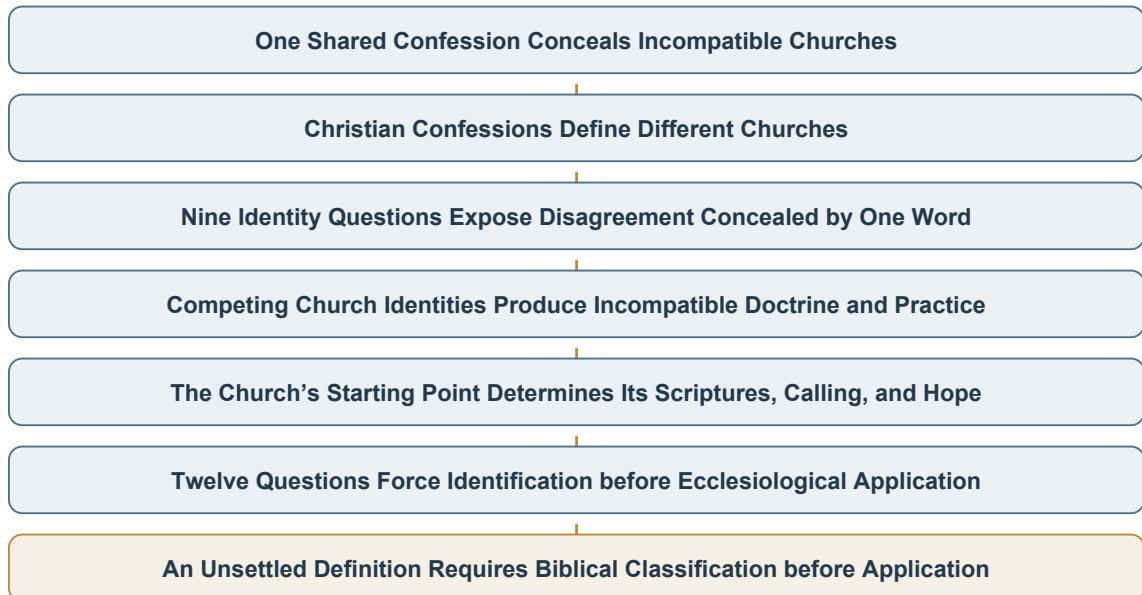


Session 6 - One Word, Mutually Incompatible Churches

SESSION THESIS

Because the bare phrase the church does not identify one agreed reality, responsible interpretation must classify the biblical group being described before assigning identity, authority, membership, practices, promises, warnings, or mission to it.

The Session Argument



Controlling Questions

- 1 What populations and structures do the principal confessions identify as the church?
- 2 How do competing church identities alter doctrine, authority, practice, and biblical ownership?
- 3 Which questions must be answered before applying a passage to the church?

One Shared Confession Conceals Incompatible Churches

THESIS

Christians confess one holy catholic and apostolic church while assigning that singular confession to populations, institutions, and structures that cannot all be the same thing.

- The shared confession creates the appearance of an agreed church.
 - Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, and many other Christians recite the words “one holy catholic and apostolic church.”
 - The common wording creates the appearance that the church names one commonly understood reality.
- The realities placed beneath that confession are incompatible.
 - Rome identifies the visible universal church with the worldwide communion of bishops united under the pope.
 - Eastern Orthodoxy identifies it with the synodal communion of apostolic local churches and rejects a universal mortal head.
 - Reformed and many Baptist confessions distinguish an invisible company of the elect from visible congregations, but disagree about who belongs to those congregations and how they are governed.
 - Mid-Acts dispensationalists identify the present church with the Body of Christ and distinguish it from Israel and the kingdom assembly.
- These are not merely different descriptions of one agreed institution.
 - A papally governed sacramental communion, a synodal communion without a pope, the elect of all ages, a covenant community containing believers and their children, a local assembly of baptized believers, and the dispensational Body of Christ are not interchangeable populations or structures.
 - The disagreement changes who belongs, who governs, which biblical passages apply, and what duties and promises are assigned to the group.
- The paradox establishes the question governing the investigation.
 - Christians use a singular confession while intending realities that exclude or contradict one another.
 - The question is not whether every tradition uses the word church, but whether the shared word has a shared referent.
 - The decisive question is: If all of these are “one church,” what would two churches look like?
 - The Confessional Gallery will test the paradox against the traditions’ own definitions rather than against labels imposed from outside.

