

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

THE CHURCH, SPIRITUAL GROWTH,
AND THE END TIMES

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4. Don't be crushed by present suffering; be comforted by future splendor.
5. Gather often to exhort one another to love and good works.

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INTRODUCTION

For some people, the word *doctrine* summons yawns of tedium, shudders of trepidation, or frowns of suspicion. Dogmatic preachers exasperate them, feuding denominations weary them, and droning scholars bore them.

When people hear *theology*, the condition sometimes worsens. They picture massive tomes packed with technical discussions, less-than-crucial data, and incomprehensible footnotes—unusable information to distract them from God rather than drawing them nearer.

Most people seeking to grow in their faith want practical principles, not theoretical concepts. They want to *know* God, not just know *about* Him.

Yet the fact is that we can't experience real spiritual growth without solid spiritual truth. We can't know the true God without knowing God truly.

In that case, where do we start? How do we begin to harvest in this fruitful field without getting caught in the tangled underbrush of mere opinions and idiosyncrasies? How can we sort through what seem like countless contradictory theories to find the essential truths necessary for strengthening and living out our faith?

Exploring Christian Theology will offer introductions, overviews, and reviews of key orthodox, protestant, evangelical tenets without belaboring details or broiling up debates. The three *ECT* volumes, compact but substantial, provide accessible and convenient summaries of major themes; they're intended as guidebooks for a church that, overall, is starving for the very doctrine it's too long avoided.

Each volume includes primary biblical texts, a history of each main teaching, relevant charts and graphs, practical implications, and suggestions for literature that you might want to have in your own library. And one of our goals for this work is to offer help to those who haven't read much in the way of theology. So we've included a glossary of terms—the unusual and the significant. If at any point you see an unfamiliar word or wonder about a definition, consider taking a moment to check that list. In a similar vein, you can look at the table of contents for a straightforward and organized glimpse of what's to come.

Further, each part or section (e.g., this volume has two parts) can stand alone—be read or referenced on its own. Or you can study through all the sections related to one “region” of theology and walk away with a handle on its biblical, theological, historical, and practical dimensions. In other words, these books can be used in a number of ways, suitable to your particular needs or interests.

Exploring Christian Theology differs from other mini-theologies in that it strives to present a broad consensus, not a condensed systematic model of one evangelical teacher or protestant tradition. Thus you might use these volumes for discipleship, catechism, membership training, preview or review of doctrine, or personal reference. Like the evangelical movement itself, we seek to be orthodox and interdenominational within a classic consensus.

Treat each volume as a simple primer that supplements (not supplants) more detailed treatments of theology—that complements (rather than competes with) intermediate and advanced works. As such, regardless of denominational or confessional commitments, these books likewise can be used by ministry training programs, Bible colleges, or seminaries for students preparing to undertake in-depth study. Whatever your background, degree of interest, or level of expertise, we hope this volume won't be the end of a brief jaunt but the beginning of a lifelong journey into—or a helpful aid alongside your ongoing immersion into—the exciting world of Christian theology.

Nathan D. Holsteen and Michael J. Svigel
General Editors

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THE CHRISTIAN STORY IN FOUR ACTS

Do you remember this story?

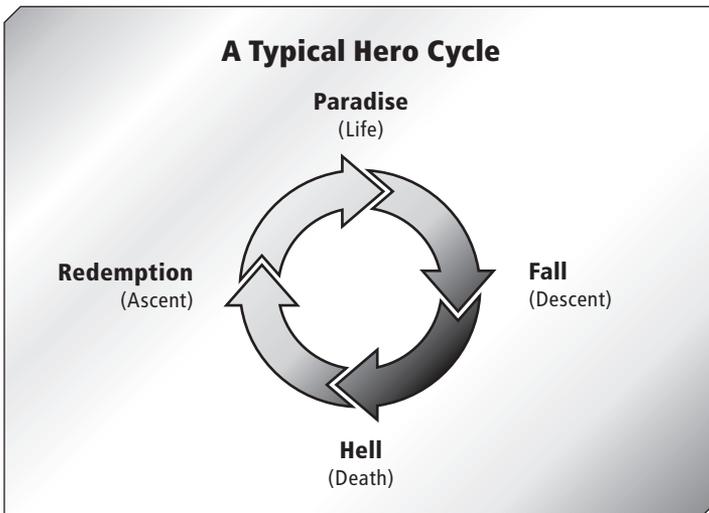
The young nephew of a rugged moisture farmer grows up under the stifling rays of Tatooine’s twin suns. But more oppressive than the heat of that desert planet is the smothering grip of the boy’s aunt and uncle, who’ve fostered his naïveté and kept him busy calibrating machines, cleaning droids, and repairing equipment. Anything to keep him from asking about his past, complaining about his wretched condition, or dreaming about a destiny that could drive him far from home. Still, deep in his heart, young Luke Skywalker senses a larger world “out there,” beyond the bleak horizon, past the blazing suns, and across the distant stars of that galaxy far, far away.

