

Session 5 - How 'The Church' Became an Institution

SESSION THESIS

Christendom did not first establish a commonly demonstrated biblical definition of church and then build its institutions; practical pressures, episcopal consolidation, councils, imperial geography, jurisdictional rivalry, and reform movements produced competing structures that later theology identified and defended as the church.

The Session Argument



Controlling Questions

- 1 How did practical pressures move assemblies toward bishop-centered order?
- 2 How did councils, imperial cities, and the great sees transform influence into hierarchy?
- 3 Why did schism and reform produce rival institutions rather than one agreed church?

The Phrase “The Church” Does Not Identify One Agreed Reality

THESIS

Familiar statements about “the church” can refer to entirely different realities, proving that the phrase has no self-evident meaning.

One Phrase Can Name Many Possible Realities

- “I joined the church.”
 - A local congregation or its membership roll (Baptist)
 - A denomination or organized communion (Methodist)
 - The universal company of believers (Reformed or confessional Baptist)
- “The church baptized me.”
 - A local assembly acting through its minister (Baptist)
 - An authorized priesthood or hierarchy (Orthodox)
 - A sacramental communion into which baptism incorporates a person (Roman Catholic)
- “The church elected me.”
 - A gathered congregation (Congregationalist or Baptist)
 - A representative denominational body (Methodist)
 - A presbytery, synod, or other governing court (Presbyterian)
- “The church excommunicated me.”
 - A local congregation removing a member (Baptist)
 - A bishop or hierarchy imposing a canonical penalty (Orthodox)
 - A sacramental communion excluding someone from its rites (Roman Catholic)
- “The church spoke against the government.”
 - One local assembly (independent Baptist)
 - A denomination or council (Methodist or Presbyterian)
 - A national establishment (Church of England)
 - A hierarchy claiming to speak for the universal church (Roman Catholic)

- “The church sent missionaries.”
 - A local congregation commissioned them (independent Baptist)
 - A denominational mission board appointed them (Southern Baptist)
 - An ecclesiastical hierarchy authorized them (Roman Catholic or Orthodox)
 - The worldwide Christian movement produced them (ecumenical usage)

Representative Speakers Use “The Church” for Different Things

- Catholic
 - The worldwide visible and sacramental communion governed by the pope and bishops in communion with him
- Orthodox
 - The communion of apostolic local churches governed synodally by canonical bishops
- Anglican
 - A visible congregation, diocese, or national established church under the authority of bishops
- Lutheran
 - The congregation of saints identified by the right teaching of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments, historically embodied in territorial churches
- Presbyterian
 - The invisible company of the elect or the visible covenant community governed through graded church courts
- Baptist
 - A particular congregation of professing baptized believers and, in many confessions, also the universal company of the elect
- Landmark Baptist
 - A local, visible, properly constituted assembly rather than a universal invisible institution
- Mid-Acts dispensationalist
 - The Body of Christ, distinguished from Israel, the kingdom assembly, and other companies also described with the word church

Institutional Development Preceded a Commonly Demonstrated Definition

- The claim is not that Christians never defined the church.
 - Creeds, confessions, catechisms, and theologians have supplied many explicit definitions.
 - The abundance of definitions is itself evidence that the reality being described was disputed rather than self-evident.
- The unresolved problem is prior to any denominational definition.
 - What biblical population or assembly does church designate in a given context?
 - Which doctrines, authorities, members, practices, and promises belong to that particular group or assembly?
- Institutional development did not wait for a universally received biblical classification.
 - Christians inherited, consolidated, defended, divided, and revised visible structures.
 - Those structures were shaped by biblical interpretation, practical necessity, inherited custom, and political circumstance.
- Ecclesiology often followed the institution already in place.
 - Later theology explained why the inherited structure should be recognized as “the church.”
 - Competing structures produced competing definitions while each continued using the same singular expression.
- The historical question for the remainder of the lesson:
 - How did Christian institutions become increasingly defined by bishops, councils, jurisdictions, national establishments, and gathered communions before Christendom agreed on what the biblical word itself designated?

