

Theoacademy

**BEING PRESBYTERIAN**  
PREPARATION FOR ORDERED MINISTRY

Session 3: Who is the Church?



# Theocademy

A ministry of the  
Synod of Mid-America

*Written by*  
Jodi Craighow

*Edited by*  
James Gale  
Landon Whitsitt

[www.theocademy.com](http://www.theocademy.com)

Cover image Creative Commons ©2013 Kate Ter Haar  
available online at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/katerha/8508270494>

# Getting started

---

**Before watching the video, consider the following questions.**

- When you think about God, what words come to mind?
- Imagine a friend approached you and said, “I can get behind Christianity, but I don’t see why the Church is all that important.” What would your response be?
- In what ways has the Church made an impact on your life up to this point?

# During the video

---

**As you watch the video, answer the following questions.**

- When we think about the Church, what must we first consider? Why?
- In what ways does God relate with the Church? How should the ways God relates with the Church influence the ways we relate with one another?
- What does God call the Church to *do*?
- What is Christ’s relationship with the Church? What does that mean?

- What potential pitfalls must we avoid as Christ's Church?

## *Ekklesia*: the "called ones"

If you've ever heard anybody talk about the study of the Church, you've probably heard the word *ecclesiology* thrown around. Yes, it's a big word – but it comes from the Greek word the Bible uses to describe the Church: *ekklesia*. It literally means "the called out ones." Thus, if we're really going to understand who we are as a Church, we need to dig into this whole idea of *calling*. Amy Plantinga Pauw mentioned the Second Helvetic Confession in the video, so let's start there and see what it has to say.<sup>1</sup>

### CHAPTER XVII.

#### Of the Catholic and Holy Church of God, and of the One Only Head of the Church

THE CHURCH HAS ALWAYS EXISTED AND IT WILL ALWAYS EXIST. But because God from the beginning would have men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2:4), it is altogether necessary that there always should have been, and should be now, and to the end of the world, a Church.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH? The Church is an assembly of the faithful called or gathered out of the world; a communion, I say, of all saints, namely, of those who truly know and rightly worship and serve the true God in Christ the Savior, by the Word and Holy Spirit, and who by faith are partakers of all benefits which are freely offered through Christ. CITIZENS OF ONE COMMONWEALTH. They are all citizens of the one city, living under the same Lord, under the same laws, and in the same fellowship of all good things. For the apostle calls them "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19), calling the faithful on earth saints (I Cor. 4:1), who are sanctified by the blood of the Son of God. The article of the Creed, "I believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints," is to be understood wholly as concerning these saints.

ONLY ONE CHURCH FOR ALL TIMES. And since there is always but one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, Jesus the Messiah, and one Shepherd of the whole flock, one Head of this body, and, to conclude, one Spirit, one salvation, one faith, one Testament or covenant, it necessarily follows that there is only one Church. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. We, therefore, call this Church catholic because it is universal, scattered through all parts of the world, and extended unto all times, and is not limited to any times or places.

THE PARTICULAR CHURCH. Moreover, the Church... upon the earth has always had many particular churches. Yet all these are to be referred to the unity of the catholic Church. This Church was set up differently before the Law among the patriarchs; otherwise under Moses by the Law; and differently by Christ through the Gospel.

THE TWO PEOPLES. Generally two peoples are usually counted, namely, the Israelites and Gentiles, or those who have been gathered from among Jews and Gentiles into the Church. There are also two Testaments, the Old and the New. THE SAME CHURCH FOR THE OLD AND THE NEW PEOPLE. Yet from all these people there was and is one fellowship, one salvation in the one Messiah; in whom, as members of one body under one Head, all united together in the same faith, partaking also of the same spiritual food and drink. Yet here we acknowledge a diversity of times, and a diversity in the signs of the promised and delivered Christ; and that now the ceremonies being abolished, the light shines unto us more clearly, and blessings are given to us more abundantly, and a fuller liberty.

THE CHURCH AS THE BODY. It is also called the body of Christ because the faithful are living members of Christ under Christ the Head.



CHRIST THE SOLE HEAD OF THE CHURCH. It is the head which has the preeminence in the body, and from it the whole body receives life; by its spirit the body is governed in all things; from it, also, the body receives increase, that it may grow up. Also, there is one head of the body, and it is suited to the body. Therefore the Church cannot have any other head besides Christ. For as the Church is a spiritual body, so it must also have a spiritual head in harmony with itself. Neither can it be governed by any other spirit than by the Spirit of Christ.

OF THE NOTES OR SIGNS OF THE TRUE CHURCH. Moreover, as we acknowledge no other head of the Church than Christ, so we do not acknowledge every church to be the true Church which vaunts herself to be such; but we teach that the true Church is that in which the signs or marks of the true Church are to be found, especially the lawful and sincere preaching of the Word of God as it was delivered to us in the books of the prophets and the apostles, which all lead us unto Christ, who said in the Gospel: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give unto them eternal life. A stranger they do not follow, but they flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:5, 27, 28). And those who are such in the Church have one faith and one spirit; and therefore they worship but one God, and him alone they worship in spirit and in truth, loving him alone with all their hearts and with all their strength, praying unto him alone through Jesus Christ, the only Mediator and Intercessor; and they do not seek righteousness and life outside Christ and faith in him. Because they acknowledge Christ the only head and foundation of the Church, and, resting on him, daily renew themselves by repentance, and patiently bear the cross laid upon them. Moreover, joined together with all the members of Christ by an unfeigned love, they show that they are Christ's disciples by persevering in the bond of peace and holy unity. At the same time they participate in the sacraments instituted by Christ, and delivered unto us by his apostles, using them in no other way than as they received them from the Lord. That saying of the apostle Paul is well known to all: "I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you" (I Cor. 11:23 ff.).

