

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 11: CONCLUSION — THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT

The Church's Certain Future

Lesson 30

THE BRIDE ADORNED

The Church from Here to Eternity — Imperfect Now, Glorious Then

The church is not a human institution that aspires to divine purposes. She is a divine creation that passes through human weakness on her way to divine glory. The gates of Hades will not prevail against her not because she is strong but because her Lord has promised, and He is.

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.”

Revelation 19:7, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Matthew 16:18; Revelation 19:7–9; 21:1–5; Ephesians 5:25–27; Revelation 7:9; John 17:24

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Thirty lessons. Eleven units. One church. The doctrine of the church has been unfolded across the full range of its theological content, its foundations in the apostolic deposit, its nature as the new covenant community of the redeemed, its membership requirements grounded in genuine regeneration, its governance ordered by qualified elders in accountable congregational structures, its covenant sealed and renewed in the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, its integrity maintained by the discipline that genuine love requires, its life ordered in the corporate worship that the God who prescribes the forms of His own approach has appointed, its mission expressed in the Great Commission and the cultural engagement that faithful discipleship produces. The covenant community has been described in its fullness. This final lesson does not add another dimension to what has been described; it provides the eschatological horizon that gives everything that has been described its ultimate meaning and its ultimate confidence.

The church as it exists in the present age is the church militant, the church engaged in the spiritual warfare, the internal struggles, the external opposition, the doctrinal battles, the pastoral failures, and the persistent imperfections that mark the life of a community of redeemed-but-not-yet-glorified sinners pressing through the age between the first and second advents. The church that has been described through the preceding twenty-nine lessons is this church: not a perfect community, not a finished product, not the eschatological community in its final form, but the covenant community in its current form, constituted, governed, sealed, disciplined, worshipping, and missioning in faithfulness to the apostolic deposit while living in the weakness, the limitation, and the ongoing struggle that the 'not yet' of the present age always involves.

This lesson stands back from the present-age church to look at what she is becoming, not through the natural development of her own institutional energies, not through the progress of cultural transformation that her mission might produce, but through the transforming work of the Lord who is building her toward the glory that she will display at His return. The church that Christ is building cannot be overpowered; the gates of Hades will not prevail against her (Matthew 16:18). The church that Christ is preparing will be presented to Himself in all her glory, without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:27). The church that Christ will receive will be the bride adorned for her husband, the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband (Revelation 21:2). This is the church's certain future, and the certainty of that future is the ground of the church's present courage, its present faithfulness, and its present joy.

The lesson is not primarily analytical; it is doxological. The thirty-lesson series that began with the most basic theological definitions of what the church is will close with the most exalted biblical vision of what the church will be. The vocabulary of the final lesson is the vocabulary of the Revelation: the bride adorned, the marriage of the Lamb, the multitude from every nation, the new Jerusalem, the throne of God and of the Lamb, the tears wiped away, the former things passed away, and the voice from the throne declaring 'Behold, I am making all things new' (Revelation 21:5). This is the church's destiny. This is why she was created, redeemed, formed, governed, sealed, maintained, gathered, commissioned, and engaged. She was made for glory. And the glory she is made for is the glory of the God who made her, to reflect His character, receive His love, and worship Him forever in the presence of the Lamb.

I. THE CHURCH MILITANT

Battling Through the Present Age

A. The Reality of the Present Struggle

The church militant is not a theological abstraction; it is the honest description of the church's present condition as every member who has been in a congregation for more than a few months has experienced it. The church is a community of redeemed sinners who are genuinely in Christ and genuinely still in the flesh, justified before God through the imputed righteousness of Christ, and simultaneously engaged in the daily struggle against the residual patterns of sin that the flesh's ongoing presence in the believer's life produces. The church is a community that proclaims the forgiveness of sins and also practices the discipline of sin; that sings of the love of God and also navigates the interpersonal conflicts that the love of fallen human beings inevitably produces; that holds the glorious gospel of the risen Christ and also stumbles, fails, corrects, repents, and presses on in the imperfect way that the 'not yet' of the present age always involves.

The specific forms of the church's present-age struggle are as familiar as the preceding twenty-nine lessons have implied: the theological battle against the false teaching that every generation of the church must face; the pastoral battle for the regenerate membership that the consumer culture's pressure on church growth constantly threatens; the governance battle for the qualified, humble, accountable elders that the pride and ambition of fallen human leadership constantly tempts; the sacramental battle for the meaningful ordinances that the liturgical minimalism of pragmatic evangelicalism constantly risks; the disciplinary battle for the covenant accountability that the conflict-aversion and therapeutic accommodation of contemporary culture constantly undermines; the worship battle for the God-centered, Word-saturated, Spirit-dependent corporate worship that the entertainment culture's pressure constantly pulls against; and the missional battle for the genuine, sacrificial, disciple-making engagement with the world that the comfort of enclave Christianity constantly seduces the community away from.

The church militant is not defeated by these battles; she is formed by them. The letter to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 is addressed to real churches in real cities with real failures and real strengths, and the risen Christ who addresses them is the Christ who knows their specific struggles with a pastoral intimacy that no ecclesiological syllabus can replicate. He knows the Ephesian church's love that has grown cold (2:4); the Smyrna church's tribulation and poverty in the midst of which it is actually rich (2:9); the Pergamum church's tolerance of false teaching (2:14); the Thyatira church's tolerance of Jezebel (2:20); the Sardis church's reputation for life alongside a reality of death (3:1); the Philadelphia church's small power and its faithful keeping of the Word (3:8); and the Laodicean church's nauseating lukewarmness (3:16). The same Christ who sends these specific rebukes also sends the specific promises: 'To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life' (2:7), 'the crown of life' (2:10), the hidden manna and the white stone (2:17), authority over the nations (2:26), the white garments and the name in the book of life (3:5), the new Jerusalem and the new name (3:12), and the right to sit with Christ on His throne (3:21). The present struggle is real; the promised future is more real.