Notes

Practical Pressures Moved Assemblies toward Institutional Order

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The movement toward bishops, sacramental order, and catholic communion was not arbitrary; it answered genuine problems, but it occurred before Christendom had reached a commonly demonstrated biblical definition of the church.

The Varied Biblical Uses of Ekklesia Require Contextual Classification

Acts 7:38 - King James Version

SCRIPTURE

38 This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:

Acts 19:32 - King James Version

SCRIPTURE

32 Some therefore cried one thing, and some another: for the assembly was confused: and the more part knew not wherefore they were come together.

Acts 19:39 - King James Version

SCRIPTURE

39 But if ye enquire any thing concerning other matters, it shall be determined in a lawful assembly.

Acts 19:41 - King James Version

SCRIPTURE

41 And when he had thus spoken, he dismissed the assembly.

Matthew 18:17 - King James Version**SCRIPTURE**

17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

1 Corinthians 1:2 - King James Version**SCRIPTURE**

2 Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

1 Corinthians 10:32 - King James Version**SCRIPTURE**

32 Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God:

Ephesians 1:22-23 - King James Version**SCRIPTURE**

22 And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church,

23 Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.

- Establish the classification problem without attempting the complete biblical reconstruction.
 - Acts 7:38 uses ekklesia for Israel in the wilderness.
 - Acts 19:32, 39, and 41 uses ekklesia for an Ephesian civic assembly.
 - Matthew 18:17 describes an assembly capable of hearing a dispute.
 - 1 Corinthians 1:2 addresses “the church of God which is at Corinth.”
 - 1 Corinthians 10:32 distinguishes “the Jews,” “the Gentiles,” and “the church of God.”
 - Ephesians 1:22-23 identifies a church as Christ’s body.

- The word church is not by itself a sufficient theological identifier.
- The reader must ask which assembly or company is meant in that context and what calling belongs to it.
- Ekklesia is historically related to ekkaleo, but “out” plus “called” does not automatically yield a theological definition.
- In ordinary Greek usage, the word designates an assembly or congregation.
- Context must identify the particular group under discussion.

Ignatius Joined Catholicity to Bishop-Centered Order

- Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the early second century.
 - Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch and one of the writers commonly called the Apostolic Fathers.
 - His surviving letters were written under unusual circumstances.
 - He wrote while under guard and being taken from Syria toward Rome for execution.
 - Along the journey, he addressed churches in Asia Minor and wrote personally to Polycarp.
 - The seven commonly received letters provide an early post-apostolic window into disputes over doctrine, unity, worship, and authority.
 - Ignatius matters to this lesson because his letters show a bishop-centered pattern of church order at an early stage of institutional development.
 - They connect doctrinal fidelity, congregational unity, authorized worship, and submission to the bishop.
 - His Letter to the Smyrnaeans contains the earliest surviving use of the expression “Catholic Church.”
 - Ignatius wrote, “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”
- The statement appears within an immediate practical argument about congregational order.
 - Ignatius connects the congregation’s unity with its bishop.
 - He urges the people to follow the bishop as Christ follows the Father.
 - He places the presbytery alongside the bishop and compares it to the apostles.
 - He also gives the deacons a recognized place within the congregation’s order.
 - The people are to gather where the bishop is present rather than form competing assemblies.
 - He treats baptism and the love feast as valid when authorized by the bishop.
 - A valid Eucharist is one conducted by the bishop or by someone he authorizes.
 - Baptism is not to be performed apart from the bishop’s approval.

