and rule, and show mercy, and he exercises his ministry through ordained office-bearers, then we must expect there to be offices that reflect his prophetic, royal, and priestly work. The three offices of lasting duration in the church include pastors, elders, and deacons. In the Belgic Confession, article 30, we confess: “We believe that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the word of God and administer the sacraments. There should also be elders and deacons, along with the pastors, to make up the council of the church.”

You may think of a certain analogy between the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king—and the pastor, deacon and elder. The prophets in the Old Testament were called to the heavenly teaching, the kings had to rule under God’s divine authority, and the priest stood in the service of mercy. We see a beautiful parallel with the New Testament offices. The pastors are called to minister the Word in the prophetic office, the elders rule the church in their royal office and the deacons serve in the priestly office of mercy.

At the same time, we cannot say that the priestly office of Christ is limited to the role of the deacons, etc. For example, in the pastoral office, Christ exercises all three of his offices. A preacher is the prophetic messenger of Christ, the royal ambassador of Christ, and the priestly servant of Christ and minister of reconciliation.

Now we want to have a closer look at the three offices of the New Testament Church. Let's look at the elders, or the presbyters. The term "elders" is frequently used in the book of Acts. For example, in Acts 14, verse 23, we read: "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." This was on Paul's first missionary journey, when he is returning through the cities of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. It indicates that Paul's normal procedure, from the time of his first missionary labors, was to establish a group of elders in each church shortly after the church began. Paul also gave instructions to others to carry out a similar process. For Paul wrote to Titus: "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee." James writes, "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him." This is a significant statement because the epistle of James is a general letter written to many churches. It indicates that James expected that there would be elders in every New Testament church to which his general epistle went. We learn the same from the letters of the apostle Peter. Peter wrote his letters more than thirty years after Pentecost, and he also assumed that all the churches in Asia Minor would have elders leading over them. Also the mother church in Jerusalem was ruled by a number of elders.

Two significant conclusions may be drawn from this short New Testament survey. First, any church, no matter how small, had a plurality of elders. And second, we do see a unified and consistent pattern in every church having elders governing it and keeping watch over it. Concerning the elders we may note first that they are "the ruling ones"—1 Thessalonians 5, verse 12; or "the overseers"—Acts 20, verse 28.

One of the major roles of elders in the New Testament is to govern the church. We read in 1 Timothy 5, verse 17—"Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine." And Peter says to the elders, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble"—1 Peter 5, verses 2-5.

Elders have to rule the church, and in doing so, they have to act as shepherds of the flock of God. Hebrews 13, verse 17 exhorts the believers to respect the authority of the elders that rule over them. "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."

Let's think about the pastors or ministers of the Word and the sacraments. It is clear that the elders were not originally teachers. There was no need of separate teachers at first, since there were apostles, prophets, and evangelists. Gradually, however, the teaching function was connected with the office of elder or bishop. Paul writes to Timothy, in 1 Timothy 5, verse 17, about elders who

rule, and other elders who especially had the calling to preach and teach. There was a special group of elders who gave their time to the activity of preaching and teaching. Paul even used the word “labor” in the sense of earning their living from that preaching and teaching. In all probability, the seven churches of Asia Minor had such teachers—Revelation 2, verses 1, and 8, and 12. Due to increasing heresies, the need for faithful preachers became more demanding. This required special preparation. Paul instructs Timothy to prayerfully look for God-fearing men who are able to teach. And he asks Titus to install men who hold fast to the faithful Word as they have been taught, so that they may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the opponents. Those who prepared for this work were set free from other labours and were supported by the churches. Today we see that the church follows this pattern of the New Testament. The ministers of the Word and the holy sacraments are to be seen as elders with a special calling to preach the gospel, to herd the flock, instruct younger and older ones in the congregation, and to administer the sacraments.

Let’s now think of the deacons. Repeatedly we read of the office of deacons in the New Testament. Acts 6, verses 1–6 records the institution of the diaconate. The seven men mentioned there were the first deacons. In the introduction to this lecture, we saw that these seven men solved the problem of the apostles. The deacons were the helpers of the apostles, in serving the poor and the needy. From Acts 6, you see that the calling of the deacons is to minister to the physical needs of those in the church or community who need help. Looking at the qualifications that Paul mentions for the deacons in 1 Timothy 3, we learn that the deacons had the responsibility of caring for the finances of the church. “Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre.” It is also significant from the New Testament that deacons do not have ruling authority over the church as the elders do. Nor are deacons ever required to be able to teach, to teach the Scriptures or sound doctrine as the pastors do.

Let’s summarize. Dear friends, thinking of the offices in the church, there is still a lot more to study. For instance, what are the qualifications for elders and deacons? And why do we not allow women to serve in the special offices in the church? I just briefly mentioned it. And how should the installation of elders and deacons take place, etc.? Questions like these do more belong to Church Order than to the study of Systematic Theology.

For now, we want to summarize that Christ is the supreme Office-Bearer in the church, as Prophet, Priest, and King. By his grace, he restores fallen sinners to their office of prophets, priests, and kings, through causing them to share in his anointing. He also appoints men to special offices in the church, so that through them, he may minister to and rule over his church. The first office was that of apostle, which laid the foundation of the church. The ordinary offices now are pastor, elder, and deacon. Since these involve the exercise of God-given authority in the congregation, only men are to be ordained in these offices. Remember that the special offices are temporal but the office of all believers, being united to Christ, are eternal. It is a blessing to serve the church, but it is a greater blessing to be united to Christ.

Thanks for following this lecture about the special offices in the church. You are kindly invited to follow the next lecture about Church Discipline.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6 ~ Lecture 7 **Church Discipline**

When you see sin or damaging behavior in someone's life, when do you keep quiet, and when do you speak with them? With this question we enter straight into the matter of church discipline. Confronting sin is a difficult business. Whether you are addressing a harmful fault in a believing family member, or facing an issue with a backsliding church member, or otherwise bringing up a problem with a Christian brother or sister, it's hard for all of us to confront sin. But the fact remains, Jesus expected his followers to address sin in an orderly fashion. Let's open the Bible, in Matthew 18, in verses 15 to 20, and listen to what the Lord Jesus teaches us: "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The question is, how to bring these instruction of the Lord Jesus into practice. We have seen that the church has spiritual power, and that the Lord Jesus governs his church through the office-bearers who are ordained to serve the church. This power also includes the right to draw up regulations for the proper application of the law, such as canons or church orders. These serve to stipulate who can be recognized as members in good standing, on what terms persons are permitted to bear office in the church, how public worship should be conducted, and how discipline should be exercised.

In some circles, people are against such regulations. They are of the opinion that the church is such a holy and spiritual body, that making canons and regulations for church order are against the being of the church. I am convinced, though, that the Bible shows us the necessity of making regulations, based on the general principles found in the Word of God. The details have to be worked out considering the special needs, the well-being, and the edification of the church. In this lecture, we want to give attention to the biblical principles that are relevant to the practice of church discipline.

Church discipline, or Biblical admonition, is always related to sin. "Sin is the transgression of the law"—1 John 3, verse 4. Transgression is the breaking of the rule of God's commandments. This breaking of God's law is so severe that it requires a confrontation. Here we have to note that

we are all sinners and transgressors of God's holy law. However, confronting sin happens when the sin has crossed certain boundaries. So when we talk about a sinner that has to be rebuked, we understand that we are speaking about an erring church member.

Likewise, parents discipline their children for their own good. The church has the duty to guard its holiness by the exercise of proper discipline. All those who belong to the church family are to be watched over. Church discipline does not concern those who are outside of the church. Jesus commanded his followers to rebuke sinners in his church. He said, If your brother sin against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him—Luke 17, verse 3. This sounds simple enough. If your Christian brother or sister sins openly and publicly, then tell him. Don't think this is harsh or rude, for Jesus teaches us to do so. Often the direct approach is the best approach. If your brother changes his mind and repents, be just as quick to forgive him. Most sins should probably be kept at that level, with loving rebukes and ready forgiveness. Discipline should always begin with this kind of private admonition. What a blessing of God's grace when these private talks and prayers are used to settle cases and to restore relationships. Then formal church discipline is not needed and the conversation between two people never becomes known to anyone else. But unfortunately, this is not always the case.

The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18 gives us further instructions. If a personal confrontation has no good result, then you should bring along one or two other people to confront again. It strikes us that Jesus chooses this more comprehensive way of confronting the sinner. In all these measures, the Lord Jesus aims for the salvation of the sinner.

Even more steps are mentioned in Matthew 18. For when this way of dealing with the hardening sinner does not bring him or her to humility and repentance, Jesus tells us what we should do. Now the time has come to tell it to the church, that is, the official representatives of the church, namely, the office-bearers. While all the members of the church are in duty to warn and admonish the wayward, only the officer-bearers of the church can apply church discipline.

But again, we have to be careful. Office-bearers can only deal with private sins, when these are brought to their attention according to the rule given in Matthew 18. But office-bearers are duty bound to deal with public sin, even when no formal accusation is brought. The elders now have to deal with the case according to the Biblical instructions for church discipline. This process of official church discipline can finally lead to a break in fellowship between the sinner and the church. Like Paul says, in 2 Thessalonians 3, verse 14, "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed."

So let's summarize the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 18. Confront the sinner alone. If the sinner does not repent, bring along one or two other people to confront. If the sinner still does not repent, tell it to the church. And here starts church discipline under the responsibility of the consistory by the elders. If the sinner still does not repent, the person is to be dis-fellowshipped or excommunicated. Jesus says solemnly that God will bless the process by sealing it in heaven.

