Marks of a False Church and Church Government

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 8 of 10

C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M. · The Theology Program · 73 minutes

Watch the lecture at medinacommunitychurch.org/systematic-theology-6-8

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

With over thirty thousand denominations on the books, how do you tell a true church from a false one? This session builds the fence from the negative side: four marks of a false church, including one that disqualifies churches whose doctrine is perfectly sound. Then the hardest practical question of the course so far: when the doors open Sunday, who is actually in charge, and by what right? Listen for the moment the teachers turn the false church test on their own theology program.

STUDY SHEET

1. Why study the false church

Everyone in the room has belonged to more than one church, usually chosen by proximity or family; few have ever asked what makes any of them a church at all. The teachers propose the negative route: define the false church and the parameters of the true one emerge. The question is live, not academic. Patton describes an ongoing web correspondence with Roman Catholics whose standing argument is the count of more than 33,000 denominations: which one is the Protestant church? His answer concedes the difficulty and refuses the shortcut on both sides: a name proves nothing, Protestant or Catholic; your theology has to go before you. And the stakes are generational: whatever church you join, you begin a tradition your children will inherit, so you owe them the ability to test it. Four marks follow, under a word with a rich Protestant pedigree: the marks.

2. Radical exclusivism

The first mark: churches that locate salvation, or sanctification, or both, exclusively in adherence to their own set of beliefs and practices, sometimes requiring membership in their particular body. What does that deny? Everything the course built first: the invisible church, the catholicity of the body, the unity of all who are in Christ. A local church is by definition a local expression of the invisible body; the radically exclusive church has no concept of anything beyond itself, and its practical message, stated or implied, is that leaving its membership means leaving the body of Christ. Historically, the teachers note, Rome at Trent fit this mark, holding baptism illegitimate outside its administration, though since 1965 the change has been dramatic, from a posture some would have called cultic toward a broad inclusivism.

3. Radical inclusivism

The opposite mark: churches with no doctrinal statement at all, no dogma except welcome, accepting every belief, creed, and lifestyle without remainder. The problem is definitional: without orthodoxy, what is the gathering defined by? A church is built on what the body of Christ is, and a body defined as everyone has crossed into universalism, which is itself outside orthodoxy. Some of these churches, the teachers observe, exist precisely to bless what Scripture condemns, congregations organized around affirming a lifestyle so that affirmation is the whole basis of their existence; liberal churches that need no Bible and no confession fit here, and some, though not all, postmodern churches. The deeper distinction introduced: orthodoxy, what a church professes, and orthopraxy, what it actually does, a comparison every church, and every Christian, must keep running.

4. Two extremes, one culture

A chart pairs the extremes trait for trait: the exclusive church is cultic, legalistic, fear driven, intolerant, relentlessly objective, endlessly polemic, the whole ministry a hunt for other churches' errors, the King James only movement offered as a specimen; the inclusive church is pluralistic, against all rules, bent on removing every fear, subjectively making it up as it goes, and radically irenic, wanting peace at any price. Modernism, generally speaking, produced the first; postmodernism has produced the second, which means doctrinally sound churches are still being moved by culture without noticing, and the swing from one extreme to the other in a generation is exactly why theology must keep re-examining its foundations against Scriptures that do not change. The true church lives between the extremes, and the teachers give the balance its classic words, from Rupertus, a virtually unknown reformer whose one famous line is often misattributed to Melanchthon or Augustine: in essentials, unity; in non essentials, liberty; in all things, charity, and charity here means love.

5. Heterodoxism: when the institution denies an essential

The third mark is heresy proper: a church that moves outside the pale of orthodoxy by denying an essential, whether an essential of salvation or an essential of orthodoxy. Common cases: denying the sinfulness of man, teaching that man is essentially good; and denying that salvation is by faith alone. The essentials named in the course's framework: faith alone, the inspiration of Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and, to a degree still working itself out today, the exclusivity of Christ. Heterodox means different teaching, as orthodox means correct teaching, and a church that goes on record denying an essential has, on its own record, left the orthodox camp; while some questions, like eternal security, were settled in the soteriology course as genuine intramural debates inside orthodoxy.