- The love feast is likewise placed under the bishop's oversight.
- Authorization is presented as the means of keeping the congregation's actions secure, orderly, and valid.
- "Catholic Church" therefore appears alongside an emerging structure of visible authority rather than as an abstract dictionary definition.
- Genuine pressures contributed to this development.
 - Christian assemblies faced the problem of maintaining continuity after the death of the apostles.
 - They also faced rival teachers and rival gospels.
 - Docetic teachers denied or diminished the reality of Christ's flesh, suffering, and resurrection.
 - Ignatius confronts this teaching especially in his letters to the Trallians and Smyrnaeans.
 - Some refused the Eucharist because they did not confess it as connected with the flesh of Christ.
 - Their proclamation changed the saving events by turning Christ's suffering into an appearance rather than a bodily reality.
 - Judaizing teachers urged Christians toward Jewish law or Jewish religious practice as the controlling framework.
 - Ignatius warns against this tendency especially in his letters to the Magnesians and Philadelphians.
 - He contrasts Christian teaching centered in Jesus Christ with a return to Judaism.
 - This controversy raised the question of whether the Christian message was governed by Christ's death and resurrection or by adoption of Jewish practice.
 - Divisive teachers and unauthorized gatherings threatened the unity of local congregations.
 - Ignatius repeatedly warns against schism and activity conducted apart from the bishop.
 - Unity around the bishop became his practical defense against competing teachers, competing assemblies, and competing celebrations of the Eucharist.
 - Historical caution
 - Ignatius usually describes the errors rather than supplying a complete catalogue of named teachers and organized sects.
 - The labels docetic and Judaizing summarize recognizable tendencies and should not imply that every opponent belonged to a later fully developed system.

- Christian assemblies had to determine who could authorize baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- They also sought to preserve unity and discipline during persecution.
- An institutional answer increasingly emerged from these pressures.
 - Recognized bishops remained in communion with other recognized bishops.
 - Those bishops were expected to preserve the public apostolic rule of faith.
 - Christian identity was becoming attached to bishop, sacramental order, and catholic communion.

Apostolic Succession Authenticated Teachers and Then Identified the Church

- Ignatius's bishop-centered order raised the next institutional question.
 - If unity depended upon gathering around the bishop, Christians needed to know which bishop possessed legitimate authority.
 - If the apostles were gone, a bishop's claim to preserve their teaching required some recognizable connection to them.
 - The need to authenticate the bishop followed naturally from the growing importance assigned to his office.
- Apostolic succession supplied that connection.
 - Apostolic succession described a claimed public continuity between the apostles and later bishops through a recognized sequence of church leaders.
 - Lists of successive bishops connected a present bishop and his teaching to earlier leaders associated with an apostolic church.
 - The argument involved more than chronological sequence; the bishop was also expected to preserve the public teaching received from the apostles.
 - Succession therefore joined continuity of office, continuity of teaching, and communion with other recognized bishops.
 - At this stage, the concept should not be treated as identical to the later fully developed doctrine of universal papal authority.
- Apostolic succession was intended to solve a problem of doctrinal authentication.
 - Rival teachers claimed hidden traditions, secret knowledge, or competing versions of apostolic teaching.
 - Christians needed a public means of distinguishing received apostolic teaching from unauthorized alternatives.

- Irenaeus stood close enough to the apostolic generation to make his appeal especially powerful.
 - Irenaeus was born in Asia Minor during the first half of the second century and later served the Christians of Lyons in Gaul.
 - He was a presbyter at Lyons during the persecution of 177 and became bishop after the martyrdom of the elderly bishop Pothinus.
 - As a young man, Irenaeus had heard Polycarp of Smyrna teach.
 - Irenaeus remembered Polycarp recounting his contact with John and with others who had seen the Lord.
 - Irenaeus described Polycarp as having been instructed by apostles and appointed bishop in Smyrna by apostles in Asia.
 - This gave Irenaeus a personal link to living memories of the apostolic generation, though it did not make him an apostle or eyewitness.
- Irenaeus used publicly known sequences of bishops as evidence that apostolic teaching had been preserved.
 - He argued that churches could identify the received apostolic faith through publicly known sequences of bishops and the teaching preserved in those churches.
 - He gave special attention to the prominent Roman church associated with Peter and Paul and also appealed to Polycarp at Smyrna and the apostolic witness of Ephesus.
 - The succession argument contrasted public teaching with the secret claims of Gnostic teachers.
 - Irenaeus could point to his own office as bishop within a recognized network of bishop-led churches and to his personal acquaintance with Polycarp, but the surviving evidence does not establish that Polycarp ordained him or provide a complete personal ordination chain from an apostle to Irenaeus.
 - His argument depended primarily upon the public succession and teaching of recognized apostolic churches rather than upon a documented pedigree for himself.
- Cyprian carried the argument into a later system in which bishops already governed churches and recognized one another's authority.
 - Cyprian lived in Roman North Africa and was trained as a rhetorician-a professional teacher and practitioner of persuasive public speaking.
 - He converted to Christianity in the middle of the third century and rose unusually quickly into church leadership.
 - He first became a presbyter, or church elder and minister.
 - Around 248 or 249, he became bishop of Carthage, a major city and Christian center in North Africa.
 - Some senior clergy opposed his selection, partly because he was a comparatively recent convert.