Notes

Christian Confessions Define Different Churches

THESIS

The principal confessional traditions do not merely describe the church differently; they define different boundaries, identifying marks, populations, and governing authorities for what they call the church.

This gallery uses representative creeds, confessions, catechisms, canons, and institutional statements as evidence. Each entry distinguishes the document's wording from the church identity that its wording establishes.

The Nicene Creed Confesses One Church without Defining Its Structure

- Creedal wording: The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed confesses “one holy catholic and apostolic Church” and “one baptism for the remission of sins.”
- Church identity established: The creed strongly asserts the church's unity and character.
- What remains undefined: It does not supply a complete operational definition of the church's population, visibility, or government. It professes that there is one church without explaining fully what that church is or where it can be found.

Roman Catholic Councils Locate the One Church in Communion with Rome

- Conciliar wording: Lateran IV, Vatican I, and Vatican II identify one universal, visible, and spiritual society governed by bishops in communion with the Roman pontiff.
- Vatican II's formulation: The one church of Christ “subsists in” the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him.
- Church identity established: Those united to that visible structure by profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion are described as fully incorporated.
- Boundary created: Properly baptized non-Catholic Christians are not treated as fully incorporated members or as independent branches of equal standing. They are said to be in a real but “imperfect communion” with the Catholic Church because elements of Christian truth and sanctification are present among them.

The Confession of Dositheus Locates the Church in Orthodox Communion

- Confessional wording: The Confession of Dositheus identifies the catholic church-with catholic meaning the whole or universal church, not the Roman Catholic Church-with the communion of apostolic local churches governed through canonical bishops and councils.
- Church identity established: Christ alone is the universal head. Autocephalous, meaning fully self-governing, churches elect their own head and bishops and conduct their internal government without submitting to a universal pope.
- Government created: Each autocephalous church governs its own territory and hierarchy, while the several churches recognize one another as one Orthodox Church through shared faith, sacraments, councils, and communion rather than through one bishop exercising jurisdiction over all of them.

The Augsburg Confession Locates the Church through Word and Sacrament

- Confessional wording: Article VII defines the church as “the congregation of saints” in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered.
- Church identity established: The church is located through Word and sacrament rather than through communion with one universal bishop.

The Thirty-nine Articles Define a Visible Anglican Church

- Confessional wording: Article XIX defines the visible church as “a congregation of faithful men” in which the pure Word is preached and the sacraments are duly administered.
- Institutional setting: That definition exists within an episcopal national church whose legal establishment recognizes the crown's supreme authority in ecclesiastical causes.

The Belgic Confession Identifies the Church by Its Marks

- Confessional wording: Articles XXVII-XXXII define one universal congregation of true believers that has existed from the beginning of the world.
- Church identity established: The true church is identified through pure Gospel preaching, proper administration of the sacraments, and church discipline under pastors, elders, and deacons.

The Westminster Confession Distinguishes Invisible and Visible Churches

- Confessional wording: Chapter XXV defines the invisible church as the whole number of the elect across all ages and the visible church as those professing the true religion together with their children.
- Questions raised by the wording:
 - How strictly is “the true religion” defined?
 - Does every member of the visible church also belong to the invisible church, or may the visible church include false professors?
- Church identity established: These definitions support a visible covenant community governed through assemblies and graded church courts.

The Second London Baptist Confession Joins a Universal Elect with Local Congregations

- Confessional wording: Chapter XXVI affirms the universal church as the whole company of the elect while defining local churches as congregations of visible saints.
- Church identity established: Local churches are constituted through credible profession and obedience. They govern themselves locally while cooperating with other congregations by consent.