What sins to confront in church discipline? In civil law, not all crimes are treated the same. The punishment for stealing a box of pens at the grocery store is petty theft—it is a so-called misdemeanor. On the other hand, shooting and killing the store manager is first degree murder—a felony. Each crime is wrong and sin in the eyes of God, but murder is more serious than pen-stealing. Likewise, from God's perspective, some sins require direct confrontation. Here's a brief list of sins that require church discipline in the New Testament. There may be other sins that require Biblical confrontation, however these sins bear the distinction of being called out as requiring church discipline in the Bible:

Sexual immorality, as Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 5: “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” Other gross sins such as greediness, covetousness, reviling, abusiveness, swindling, extortion, drunkenness, idolatry. Also divisiveness: “A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject”—Titus 3, verse 10.

The purpose and spirit of confronting a brother or sister is not easy. Church discipline is a difficult task. It is hard to rebuke a fellow church member who’s going astray when the relationship is at stake. And when you find the courage to say something, you can easily say it in a completely wrong way. Providentially, God gave us even more guidance on how to confront sin. We have to be very clear about the purpose of using the judicial power of church discipline. The purpose is twofold. In the first place, it seeks to carry out the law of Christ concerning the admission and exclusion of members. In the second place, it aims at promoting the spiritual edification of the church members by securing their obedience to the laws of Christ. Both of these aims serve to the higher end, the maintenance of the holiness of the church of Jesus Christ.

If there are erring members, the church first of all has to seek for a cure, but if this proves impossible, the church needs to put away the erring member for the protection of the other members of the church. The Bible teaches us that that has to be performed in a prayerful and spiritual way. Two things are important when you are called to exercise church discipline. We should admonish the brother or sister in a non-hypocritical spirit. In Matthew 7—that portion of the Sermon on the Mount—Jesus warns us against judging in a wrong way. He speaks about the principle of the mote and the beam. We should not be mote-inspectors when logs are hanging out of our own eyes. In essence, Jesus does not want his people to rebuke others as hypocrites.

Furthermore the admonition should be done in a gentle spirit. Confrontation should never be harsh. The message that you have to bring is already harsh enough and should not be worsened with an aggressive tone. We are to be gentle whenever we confront sin. Galatians 6, verse 1—“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” And 1 Timothy 5 verse 1—“Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren.” So when called to exercise church discipline, we have to watch over ourselves and always speak the truth in love—Ephesians 4, verse 15.

The need for confronting sin. In our day and age, it is not popular to confront sin. The thinking of many people, for sure in the western world, is very liberal. Sad to say, church discipline—a constitutive mark of the Reformed faith—has also lost practice in many contemporary protestant churches. But thanks be to God, we are witnessing a new awareness in some circles of the importance of church discipline.

Why is church discipline so important that it even has to be seen as a vital character of a true church? We already saw the rule of Christ in Matthew 18. Let’s now focus deeper upon the need of Christian censure. Here are three reasons: an upward reason, an outward reason and an inward reason.

An upward reason. The first aim in all our dealings should be the honor and glory of God. Church discipline is to defend the honor of God. God wants his people to give a good testimony in the world. It is a great tragedy when the name of God is blasphemed among the unbelievers

because of the misbehavior of believers. Christians who persist in open sin are used by Satan to slander the name of God. And those who do not believe the Gospel can justify their own sin when they come across believers who flirt with iniquity. The Bible says that there has to be a clear and sharp division between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. The Lord desires his bride to be precious and spotless—Ephesians 5, verse 27, so as to be an attractive reflection of his own holiness. A church, therefore, which permits their members to live in sin cannot shine with the light of Christ’s purity. When we forsake the means of church discipline, we are calling God’s very glory into question. That’s a very serious issue! Therefore, dear pastors, elders, and church leaders, let us not forget the earnest warnings in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3. Most of the churches mentioned in these chapters were once vibrant churches, but their decline was caused by slackness in exercising church discipline.

An outward reason. Closely connected to the upward reason is what we call the outward reason. By the word “outward”, we mean the protection of the flock of Christ. If we allow a root of bitterness to go unchecked within the church, it will not take long for the corruption to spread. A rotten piece of fruit always spreads its corruption. One rotten apple in the basket soon leads to two rotten apples and so on. As Paul aptly put it, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” When we publically rebuke those who continue in a state of non-repentance, it serves as a warning to the other church members.

In the context of disciplining elders, Scripture says, “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear”—1 Timothy 5, verse 20. This fear, of course, means holy fear. This holy fear has much to do with Christian sanctification. A good example is that of Paul and Peter when the former publically confronted the latter for his hypocrisy in distancing himself from the Gentile believers. “But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed”—Galatians 2, verse 11. Peter was corrected and the apostolic church learned a valuable lesson. Paul put an abrupt end to Peter’s corruption.

An inward reason. The third purpose of church discipline is to restore the offender. As John Calvin put it: “It is needful for their wickedness to be reprov’d so that, by means of the rod of the church, they recognize their faults in which they persist, and grow hardened when they are treated sweetly.” The intent behind church discipline is to win our brother, restore the sinner, and to save his soul in the day of Christ. If someone has to feel ashamed in order to be repent, so be it. “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother”—2 Thessalonians 3, verses 14–15. If the offender is a sheep of the Lord, the Good Shepherd will use shame to bring his beloved son or daughter back to the fold. In sharp opposition to our postmodern culture, the New Testament defends the need for fear and shame in church discipline. The desired end is the restoration of the offender. The Christian rod is always a rod of love.

Looking at these three reasons, we do well to revive this forgotten practice of church discipline. It doesn’t matter whether it’s popular or not. What counts is that it is Biblical. After all, the Lord Jesus instituted church discipline, and he sure knows how to edify his church way better than we do.

The steps of church discipline. Church discipline always begins with private admonition or silent censure, making application to the appropriate commandment or commandments of God’s holy law. The office-bearers of the church should privately admonish the guilty person, with patience and longsuffering, to try to bring him or her to repentance and confession. This silent censure also includes the necessity of barring the offending party from attending the Lord’s Supper, so as to

give no offense to the congregation. If this silent censure bears no fruit, and the offender remains unrepentant, further steps of church discipline must be exercised, using the following three public steps: first, a public admonition; then a second public admonition; and then excommunication.

In the first, public admonition, only the matter of the actual sin and the seriousness of the offence is publically declared to the congregation, and the congregation is urged to pray for the offender.

In the second step, the name of the offender is publically declared to the congregation, again urging them to pray for the offending person to turn from their sin and repent. Some church orders say that before taking the second step, the classis or presbytery must be consulted or advised—that is, neighbor churches of the same denomination. Also, before proceeding to the last step, the congregation must be publically informed of the obstinacy of the offender, the impending measures to be taken against the person, and the congregation must again be admonished to continue to pray for the offending person to repent.

In the third step, the offender is excommunicated from the church, and that should be announced publically to the congregation. God's Word says that when excommunication must be exercised, the person who is excommunicated should be thought of as a heathen and publican—Matthew 18, verse 17. If discipline is administered faithfully, in the name of the Lord, the person excommunicated is excluded from the kingdom and the Lord himself, and shall be excluded forever, unless they come to true repentance. Excommunication is more than merely breaking the tie with the visible church. It has everything to do with salvation. One day the Lord shall judge according to that excommunication, exercised and applied in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore the expression is true that one can die better on the scaffold than be excommunicated. Solemnly, the Lord Jesus says: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"—Matthew 18, verse 18. These three steps reveal to us the seriousness of church discipline!

Now, in this lecture, we still have to think about church discipline as applied to church leaders. Why do we mention this separately? Because there is a passage in Scripture that gives special instructions concerning the discipline of office-bearers in the church. First Timothy 5, verses 19, 20, and 21, reads: "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality." Paul gave this special caution to protect elders from individual attacks.

Action can only be taken against an office-bearer in the church, when there are two or three witnesses that can give evidence against him. It is also striking that Paul says that those who persist in sin are to be rebuked before all. This is because the bad example of wrongful conduct by elders will have a widespread negative effect inside, and probably also outside the church as well. A sinning elder has to be rebuked publicly. This means that some statement of the nature of the offence must be announced publically to the congregation. Not every detail of the sin needs to be mentioned. The congregation must be told enough to understand that the matter is serious enough for church discipline to be exercised. In any case, the appropriate commandment of God's holy law should be mentioned.

Further, Paul makes a remark about partiality. It is a blessing when there is a bond of unity and love among ministers, elders and deacons of the consistory or session. But being close to each other can have the negative effect of partiality. Sometimes you see that the sins of church leaders are

minimized or covered up by consistory members. Paul says that on the one hand, you have to be careful—two or three witnesses are needed. And on the other hand, you have to be clear and open in rebuking the church leaders, like we saw in Paul’s example about the case of the Apostle Peter.

Why does the Bible say that leaders of the church have to be treated different than ordinary church members? It is because their lives are to be above reproach. “A bishop then must be blameless.” This means that their lives must be so blameless that no charges of serious wrongdoing can be rightfully brought against them. Their lives should be examples for others so that others so that Christians can imitate.

In regard to exercising church discipline against office-bearers, we learn from the church order articles—as accepted in many Reformed churches—that when office-bearers commit a gross sin, the elders or deacons cannot be suspended or deposed, except upon the advice of two consistories. But ministers who are accused of committing a gross sin should be suspended until the classis or presbytery shall have judged the case.

