

A Brief Introduction to Ecclesiology

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General Introduction

Ecclesiology is the study of the church.

The term “Ecclesiology” comes from the Greek ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia = church) and λόγος (logos → ology = study of)..

[BDAG, 303-304] defines ἐκκλησία as:

1. a regularly summoned legislative body, *assembly*.
2. a casual gathering of people, *an assemblage, gathering*.
3. people with shared belief, *community, congregation*:
 - a. of OT Israelites *assembly, congregation*.
 - b. of Christians in a specific place or area.
 - c. the global community of Christians, *(universal) church*.

[Membean] indicates, “The Greek root word log means ‘word,’ and its variant suffix -logy means ‘study (of).’ Some common English words that use this root include biology, mythology, ...”

So, again, in simple terms, ecclesiology is the study of the church.

But what do we mean when we say “the church”?

[Berkhof, 567-568] writes:

The Church being a many-sided entity has naturally also been defined from more than one point of view.

1. FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF ELECTION. According to some theologians the Church is the community of the elect, the *coetus electorum*. This

definition is apt to be somewhat misleading, however. It applies only to the Church ideally considered, the Church as it exists in the idea of God and as it will be completed at the end of the ages, and not to the Church as a present empirical reality....

2. FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF EFFECTUAL CALLING. To escape the objection raised to the preceding definition, it gradually became customary to define the Church from the point of view of some subjective spiritual characteristic of those who belong to it, especially effectual calling or faith, either by naming such a characteristic in addition to election, or by substituting it for election. Thus the Church was defined as the company of the elect who are called by the Spirit of God (*coetus electorum vocatorum*), as the body of those who are effectually called (*coetus vocatorum*), or, even more commonly, as the community of the faithful or believers (*coetus fidelium*)....

3. FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF BAPTISM AND PROFESSION. From the point of view of baptism and profession the Church has been defined as the community of those who are baptized and profess the true faith; or as the community of those who profess the true religion together with their children.

I would hold that, within the minds of society's individuals, and thus also within the corporate mind of society as a whole, there exists a continuum of opinion as to what the term "church" actually stands for. What I'm contending is that there are no "pure" definitions; that the various proposed definition categories tend to overflow their semantic bounds and run together

like watercolors on a piece of poster board. For convenience, I will refer to this as the “Continuum Theory” in this paper.

So, on one end of the spectrum, we might find individuals who, when they hear the word “church”, think immediately and primarily of one particular physical structure of brick, mortar, and stained glass. But others, generally of like mind, will conjure up visions of many homespun little country churches, larger city churches, and the great Cathedral of Notre Dame. And yet others will also note that a few people are sitting in the pews. And all those slightly different perceptions can yet merge and disperse, seemingly at random, over space, time, and community.

At the other end of the spectrum, we might find those who, upon hearing the word “church”, gravitate at once to the picture of the saved of all time gathered together in New Jerusalem for all eternity; “No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 22:3-5, ESV). Others will look forward not quite so far; perhaps to the thousand years that Christ will reign on earth, or to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, or perhaps to “The Rapture”.

More towards the center of this seething mass of differing opinions, we’ll find perceptions based primarily on the contemporary human community which calls itself the church. But, there again, we find widely differing (and yet overlapping) views. Is the true “church” strongly liturgical in nature? Or is it more evangelical and free? Or is it charismatic? Or both liturgical and charismatic at the same time? Or is it just a Sunday social gathering where Realtors, doctors, and lawyers can go to drum up business?

Is Jesus Christ the Master and Head of the church, or is He simply a figurehead who's been recently sacrificed on the altar of ecumenicism, inter-faith dialogs, and secular philosophy? Does a church even need God? What about the Seattle Atheist Church? What about Anton Szandor LaVey and the Church of Satan?

But, while this laissez-faire approach might seem perfectly acceptable within today's super-individualistic society which is most notably characterized by moral and religious relativism, e.g. "Your truth is not my truth", such an approach is not useful for trying to build a workable theory of the church. We need to begin with a more absolute approach if we're ever to rise above the stifling morass of outrageously competing truth claims.

(Schmitt, 60) provides a good working definition of the difference between absolutism and relativism:

Absolutism: All truth-values are truth-values simpliciter.

Relativism: At least some truth-values are relative truth-values — truth-values relative to a person, culture, system of beliefs, cognitive framework, intellectual perspective, or conceptual scheme.

and one can even weigh the comparative clarity to be expected from the two as an inverse function of the number of words needed to describe them!

In this paper, I propose beginning from a form of Foundationalism. (Smith) presents a straightforward and clearly stated definition:

In philosophy, foundationalism is a theory that suggests knowledge and justified beliefs are built upon a foundational set of indubitable or self-evident

beliefs or truths. According to foundationalism, these foundational beliefs are the ultimate ground or starting point for all other knowledge and beliefs.

