

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 2: THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

What the Church Is Before It Considers What the Church Does

Lesson 3

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Ekklesia and Its Meaning — The Called-Out Assembly of God's Redeemed People

Before the church can know what she is to do, she must know what she is — and what she is, is determined entirely by who she belongs to.

“The church is not an organization you join — it is a Body to which you belong, a Bride for whom Christ died, a Temple in which God dwells.”

Key Texts: Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 1:22–23; 2:19–22; 5:25–32; 1 Peter 2:9–10

“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

Every discipline must begin with a definition, and ecclesiology is no exception. Before we can speak with any precision about the marks of the true church, the nature of church membership, the form of church government, the administration of the ordinances, or the practice of church discipline, we must answer a prior and more fundamental question: what is the church? The answer to that question will not be found in a survey of popular religious practice, in the dictionary's definition of an institution, or in the accumulated assumptions of Western Christendom. It will be found in the vocabulary, the metaphors, and the explicit theological claims of Holy Scripture — and those are considerably richer, more demanding, and more glorious than most church members have ever been taught.

The lesson before us is, at its core, a lexical and biblical-theological investigation. We begin with the word itself: the Greek *ekklesia*, which is the New Testament's primary term for the community we call "the church." Understanding that word, its background in the Greco-Roman world, its Old Testament antecedent in the Hebrew *qahal*, and its distinctive New Testament usage, is not merely a philological exercise. It shapes the way we think about what the church is and how she is constituted. A word that means "called-out assembly" tells us something decisive: the church is not a community that gathers itself by its own initiative or constitutes itself by its own will. She is a community that has been called, summoned, assembled, gathered, by the living God for His own purposes.

From the word, the lesson moves to the biblical metaphors. The New Testament does not offer a single, comprehensive, technical definition of the church; it offers a constellation of vivid images, each illuminating a different facet of the church's identity and each carrying its own pastoral freight. The church is the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the flock of God. Each of these images deserves sustained attention, because each one establishes a relationship, the church's relationship to the Son, to the Spirit, and to the Father who calls her, and each relationship carries with it a set of obligations, expectations, and glories that no institutional definition can capture. This is the unit in which the series turns from prolegomena to substance, from asking why the church matters to asking what the church actually is.

A word about what we are not doing in this lesson. We are not asking the sociological question, what does the church look like in various cultural expressions? We are not asking the historical question, how has the church understood herself across the centuries (that was Lesson 2's task)? We are not asking the practical question, how should the church be structured and governed (that task belongs to later units)? We are asking the ontological and theological question: what kind of thing is the church? What is her essential nature? By what relationship is she defined? What does it mean to say that one belongs to her? The answers will carry us into the deep places of Christology, pneumatology, and the doctrine of union with Christ, because the church, rightly understood, cannot be defined without reference to the triune God who created her, purchased her, and dwells within her.

I. THE WORD EKKLESIA

Called-Out Assembly in Its Linguistic and Cultural Context

A. *The Greco-Roman Background*

The Greek word *ekklesia* is a compound of the preposition *ek* (out of, from) and the verb *kaleō* (to call). Its literal meaning, therefore, is a “calling out” or “a called-out assembly.” In the classical Greek world, the word had a specific and well-understood civic meaning: it referred to the official assembly of the free male citizens of a Greek city-state, convened by a herald’s summons to conduct the public business of the polis. The *ekklesia* of Athens, for example, was the governing assembly of the Athenian democracy, in which eligible citizens gathered to debate legislation, ratify treaties, elect officials, and exercise the collective will of the city. It was a formal, summoned, purposive gathering, not a spontaneous crowd or a social club, but a recognized body of people called together for a specific and weighty purpose.

The word *ekklesia* appears in this secular sense in Acts 19:32, 39, 41, where Luke uses it three times to describe the tumultuous civic assembly that the silversmiths of Ephesus convened against Paul. This usage confirms that in the first-century world, the word retained its civic connotations: a formal, summoned assembly of a recognized community. When the New Testament writers chose this word to describe the community of Christ’s disciples, they were not choosing an obscure or novel term. They were appropriating a word that their Greco-Roman audience understood, and investing it with a radically new meaning. The church is an *ekklesia*: a called assembly. But it is not the assembly of a city’s citizens convened by a civic herald. It is the assembly of God’s redeemed people, summoned by the gospel of Jesus Christ, gathered around the apostles’ teaching, and constituted for the purposes of God in the world.

The civic background of *ekklesia* is theologically suggestive in ways that repay careful reflection. The ancient *ekklesia* was not a voluntary association that citizens joined at their own discretion; it was a body to which they belonged by virtue of their citizenship. The herald’s summons was not an invitation to those who happened to find the agenda interesting; it was a call that claimed the attendance and participation of every eligible citizen. In analogous fashion, the church is not a voluntary religious society that individuals join because they find it personally fulfilling. She is the community to which those who have been called by God belong, those who have heard the gospel summons, have been regenerated by the Spirit, and have been incorporated into the body of Christ by faith and baptism. The call creates the community, and the community is constituted by those who have received and answered the call.

B. *The Old Testament Background: The Qahal*

The New Testament’s appropriation of *ekklesia* did not happen in a theological vacuum. The word was already the Septuagint’s standard translation of the Hebrew *qahal*, the Old Testament term for the assembly of Israel gathered before the Lord. Deuteronomy 4:10 is representative: “Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when the LORD said to me, ‘Assemble the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words.’” The *qahal* is the covenant assembly, the people of God gathered in God’s presence, under God’s word, for God’s purposes. The paradigm instances are the assembly at Sinai, where Israel gathered to receive the law (Deuteronomy 9:10),

and the great assemblies of the later Old Testament at which the covenant was renewed and the Word was read (Nehemiah 8:1–8; 2 Chronicles 6:3–11).