Now about restoration and readmission. Once church discipline is active, at any stage of the process, if the sinner shows signs of repentance, the office-bearers and the members of the church need to be open to seek for a way of restoration and healing for the repenting sinner. Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 2, verses 7 and 8, “So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.”

In the process of church discipline, it is unwise to set any timetable in advance. We cannot predict how long the process should last. Prayerfully, we should continue to admonish the sinner until the Holy Spirit brings about deep, genuine repentance and a change in the condition of the person’s heart that led to the sin in the first place. It is a great blessing to see that church discipline brings repentance. When there is a true sign of sorrow and desire for forgiveness, the way of readmission has to be opened. The repenting sinner will be restored in the fellowship of the church by making a public confession. Proverbs 28:13 says, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.”

Even when someone is cut off from the fellowship of the church by excommunication, there is a way of return. Reformed churches have not only a form of excommunication that has to be read in the public church service cutting off the unrepentant, hardened sinner, but they also have a form of readmitting excommunicated persons. The form for readmission begins with touching words like these to be read out loud to the congregation: “Beloved in the Lord, it is known to you, that some time ago our fellow brother—then follows the name of the person involved—was cut off from the church of Jesus Christ. We cannot now conceal from you that he or she, by the above mentioned remedy, and by the means of good admonitions and your Christian prayers, is come so far that he is ashamed of his sins, and is asking to be readmitted into the communion of the church, etc.

Finally, you’ll remember how we started this lecture with a portion from Matthew 18. We should notice that immediately following the passage on church discipline in this chapter, Jesus strongly teaches the need for personal forgiveness of those who sin against us. We must forgive those who harm us, even “until seventy times seven”—Matthew 18, verse 22. Also Jesus says that our heavenly Father will punish us severely if we do not forgive our brother from the heart. Don’t think that this teaching of Jesus is contradictory to the exercise of church discipline. We can have the attitude of forgiveness in our hearts, and at the same time exercise church discipline, because the love of Christ constrains us to seek for the repentance of the sinner—for the good of the church,

for the honor of Christ, and because God's Word commands it.

Friends, thank you for watching this video lesson about the functions of church discipline. May the Lord bless the use of church discipline, so that the glory of Zion may be seen.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6 ~ Lecture 8

Worship of the Church and the Means of Grace

Dear friends, the calling of the church is to worship God. In relationship to God, the church has the purpose to worship him. God has destined his people to live to the praise of his glory—Ephesians 1, verse 12. Worshiping in the church is in itself fulfilling the major purpose of the church with reference to the Lord.

Worshipping God is a matter of theology. Remember what the Lord Jesus answered the Samaritan woman: “God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”—John 4, verse 24. The author of Hebrews speaks also about the worship of the Lord as the calling of every believer, and of the church as a whole. He says that we are to “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire”—Hebrews 12. The adjective “acceptable” implies that there are expressions of worship that God will not accept. The description of God as “a consuming fire” should make it abundantly clear to us that we should never approach him carelessly, thoughtlessly, or lightly. If the sinless angels in heaven bow their heads before God’s majestic holiness, and cry, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,” then how much more should we, who are but dust and ashes, worship him according to God’s holy ordinances “with reverence and godly fear.” Well, this short introduction should be convincing enough to take time in our study of Ecclesiology for The Worship of the Church and the Means of Grace.

Here we are, sitting among the other people in church. Why are we sitting here? Why do we come together, especially on the Lords Day? Is it out of tradition? or to satisfy our ego? Well, we do not come to church only to receive something, but through grace, to praise God. King David knew that this was one of the most important aspects of the church service. David says that he had gone with the multitude to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise—Psalm 42, verse 4. It was a true feast day for him when he could go into God’s house to praise the Lord. There he could meditate on the things of God and forget himself. David did not only come to the tabernacle to be fed, but also to have God in remembrance, and if he were hindered in any way, he was dismayed.

The worship of the church concerns God’s honor and glory. As we gather around God’s Holy Word, we hear the message of law and gospel, and how God’s Spirit works in the hearts of his people. We call in prayer upon God’s holy name and express all our needs before him. We sing Psalms and spiritual songs that speak of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. All these things are good, and are essential in church life, but the worship of the Lord is more than that!

God created man to praise and extol his Creator. Due to our fall in Adam, we cannot honor

God with all our heart. We all come short of the glory of God. By nature, we all stand guilty before God. Just like the people of Israel, we forget to worship God, and we worship all sorts of idols. The Reformer, John Calvin, stated that the human heart is a factory of idols. Alas, no one can praise and honor God, unless God first renews their heart by the work of his Holy Spirit.

At the same time, we may not hide behind the fact that we can no longer praise God right. God created us in such a blessed way that we were able to give him glory and praise. It is our fault that we can no longer do what God demands. Do you see and feel the guilt? God deserves honor and glory and we cannot give him the honor and glory that He deserves. We stand in need of the work of the Holy Spirit. We need a new heart and a new spirit within to worship God in spirit and in truth. How can we worship God without true knowledge of God? How can we give honor and glory to God without the mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus Christ? For only Jesus, our great High Priest, can usher us into the presence of God.

This faith perspective is something every Christian needs. It will transform everything, not least the place of the church's weekly gatherings, whether that be a temple, a riverside, a rented lecture hall, or an upper room. The earthly meeting place is insignificant. That was the truth that Jesus taught the Samaritan woman, like I mentioned earlier. The key to worship is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Although worship is God centered, it is saturated with an awareness that the only way we can come to God, be accepted by him, and enjoy fellowship with him is through the one and only Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ—1 Timothy 2, verse 5.

The pattern for worship adopted by the early Christians was widely known throughout the churches of the New Testament period. The first converts devoted themselves to four things: "They continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers"—Acts 2, verse 42. These four things may be referred to as essential for worshiping God. These core elements of worship are often referred to as "the means of grace." It pleases God when his people have fellowship through the reading and the preaching of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We truly believe that the Holy Spirit uses these means of grace to exalt God and to edify God's people.

What does this mean, this concept—what does it mean, "means of grace"? What does it signify? "Means," in general, can be defined as things or events that God uses in the life of human beings to achieve certain results. The means of grace are more specifically those things or circumstances by which the Holy Spirit applies a moral or spiritual influence upon the heart of a sinner. There is also what we call "the regular means of grace". God's Word says that we have to use these means by way of precept. In principle, the Lord will work by these ordinary means. When we use these means prayerfully and faithfully, the Lord has promised to add his indispensable blessing to it. Examples of the ordinary means of grace include a Biblical upbringing in a believing family, a Christian education, Bible study, the example of God-fearing Christians around us.

Let's mention some Bible references about the regular means of grace. "Comfort yourselves together, and edify one another"—1 Thessalonians 5, verse 11. "Pray without ceasing"—1 Thessalonians 5, verse 17. "When ye fast"—Matthew 6, verse 16. "They"—the Bereans—"searched the Scriptures"—Acts 17, verse 11. "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another"—Malachi 3, verse 16. Here, you may also add offerings for the ministry of the church—the giving of money to the Lord's work; also Christian fellowship in unity and love; the pastoral work, evangelism work, etc.

Thinking of all these means of grace, we ought to realize the amazing privilege of being members of the body of Christ—the church. At the same time, we must be convinced that all these

means of grace occur within and not outside the fellowship of the church. Those who willfully and on purpose separate themselves from the church must experience the bitter consequences of such a step. Because thereby, they cut themselves off from most of the regular means that the Holy Spirit uses to bring blessings to his people.

Besides the regular means of grace, we speak of the “ordinary means of grace”. In this narrow sense of the words, we define the ordinary means of grace as those ordinances instituted by Christ which are to be administered by the office-bearers of the church for the purpose of working and strengthening faith in the hearts of sinners.

We recognize two ordinary means of grace. The first one, the preaching of the Word of God; the second one, the administration of the sacraments. Some theologians mentions three ordinary means of grace. They add the application of church discipline. But mostly, we distinguish two ordinary means of grace: the Word and the Sacraments. The Lord has sovereignly bound himself through his institution and promises to the use of these means in the gathering of the church.

Various views of the means of grace can be distinguished. The relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace has been and continues to be debated. In the Roman Catholic view, the church itself is the primary means of grace. The church is able to administer the means in such a manner that grace is effectually applied by the administration of the means. In other words, the means work by themselves. The Latin expression is “ex opere operato,” meaning “from the work performed.” This grace is especially tied to the sacraments. The great objection to this is that the Holy Spirit is not involved, and that grace is bound to human activity, and so it is no longer sovereign.

In the Lutheran view, you see great emphasis on the Word of God, and it is asserted that the sacraments have no value apart from the Word. This is according to the teaching of Martin Luther himself. Later, Lutheran teaching tended to apply the consubstantiation principle of the sacraments, “in, under, and with,” also to the preaching of the Word. As grace is applied in, under and with the sacraments, so grace accompanies the preaching as being inseparably connected to it. The application comes with the preaching itself. It is taught in Lutheran dogma that God’s Word contains the converting power of the Holy Spirit in itself. We also have critical questions about this point of view, for it misses the necessary distinction between the external and the internal call.

There is also a so-called subjective view. This is an overreaction to the Romish and Lutheran viewpoints. Here, saving grace is separated from the instituted means. Salvation becomes centered in man’s experience, mind, and will, rather than in God’s gracious work. Here you have the danger that the means become empty or even meaningless without an “inner light” or “the spirit of truth,” instead of the written letter of the Word of God.