B. Christ's Unbreakable Promise

Matthew 16:18 is among the most consequential single sentences in the New Testament for the doctrine of the church: 'I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.' The promise has three elements that together constitute the ground of the church's present courage and future confidence. First, it is Christ who builds the church: 'I will build My church.' The church is not a human project that seeks divine assistance; it is a divine project that uses human instruments. The institutional energies, the pastoral gifts, the doctrinal faithfulness, and the missional efforts that human beings contribute to the church's life are genuine and important, but they are the instruments of the One who is building, not the engine of the building project itself. The church's existence and persistence through every age of her history is not primarily explained by the quality of her human leadership or the strength of her institutional life; it is explained by the fidelity of the One who promised to build her and who is doing so in every age and in every generation.

Second, the church belongs to Christ: 'My church.' The possessive is the most theologically significant word in the sentence. The church is not the property of her pastors, her elders, her founding families, her donors, or her most active members. She is the property of the One who purchased her with His own blood (Acts 20:28), who loved her and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25), and who is preparing her to be presented to Himself without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:27). The church's identity is determined by the One who owns her, not by the cultural context in which she is placed or the institutional preferences of those who serve her. The pastor who has grasped this truth will serve the church differently from the pastor who has not; the elder who has grasped this truth will lead the congregation differently; the member who has grasped this truth will belong to the congregation differently. She belongs to Christ. Everything else follows from that.

Third, the gates of Hades will not overpower her. The imagery is military and eschatological: the gates of Hades represent the power of death and the underworld, the forces of opposition that the church confronts in every age. The promise is not that the church will never be battered, persecuted, or diminished; the history of the church from the martyrs of the first century to the persecuted churches of the twenty-first confirms that she has been all of these. The promise is that the battering, the persecution, and the diminishment will not be the final word. The gates of Hades will not overpower her, not because she is invincible in her human form, but because she is indestructible in her divine purpose. The One who builds her will not abandon her; the One who owns her will not lose her; and the One who has promised that the gates of Hades will not prevail is the One who has already proved the truth of the promise by walking out of the tomb on the third day.

II. CHRIST'S PURPOSE FOR THE CHURCH

Sanctified, Glorified, and Presented

A. *Ephesians 5:25-27 and the Husband's Love*

Ephesians 5:25-27 provides the most intimate and the most theologically complete account of Christ's purpose for the church in all of the apostolic deposit: 'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.' The passage is addressed to husbands as an instruction about the character of marital love, but it draws the instruction from the supreme model of the love that Christ has for His bride, and in

doing so, it provides the most complete single statement of what Christ has already done for the church (loved her and gave Himself up for her), what He is currently doing for the church (sanctifying her, cleansing her), and what He will accomplish for the church at His return (presenting her to Himself in all her glory).

The three movements, sacrifice, sanctification, and presentation, together describe the full arc of the church's relationship to her Lord from the cross to the consummation. The sacrifice came first: the cross, where the Bridegroom gave Himself up for the bride who did not deserve His love and could not earn it, the most radical and most costly act of love in the history of the universe, performed not to improve a healthy relationship but to rescue a dead one, not to reward a faithful bride but to redeem an unfaithful one. The sanctification follows the sacrifice and continues through the present age: Christ is actively at work in His bride through the Word, the Spirit, the ordinances, the discipline, the worship, and the mission of the covenant community, forming her in the holiness that she does not yet fully display but that the process of her sanctification is steadily producing. The church in her present form is the church in the process of sanctification, imperfect, still marked by the spot and wrinkle of the present age's residual unholiness, but being cleansed by the washing of water with the Word that the Bridegroom's work in her life continuously applies.

The presentation is the culminating act that awaits the Bridegroom's return: 'that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.' The presentation is not the church's self-presentation; it is the Bridegroom's act of presenting His bride to Himself as the completed product of His own loving, sacrificial, sanctifying work. The church in the present age is not yet what Ephesians 5:27 describes; she is on her way to what it describes, under the Bridegroom's care and in the power of the Spirit He has given. The 'not yet' of the present age is real and honest. But the 'then' of Ephesians 5:27 is more real and more certain than the present age's imperfection, because it is not grounded in the church's own spiritual performance but in the Bridegroom's own promise and the Bridegroom's own work.

B. The Sanctifying Work in the Present Age

The present age is not merely the period of the church's waiting for the presentation that Ephesians 5:27 promises; it is the period of the sanctifying work that the presentation presupposes. The church is being made holy in the present age through the specific means that the thirty lessons of this series have described: the apostolic teaching that forms her in the knowledge of the God she serves, the ordinances that seal and renew the covenant that defines her existence, the discipline that maintains her covenant integrity, the corporate worship that forms her in the character of the God she worships, and the mission that sends her into the world with the gospel that is the instrument of the Spirit's regenerating and sanctifying work among those who have not yet received it. Each of these means is the Bridegroom's instrument in the sanctifying work that Ephesians 5:26 describes: 'having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.'

The practical implication of the sanctification theme for the series as a whole is significant: the ecclesiology that this series has described is not merely an institutional ideal for the church's organizational life. It is the description of the means through which Christ is making His church holy. The congregation that takes the apostolic deposit seriously, that maintains meaningful covenant membership, that governs itself by qualified and accountable elders, that seals and renews the covenant in the ordinances, that exercises the discipline that love requires, that gathers in the worship that the regulative principle describes, and that sends its members into the world as disciples who make disciples, this congregation is the congregation that is most fully participating in the sanctifying

work that the Bridegroom is performing in His bride. Not perfectly, not without the ongoing struggle and the ongoing failures of the present age, but genuinely, in the Spirit's power and under the Bridegroom's care.

The hope that Ephesians 5:27 provides for the present-age church's imperfection is not the false comfort of lowered expectations but the genuine comfort of the promise that the Bridegroom's work will be completed. Every spot that the present age's struggle leaves on the church's garment will be removed before the presentation; every wrinkle that the present age's weakness produces in the community's life will be smoothed before the bride stands before her Husband. The church of the present age need not despair over her imperfection, need not be paralyzed by the distance between what she is and what Ephesians 5:27 describes, and need not surrender the aspiration toward holiness that the presentation calls her toward. The imperfection is the present reality; the glory is the promised future; and the Bridegroom is at work in the interval, transforming the one into the other by the power of the same Spirit who raised Him from the dead.