The Schleithem Confession Presents a Voluntary Gathered Brotherhood

- Confessional wording: The confession presents a voluntary brotherhood marked by repentance, believer's baptism, discipline through the ban, and the breaking of bread.
- Church identity established: The church consists of individuals covenanting themselves together locally.
- Boundary created: The gathered community is separated from the coercive territorial order and does not arise from citizenship or infant baptism.

Landmark and Successionist Baptists Reserve Church for the Local Assembly

- Doctrinal position: These Baptists reserve the proper or primary meaning of church for a local, visible, scripturally constituted assembly.
- Church identity established: They commonly reject or subordinate the universal invisible church and may emphasize church perpetuity, succession, or authorized baptism.

The World Council of Churches Seeks Convergence without Claiming Final Agreement

- Institutional wording: The World Council of Churches describes itself as a fellowship of churches confessing Jesus Christ according to Scripture and seeking a common ecclesial vision.
- What remains unsettled: Its continuing search for convergence permits cooperation while acknowledging that participating churches have not reached one final ecclesiology.

The Confessions Establish Incompatible Church Identities

- The traditions identify the church as a universal hierarchy, a synodal communion, an invisible company of the elect, a visible covenant community, a national institution, or a gathered local assembly-not merely as different names for one clearly identical thing.
- Their boundaries are equally incompatible: “all elect across all ages,” “all baptized persons in communion with Rome,” “professing believers and their children,” and “a local congregation of baptized believers” identify different populations.
- Their governments range from universal papal jurisdiction to autocephalous synods, national episcopacy, graded presbyteries, and autonomous congregations.
- A body recognized as fully the church in one system may be deficient, irregular, or not a church at all in another.
- The gallery therefore reveals no uniform Christian belief about what kind of thing the church is; shared vocabulary has concealed fundamentally different referents.

Notes

Nine Identity Questions Expose Disagreement Concealed by One Word

THESIS

A controlled comparison across ontology, location, membership, visibility, authority, marks, mission, relation to the state, and historical continuity exposes disagreements concealed by the shared word church.

1. The Ontology Question: What Kind of Thing Is the Church?

- Ontology asks what kind of reality a tradition believes the church actually is, not merely what qualities it possesses.
- Christian definitions place the word church on categorically different kinds of things.
 - A sacramental institution through which grace is administered
 - A visible society with officers, laws, and jurisdiction
 - A mystical body united spiritually to Christ
 - A covenant people extending across generations
 - A universal invisible company known fully only to God
 - A communion of local churches
 - A particular assembly gathered in one place
 - A national establishment recognized by civil law
 - A voluntary association of professing believers
 - A kingdom community or a dispensationally distinct Body of Christ
- These are not interchangeable metaphors.
 - A visible institution can own property, appoint officers, and exercise jurisdiction; an invisible company cannot perform those acts in the same manner.
 - A local assembly has a location and can gather; a trans-historical company of the elect cannot assemble as one congregation in the present.
 - Before assigning doctrine to the church, the interpreter must determine what kind of entity the passage describes.

2. The Location Question: Where Is the Church?

- Traditions locate the church by different forms of presence and recognition.
 - Where an authorized bishop presides over the Eucharistic community
 - In worldwide communion with Rome
 - Among the canonical Orthodox churches
 - Wherever the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered
 - In each properly constituted local congregation
 - Invisibly among all the elect across time and place
 - Legally within the parishes and dioceses of a national establishment
 - Positionally in Christ as members of his Body
- The answers do not identify the same geographical or institutional reality.
 - One answer can exclude a congregation that another answer regards as fully a church.
 - A group may possess preaching, baptism, and professing believers while lacking the bishop, succession, polity, or dispensational identity another system considers essential.
- “Where is the church?” is therefore a recognition question, not merely a request for a street address.