Others may also move away from dependence on the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, by thinking that man has a spark of divinity within him. The preaching and the sacraments only brighten that spark of divinity.

Here we also have to mention Arminianism. In the Arminian view, man has a natural ability of the will to believe. The means of grace—especially the preaching of the gospel—exercise a powerful persuasion upon the will. They function as a motivation, and they help the will to make the choice to repent and believe. The sacraments are seen more as memorials and symbols of Christ’s redemptive work than to function as means of grace.

In the Reformed view, the sovereignty of God’s Spirit in the application of saving grace is in the center. Grace is not savingly applied to all who use the means. The means themselves do not work salvation. The ministry of Christ himself and that of the apostles shows that many came un-

der the means of grace without receiving grace. Their hearts were hardened in unbelief. There is a distinction between the “general” and the “special” work of the Holy Spirit.

With the general work of the Holy Spirit, we mean the working of the Spirit in preserving creation, giving wisdom, knowledge, etc. “Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth”—Psalm 104, verse 30. Through his general work, the Holy Spirit can form the conscience, work historical faith, even work impressions of the happiness of God’s people in a way that does not lead to salvation.

The Holy Spirit is pleased to use the means of grace in a special way, bringing sinners to salvation. As a matter of fact, the Word alone is not sufficient to work faith and conversion, but ordinarily speaking, the Spirit will not work without the Word. In the application of the work of redemption, the two work together, the Spirit using the Word as his instrument. The Spirit makes the preaching of the Word effective in the hearts of the hearers. The special, the saving, work of the Holy Spirit is that whereby “we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits”—*Heidelberg Catechism*, question 65. *The Belgic Confession* begins, in article 22, as follows: “We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits, appropriates him, and seeks nothing more besides him.” Through the indispensable work of the Holy Spirit, that which is offered in the gospel promise is applied by the effectual grace of God.

The Spirit not only works faith in the beginning, by the means of grace, but also continues to strengthen this wrought faith. Therefore, the Spirit uses the same preached Word and the Sacraments. The Word of God is an essential means of grace, while the Sacraments are not essential to salvation. The Word of God works faith, while the Sacraments confirm and strengthen faith. The Word works as an instrument for the being of faith; the Sacraments, together with the Word, are for the well-being of faith.

The preaching of the Word of God. In the means of grace, the primacy is on preaching. By preaching, we mean the proclamation of the Word of God. Paul exhorts: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine”—2 Timothy 4, verse 2. Preaching should seek to convey “all the counsel of God.” Therefore, preachers need to seek to cover all of God’s revealed truth. Biblical preaching consist of two elements: explanation and application.

From the perspective of Ecclesiology, preaching is the authoritative proclamation of the Word of God to the church. It isn’t simply an evangelistic message to an unknown body of people. No, it is the opening of the two parts of God’s Word, the law and the gospel, in the midst of the congregation.

Scripture gives preaching a place of great importance, even the first place. Christ went to the synagogue to preach. He sent out his disciples to preach. In the book of Acts, the focus is on preaching from the moment the Holy Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost. This shows that God himself has given preaching a place of great importance, not just for a particular time, but for the church of all ages. Christ Himself comes to us in the preaching: “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”—Luke 24, verse 47. God is pleased to save sinners by the foolishness of preaching. The Lord regenerates by the seed of the Word, and the Lord feeds his people by the preaching of the Word: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby”—1 Peter 2, verse 2.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, question and answer #155, gives this true instruction: “How is the word made effectual to salvation? The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially

the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.”

The Heidelberg Catechism explains the working of the Spirit by the means of grace in question and answer #65: “Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all his benefits, where does this faith come from? From the Holy Spirit, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.”

Let me also share a beautiful quotation from Thomas Goodwin: “God has chosen the preaching of the Word to fulfil his saving purposes among and toward his elect, because it is the weakest means of all others, and therefore his power would the more appear unto his own glory in it.” How true is this saying! It is fully in line with the thinking on preaching of the apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 7: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”

We already mentioned the different viewpoints about the relationship between the Word and the Spirit. Let us try to give some more clarification on this important issue. While both the Lutherans and the Reformed teach that salvation comes by the Word and the Spirit, still there is a difference concerning the relationship between Spirit and Word. The viewpoint of our Reformed confessions can be typified by two prepositions: The Spirit works *by* and *with* the Word. The expression “by the Word” emphasizes the close relationship between the Spirit and the Word. We may not separate the Word from the Spirit, as is done in mysticism. The Holy Spirit does not work without the Word, but makes use of the Word as an instrument. At the same time the Spirit works “with the Word.” Here special emphasis is placed on the sovereignty of the Spirit. What do we mean by the sovereignty of the Spirit? The Spirit does not allow himself to be locked within the confines of the Word. The Holy Spirit is sovereign in his use of the Word—he makes the Word savingly effectual if and when he pleases. The Reformed emphasize both that the Holy Spirit works *by* the Word and *with* the Word.

Besides the preaching of the Word, God gave the Sacraments as a means of grace to the church. The word “sacrament” is not found in the Bible. It is derived from the Latin word “sacramentum”, meaning a sum of money deposited by two parties in a lawsuit. After the decision of the court, the winner’s money was returned, while that of the loser was forfeited as a sacrifice to the gods. The transition of the term to Christian use is probably found in the military use of the word. The sacramentum was the solemn oath of a soldier when he pledged obedience to his commander. The word sacrament came also into use through the Latin Vulgate Bible’s translation of the Greek word for “mystery”. Sacraments were regarded as both pledges of obedience and mysteries.

The early Reformers, like Luther and Calvin, preferred to describe them as signs and seals. A “sign” is a visible representation of an invisible reality. Various Biblical signs are connected with God’s covenant relationship with men—the tree of life, the rainbow, the sand and the stars, the passage through the Red Sea, miracles, etc. But sacramental signs are different because they are instituted by God. They are abiding signs of God’s saving grace in Christ, and they are given to the church to serve as illustrations of the gospel preached.

A “seal” is a visible sign of authority confirming a solemn promise. Sacramental seals are instituted by God to confirm the promises of the covenant and the gospel of grace. The seals of the sacraments have authority because they are instituted by Christ and administered by his church,

they confirm the truth of all that God promises of his gracious covenant blessings in Christ to his covenant people. The Sacraments do not seal to anyone that he is a believer, but they seal to him the promises that God has forgiven his sin, in order that he may believe it.

According to *the Belgic Confession of Faith*, article 33, Sacraments are given to us, “taking account of our weakness and infirmities.” After this being said, the article continues and explains the threefold purpose of the Sacraments: “to seal unto us his promises; “to be pledges of the good will and grace of God towards us”—a pledge is a confirming sign verifying what is offered or about to come; and the third one is “to nourish and strengthen our faith.”

What a blessing it is that God gave us the use of sacraments. They are illustrative helps to more clearly understand the gospel of Christ’s redemptive work. Therefore, we can call the sacraments a pictorial proclamation of the gospel. They illustrate and demonstrate to our senses—sight, touch, and taste—through symbolic elements and actions, the events of Christ’s death, the washing away of sin through his blood, and the nourishing of our faith.

The following definition may be given of a sacrament: “A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which by sensible signs, the grace of God in Christ, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers, and these, in turn, give expression to their faith and allegiance”—that is, obedience—“to God”.

And *the Heidelberg Catechism*, in question and answer #66, begins with the objective function of the sacrament: “The sacraments are holy visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, namely, that he grants us freely the remission of sin and life eternal for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.”

The Church of Rome believes we have seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, mass, penance, extreme unction or last rites, holy ordination, and marriage. You could say that for every important aspect of life, there is a sacrament available in the Roman Catholic Church. In their doctrine, sacraments are absolutely necessary for salvation.

The Reformed position teaches that they are not necessary for salvation. There is no reference in the Bible that teaches us that sacraments are necessary for salvation. Only a true saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ reconciles a sinner unto God. The use of sacraments do not save us. Only the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and union with Christ, gives us forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Furthermore, we say with article 33, of *the Belgic Confession*, “We are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Lord hath instituted.” Only Baptism and Lord’s Supper have been instituted by the Lord.

We find the institution of Baptism in Matthew 28, verse 19: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” The institution of the Lord’s Supper is in Luke 22, verse 19: “This do in remembrance of me.”

The working of the Sacraments. The Sacraments do not work automatically. Rome teaches that the sacrament itself works the saving grace. This would mean that all who receive the external matter of the sacrament also receive the internal matter. Lutheran doctrine says that grace is in, and under and with the sacrament, and believers and unbelievers may receive the sacrament alike.

The Reformed position is different. The connection between the sign and the thing signified is symbolic and spiritual. There is a *symbolic* connection between the elements and the body and blood of Christ, and a solemn sealing connection between the promises and the Sacraments. There is also a *spiritual* connection between the administration and participation of the Sacraments and the grace signified by them. The strengthening grace is applied by the Holy Spirit and received by

faith alone. The Holy Spirit makes the Sacraments to work in the heart of the believer. The Sacraments are divinely tied to the Word; the Spirit uses the Word apart from the Sacraments, but he does not use the Sacraments apart from the Word. And the hand and the mouth of faith are needed to receive the blessing of the Sacraments.