6. The hardest case: Rome, Trent, and separated brethren

Naming faith alone as an essential forces the hardest sentence of the night: it places the Roman institution, a billion professors of Christ, outside the true church, and the teachers refuse to say it glibly. Patton lays out his own struggle in public: he reads Roman Catholic theologians he deeply respects and has no doubt some are believers; his email correspondents ask whether Protestants believe Catholics can be saved, and his answer is of course, because salvation turns on identification with Christ, not with an institution. But the institutional question is different. At Trent, Rome pronounced its anathema on all who hold salvation by faith alone, and the teachers' judgment is severe: that curse fell not on Protestants but on the gospel itself, and until it is revoked, the institution remains heterodox, and therefore, in the technical sense, a false church, exactly as Rome, in its kinder modern vocabulary, still regards Protestants as separated brethren. Believing the right facts about Christ, they add, is not yet saving trust; the New Testament itself observes that even the demons believe.

7. Institution and individual

A distinction guards the whole discussion from cruelty: the mark applies to churches as institutions, never as a verdict on every person inside them. Self described evangelical churches that decline to affirm the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity are, on their own record, outside orthodoxy, and yet there may be true believers sitting in them, just as there are members of every tradition who neither know nor care what their institution teaches and belong to it only by habit. And the teachers add mercy in the other direction too: teaching a heresy is not the loss of salvation, or, as Patton says to laughter that he insists is undeserved, he and Rhome are both in trouble, for no one has taught perfectly.

8. Radical imbalance: the misleading ministries

The fourth mark is the surprise: churches whose doctrine may be flawless but whose life is one ministry to the neglect of the rest. Such a body is not heterodox; it is false in a different sense, claiming to be a church while being something else, at best a parachurch ministry, at worst a misleading one, since people can spend a lifetime in it believing they were part of a church. The tour of specimens, all fictional names: the fellowship club, meet and greet, story time, small groups, and social events, a social club, and nothing wrong with fellowship; the all praise church, a concert and a worship event, and nothing wrong with singing; the signs and wonders assembly, where the practice of the gifts is ninety percent of everything, and the gifts themselves, whatever your position on their continuation, are not the problem, the imbalance is; the fellowship around the word Bible church, an exegetical lesson at every gathering and no other avenue of integration at all, which the teachers press hardest precisely because the Bible is evangelicalism's defining point, and a lecture series you could replicate with a radio preacher and a box of tapes is a teaching ministry, not a church; and the church of the perpetual altar call, every sermon evangelistic, every event an outreach event. Every one of these emphases is good; any of them made nearly everything produces a false church. The counterexample: a genuinely missions minded church where, as its people say, the preaching pastor's job is to fill the church and the missions pastor's job is to empty it, imbalance avoided by design.

9. The program tests itself

The teachers then run the test on themselves, and the transparency is the lesson. The theology program is deliberately, totally imbalanced: it teaches theology and does nothing else, and that is why it calls itself a program and refuses to call itself a church. The name was debated at length; theological studies fellowship was rejected because it would have been a lie, since the program offers no conduit for fellowship at all, only teaching, and it sends its students to their local churches for everything else. Can you get baptized by the theology program? No, and no one has asked, and the attempted communion service, Rhome deadpans, was vetoed. The difference between a parachurch ministry and a false church is honesty: say what you are. A deep exegetical teaching ministry is a good thing with a parachurch name; the same thing calling itself a church is misleading everyone in it.

10. A model for balance

What does balance look like in practice? The teachers sketch the model they actually use, offered as one way and not the way. The large congregation gathers for exhortation from the Scriptures and the practice of the ordinances, but balance cannot be created from a pulpit; the primary avenue of integration is smaller groups, called fellowships in their church, where Christ centered lasting relationships form and where the five ministries actually live, with a leader responsible for each, fellowship, worship, outreach, inreach, and teaching, and the standing question at every leaders' meeting: are we balanced, or is one ministry, even mine, swallowing the others? Alternate avenues of integration and supporting ministries, counseling, education including the theology program itself, surround the structure and push people toward the fellowships. The closing list of key ingredients for any local church: the preaching of the Scriptures, outreach to the lost, true community worship, graceful acceptance, accountability, care and concern for all people, the recognition and use of people's gifts, and balance in all the ministries.