The significance of this Old Testament background for the New Testament’s use of *ekklesia* is considerable. When the New Testament writers call the community of Christ’s disciples the *ekklesia*, they are implicitly identifying that community as the eschatological fulfillment of the covenant assembly of Israel. The church is the *qahal* of the new covenant era, the people of God gathered in the last days under the word of the apostles (which is the word of Christ), around the ordinances of the new covenant (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), in the presence of the Spirit who has been poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:17). The continuity is genuine: the God who gathered Israel at Sinai is the same God who gathers His people in Christ. But the newness is equally genuine: the new covenant assembly is not limited by ethnic boundary or geographic location, is constituted by a better covenant mediated by a better Mediator, and is indwelt by the promised Spirit in a way that old covenant Israel never was.

Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:38 confirms this connection explicitly, using *ekklesia* to describe Israel in the wilderness: “This is the one who was in the congregation (*ekklesia*) in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai.” The word choice is deliberate. Stephen is not drawing a sharp discontinuity between Israel and the church; he is tracing the continuity of the covenant assembly from Sinai to the community gathered around Jesus. There is one assembly of the living God across both testaments, constituted by covenant and gathered under His Word, and the church of the new covenant is that assembly in its eschatological fullness. This is precisely the hermeneutical instinct of Progressive Covenantal Biblical Theology: the church is not a new entity disconnected from the old covenant story, but the appointed *telos* toward which that story was always moving.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT USAGE OF EKKLESIA

Local Assembly and Universal Community

A. *The Local Church*

The dominant usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament is local and particular. Paul addresses his letters “to the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2), “to the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thessalonians 1:1), “to all who are in Rome” (Romans 1:7). The churches of Galatia are “the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:2, plural). The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 are addressed to seven distinct local assemblies in seven specific cities, each with its own particular strengths, weaknesses, and pastoral situation. This pattern of address is not accidental or merely conventional. It reflects the New Testament’s consistent understanding that the church exists concretely in particular places, that the abstract noun “church” is always instantiated in a specific community of named and known people gathering in a specific location.

The local church, in the New Testament’s understanding, is not a branch office of a larger organization or a regional expression of a universal institution. She is a complete expression of the body of Christ in her place. The church at Corinth, with all her faults and failures and theological confusions, is nonetheless called “the church of God” and “those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling” (1 Corinthians 1:2). She is not a fragment of the church awaiting completion by connection to a larger whole; she is the church, in her local and particular expression. This is a point of considerable practical significance. The local congregation that meets in an ordinary

building in an ordinary town, whose members are ordinary and struggling and imperfectly sanctified people, is not a lesser form of the church. She is the church, present in that place, for that community, in that generation. Her ordinariness does not diminish her dignity; her dignity is grounded not in her impressiveness but in the one who calls, redeems, and inhabits her.

The local church is also, in the New Testament, a community of genuine accountability and mutual knowledge. When Paul addresses the Corinthians, he knows them, he knows their factions, their moral failures, their spiritual gifts, their doctrinal confusions, and their genuine love for the gospel. The pastoral correspondence of the New Testament is not written to anonymous aggregates of consumers; it is written to communities in which the apostle has invested years of his life, in which he knows the names and stories of individual members, and in which the concrete texture of daily life together creates the context for both sin and sanctification. This is the kind of community the local church is designed to be: not a crowd of strangers who happen to share a preference for a particular worship style, but a covenant community of people who know and are known, who bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), and who are growing together into the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13–16).

B. The Universal Church

Alongside its dominant local usage, the New Testament also employs *ekklesia* in a universal sense, referring to the totality of all believers united to Christ across all times and places. This usage is most prominent in the letter to the Ephesians, where Paul speaks of God's purpose "to sum up all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth" (Ephesians 1:10) and of Christ as "head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:22–23). The church here is not a particular local assembly; she is the cosmic community of all who are united to Christ, the body of which every local congregation is a local expression and a genuine part. Similarly, Ephesians 5:25–27 speaks of Christ giving Himself for "the church" in a sense that cannot be restricted to any single local assembly; it is the church in her universal extent that He died for, sanctifies, and will present to Himself in glory.

The relationship between the universal and the local church is not one of institution to branch, or archetype to copy. It is organic: the universal church exists as the one body of Christ, and that one body is expressed and instantiated in the particular gathered assemblies of believers in every place and time. Paul's instruction to the Corinthians that they are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) is not a claim that the Corinthian congregation exhausts the body of Christ; it is a claim that the body of Christ is genuinely, fully present in the Corinthian assembly, that what is true of the universal church is true of, and embodied in, the local congregation. This has the practical implication that the local church is not merely instrumental, a means to an end beyond herself, but is itself a genuine expression of the church's full dignity and calling. To belong to a local church is to belong to the church.

The New Testament also uses *ekklesia* to refer to smaller gatherings within a city, "the church that is in their house" (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2), as well as to the aggregate of congregations in a region (Acts 9:31: "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria"). This range of usage, from the smallest household gathering to the widest regional or universal community, confirms that *ekklesia* is an inherently flexible term whose primary referent is the people of God in their gathered, assembled character, at whatever level of scale that gathering occurs. What does not change across all these usages is the fundamental reality: the church is always a community called by God, defined by her relationship to Christ, and constituted for His purposes in the world.

III. THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

Unity, Diversity, and the Headship of Christ

A. *The Image and Its Implications*

The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ is Paul's most sustained and theologically dense image for the church's nature. It appears in concentrated form in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 and Ephesians 4:1–16, and in a different key in Ephesians 1:22–23 and Colossians 1:18. The image is not decorative; it is ontological. Paul is not merely saying that the church functions like a body, that her members have different roles as the organs of the body have different functions. He is saying that the church is the body of Christ in the most literal theological sense available to him: she is the corporate humanity that is organically united to the risen Lord by the indwelling Spirit, sharing His life, expressing His character, and continuing His mission in the world.

The Christological claim embedded in this image is staggering. When the risen Christ confronted Paul on the road to Damascus and asked, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4), He identified Himself with the people whom Paul was persecuting. The church is so closely identified with Christ that to attack her is to attack Him. This identification is not merely moral or emotional; it is ontological, grounded in the Spirit's work of uniting the members of the church to one another and to their Head. The head and the body are one organism. What is true of the head, His death, His resurrection, His justification, His glorification, is true of the body. What is done to the body, in love or in persecution, is done to the Head. No ecclesiology that grasps this image will be able to treat the church casually.

The body metaphor also addresses the twin perils of uniformity and fragmentation. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul develops the image specifically to correct a community that was being torn apart by envy, pride, and the competitive display of spiritual gifts. The body is one, but it has many members, and the diversity of the members is not a liability to be overcome but the design of the Head to be embraced. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21). The church's strength is not her uniformity but her Spirit-given, Christologically ordered diversity. Every member is necessary; every gift is for the common good; no position in the body is without dignity, and no member is dispensable. This is a vision of community that stands in radical contrast to both the individualism of modern culture and the uniformity of institutional conformity.

B. *Christ as Head: The Governance of the Body*

If the church is the body of Christ, then Christ is the Head, and the significance of His headship cannot be overstated. Ephesians 1:22–23 places the headship of Christ over the church in the context of His cosmic exaltation: the Father has put "all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church." The Head of the church is not a figure of local importance or limited jurisdiction; He is the one to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matthew 28:18), the one who rules over all principalities and powers (Ephesians 1:21), and who has been given this universal authority specifically for the benefit and governance of His body.

The headship of Christ has two inseparable dimensions: authority and provision. As Head, Christ governs the church, He is the source of her doctrine, the Lord of her worship, the King of her mission, and the judge of her

conduct. No human authority in the church is coordinate with or independent of His. The pastor, the elder board, the council, or the congregation that makes decisions without reference to the revealed will of Christ as Scripture discloses it has exceeded its mandate and usurped the prerogative of the Head. But the headship of Christ is also the source of the church's provision: it is "from Him that the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16). The church does not generate her own life; she receives it from her Head.

Colossians 1:18 adds a third dimension to the image of Christ's headship: priority. "He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything." The resurrection is the event that establishes Christ's headship in its final form. He is the Head because He is the firstborn from the dead, the pioneer and prototype of the resurrection life that every member of His body will one day share. The church's identity as the body of the risen Christ means that she is an eschatological community: she lives now in the power of the age to come, as those who share in the resurrection life of the Head, awaiting the consummation when the whole body will be raised in glory. The doctrine of the church is inseparable from the doctrine of the resurrection, and both are inseparable from the doctrine of the Last Things.

IV. THE CHURCH AS THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

The Most Intimate Image and Its Demands

A. *The Bridal Metaphor in Scripture*

Of all the New Testament's images for the church, none is more intimate, more demanding, or more eschatologically charged than the image of the church as the bride of Christ. Ephesians 5:25–32 is the locus classicus: "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 image reaches its eschatological climax in Revelation 19:7–9: "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." The entire history of the church, from Pentecost to the Parousia, is framed by Paul and John as a betrothal and a wedding: the Lamb has loved the bride, purchased her with His blood, is sanctifying and adorning her through the ministry of the Word, and will present her to Himself on the last day in the glory for which He has been preparing her.

The bridal metaphor is not Paul's invention. It is rooted in the Old Testament's own use of the marriage image for the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel. In Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, the covenant is consistently figured as a marriage: God is the husband, Israel is the wife, and Israel's covenant unfaithfulness is consistently described as adultery and harlotry (Hosea 2:1–23; Jeremiah 2:2; Ezekiel 16; Isaiah 54:5–8). The prophetic promises of restoration are promises of a renewed marriage: "Your husband is your Maker, whose name is the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 54:5); "I will betroth you to Me forever" (Hosea 2:19). The New Testament's application of this bridal imagery to the church and Christ is the covenantal fulfillment of those promises: the new

covenant is the true and everlasting marriage that the old covenant could only anticipate, and the church is the bride who will be presented to her Husband without spot or wrinkle in the day of consummation.

Paul's pastoral application of the bridal metaphor in Ephesians 5 is as demanding as it is beautiful. The image does not function merely as an illustration of what Christ has done; it functions as the measure of what husbands are to do. Husbands are commanded to love their wives "just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." The church's experience of Christ's love is the paradigm for the most intimate human covenant. This means that the church's doctrine and the church's pastoral practice are not separable: the congregation that understands what Christ has done for her, the self-giving, sanctifying, glorifying love of the Bridegroom, is the congregation that is being formed into the kind of community in which human love at its most covenantal becomes possible. Ecclesiology shapes anthropology; the church's understanding of herself shapes the marriages within her.