III. THE BRIDAL IMAGERY

The Marriage of the Lamb

A. *Revelation 19:7-9 and the Wedding Feast*

Revelation 19:7-9 is the eschatological fulfillment of the bridal imagery that runs through the entire biblical narrative from the garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem: 'Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, Write, Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' The scene is the consummation of the redemptive history that the entire Scripture has been narrating: the Bridegroom who came in His first advent to win His bride through the cross has returned to receive her in His second advent, and the marriage for which she has been prepared through the entire age of sanctification is now accomplished.

The bridal imagery of Revelation 19 is the fulfillment of the bridal imagery that the Old Testament prophets used to describe Israel's covenant relationship with the LORD: Hosea's account of the unfaithful wife whom the LORD pursues, redeems, and restores (Hosea 2:19-20); Isaiah's vision of the Lord delighting in His people 'as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride' (Isaiah 62:5); Ezekiel's extended account of the unfaithful bride whom the LORD loved with a covenant love that her unfaithfulness did not extinguish (Ezekiel 16). The New Testament takes up these prophetic images and applies them to the relationship between Christ and the church: the church is the bride whom the Bridegroom loved before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28), is now sanctifying through the Word and the Spirit (Ephesians 5:26), and will one day present to Himself in all her glory (Ephesians 5:27). The wedding feast of Revelation 19 is the fulfillment of this entire covenant narrative, the moment when the love story that began before creation is completed in the eschatological union of the Bridegroom and the bride.

The fine linen that the bride wears, 'bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints', is one of the most theologically significant details in the wedding imagery. The bride is clothed in her own righteous acts; but the clothing 'was given to her', it is not the product of her own spiritual achievement but the gift of the Bridegroom's sanctifying work in her life. The righteous acts of the saints are real acts; they are the genuine fruit

of genuine sanctification, the actual transformation that the Spirit produces in the lives of those who are being formed in the knowledge and the obedience of Christ. But they are also given, not earned; they are the Bridegroom's gift to His bride, the proof that His sanctifying work has been effective, the evidence that the washing of water with the Word has produced the cleansing that Ephesians 5:26 describes. The bride who stands before the Lamb at the marriage feast is genuinely, truly, inherently beautiful, and the beauty is the Lamb's gift.

B. John 17:24 and the Desire of Christ for His Bride

John 17:24 provides the most direct expression of Christ's own desire for the eschatological union that the bridal imagery of Revelation 19 describes: 'Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.' The desire is personal and specific: not 'I desire that they be safe' or 'I desire that they be useful' or even 'I desire that they be holy', though all of these are genuine expressions of His care for His people. The desire is for presence: 'that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am.' The Bridegroom's longing for His bride is the longing for the union of presence, the presence that the marriage of Revelation 19 accomplishes and that the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 sustains forever.

The purpose of the union is the vision of glory: 'so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.' The bride who is united with the Bridegroom is the bride who sees His glory, the glory that He had with the Father before the world began (John 17:5), the glory that the incarnation veiled but did not extinguish, the glory that the resurrection began to display and that the parousia will fully reveal. The church that has been formed through the thirty lessons of this series has been formed in the knowledge of this glory, the glory of the God who revealed Himself in His Son, who is disclosed in the apostolic deposit that the series has been expounding, and who will be seen face to face by the community that He has gathered to Himself through the entire age of the church's present-age ministry. This seeing is the church's final and eternal occupation, and the entire series has been describing the formation of the community that will one day see what it has believed, know what it has hoped for, and be forever what the Bridegroom has been making it to be.

The prayer of John 17:24 is addressed to the Father, but it is answered through the Son's own work in the church. The church that is with Christ where He is, the church that sees His glory, is the church that has been brought there by the Bridegroom's own initiative, sustained by His own faithfulness, and completed by His own power. The prayer is both the expression of His longing and the declaration of His intention: He desires that they be with Him where He is, and He is the One who will bring them there. The present-age church, in all its imperfection and all its struggle, is the church that this prayer covers and this desire sustains. The Bridegroom prays for her union with Him, and the Bridegroom's prayer is never unanswered.

IV. THE MULTITUDE FROM EVERY NATION

The Scope of the Gathered Church

A. Revelation 7:9 and the Eschatological Assembly

Revelation 7:9 provides the most stunning single image of the church in her eschatological fullness: 'After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and

peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands.' The image is the fulfillment of the Great Commission's scope, the commission that Lesson 28 described as addressed to 'all the nations' (panta ta ethne) is here fulfilled in the eschatological assembly that includes representatives from 'every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues.' The mission that the church has pursued through every generation of her present-age life, the commission that she has fulfilled at great cost and through great suffering and with great joy, has produced this assembly. The innumerable multitude standing before the throne is the harvest that the commission has gathered.

The diversity of the eschatological assembly is among the most theologically significant features of the Revelation's vision of the church's future. The church that is gathered before the throne is not the church of any one culture, any one ethnicity, any one language, or any one historical period; it is the church of every culture, every ethnicity, every language, and every historical period that has ever produced a community of genuine disciples of the risen Christ. The Reformed Baptist congregation in East Texas, the underground church in China, the house churches of Iran, the growing evangelical communities of sub-Saharan Africa, the persecuted believers of North Korea, and the faithful congregations of every other time and place that the mission has reached, all are represented in the innumerable multitude of Revelation 7:9. The local congregation that understands itself as part of this global and eschatological assembly has a perspective on its own life and its own mission that no merely local or institutional frame can provide.

The declaration of the multitude before the throne establishes the substance of the eschatological worship that the church's gathered life has been preparing for and pointing toward: 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb' (Revelation 7:10). The worship is theocentric and christocentric, directed to the God on the throne and to the Lamb who was slain and is worthy. It is the declaration that the innumerable multitude makes with one voice: the salvation they share is God's salvation, accomplished through the Lamb's sacrifice, received through the faith that the Spirit produced, and now celebrated in the eternal worship of the community that the salvation has gathered. This is the worship that the church's present-age gatherings have been anticipating and practicing, and it is the worship that will continue forever, deepened by the full vision of the God who is the object of the worship and the full presence of the Lamb who is the ground of it.