- Several crises forced Cyprian to define who possessed authority within the church.
 - During persecution, some Christians denied the faith or participated in pagan sacrifice to save their lives; these Christians became known as “the lapsed.”
 - Christians disagreed over whether the lapsed could return to full fellowship, who could restore them, and what repentance should be required.
 - Rival leaders and congregations separated from recognized bishops, creating competing claims about which assembly represented the true church.
 - Churches also disputed whether baptism performed outside the recognized catholic communion should be accepted as valid.
- Roman imperial officials-not church authorities-exiled Cyprian under orders from the emperors; after returning to Carthage, he was arrested by the provincial government and executed in 258.
- Cyprian developed the idea of a unified body of bishops.
 - He argued that all recognized bishops together shared one undivided office of bishop.
 - In his model, the apostolic office continued corporately among the bishops rather than being possessed entirely by one bishop.
 - Communion with the recognized body of bishops became a test of communion with the church.
 - Cyprian could therefore claim apostolic succession for himself as a duly recognized participant in the shared office of bishops.
 - His surviving argument does not rest upon a named, step-by-step chain of ordinations from a particular apostle to Cyprian personally.
- The historical setting requires an important qualification.
 - The original question was not simply how to create a centralized papacy.
 - The immediate question was how to identify and preserve the public apostolic faith.
- This authentication system produced a significant shift in how the church was identified.
 - The initial question, “What does the text call an assembly?” increasingly gave way to “Which visible communion possesses authorized bishops?”
 - Apostolic succession moved from authenticating teaching toward identifying where the church itself could be found.

Notes

Councils and Imperial Cities Turned Regional Influence into Hierarchy

THESIS

Biblical interpretation, apostolic associations, inherited custom, imperial geography, canon law, and jurisdictional rivalry together produced the institutional hierarchy of the major bishoprics.

The Early Creeds Confessed One Church without Fully Defining It

- A council was a formal gathering of bishops called to settle disputes affecting multiple churches.
 - Ecumenical meant that the council claimed significance for the whole inhabited Christian world rather than for one city or region.
 - Emperors often summoned the early ecumenical councils, provided transportation and security, and used imperial power to enforce their decisions.
 - Bishops debated and voted, producing doctrinal statements called creeds and rules of church order called canons.
 - These councils joined theological deliberation to an increasingly organized and legally supported institutional structure.
- The Council of Nicaea met in 325 at Nicaea, a city in Asia Minor near the later imperial capital of Constantinople.
 - Emperor Constantine summoned the council after controversy over Arius and the relationship of the Son to the Father threatened church and imperial unity.
 - The council produced the original Nicene Creed and a collection of canons regulating church order.
 - The creed used at many churches today is more precisely the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, associated with the Council of Constantinople in 381.
- The later form of the creed confesses “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.”
 - One asserts the church’s singularity.
 - Holy identifies it as belonging to God and set apart for him.
 - Catholic describes it as universal or whole rather than confined to one locality.

- Apostolic claims continuity with the apostles and their teaching.
- These four marks are important descriptions, but they are not a complete operational definition.
 - They do not specify whether the church is visible, invisible, or both.
 - They do not identify whether its members are the baptized, the regenerate, the bishops, or some combination of these.
 - They do not explain whether a local assembly is fully a church or only one part of a universal institution.
 - They do not establish who possesses final authority when bishops or regions disagree.
 - They do not identify when the church began or how it relates to Israel.
 - They do not determine whether the church should be identified with the Body of Christ, the Bride, the Kingdom, or a sacramental society.
- The creed therefore made a strong claim about the church without settling what institutional and doctrinal structure the words necessarily required.
 - Christians confess the same four marks while defending incompatible forms of church government, thus invalidating the words they confess.
 - Four shared adjectives did not guarantee one shared definition.