B. The Holiness of the Bride: What the Image Demands

The bridal image carries with it a demand for holiness that is as urgent as any imperative in the New Testament. Christ's purpose in giving Himself for the church was "that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word" (Ephesians 5:26). The Bridegroom's love is not a sentimental acceptance of the bride as she is; it is a transforming love that pursues her holiness, works through the ministry of the Word to cleanse her of every defilement, and will not rest until she is presented to Himself "in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing." The bride He is preparing is holy and blameless. The church that tolerates persistent, unrepentant sin in her membership, that refuses the hard work of discipline, accountability, and truth-speaking in the name of a false peace, is a bride who resists the Bridegroom's sanctifying work.

The eschatological horizon of the bridal image is equally important. The church is a bride who is being prepared for a wedding that has not yet taken place. She lives now in the betrothal period, the time between the cross, where the price of the bride was paid, and the Parousia, where the Bridegroom will come to receive her. This betrothal period is not a time of waiting in passive resignation; it is a time of active preparation, of putting on the "fine linen, bright and clean" which is "the righteous acts of the saints" (Revelation 19:8). The church's worship, her discipleship, her mission, and her discipline are all aspects of her bridal preparation. Every sermon is the Bridegroom's voice speaking to His bride through the ministry of the Word. Every act of repentance is the bride's glad response to the Bridegroom's call to holiness. Every gathering of the congregation is an anticipation, however partial and imperfect, of the great Wedding Supper of the Lamb.

The bridal image also speaks powerfully to the church's exclusive covenant loyalty. A bride belongs to one husband; her identity is defined by that relationship of exclusive covenantal devotion. The church's identity is entirely bound up in her relationship to Christ, she has no existence, no purpose, no future, and no hope apart from Him. Every compromise of the church's doctrinal or ethical distinctiveness is, in the imagery of the prophets, a form of spiritual adultery: the bride making herself available to other lords, other masters, other wisdom-sources than the Husband who purchased her. The church that pursues cultural acceptance by softening the hard edges of the gospel, the church that chases relevance by conforming her message to the spirit of the age, the church that values institutional survival more than covenantal fidelity, all of these are departures from the exclusive loyalty that the bridal image demands. The bride of Christ has one Lord, and to Him she owes her undivided devotion.

V. THE CHURCH AS THE TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Dwelling Place of God in the World

A. *The Old Testament Background and Its New Covenant Fulfillment*

The temple was the defining institution of old covenant worship: the place where the presence of God dwelt among His people, where sacrifice was offered and atonement was made, where the covenant was maintained and renewed, and where the glory of the Lord was most visibly manifest. The Shekinah glory that filled the tabernacle at its dedication (Exodus 40:34–35) and the temple at Solomon’s dedication (1 Kings 8:10–11) was the visible sign of what the temple most fundamentally was: the dwelling place of the living God among His people. The temple was not merely a religious building; it was the cosmic center of the covenant community, the axis mundi of Israel’s world, the place where heaven and earth intersected in the manifest presence of God.

The prophets had promised that the temple’s glory would be surpassed in the new covenant age (Haggai 2:9; Ezekiel 40–48). That promise begins to find its fulfillment in the Incarnation, John tells us that the Word became flesh and “dwelt among us” (John 1:14), using the verb *skenō* (to tabernacle, to pitch a tent), which is the precise Greek word used for the Shekinah’s presence in the tabernacle. Jesus is the true Temple: the place where God and humanity meet, where atonement is accomplished, and where the presence of God is fully and personally manifest. His body, destroyed and raised in three days (John 2:19–21), is the new temple that replaces the old. And the community constituted by His death and resurrection, the church, is the extension of that temple into the world: the corporate dwelling place of the God who now inhabits His people by His Spirit.

Paul’s application of the temple image to the church in 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 and Ephesians 2:19–22 is among the most theologically concentrated passages in the New Testament. “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are” (1 Corinthians 3:16–17). The “you” is plural throughout: the corporate assembly is the temple. Ephesians 2:19–22 develops the image in even more architectural detail: the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone, “in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” The church is not merely where God is worshiped; she is where God dwells. The gathered assembly is, in the most theologically precise sense, the house of God.

B. *The Holiness of the Temple and the Seriousness of Its Desecration*

The temple image is not only glorious; it is demanding and, in the hands of Paul, explicitly threatening. “If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are” (1 Corinthians 3:17). The context is Paul’s address of the factionalism and party spirit that were tearing the Corinthian church apart, groups forming around Paul, Apollos, and Cephas, each claiming superior spiritual status. Paul’s warning is sobering: to destroy the unity and holiness of the church through divisive pride is to attack the temple of God, and God will not hold that attacker guiltless. The temple is holy because the Holy Spirit dwells in it; and what is holy must not be defiled. Church unity is not merely a matter of institutional preference or pastoral pragmatics. It is a theological imperative grounded in the Spirit’s indwelling presence.

Ephesians 2:19–22 presents the temple under construction, a holy temple “growing” and “being built together.” The present participles are significant: the church’s character as the dwelling of God is not a static achievement but a dynamic process. The Spirit is presently at work fitting the living stones together, aligning them to the cornerstone, and growing the whole structure into the holy temple that the new covenant promises. Every act of genuine sanctification in a member of the congregation, every restored relationship between estranged brothers, every new believer added to the community through the preaching of the gospel, all of this is the temple taking shape. The church’s growth in holiness and unity is not merely a mark of institutional health; it is the fulfillment of the eschatological promise of the temple’s glory.