B. The Scope of the Gathering and the Church's Present Mission

The connection between the eschatological multitude of Revelation 7:9 and the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 is the connection that gives the church's present-age mission its ultimate significance. Every member of the present-age church who shares the gospel with a neighbor, supports a missionary among an unreached people group, prays for the nations, or participates in any form of the disciple-making commission is participating in the gathering of the multitude that will stand before the throne. The mission is not an institutional program; it is the process by which the eschatological assembly is being constituted. Every disciple made is a member of the multitude added; every people group reached is a voice added to the declaration 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'

The present-age church that has genuinely grasped the eschatological vision of Revelation 7:9 will have a different relationship to the mission than the present-age church that has not. The congregation that sees the local neighbor's gospel conversation as a contribution to the eternal assembly, as a specific, personal act that may result in one more voice in the innumerable multitude before the throne, is the congregation that is most genuinely motivated for the missional engagement that the present age's commission requires. The eschatological vision

does not produce complacency (the multitude will be gathered regardless); it produces urgency (the gathering is happening now, through the mission that this congregation is part of). The motivation for the mission is the vision of the completion, and the vision of the completion is the most compelling motivation the mission can have.

John 17:20's extension of the High Priestly Prayer to all who would believe through the apostles' word connects the present-age mission directly to the eschatological assembly: the multitude before the throne in Revelation 7:9 is the fulfillment of 'those also who believe in Me through their word' in John 17:20. The chain is unbroken: the apostolic word preserved in Scripture, proclaimed by the commissioned church, received by the regenerate through the Spirit's work, and gathering the community of believers who will one day stand before the throne as the innumerable multitude from every nation. This is the chain that the entire thirty-lesson series has been describing: the apostolic deposit received, the covenant community constituted, the members formed and disciplined and worshipping and missioning, and all of it tending toward the day when the multitude stands before the Lamb and declares the salvation that brought them there.

V. THE NEW JERUSALEM

All Things New

A. Revelation 21:1-5 and the New Creation

Revelation 21:1-5 is the most comprehensive vision of the church's eschatological destiny in all of Scripture, and it places that destiny in the context of the new creation that the returning Christ will inaugurate: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. And He who sits on the throne said, Behold, I am making all things new.'

The vision is simultaneously cosmological and ecclesiological: the new creation provides the context for the new community; the new heaven and new earth are the dwelling place of the holy city, the new Jerusalem. The church in her final form is not a disembodied spiritual community hovering in an ethereal heaven; she is the holy city coming down from God, a fully realized, fully embodied, fully concrete community dwelling in the renewed creation that God has remade for her habitation. The materiality of the church's destiny, the specific, concrete, embodied community in the specific, concrete, renewed creation, is one of the most underappreciated features of the biblical eschatological vision, and it has enormous implications for how the present-age church understands the significance of its own physical, social, and material existence in the world it inhabits now.

The declaration of verse 3 is the fulfillment of the covenant formula that has governed the entire biblical narrative from Genesis through Revelation: 'the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.' The covenant promise that God first made to Abraham, 'I will be your God and you will be My people', has been renewed at every covenant transition from Abraham to Moses to David to the new covenant established in Christ's blood, and it is here fulfilled in its ultimate and eternal

form: God Himself dwelling among His people, personally present with them, and they forever His. The church's entire existence has been oriented toward this moment, every covenant established, every ordinance administered, every discipline exercised, every gathering of worship, every act of mission has been pointing toward the day when the covenant formula is fulfilled not as a promise but as an eternal reality.

B. The Wiping Away of Every Tear

Verse 4's 'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away' is the verse that the thirty-lesson series most directly addresses in pastoral terms. The church that has been described through this series is a church that has known tears: the tears of the elder who leads the community through a formal discipline process that costs everyone involved; the tears of the family that has suffered loss and has gathered around the Lord's Table for the covenant renewal that sustains the grieving; the tears of the missionary who has spent herself on the gospel among unreached peoples without the visible fruit she hoped to see; the tears of the congregation that has struggled with its own imperfection, its own failures, its own distance from the vision of what the new covenant community is supposed to be. These tears are real. The 'not yet' of the present age is genuinely painful, genuinely costly, and genuinely marked by the mourning and the crying and the pain that verse 4 names.

But verse 4 also names what will become of every one of those tears: God Himself will wipe them away. Not the passage of time, not the development of better coping mechanisms, not the gradual diminishment of grief through the natural process of adjustment, but God Himself, personally, tenderly, specifically wiping away every tear that the present age has produced in every member of the covenant community who has belonged to it through every generation of its present-age life. The specificity of the image, 'wipe away every tear', is the specificity of the God who numbers the hairs of His children's heads, who holds their tears in His bottle (Psalm 56:8), and who knows each one by name. None of the tears shed in faithful service of the covenant community's life in the present age will be unnoticed or un comforted; all of them will be personally addressed by the God who wipes them away.

'Behold, I am making all things new.' The voice from the throne declares not merely 'I will make all things new' (future) but 'I am making all things new' (present). The new creation is not merely the eschatological endpoint toward which the present age is moving; it is the reality that the present age's covenant community is already participating in through the regeneration that constitutes membership (Unit 4), the sanctification that the Spirit is performing through the means of grace (Units 5-9), and the mission that is gathering the eschatological assembly (Units 10-11). The 'all things new' that Christ declares from the throne in Revelation 21 is the completion of the 'new creation' that 2 Corinthians 5:17 describes in the present age: 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.' The present age's new creation is real but partial; the eschatological new creation is the completion of what the present age has begun.

VI. THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT

The Completed Community

A. From Militant to Triumphant

The church triumphant is the church in her final form, fully glorified, perfectly united, eternally worshipping the Lamb upon the throne, with every tear wiped away and every enemy defeated. She is not a different community from the church militant; she is the same community, the same covenant community of the redeemed, in the fullness that the Bridegroom's work has accomplished in her. The church militant is the church triumphant in the process of becoming what she will be; the church triumphant is the church militant having arrived at what she has been becoming. Every member of the present-age covenant community who has received the grace of regeneration, who has entered the community through the covenant sign of believers' baptism, who has been formed in the knowledge of God through the preached Word, who has renewed the covenant at the Lord's Table, who has been maintained in covenant integrity through pastoral accountability, who has gathered in corporate worship, and who has participated in the commission's fulfillment, every such member is the church militant on her way to being the church triumphant.