11. Church polity: the question, and the episcopal answer

Then the second subject: how should the church organize itself? Church polity has three main representative answers across history, with everything else a hybrid. The episcopal view vests ruling authority in bishops holding universal, national, or regional jurisdiction, with three offices, bishop, priest, and deacon, and the emphasis on the bishop, episkopos in the Greek. Its adherents, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, the Church of England, Lutherans, and Methodists, make it the majority view of history and of today. Rome's chart runs from the pope, the supreme bishop with universal authority, through archbishops and bishops with regional authority, to priests, the local authority corresponding to Protestant pastors and elders, down to a congregation holding no authority at all, every arrow pointing downward, with the cardinals a separate elect body assisting the pope and electing his successor. Alongside the whole structure runs apostolic succession: every bishop's authority traced by the laying on of hands back to the apostles and to Christ's grant of all authority in Matthew 28, which is also what preserves Rome's unbreakable unity. Eastern Orthodoxy keeps the succession but no universal head; its authority is the seven ecumenical councils, held to be the interpretation of the Scriptures, with regional authorities beneath. The Church of England keeps succession and only regional authority, claiming to be the true episcopal church washed clean of the papacy, though with its own political entanglements from Henry VIII onward, the crown affirming appointments; the Puritans left precisely because the government of the church, unlike its doctrine, was never purified. Rhome adds the fairness the course practices everywhere: the structure has real strengths, clear leadership, layered responsibility, no one, not even the pope with his council, holding wholly unaccountable power, and its failures do not erase what can be learned from it.

12. The episcopal case weighed

For: the historical argument, that this is how the majority of churches operated from the first century, and who lightly overrules two thousand years; the biblical argument, that Christ delegated his authority through the apostles, that James held a bishop like authority over the churches of the Jerusalem region, and that the apostles appointed elders and deacons by the laying on of hands, passing their authority on; and the practical argument, that without governing authority heresy becomes commonplace, discipline becomes irrelevant when the disciplined simply cross the street, and unity dissolves, as the comparative disunity of every other system suggests, since the New Testament knows nothing of an isolated congregation. Against: the Bible makes no distinction between bishop and elder, using the words synonymously, a point on which the teachers say all exegetes agree, so a hierarchy built on the difference cannot claim clear biblical teaching, only permissible arrangement; the priesthood has been fulfilled in Christ, as Hebrews argues at length, making the title priest misleading, more so for Rome, whose priesthood ties to the Old Testament function, than for England; apostolic succession rests on the thinnest New Testament support, a vast system drawn from scattered layings on of hands, when something vital for the church's functioning should have been taught clearly, and, in Patton's working hermeneutic, God has got to be more clear than that for a doctrine this load bearing; and the system that promises to protect doctrine has, when the top goes wrong, enforced heresy downward on millions, which is precisely the situation Luther confronted.

13. The presbyterian answer weighed

The presbyterian view, held by Reformed and Presbyterian churches, vests ruling authority in elders, presbyteroi, elected by local congregations, with authority resting never in an individual elder but in assemblies of them: the congregation elects the elders and the pastor, who is himself an elder; together they form the session, the local authority; sessions send representatives to the presbytery, the regional authority; and presbyteries to a general assembly at the denominational level. Election runs from the bottom up while real authority operates at each level. For: the New Testament church plainly appointed a plurality of elders in each city, as in Acts 14, with prayer and fasting; the word elder occurs usually in the plural, suggesting collective rather than individual authority; the people chose their leaders, as in Acts 6, where the Twelve told the whole congregation to select the seven; and Acts 15 supplies the model in miniature, the church appointing Paul and Barnabas to carry a doctrinal dispute up to Jerusalem, where a decision was rendered and a letter sent to all the churches, local, regional, and general authority in sequence; practically, the system holds unity and purity together with checks and balances, and keeps every congregation aware that it is not all there is. Against: the New Testament never quite shows elders holding authority over other churches, and the episcopal reading of Acts 15 answers that the apostles, not an assembly, were the authority there; presbyterian bodies corrupted by false doctrine have forced it downward on local congregations exactly as popes have; and, as with all representative government, actual involvement drifts far from the congregation.

14. The congregational answer weighed

The congregational view vests ultimate ruling authority in the congregation itself: pastors and deacons are elected and hold delegated authority, while the congregation retains control of major matters. Congregationalists, Baptists, and some Lutherans hold it. The Baptist chart runs upward: the congregation as ultimate authority, pastors and deacons above it holding delegated authority, and a convention above that connected only by a dotted line, possible participation, denominational influence, never necessity. The independent non denominational variant has pastor, elders, and deacons with local authority, the congregation electing or merely influencing, terms of service rotating, and nothing whatever above the local body. For: Christ is the only authority in the church, the head of the body per Colossians 1; all believers are priests, so no authority stands above the individual Christian, though the teachers note the other systems would dispute that inference; the New Testament gives ultimate authority to congregations, the discipline process of Matthew 18 ending at tell it to the church, the church electing the seven in Acts 6 and selecting the replacement apostle in Acts 1; and practically, power corrupts individuals, so the widest distribution is the best check, and every member feels genuinely part of the body, a hand, an elbow, an eye, in the decisions. Against: not all are qualified to lead, which is exactly why the New Testament names a gift of leadership, and a system giving the leadership gifted and the mercy gifted identical authority builds in an imbalance; the New Testament does demonstrate authority in the church, nowhere more plainly than Hebrews 13:17, obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, a verse no congregational theory can simply neglect; equal authority in practice yields indecision, division, and incompetence; and the system, born of modernism's individualism, tends toward isolation, with no necessary recognition of the unity of the larger body of Christ, leaving unity to individual intentionality.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Matthew 18 · Matthew 28 · Acts 1 · Acts 6 · Acts 14 · Acts 15 · Romans 1 · Colossians 1 · Hebrews 7 · Hebrews 13 · James 2