3. The Membership Question: Who Belongs to the Church?

- Every definition creates a boundary, whether that boundary is sacramental, confessional, covenantal, congregational, invisible, or dispensational.
- Proposed populations include:
 - All baptized persons
 - Those in full sacramental and hierarchical communion
 - The elect of all ages
 - Professors of the true religion and their children
 - Regenerate persons only
 - Baptized believers only (sometimes requiring a particular baptism)
 - Persons received onto a local membership roll
 - Everyone residing within a territorial parish
 - All members of the Body of Christ
 - Israel and the church as one continuing covenant people
 - A believing remnant of Israel distinguished from the Body of Christ

- These boundaries admit and exclude different people.
 - An infant may be inside a covenantal or sacramental church but outside a believers-only congregation.
 - A baptized person may remain related to one communion while being excluded from its sacraments, yet another tradition may regard removal from the local roll as removal from the church.
 - An elect person may belong to an invisible church without belonging to any visible congregation.
- A command addressed “to the church” cannot be applied responsibly until the addressed population is identified.

4. The Visibility Question: Is the Church Visible, Invisible, or Both?

- Christian traditions give several incompatible accounts of the church's visibility.
 - The church is wholly visible as an ordered society.
 - One church possesses both visible and invisible dimensions.
 - An invisible universal church exists alongside visible local congregations.
 - Only local, visible assemblies are properly called churches.
- The visible-invisible distinction changes what counts as evidence of membership and unity.
 - Visible membership may be identified through baptism, profession, communion, enrollment, or submission to recognized officers.
 - Invisible membership is usually identified with election, regeneration, or spiritual union known perfectly only to God.
- The category must be demonstrated rather than assumed.
 - What textual necessity requires a second, invisible sense of church?
 - What contextual marker signals a movement from an identifiable assembly to a universal invisible company?
 - In what sense can a body that never visibly gathers exercise the functions assigned to an assembly?

5. The Authority Question: Where Does the Church's Binding Authority Reside?

- The identity of the church determines where binding authority is believed to reside.
 - The pope together with the college of bishops
 - A synod of canonical bishops
 - A monarch and the canon law of an established church
 - Presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies
 - A local congregation
 - Pastors or elders within a congregation
 - No institution beyond the persuasive authority of Scripture
- Each model produces a different direction and extent of accountability.
 - Authority may descend universally, operate synodally, pass through graded courts, or remain within a local assembly.
 - A decision binding in one system may have no jurisdictional force in another.
- The prior question is not merely who has authority, but which identified church received that authority in the biblical text.

6. The Marks Question: How Is a True Church Recognized?

- Traditions appeal to different marks to distinguish a true church from an unauthorized or false body.
 - Unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity
 - Apostolic succession and valid sacraments
 - Pure preaching and proper administration of the sacraments
 - Preaching, sacraments, and discipline
 - Regenerate or credibly professing membership
 - Believer's baptism, local autonomy, and authorized constitution
 - Right division and identity as the Body of Christ
- These tests can produce opposing verdicts about the same congregation.
 - One tradition may recognize its preaching and profession while rejecting its orders or sacraments.
 - Another may accept its baptism while denying that its wider hierarchy constitutes a church.
- A list of marks does not solve the problem unless Scripture first establishes which entity should bear those marks.

7. The Mission Question: What Has the Church Been Commissioned to Do?

- The church's assigned mission changes with the population and calling identified as the church.
 - Administer the means of grace
 - Preserve apostolic faith and communion
 - Preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments
 - Evangelize, baptize, and make disciples of nations
 - Maintain worship, mutual edification, and discipline
 - Transform society or pursue public justice
 - Remain separate from coercive civil power
 - Provoke Israel to jealousy
 - Make all people see the fellowship of the mystery
- These commissions are not automatically cumulative.
 - A command given to Israel, the kingdom assembly, an apostolic company, a local congregation, or the Body of Christ must first be assigned to its textual recipient.
 - Combining every proposed mission under the bare phrase the mission of the church assumes the identity the lesson is testing.
- Mission must follow demonstrated identity and calling rather than inherited institutional expectation.