The practical implications of the temple image for the church’s life of worship are profound. If the church is the dwelling place of God, then her gathered worship is not a performance staged for human benefit; it is an encounter with the living God who is present in her midst by His Spirit. The sermon is not merely an educational lecture; it is the Word of God addressed to the people of God by the Spirit of God through the servant of God. The Lord’s Supper is not merely a commemorative rite; it is a covenant meal at which the risen Christ is present with His people through the Spirit. Prayer is not merely a human exercise in religious expression; it is the corporate address of the covenant community to the God who dwells among them. The recovery of a robust theology of the church as the temple of the Spirit would transform the way congregations approach the hour of gathered worship, with reverence, expectation, and a sense of the weight of glory that is present whenever the people of God assemble in the name of Christ.

VI. THE CHURCH AS THE FLOCK OF GOD

The Shepherd, the Under-Shepherds, and the Sheep

A. Christ the Chief Shepherd

The fourth great image through which the New Testament defines the church is the image of the flock. John 10:1–16 is the foundational text: “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” The flock image is ancient, the Psalms are saturated with it (Psalm 23; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3), and the prophets deployed it consistently to describe both the failure of Israel’s leaders (Ezekiel 34) and the promise of God’s own shepherding care (Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:11–16). When Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd, He is claiming to be the fulfillment of the prophetic promise that God Himself would come to shepherd His scattered and mistreated flock. The church is that flock, the sheep who hear the Shepherd’s voice, who know Him and follow Him, and for whom He has laid down His life.

The flock image captures dimensions of the church’s identity that the other images do not foreground. The body image emphasizes organic union with Christ and mutual interdependence among members. The bride image emphasizes covenantal love, holiness, and eschatological expectation. The temple image emphasizes the presence of God and the demand for holiness. The flock image emphasizes vulnerability, dependence, and the need for ongoing care, guidance, and protection. Sheep are not self-sufficient; they require a shepherd. They are prone to wander (Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 2:25), vulnerable to predators, unable to find their own way back when they are lost. The church is a community of people who, without the ongoing shepherding care of Christ mediated through His

appointed under-shepherds, would be scattered, deceived, and destroyed. The humility embedded in the flock image is one of the most important correctives to every form of ecclesial triumphalism.

Jesus' claim in John 10:16 reaches beyond Israel to the Gentiles: "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd." The eschatological gathering of the flock is both universal and singular: one flock, one Shepherd. The church of the new covenant is the fulfillment of this promise, the community in which Jewish and Gentile believers are gathered into one body under the one Shepherd who laid down His life for both. The unity of the church, which Paul labors so earnestly to maintain (Ephesians 4:3–6), is grounded in the singularity of the Shepherd: because there is one Shepherd, there is one flock. Division in the church is, in the flock's terms, a denial of the Shepherd's lordship.

B. Elders as Under-Shepherds and the Accountability of the Flock

The New Testament transfers the shepherding image to the pastoral office in texts that are foundational for the doctrine of eldership. Peter charges the elders of the churches to "shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:1–4). Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28–30 is equally compelling: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock."

The under-shepherd metaphor is one of the most searching descriptions of pastoral ministry in the New Testament. It specifies the pastor's authority, he does not rule in his own name but as the representative of the Chief Shepherd, and his authority extends no further than the Chief Shepherd's authorization. It specifies his responsibility, he is accountable not merely to the congregation but to the Lord who purchased the flock with His own blood, and whose assessment of the shepherd's stewardship will come at the appearing of the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). It specifies his manner, not lording it over the flock, not for sordid gain, but eagerly and as an example. And it specifies the primary threat the flock faces: not the challenge of irrelevance or institutional decline, but the attack of wolves, false teachers who enter the community and distort the truth to draw disciples after themselves (Acts 20:30). The elder who does not guard the flock's doctrine is not a shepherd; he is a gatekeeper who has abandoned his post.

The flock image also speaks to the congregation's responsibility toward its own under-shepherds. Hebrews 13:17 charges the congregation: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." The sheep are not passive recipients of the shepherd's ministry; they are active participants in a covenantal relationship in which they receive the shepherd's care with genuine submission and gratitude, and in which they do not make the shepherd's work unnecessarily grievous by their rebelliousness, their criticism, or their indifference. The flock that submits to its under-shepherds does so not because those shepherds are infallible or beyond accountability, but because the Chief Shepherd has appointed them, and to honor them in their office is to honor Him.

VII. THE CHURCH DEFINED BY HER RELATIONSHIPS

What the Four Images Together Declare

A. *What the Images Collectively Reveal*

The four images surveyed in this lesson, body, bride, temple, flock, are not interchangeable synonyms; each illuminates a different dimension of the church's identity and each carries its own set of practical demands. Taken together, they form a portrait of the church that no single institutional definition can replicate. The body image establishes organic union with Christ and diversity-in-unity among members. The bride image establishes covenantal love, exclusive loyalty, holiness, and eschatological expectation. The temple image establishes the Spirit's indwelling presence, the demand for holiness, and the nature of gathered worship as an encounter with God. The flock image establishes the church's dependence on her Shepherd, the role of under-shepherds in her care, and the reality of threat from false teachers. No one of these images is dispensable; together they constitute the biblical portrait of what the church is.

What all four images share is this: the church is entirely defined by her relationships. She is not an institution that exists in its own right, with its own inherent dignity and authority, whose identity can be read off from its organizational structure. She is a community whose identity is constituted by her relationship to the triune God: to the Father who elected her, to the Son who purchased and heads her and to whom she is betrothed, and to the Spirit who indwells and sanctifies her. Remove those relationships, and there is no church, only a religious organization. This is why the definition of the church cannot be reduced to organizational or institutional categories. She is the people of God, the community that belongs to, is defined by, and lives before the face of the God who called her into being by His Word and Spirit.