Nicaea Recognized Regional Jurisdictions Rather than Universal Papal Rule

- Several geographical and governmental terms clarify the development of the great sees.
 - A see is the seat of a bishop's authority, including the city where he is based and the churches or territory under his oversight.
 - The word comes from the Latin sedes, meaning "seat."
 - A great see is a major city whose bishop acquired honor or authority extending beyond one local congregation or city.
 - Jurisdiction is the recognized right to govern, appoint or confirm leaders, hear disputes, and enforce decisions within a defined area.
 - A metropolitan was the bishop of the chief city of a Roman province and exercised a coordinating or supervisory role among the province's other bishops.
- Church organization increasingly followed the geography of the Roman Empire.
 - Local churches existed within cities.
 - Bishops in the chief cities of Roman provinces gained influence over surrounding bishops.
 - The bishops of the empire's most important cities eventually exercised authority across several provinces.

- A city's civil importance, transportation links, wealth, population, and access to imperial officials could therefore strengthen its bishop's position.
- Nicaea's sixth canon recognized regional arrangements that already existed by custom.
 - The bishop of Alexandria retained authority in Egypt, Libya, and the Pentapolis, a neighboring region named for its five principal cities.
 - Alexandria was the capital of Roman Egypt, a major Mediterranean port, and an important center of learning and Christian theology.
 - The canon compared Alexandria's established custom with a similar custom associated with the bishop of Rome.
 - Antioch and the other provinces were also told to retain their existing privileges.
 - Antioch was the capital of Roman Syria, an early center of Christian mission, and one of the largest and most influential cities of the eastern empire.
- The same canon strengthened the place of metropolitan bishops in the appointment of other bishops.
 - A man was not to be recognized as bishop without the metropolitan's consent.
 - The majority decision among the province's bishops was ordinarily to prevail.
 - Local leadership was therefore becoming part of a regional system of authorization.
- Nicaea's seventh canon gave Jerusalem special honor without making it the governing city of its province.
 - Jerusalem possessed unmatched biblical and apostolic associations.
 - The Roman city built there was then commonly called Aelia, and its bishop remained subject to the metropolitan bishop of Caesarea.
 - Sacred importance and governing jurisdiction were not yet the same thing.
- Nicaea did not create the later five-part system of great sees or define a modern papacy.
 - It acknowledged ancient customs and regional privileges already operating in Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and other provinces.
 - Its canons reveal a developing map of church authority, not a completed universal constitution.

Imperial Geography Elevated Constantinople and Reshaped Church Rank

- Constantinople was a new competitor among much older Christian centers.
 - Constantine rebuilt the city of Byzantium, renamed it Constantinople, and inaugurated it as an imperial capital in 330.
 - Its position between Europe and Asia made it a center of government, commerce, transportation, and military strategy.
 - The emperor, imperial court, senate, and central administration gave the city an importance it had not possessed as Byzantium.
 - Its bishop gained access and influence because he served in the city where the eastern imperial government operated.
- The Council of Constantinople in 381 formally raised the city's church rank.
 - Canon 3 placed the bishop of Constantinople immediately after the bishop of Rome in honor.
 - The canon gave one stated reason: Constantinople was "New Rome."
 - The city's political elevation was followed by the elevation of its bishop.
 - Rank of honor did not automatically answer every question about governing authority, but honor regularly became a platform for expanded jurisdiction.
- The Council of Chalcedon met in 451 across the Bosphorus from Constantinople.
 - The council is best known doctrinally for defining that Jesus Christ is one person in two natures, truly divine and truly human.
 - Its canons also regulated disputes, appointments, appeals, and the rank of major churches.
- Chalcedon's Canon 28 made the political reasoning unusually explicit.
 - It said that old Rome had received privileges because it was the imperial city.
 - It gave comparable privileges to Constantinople because New Rome possessed imperial government and a senate.
 - Constantinople was ranked after old Rome and received authority involving Pontus near the Black Sea, parts of Asia Minor, and Thrace in the northeastern Balkans.
 - The bishop of Constantinople gained a role in confirming or appointing the chief bishops of those large regions.
- Rome rejected Canon 28's elevation of Constantinople even while accepting Chalcedon's central doctrinal definition.
 - Roman leaders grounded Rome's primacy more strongly in Peter and apostolic authority than in the city's former imperial status.