8. The State Question: How Should the Church Relate to Civil Government?

- Christian structures have assigned radically different relationships between ecclesiastical and civil authority.
 - Church authority over rulers in matters touching faith or salvation
 - Royal supremacy over an established national church
 - Cooperation or symphony between civil rulers and bishops
 - Separate jurisdictions with negotiated areas of overlap
 - A two-kingdom distinction between civil and ecclesiastical rule
 - Strict non-establishment and institutional separation
 - Anabaptist separation accompanied by nonresistance
 - An activist church commissioned to address every sphere of public life
 - A limited assembly speaking and acting within its specifically revealed commission

- These models disagree over both jurisdiction and mission.
 - The state may protect, appoint, fund, regulate, tolerate, or persecute the body called church.
 - The church may crown, advise, resist, separate from, or claim authority over the state.
- Political arrangements often reveal the operative definition of the church more clearly than general statements about spiritual unity.

9. The Continuity Question: How Does the Church Relate to Israel and the Biblical Covenants?

- Traditions place the church in different relationships to Israel and to the unfolding biblical covenants.
 - Some identify one people of God extending from creation through Israel into the present church.
 - Some describe Israel as preparation for a church founded by Christ and manifested at Pentecost.
 - Some locate the church's institutional beginning during Christ's earthly ministry.
 - Some identify Pentecost with the formation or public manifestation of the Body of Christ.
 - Some distinguish Israel's kingdom assembly from a Body revealed through Paul's salvation or ministry.
 - Some place the present mystery calling after the close of Acts.
- These are different historical identities, not merely competing dates on one agreed timeline.
 - A church continuous with Israel inherits a different set of covenants and assumptions from a Body understood as a new and previously hidden company.
 - The proposed beginning determines which earlier communities are counted as the same church and which are distinguished from it.
- The competing dates and their detailed interpretive consequences belong in The Church's Starting Point Determines Its Scriptures, Calling, and Hope.

Notes

Competing Church Identities Produce Incompatible Doctrine and Practice

THESIS

Competing definitions of the church produce incompatible conclusions about saints, the Bride, Israel, the Body of Christ, ordinances, leadership, membership, and discipline.

Different Uses of Saints Identify Different Populations

- Saints cannot function as another undefined foundation word.
 - Roman Catholic usage may distinguish canonized exemplary Christians while also using saints more broadly for the holy people of God.
 - Lutheran confessional usage calls the church “the congregation of saints.”
 - Reformed and Baptist confessions may apply the term to the elect, the regenerate, or credible professors who constitute visible congregations.
 - Dispensational readings may distinguish Pauline saints from an Israelite believing remnant or “little flock.”
- These uses identify different populations and different bases of holiness.
 - The boundary may be baptism, election, regeneration, profession, covenant standing, or participation in a particular dispensational calling.
 - Importing one confessional meaning into every biblical occurrence decides the identity of the church before the context has been examined.
- The text, rather than inherited usage, must identify the people called saints.
 - Does saints describe moral character, covenant status, divine consecration, or a particular company in the passage?
 - When Paul addresses “the saints” and “the faithful,” are these parallel descriptions or distinguishable audiences?
 - Does the word retain one technical referent across the Gospels, Acts, Paul, Hebrews, and Revelation?

The Church Must Not Be Identified as the Bride without Demonstration

Ephesians 5:22-33 - King James Version

SCRIPTURE

22 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

24 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.

29 For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:

30 For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.

31 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

32 This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

33 Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

Revelation 21:9-10 - King James Version

SCRIPTURE

9 And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.

10 And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,

- Most Catholic, Reformed, Baptist, and evangelical systems identify the church as Christ's Bride or spouse.
 - The usual argument appeals especially to Ephesians 5:22-33, where the relationship of husband and wife is compared with Christ and the church.
 - The comparison is theologically important, but the passage does not contain the bare definitional statement, "The church is the Bride of Christ."
- Revelation supplies an express identification that must also be considered.
 - Revelation 21:9-10 introduces "the bride, the Lamb's wife" and shows John "that great city, the holy Jerusalem."
 - An inferred identification from an analogy in Ephesians should not automatically erase or absorb an explicit identification in Revelation.
- The point is methodological before it is doctrinal.
 - Are church, Body, Bride, and New Jerusalem demonstrated to be identical referents, or have inherited systems blended them?
 - Every metaphor and identification must be interpreted in its own context before the terms are combined into one ecclesiology.