Peter's great declaration in 1 Peter 2:9–10 gathers the threads of all four images into a single doxological statement: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you who had not received mercy, but now have received mercy." The church is a chosen race (election by the Father), a royal priesthood (access to God through the Son), a holy nation (consecrated by the Spirit), a people for God's own possession (belonging entirely to Him). And the purpose of all of this is not the church's own benefit but the proclamation of the excellencies of God. The church exists to declare what God is like, to put His glory on display, and to invite the world to share in the mercy she herself has received.

B. *The Church Is Not a Building, a Denomination, or a Program*

The lexical, biblical-theological, and metaphorical investigation of this lesson yields a conclusion that is both obvious and countercultural: the church is not a building, a denomination, or a program. She is a people. This conclusion, simple as it sounds, has radical implications for the way we think, speak, and practice. We go to a building, but we are the church. We are affiliated with a denomination, but the denomination is not the church; the local congregation is. We participate in programs, but programs can be canceled or redesigned without ceasing to be the church; the gathered assembly of the redeemed cannot be canceled without ceasing to be a community at all.

The practical consequences of this understanding are significant. If the church is a people, a community defined by her relationships to Christ and to one another, then her health is measured not primarily by her attendance figures, her budget, her facilities, or her programming, but by the quality of those relationships: the depth of devotion to the apostles' teaching, the genuineness of the fellowship, the faithfulness of the ordinances, the earnestness of the prayer, and the love of the members for one another and for the Lord they serve. A congregation that is large and well-funded but relationally shallow, doctrinally indifferent, and spiritually inert is not a healthy church by any biblical standard. A congregation that is small and poorly resourced but deeply devoted to the Word, genuinely knit together in love, faithful in the ordinances, and earnest in prayer is exactly the kind of community that the New Testament celebrates. The church's greatness is measured from the inside, not from the outside.

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

1 Peter 2:9, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Ekklesia	The Greek term translated “church” in the New Testament. In the Greco-Roman world, a formal civic assembly of citizens summoned by a herald. In the Septuagint, the standard translation of the Hebrew qahal (assembly of Israel). In the New Testament, the gathered covenant community of Christ’s redeemed people, both locally and universally.
Qahal	The Hebrew Old Testament term for the assembly of Israel gathered before the Lord. The community called together under God’s Word, as paradigmatically at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10). Translated as ekklesia in the Septuagint, establishing the Old Testament background for the New Testament’s use of the term for the church.
Body of Christ	Paul’s primary metaphor for the church’s organic unity and diversity. The church is the corporate humanity united to the risen Christ by the Spirit. Christ is the Head; believers are the members. The body derives its life from the Head, expresses the Head’s character, and continues the Head’s mission (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 1:22–23; 4:15–16).
Bride of Christ	The most intimate New Testament image for the church, grounding her identity in covenantal love and eschatological expectation. Christ the Bridegroom gave Himself for the church, is sanctifying her through the Word, and will present her to Himself in glory (Ephesians 5:25–32; Revelation 19:7–9). Rooted in the Old Testament’s marriage metaphor for the Lord’s covenant with Israel.
Temple of the Spirit	The New Testament’s image for the church as the corporate dwelling place of God in the Spirit. The church fulfills the eschatological promise of a new and greater temple, replacing the old covenant tabernacle and temple. The Spirit’s indwelling constitutes the community as holy ground (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; Ephesians 2:19–22).
Flock of God	The New Testament’s image for the church as a community of dependent sheep gathered and cared for by the Good Shepherd (John 10). Christ is the Chief Shepherd; elders are under-shepherds; the congregation is the flock entrusted to their care (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–4). Rooted in the Old Testament’s extensive use of the shepherd-flock metaphor for the Lord’s relationship to Israel.
Shekinah	A term (not appearing in Scripture but used by Jewish and Christian theologians) for the manifest presence of God, particularly as it filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34–35) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10–11). John’s use of the tabernacling language in John 1:14 identifies Jesus as the true Shekinah, and the Spirit’s indwelling of the church extends this presence into the corporate assembly.
Headship of Christ	Christ’s governance over the church as its supreme authority and source of life. His headship is cosmic in scope (Ephesians 1:22), derivative from the Father’s exaltation of the Son, and exercised for the church’s benefit. All legitimate authority in the church is derivative from and accountable to His headship. Denying the headship of Christ in practice is the root of all ecclesiological tyranny.
Under-Shepherd	The New Testament’s metaphor for the pastoral elder, who shepherds the flock as the representative and under the authority of Christ the Chief Shepherd. The under-shepherd’s authority is derivative, his accountability is to the Chief Shepherd at His appearing, and his manner is to be an example to the flock rather than a lord over it (1 Peter 5:1–4; Acts 20:28–30).
Septuagint (LXX)	The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, produced in Alexandria in the third and second centuries B.C. and used widely by Greek-speaking Jews and early Christians. The New

Testament writers draw heavily on the Septuagint, including in their appropriation of *ekklesia* as the translation of *qahal*, establishing the Old Testament background for the church's self-understanding.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the church is constituted by a divine call, not a human choice. The language of *ekklesia*, a called-out assembly, means that the church is not a voluntary society that individuals join at their own discretion when they find it personally useful. She is the community of those who have heard and answered the divine summons of the gospel. To be in the church is to be among the called. This conviction transforms the way we think about belonging to a local congregation: it is not primarily a preference we exercise but a call we have received and a commitment we owe.