- The disagreement exposed two possible foundations for rank: apostolic claim and imperial geography.
- Political geography does not explain every feature of Rome's influence.
 - Rome was associated with Peter and Paul and the memory of their martyrdoms.
 - It possessed wide communication networks, wealth, western prestige, and a record of intervention in major controversies.
 - Its bishop gained additional civic importance as western imperial government weakened.
 - The evidence nevertheless shows that imperial status openly influenced the ranking of bishops and cities.
- The institutional sequence had become visible.
 - An imperial city gained political importance.
 - Its bishop gained practical influence.
 - A council recognized that influence as church rank.
 - Recognized rank created grounds for wider governing authority.

Rivalry among the Great Sees Mixed Sacred Claims with Political Power

- The expression great sees eventually referred especially to five major centers of church authority.
 - Rome represented the old imperial capital and the leading church of the Latin-speaking West.
 - Constantinople represented New Rome and the center of the eastern imperial government.
 - Alexandria governed the influential Egyptian church and possessed strong traditions of scholarship and association with Mark.
 - Antioch was an ancient apostolic and missionary center associated with Peter and Paul and strategically located for the eastern provinces.
 - Jerusalem possessed unique biblical prestige as the city of Christ's death and resurrection and the first apostolic assembly, despite its initially limited political power.
 - These five centers were later described as patriarchates, each led by a patriarch with authority over a large region.
- The five-see model did not appear fully formed at Nicaea.
 - Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch already possessed broad regional influence in 325.
 - Constantinople rose rapidly after becoming the imperial capital.
 - Jerusalem moved from a place of honor under Caesarea toward independent regional authority, receiving greater status at Chalcedon.

- The later system was the result of development, council decisions, imperial law, and continuing rivalry.
- Alexandria was a major rival before the enduring contest became Rome versus Constantinople.
 - Alexandrian bishops defended their authority in Egypt and often played decisive roles in eastern doctrinal disputes.
 - Theophilus of Alexandria helped bring about the deposition of John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, in the early fifth century.
 - Cyril of Alexandria opposed Nestorius of Constantinople and dominated the proceedings surrounding the Council of Ephesus in 431.
 - These disputes involved theology, but also personalities, jurisdiction, alliances, and access to imperial power.
- Antioch and Jerusalem also pursued their own theological and territorial interests.
 - Antioch possessed an old missionary pedigree and authority across a large eastern region.
 - Its theologians often differed in method and emphasis from those associated with Alexandria.
 - Jerusalem used its sacred history and support from stronger allies to gain greater independence from Caesarea and Antioch.
- Councils could elevate one see while weakening another.
 - Bishops could be condemned, removed, exiled, restored, or replaced through combinations of council action and imperial enforcement.
 - Chalcedon strengthened Constantinople and Jerusalem while controversy over its doctrinal definition divided the Alexandrian church and reduced Alexandria's standing within the imperial system.
 - Church rank was therefore not determined by biblical exegesis alone.
- Rome and Constantinople became the principal long-term rivals.
 - Rome emphasized its association with Peter and Paul and increasingly claimed authority extending beyond the western churches.
 - Constantinople emphasized its place as New Rome and its leadership within the eastern imperial world.
 - Each city accumulated canons, precedents, alliances, and theological arguments supporting its position.
- The great sees were produced by several forces operating together.
 - Apostolic memory gave some cities sacred pedigree.
 - Doctrinal victories gave bishops and cities reputational authority.

- Imperial geography gave some bishops access, money, communication, and enforcement.
- Canon law converted custom and influence into recognized rights.
- Personal rivalries and coercive power affected which claims prevailed.