Identifying the Church with Israel Reassigns Biblical Ownership

- Christian systems divide over whether Israel and the church are one continuing people or distinct companies with distinct callings.
 - Covenantal and catholic systems commonly emphasize continuity between Israel and the church.
 - Dispensational systems insist upon some degree of distinction, although they disagree about its extent and timing.
- The decision immediately controls biblical ownership.
 - Are Israel's covenants also the church's covenants?
 - Do kingdom warnings and prophetic commissions address the present church?

- Does the church inherit Israel's land, throne, priesthood, Sabbath, tithes, and national promises?
- May Israel's blessings be transferred to the church while Israel retains the judgments?
- Neither continuity nor discontinuity should be assumed from the shared phrase people of God.
 - The interpreter must demonstrate whether two passages address the same population under one calling or different populations within God's purpose.
 - The detailed chronological positions belong in Why the Beginning of the Church Matters.

The Relationship between One Body and Many Assemblies Must Be Demonstrated

- A common solution is to say that church has both universal and local senses.
 - The universal church is often defined as the Body of Christ or the invisible company of the elect.
 - Local churches are visible congregations that assemble for worship, teaching, ordinances, and discipline.
- The formula may be correct, but it must be demonstrated rather than recited.
 - What textual markers indicate a change from a local assembly to a universal company?
 - Does church name the Body as an organism, local assemblies as gatherings, or both in the same sense?
 - Can an entity that never assembles perform the actions assigned to an assembly?
- Institutions between the local and universal levels create an additional problem.
 - Is a denomination itself a church in any biblical sense?
 - Is a diocese, synod, convention, national establishment, or worldwide communion an ekklesia?
 - Useful Christian organizations do not become biblical churches merely because custom places church in their names.

Ordinances and Sacraments Follow the Identity Assigned to the Church

- The practices assigned to the church follow the identity and calling assigned to it.
 - Catholic and Orthodox systems treat sacramental life as belonging to the church's essence.
 - Lutheran and Reformed systems make proper sacramental administration a mark of the church.
 - Baptist systems ordinarily treat baptism and the Lord's Supper as ordinances entrusted to local churches.
 - Some mid-Acts systems exclude water baptism from the Body's program while retaining the Lord's Supper.
 - Some Acts 28 systems assign neither water baptism nor the Lord's Supper to the post-Acts-28 calling.
- The disagreement concerns more than terminology.
 - A sacrament may be understood as a means of grace requiring authorized ministry.
 - An ordinance may be understood as an act of obedience committed to a gathered congregation.
 - A practice may be excluded because it is assigned to Israel, the kingdom program, or an earlier dispensation.
- “The church observes baptism and communion” is therefore not neutral common ground.
 - The statement already assumes which church is meant, when it began, what commission belongs to it, and who may administer its practices.

The Definition of the Church Determines Who May Establish and Govern It

- The practical question is whether an otherwise qualified believer may simply begin gathering people and call the result a church.
- Christian traditions supply incompatible answers.
 - A church cannot exist without a bishop standing in valid apostolic succession.
 - A congregation requires canonical authorization and placement by a bishop.
 - Ministers must be examined and ordained through a presbytery or ministerium.
 - A local congregation may call and recognize its own qualified pastors or elders.
 - Gifted believers may begin gathering, with tested leadership and order developing afterward.
 - No modern clerical office possesses transmitted sacramental authority.

