The Nature of the Church

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 1 of 10

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

The last course of The Theology Program opens with a class exercise: write a one or two sentence definition of the church. It sounds easy until the teachers put ten definitions on the screen and show that each one belongs to a different tradition, from the average person on the street to Rome, Geneva, and the liberal pulpit. Listen for the claim that drives the whole course: you cannot touch the end times until your doctrine of the church is settled, because how you see the church will decide whether you believe Israel has a future.

STUDY SHEET

1. Why ecclesiology and eschatology are one course

In seminary these were separate classes, but the program combines the doctrine of the church and the doctrine of the end times deliberately, because your view of the church will greatly influence your view of the end times. How you see the nature of the church determines whether you believe Israel has a future distinct from the church. If Israel has a future, a future millennium, a rapture, and a tribulation follow naturally; if Israel is fully integrated into the church and the church is the only future, then more than likely you will not see a future millennium, a rapture, or a tribulation. The course is a study of both the nature and purpose of the church and the end times, meant to orient students to the program of God throughout the ages and to where the church fits inside it. It also draws on everything the program has already covered, especially hermeneutics, since the whole question of Israel and the church turns on how certain prophetic passages are handled.

2. The questions this course will ask

What is the church, and why is the church here, two different questions. What is the church supposed to be doing, and how? What is the difference between the universal body and the local church? How have people understood the relationship of Israel to the church, a domino issue important enough to receive two full sessions? What are the essential ministries a group must have before it can call itself a church: does a small group qualify, or is a church, as John Calvin put it, anywhere the word of God is preached and the ordinances given? The question turns intensely practical on the mission field, where persecution forces the issue of what a believing body can and cannot do and still be the church. The course will also take up spiritual gifts, where every church must land somewhere between cessationism and the charismatic position, and the teachers preview a striking claim: your spiritual gift is not finally yours but the church's, given so that you can serve the body. Then two sessions on the end times, and a final session on heaven and hell, where views such as annihilationism will get a hearing.

3. The story of Christianity in five minutes

Patton retells the whole story the program has been walking. God, eternally existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, lacked nothing, yet created because it is his nature to give. Creation was built up toward man, and God gave gift after gift: food, pleasure, a companion, and finally the gift with a consequence, free will. Man fell, and all creation fell under him, yet God did not scrap the race and start over; he made a promise. To Eve in Genesis 3, an obscure word that someone would come to correct what had gone wrong. To Abraham, pulled out of idolatry, that through his descendants the earth would be blessed. To Israel at the mountain, that they would be his people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. To David, that the promised one would come through his line. Then the Messiah came, redemption was accomplished, and Christ promised the Spirit in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31, the new covenant written on the heart. At Pentecost in Acts 2 the Spirit came and a new entity was formed, joining all believers together from the inside, not by a law outside them but by a Spirit living within. That entity is where this course enters the story.

4. Define the church: the exercise and its traps

Students pair up and write a definition of the nature of the church, not its function, and the discussion immediately exposes the hard edges. Is the church temporary, lasting only until Christ takes us, or an eternal entity? One student defines it as all believers since the day of Pentecost, and the teachers ask about Moses: a believer, but on that definition not part of the church. Another definition, any body of religious worshippers, draws the question of whether other religions could use it too, which they do, so a Christian definition must be uniquely Christian or it has quietly opened the door. Every definition, it turns out, is making a theological decision, and most of us inherited ours without knowing it.

5. Ten definitions, ten traditions

The teachers survey ten live definitions and name where each comes from. A building for religious worship: average Joe theology, and Webster would half agree. Any body of religious worshippers: politically correct, more postmodern and pluralist. The house of the Lord, carrying a special holiness the way the temple did: Eastern Orthodoxy, with real weight on the building as the place of God's presence. A Christian religious institution in which appointed leaders guide the people of God through the administration of the sacraments: Roman Catholic, the institution being the key word, and a definition honestly trying to draw itself from the text, since Christ commanded the supper and baptism as the way to remember him. The people of God of all time: covenant theology, the definition of the Reformers and, the teachers note, of the majority of church history. Those who have trusted in Christ since the day of Pentecost: dispensationalism, resting on the future tense of Matthew 16, upon this rock I will build my church, a body not yet built when Christ spoke.

6. The rest of the list, and where history sides

An invisible body of people, living and dead, holding a common orthodox confession: the emphasis of the early church, which framed the creeds precisely so that everyone could share that confession. A visible body of people with a common practice demonstrating mercy: liberal theology, works ahead of beliefs. Any group of people who come together to worship God and study his word: a fundamentalist instinct, the Bible and a gathering being all that is needed. Christ's continued active presence on the earth: broad evangelical theology, deliberately general, refusing to nail down whether the church begins before or after Pentecost. Each group, the teachers insist, has serious arguments, and none of these positions falls outside the orthodox circle; but the majority of church history has held to the people of God of all time, and dispensationalism, which the next two sessions will examine, is a recent development, arising around the nineteenth century.