May the Lord grant us grace to worship him through the working of the Holy Spirit by the means of grace.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6 ~ Lecture 9

The Sacrament of Christian Baptism

Dear friends, do you remember why we study ecclesiology? Because of God, and because of the church—it is God’s church! The study of the church is about our relationship to Jesus, and it is about our salvation. The church is the body of Christ, ordained by Christ, purchased by his precious blood, called from death unto life through the Spirit of Christ. He preserves his people and leads them into everlasting life through the Holy Spirit. As we saw in the previous lecture, God uses the means of grace to bring sinners to repentance, and to unite them with Christ and all his benefits. Therefore, God gave his church his holy Word and the use of the holy Sacraments. In this lecture, we want to study the Sacrament of Christian Baptism.

Christ himself instituted the Sacrament of Baptism. We read about this institution in Matthew 28, verses 19 and 20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” These words evidence the holy Trinity, for Jesus does not say, “baptize in the names,” but “in the name”—singular. There is holy unity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. True Baptism has to take place according to this baptismal formula. When it is said that the apostles baptized in the name of Jesus, it is a sign that points to the doctrine of Jesus, and this doctrine of Christ includes Baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So, when the apostles baptized in the name of Christ, it does not mean that they did not baptize in the name of the Triune God. From early sources, we also know that the Christian church used the same formula as the one we use today.

In Baptism, the Triune God solemnly seals his covenant and his promises. He swears with an oath, “Jehovah’s truth will stand forever, his covenant bonds he will not sever.” John Calvin explains beautifully why the name of the Triune God must be used: “There are good reasons why the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are expressly mentioned, for there is no other way in which the efficacy of Baptism can be experienced than when we begin with the unmerited mercy of the Father, who reconciles us to himself by the only begotten Son; next, Christ comes forward with the sacrifice of his death; and at length, the Holy Spirit is likewise added, by whom he washes and regenerates us, and, in short, makes us partakers of his benefits.”

The three persons of the Trinity show their saving work in Baptism, and each of them seals that they will work that which is necessary for salvation. There’s no salvation without the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity—one God in three persons. When we call upon their name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we’re depending upon them, all of them. And we’re honor-

ing them. And we're saying that this act of Baptism is by them and for them.

In the Greek language, "in the name" is a very strong expression. It does not only mean commanded by God, but in communion with the name of the Triune God. It has the sense of "into". It designates a transfer into communion with God. Thus, "in the name" says what God wants for his church—he wants to bring them into communion with himself, and to be a God of full salvation to them. Do you see the depth and the riches of the baptismal formula? It speaks about the necessity and the possibility of being transferred into communion with God, in the way of a new birth, through the Holy Spirit, and the blood of Christ.

The administration of Baptism in the name of the Triune God is also a divine seal of his covenant and promise. It is just like someone who writes his name at the bottom of an important document, as a sign that he guarantees its content. The Triune God puts his name under his Word and promise, guaranteeing that everything he spoke in his Word is true. So the sacrament is a seal of God's promises. The eternal covenant stands unmovable. True believers are comforted that they have an eternal covenant of grace with God, and may say in faith, "Yet, he hath made with me an everlasting covenant"—2 Samuel 23, verse 5.

Baptism is also a blessing to the visible church. In the administration of Baptism, God promises to establish his covenant with the visible church and her seed, and to gather his elect church from within her. He confirms all this by underwriting it with his triune name. Here is a great comfort for us and our children. God swears that his promises in the gospel are certain and true, that Jesus Christ has come into the world to save sinners. The Lord wants us to answer to his promises by praying, "Lord, do as thou hast said"—2 Samuel 7, verse 25.

In conclusion, we see three major points in the institution of Baptism. The first one, Baptism is Christ's ordinance for the church throughout time to show the relationship that the Triune God established with the church through the Lord Jesus Christ. In second place, the Triune God and Jesus Christ can never be separated or opposed to each other. Third place, recognizing the Trinitarian message of Baptism is a call to have Trinitarian ministries, and to teach those who are baptized who this Triune God is, and what he speaks and does.

The oldest mode of Baptism is by immersion. This is the most significant mode of administering Baptism. But that does not mean that the mode of sprinkling is less significant. The sign of Baptism is the water. And the meaning of the water is the idea of purification. As water washes the dirt of the body, so the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ cleanseth us of all our sins—1 John 1, verse 7. Jesus did not prescribe a certain mode of Baptism, and the Bible never stresses any particular mode. The word that Jesus used for Baptism does not only mean "to immerse", but it may also mean "to purify by washing". It's possible and even probable that some of the cases of Baptism mentioned in the Bible were cases of Baptism by immersion. But from the earliest times, it was also customary to baptize by sprinkling and pouring. It is not likely that the multitudes of three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost were baptized by immersion. From early church history, we also know that Baptism by immersion and Baptism by sprinkling were both practiced. Even in the days of the Old Testament, sprinkling was used for ceremonial washings. And the prophet Ezekiel speaks of spiritual renewal by sprinkling. In our Reformed point of view, we believe that there is no Biblical demand for Baptism by immersion only. Baptism by sprinkling is a biblical and lawful mode of Baptism.

Now we want to focus on some examples of Baptism from the New Testament. Let's look at the book of Acts. What lessons do we learn from there? On the day of Pentecost, thousands came to repentance and were baptized. And those who were baptized were "added to the church"—Acts

2, verse 47. And being added to the church also means no longer belonging to “this untoward generation”—Acts 2, verse 40. Here we see that Baptism is a mark of membership of the church.

In Acts 2, we also see that Baptism did not take place on the basis of the repentance or the faith of the people. They were baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins”—Acts 2, verse 38. Baptism is based on the revelation of Jesus Christ, as displayed in his finished work, and Baptism is not on the basis of anything in the person being baptized. Baptism signifies the remission of sins, and seals the promise of forgiveness, and therefore, Baptism calls for faith and repentance as the way in which to receive forgiveness.

Baptism is related to the gift of the Holy Spirit. The coming of Christ’s kingdom on Pentecost is a confirmation of John’s message that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit. In Acts, chapter 8, we find the well-known story of Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch. Baptism was administered unto the eunuch after he confessed that he believed Jesus Christ to be the Son of God. Philip did not judge the heart, but accepted his word and baptized him. This confirms once again that Baptism is not a sign of the baptized person’s faith, but a confirmation of the preaching of the gospel. The eunuch’s Baptism confirmed the truth of God’s Word preached unto him by Philip.

In the book of Acts, we also read of the Baptism of households. Cornelius, the centurion, was baptized, with his household and those who were with him—Acts, chapter 10. Lydia’s heart was opened when she heard Paul speaking, and she and her household were baptized—Acts 16, verses 14–15. The Philippian jailor believed and was baptized, he and all his household. Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue in Corinth, believed on the Lord with all his house, and many of the Corinthians believed, and all were baptized

Acts 18, verse 8. Keep in mind that the New Testament shows that believers and their household are baptized. In the Old Testament, God instructed Abraham to circumcise all males who were in his tent. Here we see again the unity between the Old and the New Testament. In the Old Testament, all males who belonged to Abraham’s tent had to be circumcised, and in the New Testament, all who belonged to the household of a believer had to be baptized. We will come to this later when we think of Baptism and God’s covenant.

Furthermore, the New Testament teaches us that Baptism evidences salvation in Christ alone. Romans 6, verses 3 and 4 says: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by Baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Also Galatians 3, verses 26–29 declares: “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

In Galatians, Paul opposes legalism that would return to the law as a condition for receiving salvation. His central argument is that “a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ.” The work of Christ on the cross satisfies God’s justice, removes the curse of God’s wrath, and opens the way of salvation.

Paul says that Baptism is “into Christ” and is about “putting on Christ.” Baptism is not just another way to gain God’s favour from man’s side, but directs us to Christ and his finished work. In fact, the New Testament believer receives salvation in the same way as Abraham—by faith. For we are saved not by works but by faith. When by faith a person understands the message of Baptism and embraces this Christ, all legalism is crushed, and all that is left is the adoration of God’s

grace in Christ.

The New Testament also teaches us the connection of Baptism with the unity of the church. When by faith a person embraces the message of Baptism, all differences with others who are also saved by Christ fall away. We all have to confess that we are conceived and born in sin, and therefore, are children of wrath. Only by free and sovereign grace are we saved, not by works, but by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We all stand in need of the work of the same Spirit, who unites us with Christ and makes us partakers of all his benefits.

When the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, rebuking them because of partiality, he points them to the sacrament of Baptism: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit”—1 Corinthians 12, verse 13. This call for unity is closely connected with sanctification. For example, in Romans 6, verses 3 and 4, is set in the context of an antinomian misuse of the gospel of grace. Paul uses the argument of Baptism to show how it reveals union with Christ, which cannot but result in newness of life. The rich grace of God in Baptism is not received through obedience but can be forfeited through disobedience. Paul uses this also to stir up believers to watchfulness.

The epistles especially place Baptism between the redemptive historical realities of Christ’s salvation, and the personal application of that salvation. As a testimony and a seal of that salvation, Baptism is a call and motivation to faith in Christ, unity of the church, and holiness of its members. The opposite side is a warning against neglecting such a great salvation signified in Baptism.

Baptism as a covenant sign and seal. We will now deal with the important aspect of the doctrine of Christian Baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. God’s covenant was formally revealed to Abraham and his seed. The sign God gave for that was circumcision. The Lord declared: “I am the LORD thy God.” That is the heart of God’s covenant. Throughout the rest of Scripture, God addresses his covenant people as “my people.” Israel was his covenant people. That covenant bond involved his promise to be their God, his claim on their lives to belong to him, to live out of him and unto him, as well as his threat if they should disobey.