KEY TERMS

Radical exclusivism

The first mark of a false church: locating salvation or sanctification exclusively in one's own body, its beliefs, practices, or membership, which denies the invisible church and the catholicity of the body of Christ. Cultic, legalistic, fear driven, and polemic in character.

Radical inclusivism

The second mark: a church with no doctrinal definition at all, accepting every belief and lifestyle, sometimes existing precisely to bless what Scripture condemns. Pluralistic and radically irenic, it has surrendered the very orthodoxy that defines a church.

Heterodoxism

The third mark: different teaching, the denial of an essential of salvation or of orthodoxy by a church as an institution, whether the sinfulness of man, faith alone, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, or the inspiration of Scripture.

Radical imbalance

The fourth mark: one good ministry grown to the neglect of the rest, producing not a heterodox church but a misleading one, at best a parachurch ministry falsely calling itself a church, whether built on fellowship, praise, the gifts, teaching, or the altar call.

In essentials unity

The balance line of Rupertus, a virtually unknown reformer whose one famous saying is often misattributed to Melanchthon or Augustine: in essentials, unity; in non essentials, liberty; in all things, charity, that is, love.

Orthodoxy and orthopraxy

What a church professes and what it actually does. A church, and a Christian, must keep the two in constant comparison, since a flawless doctrinal statement can coexist with a practice that denies it.

Church polity

The government of the church: how the body organizes authority to keep itself pure, balanced, and functioning. Three main representative answers span church history: episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational.

Episcopal government

Rule by bishops with universal, national, or regional jurisdiction, in three offices of bishop, priest, and deacon; the system of Rome, Orthodoxy, England, Lutherans, and Methodists, and the majority polity of church history.

Apostolic succession

The claim that every bishop's authority descends by the laying on of hands from the apostles themselves, and through them from Christ's grant of all authority; the backbone of episcopal polity and, its critics answer, a vast system resting on thin New Testament support.

Presbyterian government

Rule by assemblies of elected elders: session, presbytery, and general assembly, election running upward from the congregation while authority operates at each level, holding unity and purity together with checks and balances.

Congregational government

Ultimate authority vested in the congregation itself, with pastors and deacons holding delegated authority and anything beyond the local body, such as a convention, connected only by voluntary participation.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

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

1. Why do the teachers approach the true church through the false one?

   A. Because no true churches remain

   B. Because defining the false church sets the parameters of the true one, fencing the pale of orthodoxy from the negative side

   C. Because the marks of a true church were never defined

   D. Because church history records only failures

2. What does radical exclusivism deny?

   A. The existence of local congregations

   B. The need for ordinances

   C. The invisible church and the catholicity of the body: a local church is a local expression of the invisible body, not the boundary of salvation

   D. The authority of any leadership

3. Why is radical inclusivism a mark of a false church rather than a virtue?

   A. Because welcome itself is wrong

   B. Because it requires too many creeds

   C. Because it grew from the Reformation

   D. Because without orthodoxy a gathering is defined by nothing; a body defined as everyone has crossed into universalism, outside orthodoxy itself

4. How does the culture chart pair the two extremes?

   A. The exclusive church is cultic, legalistic, fear driven, and polemic, a product mostly of modernism; the inclusive church is pluralistic, subjective, and radically irenic, a product mostly of postmodernism

   B. Both extremes are products of the first century

   C. The exclusive church is subjective and the inclusive objective

   D. The chart shows no relationship to culture

5. What is the balance line of Rupertus, and what is notable about its author?

   A. In all things dogma; written by Augustine

   B. In essentials liberty; written by Melanchthon

   C. In essentials, unity; in non essentials, liberty; in all things, charity; from a virtually unknown reformer whose one famous line is usually credited to someone else