- The word ordination often collapses several distinct questions.
 - Who may preach or teach?
 - Who may gather believers or constitute a church?
 - Who may administer baptism or the Lord's Supper?
 - Who may appoint elders and exercise discipline?
 - Does ordination transmit authority, create an office, or publicly recognize qualifications already present?
- Biblical qualification and institutional credentialing are not identical.
 - First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 emphasize character, competence, household order, and tested reputation rather than an academic degree.
 - Prudential education may be valuable without becoming the biblical act that creates ministerial authority.

Membership and Expulsion Depend upon the Church Being Defined

- Traditions disagree about the act that places a person inside the church.
 - Infant baptism
 - Believer's baptism
 - Profession of faith
 - Election and regeneration
 - Confirmation or formal reception
 - Enrollment in a local covenant or membership roll
 - Spirit baptism into the Body of Christ
 - Residence within a territorial parish
- They also disagree about what places a person outside.
 - Heresy, apostasy, moral scandal, or refusal of ecclesiastical authority
 - Excommunication by a bishop, court, or congregation
 - Removal from a local membership roll
 - Nothing can erase invisible membership if it rests upon eternal election or irreversible spiritual union.
- The same disciplinary word can describe different realities.
 - Catholic law distinguishes baptismal incorporation, full communion, eligibility for the sacraments, and canonical penalty; excommunication does not undo baptism.
 - Congregational removal may terminate membership in one local body without claiming to reverse regeneration or erase membership in a universal invisible church.
 - Hierarchical, presbyterial, and congregational systems also assign the act of exclusion to different authorities.

- A coherent doctrine of discipline therefore depends upon a prior definition of membership, authority, and the entity from which a person is expelled.

Notes

The Church's Starting Point Determines Its Scriptures, Calling, and Hope

THESIS

The point at which a tradition believes the church began determines which people, apostles, commissions, ordinances, covenants, Scriptures, and future hope it assigns to the church.

- The proposed beginnings are competing identity claims rather than answers to a trivia question.
- Creation or Adam: one people throughout history
 - Representative approach: strong covenantal formulations and some catholic accounts of one people of God across the covenants.
 - Immediate result: Israel and the church are treated as successive stages or administrations of one continuing people.
- Old Covenant preparation, Christ's founding, and Pentecost manifestation
 - Representative approach: the Roman Catholic multi-stage account.
 - Immediate result: Israel prepares the church, Christ establishes it, and the Spirit publicly manifests it as a sacramental and apostolic society.
- John the Baptist or Christ's earthly ministry
 - Representative approach: Landmark and church-perpetuity Baptist positions.
 - Immediate result: the Gospel narratives contain the church's constitution, officers, discipline, and ordinances before Pentecost.
- The cross, resurrection, or Pentecost
 - Representative approach: many evangelicals and traditional dispensationalists.
 - Immediate result: Christ's saving work and the Spirit's coming form or publicly inaugurate the Body, making Acts 2 the principal beginning point.
- Acts 9: the salvation and commission of Paul
 - Representative approach: Stam-type mid-Acts dispensationalism.

- Immediate result: the Body of Christ begins with Paul, while the earlier Acts community continues Israel's kingdom program.
- Acts 13 or another Pauline transition point
 - Representative approach: other mid-Acts positions that distinguish a gradual transition within Acts.
 - Immediate result: the Pauline mission marks the emergence of the Body while earlier events and commissions remain associated with Israel and the little flock.
- Acts 28: the close of the Acts-period offer to Israel
 - Representative approach: Bullinger- and Welch-type dispensationalism.
 - Immediate result: the prison epistles disclose the present mystery calling, distinguished from the hope and practices operating during Acts.
- Moving the starting point moves every identity, authority, and calling attached to the church.
 - Which apostles establish the church's doctrine
 - Which Gospel commission belongs to it
 - Whether Pentecost fulfills prophecy for Israel or reveals the mystery of the Body
 - Whether water baptism and the Lord's Supper are constitutive, continuing, or excluded
 - Whether Israel's covenants and promises belong to the church
 - Which biblical books directly address its members
 - What earthly or heavenly future hope it possesses
- The interpretive consequence reaches the ownership of Scripture itself.
 - A wrong starting point can give one company another company's identity, mail, obligations, warnings, and hope.
 - The date cannot be settled by denominational inheritance; the text must demonstrate when the particular company began and what revelation governs it.