The transition from militant to triumphant is not a transition that the present-age church produces by its own efforts or achieves by its own spiritual progress. It is a transition accomplished by the returning Lord at His parousia. The resurrection of the dead, the transformation of the living, the gathering of the elect from the four winds, the judgment of the nations, the defeat of the final enemies, and the establishment of the new creation, these are the acts of the returning King, not the achievements of the present-age church. The church's present-age faithfulness is real and genuinely significant; it is the means by which the Bridegroom is sanctifying His bride and gathering the eschatological assembly. But the completion, the wiping away of every tear, the abolition of death, the presentation of the bride without spot or wrinkle, the new Jerusalem coming down from God, is the Lord's act, not the church's achievement.

The practical implication of this eschatological realism is the specific kind of present-age faithfulness that is grounded in hope rather than in the anxiety of self-reliance. The present-age church can be genuinely faithful to the apostolic deposit, preaching the Word, administering the ordinances, exercising the discipline, gathering in worship, pursuing the mission, without the frantic anxiety of a community that fears that its own performance is all that stands between the church and her destruction. The gates of Hades will not prevail; the Bridegroom will present His bride; the multitude from every nation will stand before the throne. These things are certain, not because the present-age church is performing impressively, but because the One who promised them is faithful and true (Revelation 21:5). The present-age church's task is faithfulness, not heroism; obedience, not self-reliance; and the patient, hopeful, Spirit-dependent continuance in the apostolic deposit that the Lord who is building His church is using as His instrument in the building.

B. The Eternal Worship

The eschatological community's eternal occupation is worship, the worship that Revelation 7:9-12 depicts with such overwhelming force: the great multitude from every nation, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, crying out in a loud voice 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb,' while all the angels and all the elders and all four living creatures fall on their faces before the throne and worship the Lord, saying 'Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.' The worship is eternal; it does not end; it does not diminish; it does not grow stale or routine. It is the worship of a community that is in the direct, unveiled presence of the God it has known through the apostolic deposit, loved through the means of grace, and served through the commission, and that now sees, face to face, the fullness of the glory that the present age's partial knowledge has only described.

The present-age church's corporate worship, the regulative principle-shaped, Word-centered, Spirit-dependent gathering that Unit 9 described, is the practice and the anticipation of this eternal worship. Every Lord's Day gathering of the covenant community is a participation in the worship that Revelation 7 describes, and an anticipation of the form that worship will take when the partial is replaced by the full, the imperfect by the perfect, and the present age's veiled encounter with the living God by the direct, face-to-face vision that John 17:24 promises and Revelation 22:4 describes: 'they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.' The church that gathers on the Lord's Day to read the Word, hear the sermon, pray the prayers, sing the songs, receive the ordinances, and receive and give the offering is the church that is practicing for the eternal worship to which her entire present-age life is pointing.

This is why the series began where it began and ends where it ends. The covenant community was constituted for the glory of the God who created it; it was redeemed for the worship of the God who purchased it; it was formed and governed and sealed and maintained and gathered and sent for the mission that is gathering the eschatological assembly; and the eschatological assembly will worship forever the God for whom the entire project has always been. The doctrine of the church begins with the character of God and ends with the worship of God, the eternal worship of the innumerable multitude, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. To this community and to this worship belongs the *Soli Deo Gloria* that has closed every lesson in this series, now received in its fullest meaning: to God alone be the glory, in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

VII. THE SERIES COMPLETED

Thirty Lessons, One Church, One Glory

A. *What the Series Has Described*

This series has described one thing with thirty different lenses: the local church as the new covenant community of the redeemed, called to embody the apostolic deposit in its specific time and place, equipped by the means of grace that the Lord has appointed, sustained by the covenant integrity that the discipline maintains, formed in the worship that the regulative principle orders, and sent into the world with the gospel that is gathering the eschatological assembly. The journey has been long, from the foundations of covenant theology in Unit 1 through the nature and membership of the church in Units 2-4, the governance in Unit 5, the ordinances in Units 6-7, the discipline in Unit 8, the worship in Unit 9, the mission in Unit 10, and now the eschatological conclusion in Unit 11. But the length of the journey reflects the depth of the subject, and the depth of the subject reflects the richness of the God who is the subject's source and the subject's end.

The series has been arguing throughout for a vision of the local church that is simultaneously more demanding and more beautiful than the institutional vision that the contemporary evangelical church most commonly offers and most commonly settles for. More demanding: because the apostolic deposit is serious, the regenerate membership standard is serious, the discipline mandate is serious, the worship standard is serious, and the missional commission is serious, and taking them all seriously at the same time requires the kind of institutional courage, pastoral seriousness, and communal commitment that is both difficult and costly. More beautiful: because the church that takes all of these seriously is the church that is most fully becoming what Ephesians 5:27

describes, the church that is being sanctified and cleansed and prepared for the presentation that the Bridegroom intends. The beauty that the present-age church glimpses in her best moments is a real glimpse of the glory she is moving toward; and the labor of the present age's faithfulness is the labor of a community that knows what it is becoming and who is bringing it there.

The series closes with the same conviction with which it began: the church is the household of God, the pillar and support of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). She is God's household, not a human organization that serves God's purposes, but the community that God has constituted, owns, and is building toward her eschatological destiny. She is the pillar and support of the truth, the institutional form through which the apostolic deposit is preserved, proclaimed, defended, and applied in every age of the world's history. This is the community that the thirty lessons have described, and this is the community that every congregation that takes these lessons seriously is being formed to be. Let that formation continue. Let the local church be what the apostolic deposit describes. And let the glory that awaits the church triumphant be the horizon that gives the church militant its courage, its faithfulness, and its joy.