Foundationalists assert that some beliefs are inherently justified and do not need support from other beliefs....

Foundationalism is an epistemology framework. An epistemological framework is a set of beliefs in specific disciplines which dictate what is studied, how it is studied, what counts as evidence, and why the knowledge produced is essential.... Foundationalism posits that knowledge is structured hierarchically, with certain foundational beliefs as the starting point for all other beliefs.

while (Hasan and Fumerton) are somewhat more formal:

Foundationalism is a view about the structure of (epistemic) justification or knowledge. The foundationalist's thesis in short is that (a) there are some "basic" or "foundational" beliefs that have a positive epistemic status—e.g., they count as justified or as knowledge—without depending on any other beliefs for this status, and (b) any other beliefs with a positive epistemic status must depend, ultimately, on foundational beliefs for this status.

Of course, the tenets of Foundationalism are not particularly palatable to today's relativists. In fact, (Martin, 273) uses the very state of affairs I describe in the Continuum Theory to argue that what many would consider to be the foundations of their faith are not even logically basic:

Some Christians believe in God on the basis of the traditional arguments or on the basis of religious experiences; their belief in God is not basic. There would, then,

certainly be no agreement in the Christian community over whether belief in God is basic or nonbasic. More important, there would be no agreement on whether doctrinal beliefs concerning the authority of the pope, the makeup of the trinity, the nature of Christ, the means of salvation, and so on were true, let alone basic. Some Christian sects would hold certain doctrinal beliefs to be basic and rational; others would hold the same beliefs to be irrational and, indeed, the gravest of heresies. Moreover, there would be no agreement over the conditions for basic belief. Some Christians might believe that a belief is properly basic when it is triggered by listening to the pope. Others would violently disagree. Even where there was agreement over the right conditions, these would seem to justify conflicting basic beliefs and, consequently, conflicting religious sects founded on them.

Of course, there are certainly counter-arguments to Martin's position. As just one example, (Lagoon, 553) quotes (Corduan, 42):

In fact, we can turn the table on the person making such demands on us and point out that the demand is not even legitimate. It implies the thesis that in order to be true a belief must be able to withstand any conceivable doubt. No belief can withstand that requirement - including the belief that in order to be true a belief must be able to withstand any conceivable doubt.

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Please note that some references within this document are abbreviated in brackets for convenience. For example, [BDAG], etc. These abbreviations are more fully described in the "Works Cited" list below.

Section 01: A Working Foundation

God exists!

That's the basic foundational belief I'm going to start with. I postulate that it is indeed basic, and thus needs no further justification. (But, of course, I'm going to offer a few "justifying" remarks anyway.)

In formal sentential logic, there exists the Principle of the Excluded Middle, expressed by the propositional formula $p \vee \neg p$, i.e. "p or not p". This is an XOR (Exclusive OR) function. What it means is simply that for every proposition, either the proposition is true or its negation is true, i.e. the proposition is either true or the proposition is false. There is no middle ground where the proposition is partially true and partially false at the same time. And there is no encompassing ground wherein the proposition is both true and false at the same time. Thus we say, "Either 'God Exists' is true, or 'God Does Not Exist' is true. There is no middle ground where God only partially exists. And there is no encompassing ground where God both exists and also does not exist at the same time."

Of course, one can begin with "God Does Not Exist" instead. Indeed, that's where Atheism begins. But I would contend that if you proceed honestly from the "God Does Not Exist" basic premise, all roads eventually lead to the nihilism of Jacobi and Nietzsche where everything is meaningless and the whole system of logic collapses under its own weight. And no one can actually live under such a collapsed system. So, no one actually proceeds honestly from the "God Does Not Exist" basic premise; they instead introduce compromising factors which allow them to live and function more or less "normally" within the world and culture in which they find themselves.

Thus, “God Does Not Exist” is not at all viable as a basic premise. Which, by the Principle of the Excluded Middle, only leaves “God Exists”; the very definition of a basic foundational belief

But, if we grant that God exists, then we naturally have to ask, “Who is God?” and “What is God?” People have been searching for answers to those questions for as far back as we can remember. The general human approach to answering these questions is called “Natural Theology”. Taliaferro defines this as:

Natural theology is the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divine revelation or scripture. Traditionally, natural theology involves weighing arguments for and against God’s existence, and it is contrasted with *revealed theology*, which may be carried out within the context of ostensible revelation or scripture.... Natural theology... develops arguments about God based on the existence of the cosmos, the very concept of God, and different views of the nature of the cosmos, such as its ostensible order and value.