7. The church as body and temple

Scripture never hands us a dictionary entry; it hands us analogies, and the teachers walk them. Colossians 1 calls Christ the head of the body, the church: the head controls, directs, and works through the body as its hands and feet. Ephesians 2 says believers are being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ himself the cornerstone, growing into a holy temple, a dwelling of God in the Spirit. To Paul's first readers the temple meant one thing, the special place of God's presence, and it was still standing when he wrote, within decades of its destruction. The analogy is collective: stones built one on another, so that together, not individually, believers make up the place where God dwells.

8. Bride, priesthood, and flock

Revelation 19 and 21 name the church the bride of the Lamb, the holy city made ready and adorned for her husband. The teachers press the class on what kind of analogy that is: not functional, what we do, and not ontological, what we are, but relational, the most special relationship there is, and they point out the cross analogy that God in Hosea calls himself the husband of Israel. First Peter 2 calls believers a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, language Peter lifts directly from the covenant offer at Sinai in Exodus 19, so that in Peter's mind there is some vital connection between the church and Israel. Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 give the flock: the church of God purchased with his own blood, shepherded now by human overseers who are not to lord it over the flock but to be examples, which quietly establishes that this unity has a real structure of leadership. Why so many pictures? Because the church is more than any dictionary definition, and each analogy shows a different side of how it relates to Christ and how it will be called to function.

9. The visible church and the invisible church

Two key terms carry centuries of struggle. Ecclesia visibilis, the visible church: the organization of those who confess Christ and belong to local congregations, the body people can see. Ecclesia invisibilis, the invisible church: the sum total of all true believers, living and dead, united by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, known only to God. Augustine pressed the distinction harder than anyone: within the visible communion is the communion of saints and hypocrites together, and the true church is the invisible one. The old saying that whoever does not have the church for his mother cannot have God for his Father forced the question of what exactly the church is, and traditions split over which side to emphasize, some insisting the visible organization is everything, others concluding that if the real church is invisible, the local church hardly matters, the mistake of the believer who stays home with a Bible and a broadcast.

10. Wheat and tares: Jesus holds the two together

Both emphases trace to the teaching of Jesus himself. In the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13, wheat and tares grow together, true believers and pretenders side by side, and Jesus forbids pulling the weeds early: wait for the harvest, when the separation belongs to the end times. At the close of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, many will point to visible works, casting out demons, mighty deeds, and hear him say he never knew them, so membership in the church is not finally a visible matter. Yet by their fruit, something visible, his people will be known. The church has gone back and forth ever since: is it those who come on Sunday, or a body within the body? Nearly every credible tradition affirms that both the visible and the invisible church exist; the real question is which one a church emphasizes.

11. Where each tradition puts the emphasis

Roman Catholicism emphasizes the visible; so does Eastern Orthodoxy. The original Protestants, rebelling against an overgrown visibleness, threw their weight on the invisible, and their heirs still feel the pull to neglect the visible altogether. Protestant systems for making the church visible are chiefly membership, sometimes tied tightly to baptism, so that being baptized is joining the body in its local form, while other traditions barely press membership at all. And the culture is moving: postmodern believers are rebelling against invisible, individualistic religion and wanting to see the church again, community representing God together. One sharp observation from the discussion: Acts is a functional book, so it naturally shows the visible church at work; talk about the theology of the church and the invisible comes forward, talk about its functioning and the visible does.

12. The liberal view and the liberation view

Four primary views close the session. The liberal view, born in the nineteenth century and now fading, builds the church not on a common confession but on a common practice of bringing mercy, love, and acceptance to those in need, the social gospel, summed up in the slogan that theology divides while service unites. Its strengths are real: it carries on Christ's mission of mercy, recognizes the diversity of Christian belief, and seeks unity. Its weaknesses are fatal: it fails to grasp the importance of truth, places orthopraxy ahead of orthodoxy when Scripture grounds right practice in right belief, and cannot actually have unity without a common confession of who Christ is. The teachers cite the famous line of H. Richard Niebuhr, that in such a theology a God without wrath brings people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross. The liberation view, strong in Latin America and more Roman Catholic than Protestant, sees the church as Christ's liberating presence, bound to fight social injustice and governmental abuse, echoing Marx's dictum that philosophers have explained the world and the task is to change it. It rightly sees the church's power to affect a culture and the severity of oppression, but it shares the liberal view's failure on truth, and it misses something harder: Scripture shows that oppression, while never ideal, is not always outside the will of God, who has at times placed his people under it, so a church may find itself fighting the very program of God. Romans 13 stands as a caution.