B. The Final Doxology

The closing doxology of Ephesians 3:20-21 has accompanied every lesson of this series as the recurring declaration that gathers every theological argument, every pastoral instruction, and every practical application into its single, comprehensive, God-directed expression: 'Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.' The doxology is addressed to the God who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that the church asks or thinks, the God whose capacity to accomplish His purposes in and through the imperfect, struggling, often-failing covenant community of the present age infinitely exceeds the community's own assessment of what is possible. The power that works within us is the Spirit's power, the same power that raised Christ from the dead, that regenerated the elect, that sustains the present-age church through every generation of her militant life, and that will accomplish the final presentation of the bride without spot or wrinkle at the Bridegroom's return.

To Him be the glory in the church. Not to the church, to Him, in the church. The church is the location where the glory is visible; God is the One whose glory it is. The community that has been constituted, governed, sealed, maintained, gathered, commissioned, and engaged is the community in which the triune God is displaying His wisdom (Ephesians 3:10) to the watching spiritual world, demonstrating in the life of a specific community of redeemed sinners the full range of the divine purposes that the redemptive history has been advancing. To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus: the glory is in the church and in Christ because the church exists in Christ, is constituted by His redemptive work, is sanctified by His Spirit, and is heading toward the eternal dwelling in His presence that John 17:24 describes as His own desire.

To all generations forever and ever. The doxology that has closed every lesson of this series will be the declaration of the eschatological assembly that every generation of the present-age church has been preparing for and pointing toward. The congregation that gathers in East Texas on the Lord's Day to read the Word, hear the sermon, sing the psalms and hymns, pray the prayers, receive the ordinances, and send its members back into the world as disciples who make disciples, is a specific, historically located, geographically situated, culturally embedded expression of the eternal community of the redeemed, and its gathering on any given Lord's Day is a participation in the worship that will never end, an anticipation of the assembly that will never be diminished, and a contribution

to the eschatological multitude that will stand before the throne forever and declare: Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. Amen.

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.”

Revelation 19:7–8, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Church Militant	The church in her present state, engaged in spiritual warfare, internal struggle, external opposition, and the persistent imperfections that mark the life of a community of redeemed-but-not-yet-glorified sinners in the interval between the first and second advents. Not a pejorative description but an honest one: the same church that is destined for the glory of the church triumphant is the church that is passing through the weakness, limitation, and ongoing struggle of the present age. The church militant is the church triumphant in process.
Church Triumphant	The church in her final and eternal state: fully glorified, perfectly united, eternally worshipping the Lamb upon the throne, with every tear wiped away, death abolished, and every enemy defeated. Not a different community from the church militant but the same community in the fullness of what the Bridegroom's sanctifying and glorifying work has accomplished in her. Described in Revelation 7:9-12, 19:7-9, and 21:1-5. The church militant is on her way to becoming the church triumphant under the Bridegroom's care.
Matthew 16:18	Christ's foundational promise: 'I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.' Three elements: (1) 'I will build', the church is Christ's project, not a human institution that seeks divine assistance; (2) 'My church', the possessive establishing the church's identity as determined by Christ who owns and purchased her; (3) 'the gates of Hades will not overpower it', the promise that the present age's battering, persecution, and diminishment will not be the final word. The church is indestructible not because she is strong but because the One who builds her is faithful.
Ephesians 5:25-27	The most complete apostolic statement of Christ's purpose for the church: sacrifice ('He loved the church and gave Himself up for her'), sanctification ('that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word'), and presentation ('that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless'). The three movements describe the full arc from the cross to the consummation. The present age is the age of sanctification; the parousia is the moment of presentation.
Revelation 19:7-9	The eschatological fulfillment of the bridal imagery: the marriage of the Lamb, the bride made ready, clothed in fine linen (the righteous acts of the saints, given to her as a gift from the Bridegroom's sanctifying work), and the declaration 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' The consummation of the covenant love story that runs through the entire Scripture from the garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem.
Revelation 7:9	The eschatological vision of the church in her final diversity: 'a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands.' The fulfillment of the Great Commission's scope (all the nations); the harvest that the present-age mission is gathering; the declaration of the multitude ('Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb') as the eternal worship for which the present-age church's corporate gatherings are preparation and anticipation.
Revelation 21:1-5	The vision of the new creation and the new Jerusalem: 'a new heaven and a new earth,' 'the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband,' the covenant formula fulfilled ('He will dwell among them'), every tear wiped away, death abolished, mourning and crying and pain ended, and 'Behold, I am making all things new.' The church in her final form is not a disembodied spiritual community but the holy city in the renewed creation. The completion of the new creation that 2 Corinthians 5:17 describes in the present age.

John 17:24	Christ's prayer expressing His own desire for the eschatological union: 'Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory.' The desire is personal and specific: the Bridegroom's longing for the presence of His bride, the desire for the union of presence that the marriage of Revelation 19 accomplishes. The purpose of the union is the vision of glory, seeing face to face what the present age has known only through the apostolic deposit. The prayer is both desire and declaration of intent: He will bring them where He is.
The Bridal Imagery	The comprehensive biblical metaphor for the relationship between Christ and His church, running from Old Testament prophetic use (Hosea, Isaiah 62, Ezekiel 16) through the New Testament (Ephesians 5:25-27, John 3:29, 2 Corinthians 11:2) to the eschatological fulfillment (Revelation 19:7-9, 21:2). The Bridegroom loves His bride with the love that gave Himself up for her; is sanctifying her; will present her without spot or wrinkle; desires to be with her where He is; and at the marriage of the Lamb will receive her in the presence of the Father and all the heavenly host.
Soli Deo Gloria	Latin for 'To God Alone Be the Glory', the closing declaration of every lesson in this series and the comprehensive confession of the entire ecclesiological project. The glory is in the church (Ephesians 3:21, God displays His wisdom through the church to the spiritual world) but it belongs to God (the church is the location where the glory is visible; God is the One whose glory it is). The present-age doxology of Ephesians 3:20-21 will become the eternal declaration of the eschatological assembly of Revelation 7:10-12. The series ends where every good theology must end: not with the church but with the God for whom the church exists.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must recognize that the church in its present form is not yet the church in its final glory. The spots, wrinkles, and imperfections of this age remind us that we still await Christ's completed work. A congregation that honestly acknowledges its present weakness is not lacking faith but demonstrating theological realism, living in hope of the day when Christ will present His bride in perfect holiness and splendor.