Notes

Twelve Questions Force Identification before Ecclesiological Application

THESIS

Every claim about the church must first identify its biblical term and referent before assigning identity, authority, membership, practices, promises, warnings, or mission to it.

- The same twelve questions apply whenever a speaker, confession, or interpreter says the church.
 - 1. Exact term: What biblical word or expression is actually present?
 - 2. Population: What people does that term designate in this context?
 - 3. Scope: Is the referent local, regional, national, heavenly, or trans-local?
 - 4. Visibility: Is the group visible or invisible, or has that distinction been imported from a theological system?
 - 5. Boundary: Who belongs to the group, and by what act or condition?
 - 6. Beginning: When did this particular company begin?
 - 7. Relationship: How is it related to Israel, the little flock, and the Body of Christ?
 - 8. Authority: What authority does the passage actually give to it?
 - 9. Officers: What leaders or offices does the passage actually give to it?
 - 10. Practices: What ordinances, sacraments, meetings, or disciplines are actually commanded to it?
 - 11. Address: What promises, warnings, commissions, and hope belong to it?
 - 12. Derivation: Is the conclusion drawn from the text, or inherited from a structure already called church?
- The audit proceeds from identification to doctrine and application.
 - The language and the group identified come before doctrinal or practical questions.
 - Authority, ordinances, promises, and mission depend upon establishing the population being addressed.
 - A change in the group identified between passages prevents conclusions from being transferred merely because the English translation uses church in both places.
- The audit does not supply a preferred ecclesiology by itself.
 - It identifies hidden assumptions, prevents equivocation, and establishes the questions a positive biblical reconstruction must answer.

Notes

An Unsettled Definition Requires Biblical Classification before Application

THESIS

Because the bare phrase the church does not identify one agreed reality, responsible interpretation requires classification of the biblical referents before theological judgment or application.

- The verdict follows from the evidence without requiring the entire gallery to be repeated.
 - Christendom can identify where its institutions meet, who owns their property, who appoints their ministers, who controls their funds, who may receive their sacraments, and where appeals are decided.
 - It cannot use the bare phrase the church and guarantee that two Christian traditions mean the same population, institution, calling, or authority.
- What is at stake is the ownership of biblical doctrine and instruction.
 - Ecclesiology determines biblical ownership.
 - Until the addressed company is identified, the interpreter does not know whether a command, promise, warning, office, ordinance, commission, or prophecy belongs to that company.
- The methodological conclusion follows from the unsettled definition.
 - Shared vocabulary is not shared meaning.
 - Classification must precede adjudication: identify the biblical uses, distinguish their referents, and only then determine what God assigns to each company.
- The unsettled definition leads to a later positive biblical reconstruction.
 - The next task is not to add another inherited definition to the gallery.
 - It is to examine the biblical occurrences, identify what is present in each context, and test whether the referents may legitimately be combined.
 - This repeats the course's governing discipline: establish what the text identifies before allowing a theological system to control its application.

Notes

What This Session Established

- One shared confession is applied to populations and structures that cannot all be the same thing.
- Nine identity questions expose disagreements concealed by the shared word church.
- The church's proposed identity and beginning determine its Scriptures, authority, practices, calling, and hope.
- The Twelve-Question Church Audit forces identification before ecclesiological application.
- Classification of the biblical groups must precede theological judgment and application.

SESSION CONCLUSION

Because the bare phrase the church does not identify one agreed reality, responsible interpretation must classify the biblical group being described before assigning identity, authority, membership, practices, promises, warnings, or mission to it.

What This Session Did Not Establish

- The Church Audit by itself supplies a complete preferred ecclesiology.
- Every use of church in Scripture identifies the same population or kind of body.
- A useful Christian institution becomes a biblical church merely because custom calls it one.