Rome's Claims Expanded from Primacy to Universal Jurisdiction

- Rome's early prominence and its later universal claims should not be treated as identical stages.
 - Nicaea acknowledged an established Roman custom while also preserving the regional privileges of Alexandria, Antioch, and other provinces.
 - Rome possessed first rank and wide influence, but the exact meaning and extent of that primacy remained disputed.
 - A primacy of honor, a right to hear appeals, regional governing authority, and immediate jurisdiction over every church are different claims.
- Several conditions strengthened the bishop of Rome over time.
 - Rome's association with Peter and Paul supported a claim of unique apostolic inheritance.
 - The martyrs, wealth, communication networks, and doctrinal reputation of the Roman church increased its prestige.
 - The collapse of western imperial government left Roman bishops performing wider civic and diplomatic roles.
 - The Latin West lacked the cluster of competing ancient sees found in the Greek-speaking East.
 - Medieval reform movements increased the central administration of the western church and the pope's control over appointments, law, and appeals.
- The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 presented a highly developed universal-church claim.
 - Pope Innocent III convened the council at Rome.
 - Its first constitution confessed one universal church of the faithful outside of which no one is saved.
 - The statement joined the identity of the church to sacramental and doctrinal boundaries recognized by the Roman communion.
 - This was substantially more explicit than Nicaea's recognition of regional custom.
- Pope Boniface VIII issued *Unam Sanctam* in 1302 during a conflict with King Philip IV of France.
 - The document affirmed one church, one body, and one head under Christ and his earthly representative, the pope or bishop of Rome.

- It placed spiritual authority above temporal—that is, secular or civil—authority and asserted the pope’s right to judge earthly rulers in matters affecting salvation.
- It concluded that submission to the pope is necessary for salvation.
- The claim identified unity with subjection to a particular universal office rather than merely communion among regional bishops.
- The First Vatican Council gave dogmatic precision to papal authority in 1870.
 - Pastor Aeternus identified the bishop of Rome as Peter’s successor, Christ’s representative, head of the whole church, and teacher of all Christians.
 - It defined the pope’s governing authority as supreme, full, ordinary, immediate, and universal.
 - Ordinary means that the authority belongs to the office itself rather than being temporarily delegated.
 - Immediate means that the pope may exercise it without acting only through a local bishop or regional leader.
 - Universal means that it extends throughout the whole church rather than only through the territory surrounding Rome.
 - It also defined papal infallibility under limited conditions.
 - The pope must speak *ex cathedra*, meaning in his official capacity as supreme pastor and teacher of all Christians.
 - He must define a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church.
 - Such a definition is held to be protected from error and binding in itself, not because the rest of the church later consents to it.
- The progression reveals an expanding and increasingly precise institutional definition.
 - Nicaea recognized Rome among several ancient regional centers.
 - Medieval statements tied the one church and salvation increasingly directly to Roman submission.
 - Vatican I defined the pope’s immediate jurisdiction over the whole church and his authority to make certain doctrinal definitions that cannot be reversed.
 - These later claims cannot simply be read backward into Nicaea’s sixth canon as though the institutional structure had remained unchanged.

Notes

The East-West Division Produced Two Incompatible Catholicities

THESIS

The East-West division demonstrates that Christians who confessed one catholic church came to identify its visible unity and governing authority in incompatible ways.

The Division Developed over Centuries

- The separation did not occur in a single moment in 1054; it grew through centuries of linguistic distance, political rivalry, disputed jurisdiction, differing liturgical customs, and doctrinal controversy-including the Western addition of the filioque to the creed.
- The mutual excommunications of 1054 became an important symbol, but the Latin conquest and sack of Constantinople in 1204 deepened the breach and made reunion far more difficult.

Rome Located Catholicity in Communion with the Pope

- The Roman model located the visible unity of the worldwide church in the communion of bishops under the successor of Peter.
- In its developed form, that office possessed universal jurisdiction and served as the visible principle of the church's unity.

The East Located Catholicity in the Communion of Apostolic Churches

- The Eastern model located catholicity in the shared faith, sacraments, and synodal communion of apostolic local churches under Christ.
- It could acknowledge Rome's primacy of honor while rejecting the claim that one bishop possessed immediate jurisdiction over every church; the Confession of Dositheus (1672) expressly rejected a mortal universal head and identified Christ as the church's head.