We must believe that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church, not because the church is strong but because her Lord has promised and He is faithful. The present age's cultural hostility to the gospel, the internal failures and fractures of the covenant community, the persistent imperfection of even the most faithfully ordered congregation, and the apparent weakness of the church's institutional presence in an increasingly post-Christian culture, none of these is the final word. The final word is the Bridegroom's promise: I will build My church. The final word is the Bridegroom's prayer: Father, I desire that they be with Me where I am. The final word is the Bridegroom's declaration from the throne: Behold, I am making all things new.

We must believe that the eternal worship described in Revelation 7:9-12 is the destination toward which every Lord's Day gathering of this congregation is pointing, every ordinance it administers is anticipating, and every act of missional faithfulness it performs is contributing to. The thirty-lesson series that concludes with this vision has not been preparing the congregation for an institutional improvement program; it has been forming the congregation in the identity and the practice of the community that will stand before the throne and declare, with the innumerable multitude from every nation, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a genuine longing for the completion of what the present age has begun, a genuine, eschatological longing for the day when the Bridegroom returns to receive His bride, when the marriage of the Lamb is come, and when the community gathered around the Lord's Table in imperfection and hope is finally gathered around the eternal feast without imperfection and without hope, because faith has become sight and hope has become possession. This longing is not an escapism that abandons the present age; it is the energy that sustains faithful presence in the present age precisely because it knows what the present age is pointing toward.

We should feel a genuine, specific, pastoral affection for this congregation, for the specific members of this specific community in this specific time and place who are together the covenant community that these thirty lessons have been describing. Not the abstract church of ecclesiological theory but the actual congregation that gathers on the Lord's Day with all its imperfections and all its struggles and all its genuine love for the Lord and for one another. These are the people who will stand before the throne. These are the members of the innumerable multitude in their preliminary gathering. This congregation, in its imperfect present form, is a genuinely significant community in the economy of God's redemptive purposes.

We should desire to present ourselves faithful at the end, to be found, at the Lord's return, as those who took the apostolic deposit seriously, who cared for the covenant community with the seriousness and the love that the thirty lessons have described, and who participated in the gathering of the eschatological assembly through the specific, local, faithful obedience that the Great Commission requires of every member in every place in every generation. Not the heroic faithfulness of exceptional spiritual achievement, but the quiet, sustained, Spirit-

dependent faithfulness of those who continued in the apostolic teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers (Acts 2:42) until the end of the age.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Revelation 7:9-17 in full as the eschatological vision that gives the entire thirty-lesson series its ultimate orientation. Note the diversity of the multitude (every nation, tribes, peoples, tongues), the declaration of the multitude ('Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'), the response of the heavenly host (verses 11-12), and the elder's description of who these are and how they arrived there (verses 13-14: 'These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb'). How does this vision change the way you understand this specific congregation's weekly gathering?
- Write the series synthesis that Lesson 29 anticipated: a single paragraph that integrates the thirty lessons of the series into a unified account of what the church is, what she does, and where she is going. The paragraph should move from the covenant foundations (Units 1-4) through the governance (Unit 5), the ordinances (Units 6-7), the discipline (Unit 8), the worship (Unit 9), the mission (Units 10), and the eschatological hope (Unit 11). This synthesis is both a theological exercise and a personal formation exercise: the congregation member who can write this paragraph has genuinely internalized the series and is equipped to live its vision.
- Identify one specific commitment you will make as a direct result of this series, one specific change to the way you participate in the life of this covenant community that the thirty lessons have called you to. The commitment should be specific enough to be actionable and significant enough to represent a genuine response to what the series has described. It might be a deeper engagement with the corporate worship, a more intentional participation in the covenant accountability that genuine membership requires, a more active participation in the congregation's missional life, or some other specific expression of the theological formation the series has provided.
- Pray specifically for the elders of this congregation, for the congregation's membership as a whole, and for the specific people in this congregation's community who have not yet come to faith in Jesus Christ, with the specific awareness that the prayer is a participation in the eschatological project that these thirty lessons have described: the gathering of the community that will stand before the throne, the preparation of the bride for the Bridegroom's return, and the advancement of the mission that is adding voices to the innumerable multitude from every nation. This is not merely pastoral prayer; it is eschatological participation.
- Receive the closing doxology of the series, Ephesians 3:20-21, as your own personal declaration, addressed to the God who has been the subject of the entire series, the builder of the church, the Bridegroom of the bride, the Father of the multitude, and the One who sits on the throne: 'Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.' Say it out loud. Mean it. Let it be the last word of the series that sends you back into the covenant community's life with the conviction, the courage, and the joy that the doctrine of the church, rightly understood, was always designed to produce.

Key Texts: Matthew 16:18; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:1-5; Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 7:9; John 17:24

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Having completed this thirty-lesson series, what is the most significant single thing you now understand about the church that you did not understand before, or that you understood differently before? How has the series changed your understanding of, your participation in, and your hope for the covenant community to which you belong?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Matthew 16:13-19. What is the context of the great commission promise (Peter's confession of Christ as the Son of the living God)? What does verse 18 say Christ will build? What possessive does he use? What three elements make up the promise? How does the building, the ownership, and the protection together constitute the ground of the church's present courage?
- Read Ephesians 5:25-27. What three actions does Paul describe? What is the specific goal of the sacrifice (verse 26)? What is the means of the ongoing sanctification (verse 26)? What is the description of the final presentation (verse 27)? How do the three movements together describe the full arc of the church's relationship to her Lord from the cross to the consummation?
- Read Revelation 7:9-17. What is the first thing John sees (verse 9)? What is the declaration of the multitude (verse 10)? What is the response of the angels, elders, and living creatures (verses 11-12)? Who are these people and how did they arrive (verses 13-14)? What is their present occupation (verse 15)? What are the promises of verses 16-17?
- Read Revelation 21:1-5. What is new (verse 1)? What comes down from heaven and how is it described (verse 2)? What does the voice from the throne declare (verses 3-4)? What is wiped away? What is abolished? What does the One on the throne say (verse 5)? How does the covenant formula of verse 3 ('they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them') connect to the covenant formula that has governed the biblical narrative since Genesis?
- Read John 17:20-26. For whom does Jesus pray in verse 20? What does He ask for in verse 21, and what purpose does He give (so that the world may believe)? What does verse 22 say He has given them? What is the specific desire He expresses in verse 24, and what is the purpose of that desire? How does this prayer connect the present-age church's unity and mission to the eschatological vision of Revelation 7:9?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson describes the church militant as 'the church triumphant in the process of becoming what she will be.' Is this a helpful and accurate description of the relationship between the present-age church and the eschatological church? What does it imply for how the present-age church should understand her own imperfections and failures, as terminal conditions that disqualify her from the glory she is heading toward, or as the 'not yet' of a process whose completion is guaranteed by the Bridegroom's work?
- The lesson argues that the fine linen of Revelation 19:8 ('the righteous acts of the saints') was 'given to her', that it is the Bridegroom's gift to the bride, the proof of His sanctifying work, not the bride's own spiritual achievement. Is this interpretation of Revelation 19:8 persuasive? How does this interpretation relate to the Reformed soteriology that this series has consistently affirmed? And what does it imply for the relationship between the present age's sanctification and the eschatological presentation?