We must believe that the four images by which the New Testament defines the church, body, bride, temple, flock, are not decorative language but theological claims about what the church actually is. The church is organically united to Christ; she is the object of His covenantal love; the Spirit dwells in her corporately; she is dependent on her Shepherd. These are not inspirational metaphors; they are the ontological realities that give the church her identity and that place inescapable demands upon everyone who belongs to her.

We must believe that the church is not a building, a denomination, or a program but a people, and that her health is therefore measured primarily by the quality of her relationships: to Christ through the Word and the Spirit, and to one another in love, accountability, and mutual service. This conviction challenges every ecclesiology that measures success primarily by numbers, budgets, or cultural influence, and calls us back to the New Testament's own standard: devotion to the apostles' teaching, genuine fellowship, faithful observance of the ordinances, and earnest prayer.

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

We should feel a renewed sense of wonder at what the church is. To say that the church is the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, and the flock of the Good Shepherd is to say that the gathered assembly of believers is one of the most theologically weighty realities in all of creation. The local congregation that meets in an ordinary building on an ordinary Sunday morning is the dwelling place of the living God, the body of the risen Christ, the bride for whom He died, and the flock He tends with His own pastoral care. That should produce not familiarity but awe, not the manufactured excitement of a consumer event, but the settled, reverent wonder of those who have been given eyes to see what is really present when God's people gather.

We should feel a deep desire for the church's health and holiness, not merely as an institutional concern but as a covenantal one. If the church is the bride of Christ, then her holiness is the Bridegroom's passionate concern, and it should be ours. If the church is the temple of the Spirit, then her purity is a theological matter, not merely a moral one. If the church is the body of Christ, then her unity is not a nice-to-have but a constitutive expression of the oneness of the Head. Let these truths produce in us a corresponding passion for the church's sanctification, beginning with our own contribution to her health through faithful membership, active participation, and the willingness to speak the truth in love.

We should desire to inhabit every metaphor the New Testament offers with full theological seriousness. To be a member of the body is to take seriously both the gifts we bring and the gifts we need from others; it is to resist the individualism that says, "I have no need of you." To be a member of the bride's community is to honor the exclusive covenantal loyalty the Bridegroom demands; it is to resist every compromise with the spirit of the age.

To be a member of the temple is to come to gathered worship with reverence and expectation; it is to resist the consumerism that evaluates the service as a performance. To be a member of the flock is to receive the ministry of under-shepherds with genuine submission and gratitude; it is to resist the rebellious independence that refuses to be led.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- This week, read 1 Peter 2:9–10 aloud each morning as a declaration of identity. Let the four designations, chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, people for God’s own possession, shape the way you think about yourself, your congregation, and the purpose of your gathered life together. What does each designation demand of you in the coming week?
- Meditate on one of the four images from this lesson, body, bride, temple, or flock, and identify one specific implication for your own participation in this congregation. What does the body metaphor demand of you in terms of your gifts and your dependence on others? What does the bride metaphor demand of you in terms of holiness and exclusive loyalty? What does the temple metaphor demand of you in terms of how you prepare for and participate in gathered worship? What does the flock metaphor demand of you in terms of your relationship to the under-shepherds God has placed over you?
- Examine the language you use when you speak about the church. Do you say “go to church” or “be the church”? Do you describe your congregation primarily in institutional terms (the programs it offers, the facilities it provides) or in relational and theological terms (the community it is, the Lord it serves, the mission it pursues)? Commit to one intentional change in the language you use about the church this week, a change that reflects the theological dignity of what the church actually is.
- If you are not currently a covenanting member of a local congregation, this lesson is a call to address that gap. The church is not an optional supplement to private faith; she is the community to which those who have received the divine call belong. If circumstances or wounds have kept you from formal membership, bring that situation before God in prayer and before a pastor or elder in honest conversation. Seek to be formally received into the covenant community that the Lord has called you into.
- Pray for three specific people in your congregation this week, one person you find difficult, one person you find easy to love, and one person you barely know. Pray for each of them as a fellow member of the body of Christ, a fellow participant in the bride’s preparation, a fellow stone in the temple, a fellow sheep under the Shepherd’s care. Let the theological weight of those relationships transform the quality of the prayer.

