

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

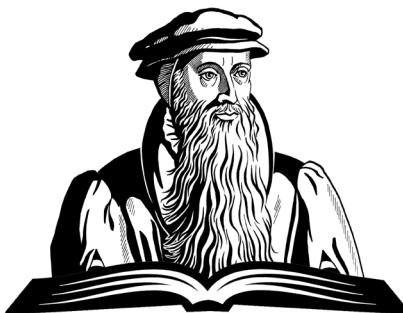
Module 6:

ECCLESIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Lecture 3

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH



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

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Module 6 ~ The Doctrine of the Church

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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 himself 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.