- The lesson locates the church's indestructibility in the promise of the One who builds her rather than in her own institutional strength. How should this conviction shape the church's response to periods of apparent institutional decline, cultural hostility, or visible weakness? Is there a danger that this conviction produces a passive resignation to institutional failure, on the grounds that Christ will build His church regardless of what the present-age church does or fails to do?
- The lesson describes the church's eternal occupation as the worship of Revelation 7:9-12, the perpetual declaration of 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' How does this eschatological vision of eternal worship shape the present-age church's understanding of its corporate worship as described in Unit 9? In what sense is every Lord's Day gathering a participation in and an anticipation of the eternal worship that Revelation 7 describes?
- The lesson concludes: 'The doctrine of the church begins with the character of God and ends with the worship of God.' Is this a valid summary of the entire thirty-lesson series? What specifically connects the doctrine of the church, its covenant foundations, governance, ordinances, discipline, worship, and mission, to the character of God as the series has described it? And what does the doctrine of the church's ending in the worship of God say about the ultimate purpose of the church's entire present-age institutional life?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson calls the present-age church to the 'patient, hopeful, Spirit-dependent continuance in the apostolic deposit' grounded in the certainty of the eschatological promise. What does this specific kind of faithfulness look like in the specific context of this congregation's current situation? What are the specific temptations to impatience, despair, or self-reliance that the congregation is currently most susceptible to, and how does the eschatological certainty of Revelation 19, 21, and Matthew 16:18 specifically address those temptations?
- The series has covered thirty lessons across eleven units. Looking back over the full curriculum, which unit do you believe has most directly addressed this congregation's most significant current gap between its present form and the apostolic ideal the series has described? What specific, concrete step toward closing that gap would you recommend, and why?
- The final practical application calls for the writing of the series synthesis, the single paragraph integrating all thirty lessons into a unified account of what the church is, what she does, and where she is going. Write that paragraph now, and bring it to the final study session as your contribution to the group's collective reception and internalization of the series. Let the paragraph be your own personal theological summary, in your own words, of what this series has given you.
- The series closes with the Soli Deo Gloria, 'To God alone be the glory.' In one final reflection, describe how this series has deepened your understanding of why the glory belongs to God alone in the church's life. How does the understanding of the church as God's covenant community, built by His Son, sanctified by His Spirit, heading toward His eternal presence, and existing for His eternal worship change the way you understand the church's institutional life, its successes and failures, its present imperfections and its promised glory?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Revelation 7:9-12 aloud, slowly, with full awareness that this is the vision of where the church is going and what she is for: 'After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.' Read it again, with full attention. This is the destination. This is the culmination of every covenant established, every ordinance administered, every sermon preached, every discipline exercised, every gathering of worship, every act of mission. The multitude from every nation, standing before the throne, crying out with a loud voice: Salvation to our God. This is where the church is going. Let the vision shape every prayer that follows.

Pray for this congregation with the Revelation 7:9 vision as the frame. Pray that every member of this congregation who has been constituted as the new covenant community through genuine faith in Jesus Christ would persevere, would endure through the struggles of the present age, the spiritual warfare, the internal imperfections, and the external hostility that the church militant always faces, and would arrive at the throne as one of the innumerable multitude from every nation. Pray for any members of this congregation who are currently struggling with discouragement, doubt, or the temptation to abandon the covenant community's life, that the eschatological vision would sustain them through the present age's darkness, and that the promise of Matthew 16:18 would be more real to them than the present age's apparent weakness.

Pray with gratitude for the thirty lessons of this series, for the theological formation they have provided, for the congregation's willingness to engage them, for the elders who have led the study, and for the Spirit who has worked through the Word to form the congregation in the knowledge and the obedience of God. The formation is not complete; no present-age formation is complete. But the formation that has occurred through these thirty lessons is genuine, and the congregation that has genuinely engaged them is a congregation that is more fully equipped to be the covenant community the apostolic deposit describes, more fully prepared for the mission the Great Commission assigns, and more fully oriented toward the eschatological destiny that this final lesson has described. Give thanks for that formation, and pray for its continuation in the community's ongoing life under the Word.

Close by receiving the closing doxology of the series as the prayer that gathers everything into its proper end, the end that is not the church but the God for whom the church exists. Read it aloud: 'Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.' This is the prayer that the church has prayed in every generation, that the eschatological assembly will pray in the eternal generation, and that this congregation prays now, at the conclusion of thirty lessons on the doctrine of the church, as the declaration that places every preceding lesson in its proper orientation: not the church for her own sake, but the church for the glory of the God who created her, redeemed her, is sanctifying her, and will one day present her without spot or

wrinkle to Himself, the Bridegroom who loved her and gave Himself up for her. To this God, in this church, through this Christ, forever and ever: Soli Deo Gloria.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Matthew 16:18; Revelation 19:7–9; 21:1–5; Ephesians 5:25–27; Revelation 7:9; John 17:24

The Series Completed

Thirty Lessons • Eleven Units • One Church • One Glory

Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

Revelation 7:10, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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