Key Texts: *Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 1:22–23; 2:19–22; 5:25–32; 1 Peter 2:9–10*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before this lesson, how would you have defined the church if someone had asked you? Would your definition have been primarily institutional (a building, an organization, a denomination), primarily sociological (a community of like-minded people), or primarily theological (a people defined by their relationship to God)? What shaped that default definition?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Acts 2:42–47 alongside 1 Peter 2:9–10. What do these two passages together tell us about the identity and purpose of the community the New Testament calls the church? How do the four descriptions in 1 Peter 2:9 (chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, people for God’s own possession) relate to the four marks of Acts 2:42 (apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer)?
- Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. What is the main argument Paul makes about unity and diversity in the body? What are the two errors he specifically addresses (verses 15–16 and 21)? How does the argument of verses 22–26 challenge the tendency to honor the visible and prominent members of the congregation while neglecting the less visible?
- Read Ephesians 5:25–32. What three things does Christ do for the church in this passage (gives Himself, sanctifies, presents)? What does each of these actions tell us about the church’s present condition, present process, and future glory? What does Paul say is the “great mystery” in verse 32, and how does that shape the meaning of the passage as a whole?
- Read Ephesians 2:19–22. What four images does Paul use for the church in verses 19–22? What is the “cornerstone,” and what role does it play in the structure? What does it mean that the whole building is “growing” into a holy temple? What does the present tense suggest about the church’s character as the temple?
- Read John 10:1–18. What distinguishes the Good Shepherd from the hireling (verse 13)? What does it mean that the sheep “hear His voice” and “know Him” (verses 3–4, 14)? How does Jesus’ claim in verse 16 (“other sheep”) shape our understanding of the church’s scope and unity?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that *ekklesia* means not merely “a gathered group” but “a summoned assembly”, a community constituted by a call it did not initiate. What are the theological and practical implications of this distinction? How does it challenge the consumer’s understanding of church membership as a voluntary preference?
- Paul’s body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 addresses the twin errors of inferiority (“I am not part of the body because I’m not like the eye”) and superiority (“I have no need of the hand”). Which of these errors do you think is more prevalent in contemporary evangelical churches? How does a robust theology of the body as the work of one Spirit distributing gifts sovereignly (verse 11) address both errors simultaneously?
- The lesson argues that the bridal image demands exclusive covenant loyalty from the church, that every compromise with the spirit of the age is a form of spiritual adultery. Is this a fair application of the image? Where do you see the contemporary church most tempted toward this kind of unfaithfulness? What would renewed covenantal loyalty to Christ look like in practice?

- The temple image in 1 Corinthians 3:17 carries an explicit threat: God will destroy whoever destroys His temple. In context, Paul is addressing party spirit and divisiveness. How broadly should this warning be applied? Does it extend beyond divisiveness to other forms of damage to the community, such as false teaching, sexual immorality (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:15–20), or persistent ungodliness? What does it mean to take this warning seriously in the pastoral care of a congregation?
- The lesson presents 1 Peter 2:9–10 as a summary of the church’s identity and purpose. The passage ends with a purpose clause: the church has been given this identity “so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you.” What does this say about the relationship between the church’s identity (what she is) and her mission (what she does)? Can mission be properly understood apart from identity? Can identity be properly maintained without mission?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- Of the four images, body, bride, temple, flock, which one most challenges your current practice of church membership? What specific change in how you participate in this congregation does that image demand of you?
- The lesson argues that the church’s health is measured by the quality of her relationships rather than by her institutional metrics. How does your congregation currently measure health and success? What would change if the four New Testament images became the primary lens through which you evaluated congregational life?
- The flock image places elders in the role of under-shepherds who are accountable to the Chief Shepherd for their care of the flock. How does your congregation currently support and hold accountable its elders and pastors? In what ways might the congregation’s relationship to its leadership become more genuinely covenantal, more characterized by the mutual accountability described in Hebrews 13:17?
- Peter declares that the church exists “so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). In what specific ways is this congregation currently fulfilling that proclamatory purpose? In what ways is it falling short? What is one step your community could take this month to more faithfully declare the excellencies of God to the watching world around you?

Prayer Focus

Before praying, read 1 Peter 2:9 aloud together: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Read it slowly, and let each phrase land with its full weight. You are chosen. You are royal. You are holy. You are His. Not because of anything you brought to the table, you were in darkness when He called, but because of everything He brought to the cross. That is the ground on which we stand when we pray. And we pray as those who have been called out of darkness into light: with open eyes, clear minds, grateful hearts, and the confidence that the God who called us hears us.

Pray for this congregation as the body of Christ: that every member would understand and inhabit his or her place in the body with the dignity and the humility that the image demands; that the gifts distributed by the Spirit would be recognized, developed, and deployed for the common good; that neither the pride that says “I have no need of you” nor the shame that says “I am not part of the body” would find a home in this community; and that the Head would govern the body through His Word and Spirit, directing the whole assembly in the mission for which He has called and equipped her.

Pray for this congregation as the bride of Christ: that she would be a holy and devoted community, characterized by the exclusive covenant loyalty that the Bridegroom demands; that the ministry of the Word would accomplish its sanctifying purpose, washing the congregation in the truth and preparing her for the day when she will be presented to her Lord in glory; that the temptations to spiritual unfaithfulness, the pursuit of cultural acceptance at the cost of doctrinal fidelity, the accommodation of the spirit of the age at the cost of the Bridegroom’s honor, would be resisted with courage and love; and that the anticipation of the Wedding Supper of the Lamb would fill the congregation’s gathered worship with genuine eschatological expectation.

Pray for this congregation as the temple of the Holy Spirit: that the gathered assembly would be marked by the reverence and expectation that befits a community in whose midst the living God dwells; that preaching would be received as the voice of God addressed to His covenant people; that the Lord’s Supper would be administered and received with the theological weight it deserves; that prayer would be earnest, corporate, and expectant; and that the unity of the assembly would be guarded with the seriousness that Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 3:17 demands.

Pray for this congregation as the flock of God: for the elders and pastor, that they would shepherd the flock with the eagerness, humility, and doctrinal vigilance that Peter commands; for the congregation, that it would receive the ministry of its under-shepherds with genuine submission, encouragement, and covenantal loyalty; for those in the flock who are wandering, who have drifted from the assembly, from the Word, from the community of faith, that the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep would pursue them with His irresistible grace and restore them to the fold. Close by giving thanks that the Chief Shepherd knows His sheep by name, and that none of them will ultimately be lost from His hand (John 10:28–29).

“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; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 1:22–23; 2:19–22; 5:25–32; 1 Peter 2:9–10

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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