   D. Unity at any price; author unknown

6. What makes a church heterodox?

   A. Any error of any kind in its teaching

   B. The denial, as an institution and on its own record, of an essential of salvation or of orthodoxy

   C. The absence of a building

   D. Holding a minority view on eternal security

7. How does Patton answer whether Catholics can be saved, and whether Rome is heterodox?

   A. No to both questions

   B. Yes to both without qualification or distinction

   C. He declines to answer either

   D. Of course Catholics can be saved, since salvation turns on identification with Christ, not an institution; and yes, the institution is heterodox until Trent’s anathema on faith alone is revoked

8. On whom did Trent's anathema actually fall, in the teachers' judgment?

A. On the Protestant reformers alone

B. Not on Protestants but on the gospel itself, and so on the institution that pronounced it

C. On no one, since it was never ratified

D. On the Eastern churches

9. What distinction keeps the heterodoxy discussion from cruelty?

A. The mark judges churches as institutions, never every individual inside them, and teaching a heresy is not the loss of salvation

B. Only leaders can be judged, never members

C. Heterodoxy applies only to past centuries

D. No distinction is needed

10. In what different sense is a radically imbalanced church false?

A. It denies an essential doctrine

B. It practices the wrong ordinances

C. Not heterodox but misleading: it claims to be a church while being something else, at best a parachurch ministry, and its people may spend a lifetime thinking they were in a church

D. It is too small to qualify

11. Why do the teachers press hardest on the exegetical teaching church specimen?

A. Because teaching is the least important ministry

B. Because exegesis is impossible today

C. Because such churches deny the Bible

D. Because the Bible is evangelicalism's own defining point, and a lecture series with no fellowship or integration is a teaching ministry you could replicate with a radio and a box of tapes, not a church

12. Why did the theology program reject the name theological studies fellowship?

A. Because the name would have been a lie: the program offers no conduit for fellowship, only teaching, and honesty about what you are is what separates a parachurch from a false church

B. Because the name was already taken

C. Because fellowship is unimportant

D. Because programs may not use the word studies

13. Where does balance actually live in the teachers' working model?

A. In the pulpit announcements

B. In the smaller groups, the fellowships, where the five ministries operate with a leader responsible for each and the standing question, are we balanced?

C. In the denominational offices

D. In the supporting ministries alone

14. What preserves Rome's unity on the episcopal chart?

A. The vote of the congregations

B. The seven ecumenical councils

C. Every congregation's authority derives from the pope through apostolic succession, all arrows pointing downward

D. A shared hymnal

15. What is Eastern Orthodoxy's authority in place of a universal head?

A. The patriarch of Rome

B. The national governments

C. The local congregations

D. The seven ecumenical councils, held to be the interpretation of the Scriptures

16. What is the strongest exegetical argument against episcopal hierarchy?

A. The New Testament uses bishop and elder synonymously, as all exegetes agree, so the hierarchy can be a permissible arrangement but not clear biblical teaching

B. The word bishop never appears in Scripture

C. The apostles refused all authority

D. The office of deacon was abolished

17. How does Acts 15 function in the presbyterian case?

A. It records the first papal election

B. It abolishes regional assemblies

C. It settles the question of the ordinances

D. The church appointed Paul and Barnabas to carry a dispute to Jerusalem, where a decision was rendered and a letter sent to all the churches: local, regional, and general authority in sequence

18. What verse does no congregational theory get to neglect, and why?

A. Hebrews 13:17, obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account: the New Testament does demonstrate authority above the congregation

B. Psalm 23, because the Lord is our shepherd

C. Genesis 1, because of the creation mandate

D. Revelation 22, because of the closing blessing

19. What cultural taint do the teachers name in isolated congregationalism?

A. Ancient tribalism

B. Modernistic individualism: a system born of modernism, with no necessary recognition of the unity of the larger body, leaving unity to individual intentionality

C. Medieval feudalism

D. Postmodern relativism

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 A · 5 C · 6 B · 7 D · 8 B · 9 A · 10 C · 11 D · 12 A · 13 B · 14 C · 15 D · 16 A · 17 D · 18 A · 19 B

TALK IT OVER

1. Run the four marks over your own congregation honestly: which extreme does your culture pull it toward, exclusivism or inclusivism, and which ministry, if any, is quietly swallowing the others? What is one correction you could actually help make?

2. The teachers held two sentences together: many Roman Catholics truly love Christ, and the institution remains heterodox until Trent is revoked. Can you hold both without letting either erase the other, and how does the institution and individual distinction change how you speak to friends in other traditions?

3. Which polity does your church actually practice, whatever its official name, and where does authority truly rest when a hard decision comes? Having heard each system argued for and against, what would you now want strengthened in

your own church's government?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Hebrews 13 gives the word every polity must reckon with: obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, that they may do so with joy and not with groaning.