13. The Roman Catholic view

The Roman Catholic view defines the church as the institutional authority given by God, led by the pope, through which Christ administers his grace, including all who submit to its mandates, doctrine, and instructions. Before Vatican II in 1965 the principle was extra ecclesiam nulla salus, outside the church there is no salvation; the modern Roman church is far more inclusive than it was, so speaking of Rome today is not the same as speaking of Rome before 1965. Its strengths: it sees the visible church as a genuine component of the plan of God, which has always worked through visible means, Israel itself being both visible and invisible, and it creates real unity of doctrine and practice. Its weaknesses: it fails to recognize the unity the Holy Spirit gives to all who have been justified by faith, neglects the invisible church, grants the institution a sacramental power God has not given, since the grace received turns on the condition of the receiver's heart rather than any power in the giver, and in creating unity it leaves little room for the diversity God intends within it.

14. The evangelical Protestant view, weaknesses included

The evangelical Protestant view: the church is the body of Christ, composed of all who have been justified by faith alone, standing on the saying attributed to Luther that justification is the article by which the church stands or falls. Its strengths: it understands that the Holy Spirit brings unity to all believers, creating an indivisible church; it limits required doctrinal unity to who Christ is, why he died, and how his death applies; it recovers the priesthood of all believers, so that no institution stands between the Christian and God; and it confesses Christ, not any man, as head of the church. But the teachers refuse to leave the Protestant view unexamined. It can emphasize the invisible church until the visible is neglected. It breeds an individualistic attitude that fails to see that sanctification happens in a community of believers, not in isolation, which Patton calls probably the biggest problem the Protestant church has: if we grow alone, it is in spite of how we are doing it, not because of it. It can shy away from social outreach simply because liberalism touched it first. And its lack of a unifying authority multiplies churches that build their walls high and feel no unity even with the congregation down the street. The task the course leaves its students is balance: the visible and the invisible held together, in our churches and in our own lives.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Genesis 3 · Exodus 19 · Jeremiah 31 · Matthew 7 · Matthew 13 · Matthew 16 · Acts 2 · Acts 20 · Romans 13 · Ephesians 1 · Ephesians 2 · Colossians 1 · 1 Peter 2 · 1 Peter 5 · Revelation 19 · Revelation 21

KEY TERMS

Ecclesiology

: The doctrine of the church: the study of its nature, what the church actually is, and its purpose, what it is here to do. The course treats it together with eschatology because the first largely decides the second.

Eschatology

: The doctrine of the end times. Orthodox Christianity has always confessed that Christ is coming back; the differences, which this course maps, concern the details of his coming.

Ecclesia visibilis

: The visible church: the organization of those who confess Christ and are members of local congregations, the body of Christ as the world can see it.

Ecclesia invisibilis

: The invisible church: the sum total of all true believers, living and dead, united by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, and known only to God. Augustine pressed this distinction hardest.

Covenant theology

: The tradition, dominant through most of church history, that defines the church as the people of God of all time, the name church simply arriving with fuller revelation. Kind of the theological opposite of dispensationalism; two full sessions will weigh them.

Dispensationalism

: The view that the church is those who have trusted in Christ since the day of Pentecost, a new institution not built when Christ spoke of it in the future tense. A recent development, arising around the nineteenth century.

Social gospel

: The liberal program of building the church on a common practice of mercy rather than a common confession, under the slogan that theology divides and service unites.

Liberation view

The view, strongest in Latin America and in Roman Catholic circles, that the church is Christ's liberating presence on earth, called to fight oppression and social injustice with all its influence.

Extra ecclesiam nulla salus

Outside the church there is no salvation: the Roman principle before Vatican II in 1965, when the Roman church became markedly more inclusive.

Orthodoxy and orthopraxy

Right belief and right practice. The liberal and liberation views place practice ahead of belief; the teachers argue Scripture grounds right practice in right belief, since we mirror a God we must first know.

Priesthood of all believers

The Protestant recovery that no institution stands between the Christian and God: every believer comes to God directly through Christ, the only head of the church.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Answer each question, then check yourself against the key at the end of this section.

1. Why does the course combine ecclesiology and eschatology?

   A. Because neither doctrine matters much on its own

   B. Because your view of the nature of the church, especially whether Israel has a future distinct from it, largely determines your view of the end times

   C. Because seminaries have always taught them together

   D. Because eschatology is too short to fill a course

2. What striking claim do the teachers preview about spiritual gifts?

   A. Gifts ended with the apostles, so the question is closed

   B. Every believer receives every gift

   C. Your gift is not finally yours but the church's, given so you can serve the body

   D. Gifts are reserved for ordained ministers

3. In the five-minute story of Christianity, why did God create?

   A. Because he lacked companionship

   B. Because creation was necessary to his being

   C. Because the angels requested it

   D. Not from any lack, but because it is his nature to give; creation itself was gift after gift

4. What happened at Pentecost in the telling of the story?

   A. The law of Moses was reissued on stone

   B. The Spirit came and a new entity was formed, joining all believers together from the inside rather than by a law outside them