Though the revelation of Christ is clearer in the New Testament than the Old Testament, his gracious salvation is the same in both. God maintains one covenant of grace in both Testaments. In bringing people into a covenant relation to him, he makes them members of his church throughout all ages. During the Old Testament dispensation, the covenant mark was male circumcision. In Genesis 15, God established his covenant with Abraham. Abram cut several animals in half and created a pathway between the halves. He kept the birds from picking at them until the sun went down, then deep sleep fell upon him. Then he heard God speak, and he saw a “smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.” This ancient method of confirming a covenant was an oath of self-malediction. Covenant makers were saying, “If I do not keep my part of the covenant, let me be slain like these animals.” In this case, God alone walked through the pieces, showing his faithfulness to his covenant Word. It also shows that God and God alone put himself in a covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

God established his covenant first with the patriarchs, and later with the people of Israel. In Genesis 17, God gave Abraham and his seed a lasting sign of his covenant—circumcision. This sign involved blood being shed as a piece of skin was cut off. God wanted to seal the covenant with Israel and their children. On the eighth day after birth, all male babies had to be circumcised. The promises of the covenant were the reason for the children’s circumcision. Then the children were part of the church of Israel.

We clearly find this in Joel 2, verse 16: “Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble

the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts.” The children were comprehended in the covenant of God, and thus they received the sign of the covenant. The same must be said of the children of New Testament believers. Because they are born to Christians parents, they are comprehended in God’s covenant and therefore they must be baptized.

There is a general agreement as to the legitimacy of the Baptism of adult believers, but there is no such unanimity respecting the lawfulness of baptizing their children. The Baptist churches deny that children are entitled to Baptism. But we believe that there is a Scriptural basis for Baptism of all children of believing parents. It is true that the children who are baptized cannot yet exercise faith. However, this is no hindrance for them to be baptized, as the children of the Jews were circumcised when they could not exercise faith either. Our children are baptized on the same basis, namely, because of God’s covenant and promises.

Circumcision was a minor operation. It was a mark in the flesh. Thus Israel was a marked nation, a people owned by God. Likewise, Baptism marks us. The saying is true that this mark can never be taken away. Even the flames of hell can never wipe away the water of Baptism. The children of the visible church bear God’s mark on their foreheads. It says what circumcision said of Israel: “These people are set apart.” Through circumcision, the Israelites came into a special relationship with God. This applies also to all who are baptized, both adults and children. We ought to be separated from the world, and to bring forth fruits worthy of faith and repentance. Circumcision is spoken of as an inward change of heart. The call was to circumcise the heart. This is confirmed in Romans 2, verse 29: “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.” Baptism is not only a mark but also a seal of the covenant.

The Apostle Paul says, in Romans 4, that Abraham believed in Christ, even before he was circumcised, and therefore, that he was justified before God. After that, he received circumcision as a seal of the justification through faith. Circumcision sealed to Abraham the truth that he was justified by faith in the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ. It sealed God’s grace to his heart. The seal was fixed to the covenant and the promises of God. Viewed from God’s side, this was unnecessary, since he is the truth himself. But the Lord did this for Abraham’s sake, to strengthen his faith.

Baptism, like circumcision, seals the truth of God’s covenant and promises. The baptized person does not have to doubt whether God is sincere when he says to him, “for the promise is unto you.” God’s people receive the same confirmation Abraham received—they are justified by faith.

Circumcision culminates in the circumcision of Jesus Christ on the eighth day. Christ was circumcised as the seed of Abraham. He came to take and fulfill our side of God’s covenant perfectly. He fulfilled all righteousness. Christ was circumcised as the Lamb of God. He bore the mark of a sinner whose sin had to be removed because he bore that sin. The knife of circumcision shedding blood was the beginning of what would be fulfilled on the cross. The tiny piece of skin cut off foreshadowed his being “cut off out of the land of the living”—Isaiah 53, verse 8. Christ was circumcised as the Savior of sinners. The day of his circumcision, he received his name: Jesus—“Jehovah saves”. There is cleansing from guilt, and circumcision of the heart in him, so that in faith we will call his name Jesus—Savior!

Colossians 2:11 and 12 clearly proceeds on the assumption that Baptism has taken the place of circumcision. This implies that all the blessings and obligations of the covenant in the Old Testament for the people of Israel have now also come upon the church of the New Testament. Churches of the Reformation have clearly expressed that Baptism has replaced circumcision. *The Belgic Confession*, article 34, shows how Christ unites Baptism and circumcision: “We believe and

confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, hath made an end, by the shedding of his blood, of all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin: and that he, having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, hath instituted the sacrament of Baptism, instead thereof....Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, that Baptism is for our children. And for this reason Paul calls Baptism the circumcision of Christ.”

Let us now focus a bit more on infant Baptism. In Reformed circles, a solid ground is pointed out for baptizing infants. We practice infant Baptism because of the covenant and the promises of grace. We reject the doctrine that children have to be baptized on the basis of a presumptive regeneration. We do not baptize them because we believe they are saved, or that they will be. It is a shallow ground to baptize children of Adam on the basis of an assumption. We also reject the idea that we baptize children on the basis of the faith of their parents. No, the covenant and the covenant promise afford the only certain and objective ground for the Baptism of infants.

Lord’s Day 27, of *the Heidelberg Catechism* teaches us, in question #74, why infants are also baptized: “For since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore be Baptized, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church; and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which Baptism is instituted in the new covenant.”

Does Baptism mean that all those who are baptized partake in the covenant and the promises in a saving way? In the lessons on the Covenant of Grace we explained that there are two kinds of covenant children. Think of Abraham. He circumcised all who belonged to his household, including Ishmael, his son. Nevertheless, Ishmael was not a believer. Actually, he and his descendants drifted away from God and from the precepts of the covenant. Esau was no different. Also in the church of the New Testament, we see that chaff and wheat are mixed together. Think of Ananias and Sapphira, Simon the sorcerer, and others. The apostle says, in Romans 9, verse 6, “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” They are not all true Israelites who belong to the external Israel.

Here I recall the distinction of Calvin and other Reformers that the covenant should be considered in a twofold manner. First, the essence of the covenant, or the things that are promised by God. Secondly, concerning its administration in the visible church. We have to keep in mind what John the Baptist preached to the people of Israel: “The kingdom of heaven is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel”—Mark 1, verse 15. We may not despise the privileges of those who are baptized and belong to the visible church, but we must keep ourselves from becoming people who say, “We are Abraham’s children,” without doing the work of Abraham. Great are the privileges of Baptism, but more is required for salvation. We need the works of Abraham. We need Abraham’s grace. We need Abraham’s God. For there is no rest until we find rest in the Triune God of complete salvation.

Now we want to summarize what we have studied about Baptism. Baptism is a mark of membership in the church and covenant of God. God makes believers and their children members of his church and covenant. He revealed this to Abraham. He continued to do so through the generations in the Old Testament, and instead of commanding this to stop in the New Testament, he gives indications that he continues to include believers and their children in his church. Thus, they are to receive the sign of inclusion, namely, Baptism, which has come in the place of circumcision. What a message that is, that God calls and sets us in his church! What a calling that comes with it as well, to live as members of his church in faith, repentance, and new obedience, taking his promise,

warning, and call to heart.

Secondly, Baptism is a sign of cleansing and life, in and through Christ. The water resembles washing, giving life, and judgment. It all points to Christ as the one who endured the judgment to deliver from it, and be the source of cleansing from the guilt and power of sin, so that sinners may live a new life to God. This is so humbling because God is declaring that, of ourselves, we are filthy and dead. This is so amazing because God is declaring he gives this grace!

Thirdly, Baptism is a seal of God's promise of grace in Christ. Literally, Baptism is "into" the triune name. He connects his name to our name by his covenant bond. At the heart of God's covenant is his promise: "I will be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee." The Triune God seals his promise of grace to show how trustworthy he is, and he gives such a foundation for faith. He even promises to give his Spirit to apply to us all the grace in Christ.

In the fourth place, Baptism involves the well-known three parts of *the Heidelberg Catechism*: misery, deliverance and gratitude. Baptism points to our misery. Only the filthy need cleansing. We are admonished to abhor and humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing, not in ourselves, but outside ourselves in Christ Jesus. Baptism seals and testifies of our deliverance from this misery. Baptism declares to us the promise of the Triune God concerning the washing away of our sins through Christ, our adoption as children of God, and the applying work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism admonishes and obliges us to new obedience and a life of gratitude. Baptism calls us to cleave to this Triune God, trust in him, and love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength as well as to forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.

Fifthly, Baptism is of great importance. God promises to remember his covenant, and to fulfill his promises. "He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations. Which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac; and confirmed the same unto Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant"—Psalm 105. Baptism is of great comfort to God's people by sealing unto them the promises of God. It is also a visible preaching to the entire congregation about that fountain which the Lord has opened for sin and uncleanness. And Christ gave Baptism to his church as a solemn pledge that the good work he began, he will complete on his return.

Thank you for following this lesson on Christian Baptism. We still have another sacrament to study. So, in the next lecture, we want to consider the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. May God bless you.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Rev. Walter Harinck

Module 6 ~ Lecture 10

The Sacrament of The Lord's Supper

If my father, lying on his deathbed, would ask me if, after his passing away, I would do something for him, what do you think I would answer? “This do, in remembrance of me.” This was the last time before his crucifixion that Jesus was alone together with his disciples. It was in the upper room, the night before his death. In that touching moment, he asked his disciples to do this—the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the cup—as a lasting remembrance of him.