OUTSIDE THE CHURCH OF GOD THERE IS NO SALVATION. But we esteem fellowship with the true Church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it. For as there was no salvation outside Noah's ark when the world perished in the flood; so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church; and hence we teach that those who wish to live ought not to be separated from the true Church of Christ.

THE CHURCH IS NOT BOUND TO ITS SIGNS. Nevertheless, by the signs [of the true Church] mentioned above, we do not so narrowly restrict the Church as to teach that all those are outside the Church who either do not participate in the sacraments, at least not willingly and through contempt, but rather, being forced by necessity, unwillingly abstain from them or are deprived of them; or in whom faith sometimes fails, though it is not entirely extinguished and does not wholly cease; or in whom imperfections and errors due to weakness are found. For we know that God had some friends in the world outside the commonwealth of Israel. We know what befell the people of God in the captivity of Babylon, where they were deprived of their sacrifices for seventy years. We know what happened to St. Peter, who denied his Master, and what is wont to happen daily to God's elect and faithful people who go astray and are weak. We know, moreover, what kind of churches the churches in Galatia and Corinth were in the apostles' time, in which the apostle found fault with many serious offenses; yet he calls them holy churches of Christ (I Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:2).

NOT ALL WHO ARE IN THE CHURCH ARE OF THE CHURCH. Again, not all that are reckoned in the number of the Church are saints, and living and true members of the Church. For there are many hypocrites, who outwardly hear the Word of God, and publicly receive the sacraments, and seem to pray to God through Christ alone, to confess Christ to be their only righteousness, and to worship God, and to exercise the duties of charity, and for a time to endure with patience in misfortune. And yet they are inwardly destitute of true illumination of the Spirit, of faith and sincerity of heart, and of perseverance to the end. But eventually the character of these men, for the most part, will be disclosed. For the apostle John says: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would indeed have continued with us" (I John 2:19). And although while they simulate piety they are not of the Church, yet they are considered to be in the Church, just as traitors in a state are numbered among its citizens before they are discovered; and as the tares or darnel and chaff are found among the wheat, and as swellings and tumors are found in a sound body, when they are rather diseases and deformities than true members of the body. And therefore the Church of God is rightly compared to a net which catches fish of all kinds, and to a field, in which both wheat and tares are found (Matt. 13:24 ff., 47 ff.).

WE MUST NOT JUDGE RASHLY OR PREMATURELY. Hence we must be very careful not to judge before the time, nor undertake to exclude, reject or cut off those whom the Lord does not want to have excluded or rejected, and those whom we cannot eliminate without loss to the Church. On the other hand, we must be vigilant lest while the pious snore the wicked gain ground and do harm to the Church.

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH IS NOT IN EXTERNAL RITES. Furthermore, we diligently teach that care is to be taken wherein the truth and unity of the Church chiefly lies, lest we rashly provoke and foster schisms in the Church. Unity consists not in outward rites and ceremonies, but rather in the truth and unity of the catholic faith. The catholic faith is not given to us by human laws, but by Holy Scriptures, of which the Apostles' Creed is a compendium. And, therefore, we read in the ancient writers that there was a manifold diversity of rites, but that they were free, and no one ever thought that the unity of the Church was thereby dissolved. So we teach that the true harmony of the Church consists in doctrines and in the true and harmonious preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and in rites that have been expressly delivered by the Lord. And here we especially urge that saying of the apostle: "Let those of us who are perfect have this mind; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you. Nevertheless let us walk by the same rule according to what we have attained, and let us be of the same mind" (Phil. 3:15 f.).

As any theologian – or linguist, for that matter – will attest, prepositions are extremely important. They're usually some of the smallest words in a language, but they often carry some of the biggest significance. And the same principle applies in terms of the Church's calling. Yes, we're known as the "called ones," but only when we start pairing that with prepositions does the true significance emerge. Think about what you heard in the video and read in the selections from the Second Helvetic Confession as you discuss the following questions.

## Called by God

- Why is God's responsibility for calling together the Church significant for the "called ones?"
- What is the character of our Caller? How does that affect our character as the Church?

## Called from the world

- In some places in the Bible,<sup>2</sup> "the world" is referred to in a negative sense – and God is calling us out of that. How is our life as the Church to reflect a different set of understandings and priorities than that of the world around us?
- In another sense, though, God has put us into our particular contexts for a very specific reason and with a very specific purpose. In what ways has your "world" shaped your sense of calling? What experiences or relationships have been especially influential for you and/or this congregation?

---

<sup>2</sup> John 15:18-21; Romans 12:2; and 1 John 2:15-17 are a few examples.

## Called *with* the communion of saints

- It can be difficult to wrap our heads around the idea that God calls into the Church believers from across the ages – past, present, and future – and that we’re joined in a single fellowship. But it’s nonetheless true. In what ways can we maintain communion<sup>3</sup> with Christians who have come before or will come after us?
- It’s also crucial for us to remember that God calls believers from all locations and walks of life. How does this unity-in-diversity reflect God’s nature and character? What are some ways that we as the Church can ensure that all of God’s children have a place within the fellowship?

## Called *into* the body of Christ

- Think about the different ways we use the term *head* in the English language. What, then, does it mean that Jesus Christ is the “head” of the Church?
- One of the Apostle Paul’s favorite metaphors for describing the Church is “the body of Christ.”<sup>4</sup>
  - What does that mean in terms of our relationship with Christ?
  - What does that mean in terms of our relationship with our fellow believers?
  - What does that mean in terms of our relationship with the rest of the world?

---

<sup>3</sup> First-century Christians called this sort of intimate fellowship *koinonia*.

<sup>4</sup> He uses the terminology in passages like Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:4-31; and Ephesians 4:12.