But this type of study is more man-centered than God-centered: Over the course of history (and perhaps even prehistory), it has led to a very broad collection of religions, sects, cults, and other philosophic entities. For example, consider the difference between Deism and Theism. (Dictionary.com) says:

Deism and theism are both general terms for belief systems. Deism holds that a god must exist, based on the evidence of reason and nature only, not on supernatural evidence. Some deists believe that a god created the world but is

indifferent to it. Theism holds that there is one God who is still actively engaged with the universe in some way. Theists do not reject supernatural evidence.

Even within Christianity itself, such speculations have led to doctrines which seem more man-centered than God-centered. I believe it was (Sweeting) who observed that many strange spin-offs from orthodox Christianity descend from the concept of a “Jello-Jesus” that you can fit into any mold you want.

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So, I have to conclude that Natural Theology, by itself, is a dead-end. I find it better to consider as an axiom, the concept that God is so far beyond us that we cannot humanly discover who and what He is. Beyond the very minimal information that we can (imperfectly) glean from Natural Theology, the only things we can know about God are those things which He, Himself, chooses to reveal to us in terms which we can understand.

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Section 02: Revealed Theology

If we are going to have to rely upon what God has chosen to reveal to us about Himself as our primary source of information about who and what God is, then we have to ask. “Which revelation?” Which revelation is authoritative; the Hebrew scriptures, the Christian Bible, the Islamic Qur’an, the Hindu texts (the Vedas, the Upanishads,...), the Buddhist texts (Mahayana, Tantric,...), the texts of Confucius (Analects, Mencius,...), the Tao of Lao Tzu, or..., or...

Which revelation is the authentic revelation from God? While we certainly are able to locate some passages which are similar in intent across all these potential candidates, there are many others where there are no parallels in the other candidates, and some passages which flat-out contradict the pronouncements of the others. Given those conflicts, therefore, only one (at most) can be True; all the others are False. (I can feel the “all paths lead to God” and the “my truth is true for me” proponents picking up their whomping sticks even as I write this.) But, I will nevertheless continue to hold to the Principle of the Excluded Middle: given propositions that mutually conflict, only one of them (at most) can be True.

So, how do we decide? This way:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. (Acts 2:22-24, NIV84). And:

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 1:1-4, NASB95). And:

Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead; (Galatians 1:1, KJV). And:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep. After that, He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8, LSB).

Christ arose! This is the greatest evidence of all for the Truth of Christianity. Other evidence, though also important, nevertheless are pale by comparison to this. (Mills, np. Appendix C, point 3) begins with:

The authenticity of any historical fact depends entirely on the credibility of its witnesses, for it is an obvious fact that history cannot be re-run simply to satisfy the skeptic. For instance, we all accept that Hannibal crossed the Alps and was defeated by Rome, and that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon and was

eventually assassinated-but on what basis do we accept these facts? Simply on the written testimony of historians who recorded the evidence they gathered from witnesses. The case for Jesus Christ's resurrection is exactly the same, though profoundly more solid from two distinct perspectives: the extent and reliability of literary support, and the demonstrated veracity of the witnesses.

And (Hanegraaff, xix) also outlines the enormity of the Resurrection and its impact upon all of history, and also the horrendous results to be reaped by discounting its importance:

Before you start down the road to resurrection — a pilgrimage that for some will be measured in days and for others in decades — we would do well to chart the course. Allow me to start by underscoring the importance of the trek. This is not just any journey; it is a journey of enormous consequence. You see, without resurrection, there is no hope. Indeed, without resurrection, there is no Christianity.

And Hanegraaff, here, is echoing what the Bible plainly says in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians:

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:14-17, ESV)

This has been but a brief treatment of the concept of Revealed Theology. Much more could be said, but that would be beyond the scope of this paper. I would refer any who wish to explore this further to the “Works Cited” list herein, most specifically to (Berkhof), (Corduan), and (Grudem).

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Section 03: Ecclesiology Proper

Along with the Continuum Theory which I outlined in the General Introduction to this paper, I would further hold that:

1. The physical buildings and structures which are called churches are not without value: Our Lord has blessed them as places where His children can gather together to worship Him in community, and to comfort and encourage one another in His service.
2. But the true definition of the “church” is to be found in the people who are the Elect as per Berkhof’s definition number 1 which was presented at the head of the General Introduction above. The entire first chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians is devoted to the proclamation of that truth, but especially verses 4 and 5, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (NIV84).
3. There is no space available here to go into a detailed discussion of the Sovereignty of God vs. The Free Will of Man. I will simply affirm my belief that in some way which is not comprehensible to us this side of Heaven, God is absolutely sovereign, and yet we are also completely responsible. God chose us from before the foundation of the world, and yet we are still required to make the choice of whether or not to accept Him.