One Confession Came to Name Two Incompatible Structures

- Both communions confessed one holy catholic and apostolic church, but they no longer constituted one visible communion and disagreed over where universal governing authority resided.
- The dispute therefore concerned not merely which leader held first place, but what institutional form could rightly be identified as the one church.
- After 1054, Christendom remained divided into incompatible communions while each continued to proclaim "one holy catholic and apostolic church." For almost a thousand years, Christians have spoken as though church named an agreed reality when they have not agreed on what visible institution that word identifies.
 - Repetition of the creed has preserved the appearance of agreement while concealing a fundamental disagreement about the identity and government of the church.
 - Even a brief observational study shows that Christendom does not agree on what the church is.

Notes

Rejecting Rome Produced Several Rival Church Structures

THESIS

Theological convictions, inherited institutions, and differing political settings produced territorial, bishop-led, presbyterian, and gathered-church structures after reforming movements rejected Roman jurisdiction without arriving at one replacement definition of the church.

Lutheran Reform Retained Word, Sacrament, and the Territorial Church

- Augsburg Confession Article VII identified the church as the assembly in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered.
- In practice, Lutheran churches commonly developed as territorial institutions under the protection and supervision of civil rulers.

Anglican Reform Joined a Reformed Definition to Royal Supremacy

- Article XIX defined the visible church through the preaching of God's Word and the proper administration of the sacraments.
- The Act of Supremacy and parliamentary action nevertheless established a national, bishop-led church under the authority of the English crown.

Reformed and Presbyterian Churches Organized around Marks, Discipline, and Graded Courts

- Reformed churches emphasized the true preaching of the Word, the sacraments, and church discipline as marks by which the church could be recognized.
- Presbyterian polity distributed authority through sessions, presbyteries, synods, and assemblies rather than locating it in a pope or monarch, though its forms varied by political setting.

Anabaptists and Later Separatists Developed Gathered-Church Alternatives

- The Schleitheim Confession (1527) presents the Anabaptist model of a voluntary community of baptized and disciplined believers separated from the territorial-church system, although Anabaptist movements were diverse.
- Later Separatists, Congregationalists, and Baptists more fully developed the gathered-church model through voluntary membership, local congregational authority, and, among Baptists, believer's baptism.

Notes

Christendom Built Institutions without Settling the Biblical Identity of the Church

THESIS

The institution was already being built before Christendom agreed on what the biblical word church designated, and later theology often defended the structure history had delivered.

Local Assemblies Became Authorized Communions

- Local problems of teaching, worship, unity, and discipline contributed to the rise of bishops, regional networks, councils, and systems of authorized communion.
- Structures developed to preserve the church gradually became competing answers to the question of what the church is.

Imperial Catholicity Divided before the Reformations Multiplied Its Alternatives

- Imperial organization and rivalry among the great sees helped form an institutional catholicity that eventually divided into Eastern and Western communions.
- The Reformations rejected Roman jurisdiction but produced several replacement structures rather than one commonly accepted biblical form.

Many Churches Did Not Produce One Commonly Demonstrated Biblical Identity

- Each enduring communion claimed continuity with the church confessed in Scripture, yet their incompatible structures could not all constitute the same visible institution.
- Christendom did not fail to build churches; it failed to establish that all the structures called church were the same biblical thing.

Notes

What This Session Established

- The phrase the church can name incompatible populations, assemblies, and institutions.
- Bishops, succession claims, and catholic communion answered genuine problems of unity and authentication.
- Councils, custom, apostolic memory, and imperial geography converted regional influence into hierarchy.
- Rome and the East developed incompatible accounts of catholic unity and governing authority.
- Reformation movements rejected Rome but produced several rival replacement structures.

SESSION CONCLUSION

Christendom did not first establish a commonly demonstrated biblical definition of church and then build its institutions; practical pressures, episcopal consolidation, councils, imperial geography, jurisdictional rivalry, and reform movements produced competing structures that later theology identified and defended as the church.

What This Session Did Not Establish

- Christians never attempted to define the church.
- Every institutional development was arbitrary or purely political.
- One later institutional structure has been demonstrated to be the biblical church.