Dear friends, in this last lecture of this module on Ecclesiology, we want to make study of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is all about the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the center part of this holy Sacrament. Shortly before His death on the cross He instituted this precious Sacrament with the signs and seals that proclaim His love and faithfulness.

The Lord's Supper was instituted in the midst of the Passover meal. This was not mere coincidence, but sheds important light on both the Lord's Supper and the Passover. The Passover belonged to the Old Covenant. The old cannot go out till the new has come in. The old was the preparation for the new. In the coming of the Lord Jesus, the Passover is fulfilled. So the Passover was a preparation for the supper of the New Testament church.

In our thoughts, let's go to the upper room in Jerusalem. We see Jesus and his disciples gathered around the table for the Passover meal. On the table, the roasted lamb, the unleavened bread, the herbs, the cups and the wine. The Lord Jesus probably followed the usual pattern. He took the first cup and said: “with desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer”—Luke 22, verse 15. Then Jesus arose, wrapped himself in a towel, and took a basin to wash the feet of the disciples. When all were seated around the table, then Judas likely dipped in the dish with Jesus. Then Jesus took the second cup, speaking of his sufferings, his betrayal, and his death. He broke the bread, as was customary, but instead of saying the regularly recited words, “This is the bread of misery that our fathers ate in Egypt,” he pronounced these astonishing words: “This is my body”. The term “body” was normally applied to the roasted lamb, however, Jesus sets the lamb aside, and he points to himself as its fulfillment. Most likely, it was the third cup, the cup of blessing, that was transformed into the cup of the Lord's Supper, when he said, “This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you”.

The Passover was instituted by God to be a yearly religious ceremony as a commemoration of Israel's deliverance out of Egypt—Exodus 12. It is identified by Paul as a type of Christ, in 1 Corinthians 5, verse 7. For the sake of the lamb's blood painted on the doorposts of the children of Israel, the angel of death had “passed over” their houses, and went on to kill all the firstborn in Egypt, for those who did not apply the blood.

The lamb of the Passover was a sacrificial lamb. The meal that followed the sacrifice owed its significance to its relation to the sacrifice. It was a feast of death and of life at the same time, because the death of the lamb was a vicarious sacrifice—a substitute. The Passover lamb secured protection for the lives of the Israelites.

The Lord's Supper has a similar character to that of the Passover. It is not merely a memorial instituted by Christ, but it is a means through which he gives his grace. The communicants symbolically partake of the sacrifice offered on the altar of the cross. In partaking, we do not repeat the sacrifice, but continue the feast instituted by Christ, by which we testify our participation in the altar and share in the benefits bought by the sacrifice offered on it. The Lord's Supper is for communion with the sacrifice, which presupposes it to have been offered up already.

In the same way that baptism was given in the place of circumcision, the Lord's Supper was given in the place of the Passover feast. The Lord's Supper is actually a new form of the Passover, in the fulfilled work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The change is fitting to the New Testament period. The body is no longer a roasted lamb, but simple bread, pointing to the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. The wine now represents the precious blood of Christ, and the full atonement he accomplished. Christ is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament ceremonies, and the entire Old Testament sacrificial system.

The institution of the Lord's Supper is recorded in four places in the Bible. In the first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in the first letter of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians, we find accounts of this institution.

Let's read the account in 1 Corinthians 11, verses 23–26: “For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.”

Jesus spoke about the bread, “this is my body.” These words are most fundamental. In Luke 22, verse 19, the words are added: “which is given for you.” And 1 Corinthians 11:24, it is added: “which is broken for you.” These words show the focus is not confined to the actual substance of Jesus' body, but Jesus himself, who was the Word made flesh, to suffer, to die and to give himself for his people. The words and the actions of Christ in the Supper are essential. We may not leave out any part of it without perverting the whole action. Jesus took the bread, he blessed the bread, he brake the bread, and he gave the bread. And he said, “Take, eat: . . . this do in remembrance of me.”

The Biblical accounts concerning the cup are even more detailed than that of the bread. There is a call to drink, a statement of the wine being his blood, and the promise that he will drink it anew with them in the kingdom of God. Concerning the wine, Jesus said, “my blood,” “for many,” “the new testament,” or “the new covenant.” In giving himself for his people, Christ secured and ushered in that new covenant in his blood. When Jesus took the cup, the history of redemption turned from the Old Testament to the New Testament: “This cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you”—Luke 22, verse 20. The “cup of the New Testament” and “my blood” are closely connected to “for the remission of sin.” Christ gave himself and his blood as a perfect Passover Lamb, and his blood is the full remission of sin. No other sacrifice is needed. The offer in the blood of Christ is sufficient for the greatest of sinners.

The actions of Jesus with the wine are the following: he poured the wine in the cup; he blessed

the cup; and he gave the cup—Matthew 26, verse 27. And then he declared, “Drink ye all of it.” We assume that Jesus himself was the first to drink of the cup followed by the words: “This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.” The description of the words and the actions of Christ are important. They help us to shape our understanding of the institution of the Holy Supper.

In the early chapters of Acts, it is referred to as “the breaking of bread.” Luke, the author of Acts, used this expression to identify that special meal, along with the apostolic teaching, fellowship, and prayer, which constituted the core components of Jerusalem church life in the beginning. During the early phase of the New Testament church, the Lord’s Supper was an extension of the fellowship meals, or love meals, of that period—Acts 2, verse 46. As the church grew in its appreciation of Christ’s teaching, so its understanding of the significance of the Supper deepened.

In the New Testament, we read several different names referring to this Sacrament. It is referred to as “the Lord’s supper”—1 Corinthians 11, verse 20; “the Lord’s table”—1 Corinthians 10, verse 21; “communion of the blood of Christ,” and “communion of the body of Christ,” in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 16; and it is Jesus’ description of how we commune with him, in John 6, verse 53–58. Let us read the verses of that portion: “Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.”

It is also referred to as the Eucharist, from the Greek verb “eucharisteo”, which means to give thanks. Jesus gave thanks before he administered the first Supper. Each term helpfully conveys a different dimension of this Sacrament.

During the long history of the church, the Lord’s Supper has been a matter of controversy. Four distinct views have been put forward, which seek to explain the nature of the Supper, and how it benefits those who receive it.

The church of Rome teaches the doctrine of “transubstantiation.” It believes that the body and blood of Christ are physically present in the bread and wine. When the priest consecrates the elements in the Supper, it is claimed that the so-called “substance” of the bread and wine is changed into the “body, blood, soul, and divinity” of Jesus Christ. The medieval Catholic Church formally approved the doctrine of transubstantiation in 1215. It promotes the belief that Jesus Christ is offered up as an “unbloody” sacrifice each time the Mass is celebrated. The name “Mass” comes from the Latin formula that sounds after the preaching and prayers, so that all the non-members would leave before the Lord’s Supper takes place. This doctrine of transubstantiation was one of the key theological battlegrounds of the sixteenth-century Reformation. The Reformers were right to strongly condemn the Mass as a degrading denial of the finished work of Christ, and as promoting the idolatrous worship and adoration of the bread and wine.

The Lutherans seek to distance themselves from the Roman view of the Supper, embracing the doctrine of “consubstantiation,” in relation to the way Christ is related to the elements. Instead of the elements becoming his actual body and blood, Christ is believed to be present “in, with, and under” the elements. This was an attempt to do justice to the words of Jesus, “This is My body”. But its great weakness is its failure to safeguard the Bible’s teaching on the nature of Christ’s humanity. In order to maintain the link between Christ’s physical body and the elements of bread and wine, Lutherans spoke of the “ubiquity” of Christ’s body. This means that from the day of ascen-

sion into heaven, the body of Christ is now everywhere present. The consequence of this teaching is that the human nature of Christ is somehow fundamentally different from the rest of the human race. But, if Jesus was not made like his brethren in every aspect, except for sin, then how could he be our representative and Savior?

The Swiss Reformer, Huldrych Zwingli, explained the Lord's Supper in a way that distanced him from the Lutheran view. While affirming that Christ is indeed present in the Sacrament, he tended to understand that as an extension of Christ's promise to be present. He thought of the Supper as a present testimony to the things Christ accomplished in the past. Zwingli put all the emphasis on the commemoration of the sufferings of Christ. He believed that the power of the Sacrament came through the preaching of the Word as part of the celebration. Other Reformers disagreed with this view, arguing that it fails to capture the full weight of the language used in the Supper, both in the Gospels and in Paul's letters.

The dominant view of the Reformation is the one reflected in the confessions of many Reformed churches, that Christ is really present and at work in the Holy Supper by his Holy Spirit and through his Word. In the covenantal meal, Christ is pleased to impart himself to his people. At the Supper, believers "feed upon him in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving." This view also matches with the warnings linked to the Lord's Supper: "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body"—1 Corinthians 11, verse 29. The Reformed viewpoint is the Calvinistic viewpoint of the Reformer of Geneva.

John Calvin developed the teaching of the instrumental nature of communion. The bread and the wine are means through which the Holy Spirit communicates Christ to the believing communicant. In contrast to Luther and the Roman Catholics, he taught that Christ's physical presence is contrary to the truth that Christ has a real human nature. As God, he is everywhere present, but as man, his human nature ascended into heaven. Being a human body, his body cannot be physically present in thousands of places throughout the world, where the Lord's Supper is held. Sacramental elements are signs of spiritual realities, not the realities themselves.