4. The “Church”, as the Church, officially began at the first Pentecost following Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:1-4, ESV).
5. Nonetheless, I would also hold that the “Church” also includes all those who placed their faith in God’s promise of the Savior throughout all of history prior to His Advent, beginning with Adam and Eve, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15, ESV). They placed their faith on the Savior based on the testimony that He *would* indeed come; similarly, we placed our faith on the Savior based on the testimony that He *has* indeed come.
6. Yes, on the one hand, Israel is heir to some promises which don’t accrue to those not of Israel, but those promises only accrue to those of Israel who are the true Israel, i.e. the remnant; those who have remained faithful to God. On the other hand, “those who have remained faithful” are just indeed those who are encompassed within the Church, e.g. the first Christians were all Jews; they were all of Israel.

7. Furthermore, while it is true that we exist in time and are not able to truly comprehend the limits of eternity, it is also true that some of the basic concepts of the eternal are not entirely beyond us. The professing church, as per Berkhof's third point, is an important mechanism in the world. Those within it who only profess but do not possess, i.e. those who today are fake Christians, may yet become real Christians tomorrow in response to the witness of those within the professing Church who are also possessors, i.e. real Christians.
8. Even those outside the professing Church; those who today are our worst enemies; may yet tomorrow become our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us, therefore, despise no one. Let us offer our testimony to all. But let us do so in proper humility, not erroneously supposing that our efforts can save anyone; it is the Holy Spirit who convinces and convicts. "However, I am telling you the truth: It's good for you that I'm going away. If I don't go away, the helper won't come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. He will come to convict the world of sin, to show the world what has God's approval, and to convince the world that God judges it." (John 16:7-8, GW).

Following are some quotes which I have found to also be instructive regarding the definition of "ecclesiology".

(Cairns, 143) defines "Ecclesiology" as:

That branch of systematic theology that treats the church, covering such things as the scriptural definition of its names, nature, government, and power.

(Tony Evans, 27) presents a more relational viewpoint:

Ecclesiology: The doctrine of the church comes from the Greek word *ekklēsia*, which means “assembly” or “called out ones.” From this term we can formulate a definition of the church as a special called-out assembly of people, chosen by God to become part of what Paul called both the body and the bride of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–31; Eph 5:22–27, 32).

An even more down-to-earth working definition is provided by (Van Neste, 417):

The repeated exhortations to love one another should significantly inform our ecclesiology (doctrine of the church). John envisions the church as a community of people who care deeply for one another and invest fully in one another. As the exposition of relevant texts in the commentary will show, the love John enjoins is no mere sentiment or emotion but is aggressive, devoted care. This costly care is not mentioned as an option for the particularly committed but is presented as the basic way of life for any true believer.

Christians are responsible for one another in terms of helping with basic needs (1 John 3:17) as well as helping each other persevere in the faith (1 John 5:16). John assumes we will know of one another’s needs and sins. Otherwise, his exhortations make no sense. This sort of care makes most sense in local

congregations where people do not merely see one another once a week but engage with one another regularly for mutual support, help, and care.

(Erickson, 1034) writes;

Obviously the church includes all persons anywhere in the world who are savingly related to Christ. It also includes all who have lived and been part of his body, and all who will live and be part of his body. This inclusiveness is strikingly depicted in Hebrews 12:23: “and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” In view of this inclusiveness we may offer a tentative theological definition of the church as the whole body of those who through Christ’s death have been savingly reconciled to God and have received new life. It includes all such persons, whether in heaven or on earth. While it is universal in nature, it finds expression in local groupings of believers which display the same qualities as does the body of Christ as a whole.

(Grudem, 853) provides a very concise summary of this definition. He writes, “The church is the community of all true believers for all time.” He goes on to expand this meaning:

Here the term “the church” is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ. But that must include all true believers for all time, both believers in the New Testament age and believers in the Old Testament age as well. So great is God’s plan for the church that he has exalted Christ to a position of highest authority for the sake of the church: “He has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all

things *for the church*, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all”

(Eph. 1:22-23).

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Closing Thoughts

In the General Introduction to this paper, I began by quoting Berkhof's first definition of the church, to wit:

1. FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF ELECTION. According to some theologians the Church is the community of the elect, the *coetus electorum*. This definition is apt to be somewhat misleading, however. It applies only to the Church ideally considered, the Church as it exists in the idea of God and as it will be completed at the end of the ages, and not to the Church as a present empirical reality....

Contra Berkhof, I would argue that this definition is not misleading at all; it is rather a guideline to how we should approach Ecclesiology, the study of the Church. Those within the professing Church who are not real Christians today, and those who are completely outside the Church today, may yet tomorrow be included in the community of believers, becoming our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.

While being cautious because they are enemies today, we should nevertheless reach out to them, witnessing to the truth of the Gospel, and looking forward to the possibility of welcoming them into the family tomorrow.

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