   C. The temple was rebuilt

   D. The apostles wrote the creeds

5. Why does the definition of the church as all believers since Pentecost raise a question about Moses?
   A. Because Moses founded the church
   B. Because Moses was not a believer
   C. Because Moses was a believer, yet on that definition he is not part of the church
   D. Because Moses appears in the book of Acts

6. Why must a Christian definition of the church be uniquely Christian?
   A. Because a definition like any body of religious worshippers could be used, and is used, by other religions entirely
   B. Because dictionaries require it
   C. Because the early church wrote in Greek
   D. Because no other religion gathers for worship

7. Which definition belongs to Roman Catholic theology, and what is its key word?
   A. The people of God of all time; the key word is covenant
   B. A religious institution in which appointed leaders administer the sacraments; the key word is institution
   C. A building for worship; the key word is temple
   D. Any group studying the Bible; the key word is fellowship

8. On what text does the dispensationalist definition rest, and how?
   A. Acts 2, because the Spirit is never mentioned before it
   B. Ephesians 2, because the temple is finished
   C. Genesis 3, because the promise was made to Eve
   D. Matthew 16, where Christ says he will build his church, a future tense implying a body not yet built

9. Which definition has the majority of church history behind it?
   A. The people of God of all time, the definition of covenant theology and the Reformers
   B. Those who have trusted Christ since Pentecost
   C. A visible body with a common practice
   D. Christ's continued active presence on earth

10. What makes the bride a different kind of analogy from the body?
    A. It is functional, describing what the church does
    B. It is ontological, describing what the church is
    C. It is relational, describing the most special of relationships, and Hosea shows God using the same picture for Israel
    D. It appears only in the Old Testament

11. What does Peter do with the covenant language of Exodus 19?
    A. He argues it never applied to Israel
    B. He applies chosen race, royal priesthood, and holy nation to the church, showing he sees some vital connection between the church and Israel
    C. He restricts it to the apostles
    D. He quotes it to prove the temple must be rebuilt

12. What is the invisible church?
    A. The church during times of persecution
    B. The church before Pentecost only
    C. Believers who avoid membership rolls
    D. The sum total of all true believers, living and dead, united by the Spirit and known only to God

13. How does the parable of the wheat and the tares bear on the question?
    A. It commands the church to remove pretenders immediately
    B. It teaches that true believers and pretenders grow together until a separation that belongs to the end times, so the true church is not finally visible now
    C. It proves there are no pretenders in the church
    D. It concerns farming practices in Galilee

14. Which emphasis did the original Protestants choose, and why?
    A. The visible, to rival Rome's cathedrals
    B. Neither; they denied both churches exist
    C. The invisible, in rebellion against an overgrown emphasis on the visible church
    D. The visible, because of their view of baptism

15. What weakness do the liberal and liberation views share?
    A. They overemphasize doctrine at the expense of mercy
    B. They both fail to grasp the importance of truth, placing right practice ahead of the right belief that must ground it
    C. They deny that Christ ever lived
    D. They restrict the church to one nation

16. What caution do the teachers raise against the liberation view in particular?
    A. Oppression, while never ideal, is not always outside the will of God, so a church fighting it may find itself fighting God's own program; Romans 13 stands as a caution
    B. Freedom is unimportant to Scripture
    C. The church should never touch public life
    D. Only governments may show mercy

17. Why do the teachers deny that the sacraments carry power in themselves?
    A. Because the sacraments were abolished after the apostles
    B. Because only the pope may administer them
    C. Because grace turns on the condition of the receiver's heart, not on any power in the giver
    D. Because the sacraments are purely symbolic of church membership

18. What does Patton call probably the biggest problem of the Protestant church?
    A. Too much church discipline
    B. Overemphasis on the visible church
    C. Excessive unity among denominations
    D. Individualism: forgetting that sanctification happens in a community of believers, not in isolation

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 B · 5 C · 6 A · 7 B · 8 D · 9 A · 10 C · 11 B · 12 D · 13 B · 14 C · 15 B · 16 A · 17 C · 18 D

TALK IT OVER

1. Before this session, how would you have written your one or two sentence definition of the church? Which of the ten definitions was it closest to, and did you know which tradition you were echoing?

2. The teachers say the biggest Protestant problem is the belief that we can grow in Christ by ourselves. Where has that individualism shaped your own habits, and what would it look like this month to treat sanctification as something that

happens in community?

3. Each of the four views had strengths the teachers refused to dismiss: mercy, liberation, visible unity, invisible unity. Which strength is weakest in your own church experience, and what would recovering it, without the accompanying error, actually require?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Paul crowns the analogies in Ephesians 1: God placed all things under Christ's feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all in all.