Calvin strongly opposed the Roman Catholic viewpoint. Just as the water of baptism doesn't become the blood of Christ, or wash away sin itself, so the bread and wine do not become the body and blood of Christ. In contrast to Zwingli, Calvin taught that the Lord's Supper is not primarily about the believer's witness but God's action. The Lord's Supper directs the heart of the believer not only to the past, but to Christ in heaven in the present. Christ is present in the Lord's Supper service—not physically, but spiritually. This presence is known by the Holy Spirit in the way of the exercise of faith. Calvin stressed the spiritual nature of the Sacrament: "Christ is not an empty deceiver to mock us with empty representations." In a very real way, Christ feeds his people with his body and blood through the bread and wine. He feeds them with himself through the Lord's Supper.

Calvin's view is captured in *the Belgic Confession*, article 35: "Christ, that he might represent unto us this spiritual and heavenly bread, hath instituted an earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of his body and wine as a sacrament of his blood, to testify by them unto us that as certainly as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands, and eat and drink the same with our mouths, by which our life is afterward nourished, we also do as certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the true body and blood of Christ our only Saviour in our souls for the support of our spiritual life."

To teach his people, Christ instituted the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. He had special reasons to speak of "his body" and "his blood." Like bread and wine support this temporal life, so the

crucified body and the shed blood of Christ are the true meat and drink, whereby our souls are fed unto eternal life. Article 35, of *the Belgic Confession* says: “To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood.”

The new life of faith needs food and drink. As soon as the Holy Spirit begins to work grace in the heart of a sinner, the sinner begins to hunger and thirst after righteousness, forgiveness of sins, and looks for a way to be restored to God. Like the prodigal son, you cry out, “I perish with hunger.” To support this spiritual life, God sent Jesus Christ, who is the bread of life. There is such divine teaching in the tokens of the Lord’s Supper. There is a lengthy process before kernels of wheat can become bread. The kernel has to be sown in the dark earth, where it dies. It has to grow, to ripen in the sun and in the rain, and to be blown by the wind. It has to be cut down and threshed, then separated from the chaff. Then the kernels are ground into flour, mixed with water and oil, and baked in a hot oven.

It was also a long way that Christ had to go before he could be the bread of life to nourish starving sinners. Like the kernel of wheat, he had to be sown in the earth, and he had to die. He needed to be broken under the guilt of his people. He had to be ground under the millstones of God’s holy wrath because of our sin. He had to go into the hot oven of Satan’s temptations. He was brought under the demands of God’s justice. Jesus gave us the token of the Lord’s Supper to remember his suffering, and to recall that he paid a precious price for our salvation. Think of the long way he had to go.

Also the token of the poured out wine is given to teach and instruct the believer. It is also a long process before grapes become wine. Grapes have to be pressed in the winepress, before they give wine. Thus Christ had to be trodden as the grapes and pressed as the berries in the winepress of God’s anger against sin: “How am I straitened till it be accomplished”—Luke 12, verse 50.

The tokens in the Holy Supper point to his dying love, and his justifying sacrifice. They show so richly how Jesus has become the author of our eternal salvation. His broken body and shed blood are the true meat and drink for a hungry and thirsty people. This is experienced through the work of the Holy Spirit: “For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed”—John 6, verse 55. Without a spiritual hunger and thirst, Christ has no form, no comeliness to us. Then we do not see and taste significance in the tokens. Without a believing heart, the tokens will remain empty for us.

Calvin writes: “And truly he offers and shows the reality there signified to all who sit at that banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept such great generosity with true faith and gratefulness of heart”. Only when we know something of the bitterness of sin, Christ will be sweet to us. The paschal lamb had to be eaten with bitter herbs. Do you know how bitter it is to have sinned against a God so good and holy? To have pierced Christ with our sins? Oh, surely, you will taste the sweetness of the Lamb of God, and admire him in the tokens of the broken bread and the poured out wine.

In a spiritual way, Christ is present in the administration of the Holy Supper. He is the Host of the Table. He invites those who labor and are heavy laden, and promises to give them rest—Matthew 11, verse 28. He invites as the great physician, who knows and heals their diseases. Christ fulfills at the Table what he promises: “If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me”—Revelation 3, verse 20. That’s what the newly born heart needs and seeks in the Lord’s Supper.

The tokens are not empty and vain. Bread remains bread, and wine remains wine, but the Lord

is at the Table, and he assures his people through the tokens of his love and faithfulness. Answer #79 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* says so clearly: Christ wants “to assure us that we are as really partakers of his true body and blood (by the operation of the Holy Spirit) as we receive by the mouths of our bodies these holy signs in remembrance of him; and that all his sufferings and obedience are as certainly ours, as if we had in our own persons suffered and made satisfaction for our sins to God.” In other words, the riches of the Holy Supper is the precious assurance of faith that in life and death, I belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Do you see the rich blessing of this Holy Sacrament? Faith always stretches out its hands to Christ and cannot do without Christ. Christ wanted to teach and assure his penitent people about his love, to seal unto them the forgiveness of sin, the acceptance of their persons, and the salvation of their souls.

In this Sacrament, Christ especially approaches his doubting children, who say, “Does the Lord Jesus love me? Did he allow his blood to be shed for me? Did he allow his body to be broken for me? For such a one as I am?” Then Jesus says, “Yes, for you also, my body was broken, and my blood was shed. See the token—see the bread being broken before your eyes and the wine poured out in the cup. And as certain as you see with your eyes and taste with your mouth, have I given myself also as a reconciliation for all your sins and iniquities.” The Lord Jesus did this so that they will be delivered from their doubt, and say with the bride, “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is towards me.”

In Biblical times, and also in many cultures today, a meal served not only to feed the body, but also to have fellowship with one another. The Holy Supper is a spiritual meal with very simple outward tokens, but it serves two purposes—feeding and fellowship. The food and the Host are both in Christ. The Lord’s Supper is about communion with Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ is the central focus when we come to the Table of the Lord.

The key text about the communion with Christ is 1 Corinthians 10, verse 16: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” And immediately after writing this about the communion of the blood and body of Christ, Paul continues, in verse 17, where he adds: “For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.” Paul confesses “we are many.” We are all different, unique individuals with our own weaknesses and gifts. But we are also “one bread and one body.” There is unity in Christ! The Lord’s Supper is to be an expression of that spiritual unity, which Christ himself works in uniting sinners to himself, the One who is the bread of life. Each partaker makes the same confession—they shew forth the death of the Lord Jesus.

This also shows that communion with Christ cannot be enjoyed while the communion with each other is broken. Paul strongly warns about “eating and drinking unworthily.” God’s anger is stirred up when the Holy Supper is used while there is division between his people. The issue was not that they were unworthy, but they were unloving. And therefore, we have to examine ourselves before we use the Lord’s Supper—1 Corinthians 11. Verse 28.

The purpose of the Lord’s Supper is to strengthen the faith that is already present. Christ instituted the Supper for those who follow him in truth and in spirit. Only believers can receive the blessing of the Lord’s Supper. The call to remember him presupposes knowing him, and discerning the Lord’s body presupposes spiritual eyesight. Attending in unbelief is to eat and drink judgment to yourself. Therefore we have to examine ourselves, as Paul stresses in 2 Corinthians 13, verse 5: “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves.”

The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 30, question and answer #81, gives Biblical instruc-

tion: “For whom is the Lord’s Supper instituted?—For those who are truly sorrowful for their sins, and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ; and that their remaining infirmities are covered by his passion and death; and who also earnestly desire to have their faith more and more strengthened, and their lives more holy; but hypocrites, and such as turn not to God with sincere hearts, eat and drink judgment to themselves.”

Three simple marks are mentioned, which we find everywhere in Scripture—repentance, faith, and charity. Repentance is turning to God and Christ with true sorrow for your sins, making confession before God, pleading for mercy on the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Repentance is always closely connected to faith. The worthy partaker of the Holy Supper has a true sorrow because of his sins and miseries, but he also has faith that hungers and thirsts after Christ. Faith turns to Christ as he reveals himself to the believer in the promises of the gospel: “Thou Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Last but not least, there is the mark of charity—the desire to love and serve God and our neighbor, to live a holy life before God and men. This desire is not without struggle with the old Adam within: “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”—Romans 7, verse 24. Do you know about repentance, faith and charity? In preparing for the Lord’s Supper, we need to pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”—Psalm 139. What a blessing it is to truly hunger and thirst after the Lord Jesus Christ, confessing with the disciples, “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.” Then repentance may be imperfect, and faith may be weak, and charity may be defective, but he will in no wise cast you out.

The Sacrament of the Holy Supper focuses on the past, the present, and the future. Jesus commanded us to do this in remembrance of him. So we remember his suffering and self-sacrificing love in the past. We focus on the present because Christ is our living Savior. He is the living Host of the Table. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, he draws his people unto himself. But we also anticipate the future, and the Lord’s Supper proclaims a glorious future. Matthew 26, verse 29 says, “But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” And 1 Corinthians 11, verse :26 says, “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come.”

The Lord’s Supper is a foretaste of the fullness to come. In Christ, the Kingdom of God has come already, and the communicants may have a taste of the feast that Christ has prepared. In the Lord’s Supper, Christ lifts up the hearts of his people to himself, and to expect that blessed future. The Lord’s Supper points forward to the true last supper, which will be the eternal marriage supper of the Lamb—Revelation 19, verse 9. This glorious future makes the Lord’s Supper a meal of hope, and gives us a desire for Christ’s return. May that hope and desire be our blessed portion.

Thank you for following these lessons about Ecclesiology, the Doctrine of the Church. I kindly invite you to follow the next and last module in this study Systematic Theology about the great things to come.