Ever since the film’s original release in 1977, the *Star Wars* phenomenon has continued to resonate with young and old alike, trading in universal themes of fall, struggle, self-sacrifice, and redemption. Most storytellers admit that the movies reflect something profound about the human experience, touching something deep within the soul. George Lucas, the creator of the *Star Wars* franchise, quite intentionally cast his narrative in a time-tested form, drinking deeply from the wells of ancient mythology and incorporating themes that repeatedly appear in epic poems, plays, legends, myths, and religious beliefs of various world cultures.¹

Lucas utilized what storytellers often call “the hero cycle.”² With this pattern, authors grasp and hold their audience by tapping into

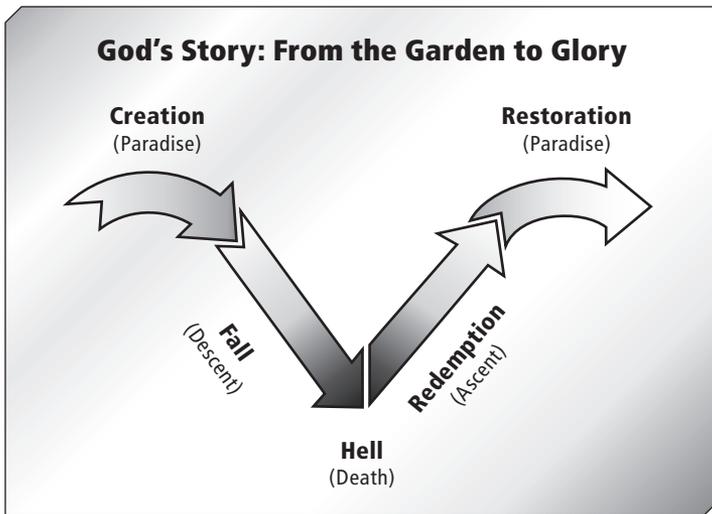
universal experiences—elements common to most or all individuals and cultures:

- an experience of personal conflict between good and evil
- frustration with the present world
- anxieties about the future
- a sense of having a greater purpose and meaning
- the conviction that this world isn't the way it's supposed to be
- the hope that things will one day be better than they are



Our well-known stories of initiation, fall, struggle, testing, redemption, and ultimate victory put into words, portray on stage, or project on screen the unconscious realities we feel in our hearts. Our favorite movies or books are “favorites” because they touch on themes related to this cycle that resonates with our experiences. They “speak” to us, inviting us to enter into a larger story that transcends our lonely individualism and our deteriorating world.³

Reminiscent of the hero cycle (with some astonishing twists), the chronicle of the classic Christian faith is a captivating account that can be summed up in four acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.



Act I: Creation

If a composer were to write a score for the Old Testament, what kind of motifs would he or she employ? Gentle harps and melodic strings? Majestic trumpets? Delightful woodwinds or pounding drums? Through whatever means, the theme would probably *begin* with a burst of symphonic grandeur, followed by a flourish of interwoven melodies signifying the creation of heaven and earth in glorious perfection.

As this bold overture resolved into a blissful ballad, however, a dark and ominous minor chord would slither into the melody, eventually turning the key from major to minor. Perhaps oboes and bassoons would replace flutes and piccolos; enter bass drums for xylophones; cellos and basses for violins and harps; tubas for trumpets. We'd hear harsh, discordant notes.

Even so, amid this cacophony, hints of the original beauty, majesty, and power would occasionally break through, promising to reemerge and eventually, ultimately, to triumph.

What, in words, is the theme of the Old Testament? *The tragic fall of a perfect creation followed by judgment and the promise of final redemption.*

Genesis 1–2 stunningly depicts the original creation of the heavens, the earth, all living things, and humankind. The story begins not

with competing deities or an absolute nothingness but with *God*: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). God, through His eternal Son and Spirit, created everything that exists—whether things in heaven or things on earth, “things visible and invisible.”⁴ The triune God is the Author, Producer, Director, and leading Actor in the story of creation and redemption. And, as Master Storyteller, He has made himself known through His works (Ps. 19:1–2) and through His Word (2 Tim. 3:16). He both shows and tells His power, His plan, and His purpose. Simply put, the great and mighty God is knowable and has made himself known:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.⁵

As the crowning work of His creation, God made humans, male and female, co-regents over what He had made with a mandate to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). God desired to share the stage of His production with creatures He formed from mud, transforming dust into stars (Ps. 8:3–6). They were created in the image of God—that is, reflecting His glory and character and destined to rule as His representatives over creation (Gen. 1:26–30). As God’s image-bearing envoys, humans were to work in the Paradise of Eden, cultivating it and ultimately extending its borders to cover the entire uncultivated earth (2:7–25).

Act II: Fall

Alas, that state of pure innocence would not last. As intelligent creatures given free will, the first humans succumbed to temptation and turned their backs on their Creator, forfeiting their role as His rulers over earth and falling victim to sin and death (Gen. 3). The blast wave of this disobedience resounds forward through all human history, its devastating effects illustrated in Genesis 4–11: murder, anarchy, destruction, and then rebellion against God. Everybody today will admit that something is wrong with the world and with the people in it. As Ecclesiastes says, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never

sins” (7:20), and “The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives” (9:3 NASB).

Thus half the story cycle is complete—from Paradise and life, through tragic fall, to an earthly state of living condemnation and then universal death.

Act III: Redemption

If we were to commission the same composer to score a New Testament sequel to the Old Testament part of the story, what kind of themes would we want? How does the continuation of His-story in the New Testament relate to its beginnings in the Old?

The sequel’s score would probably look like a mirror image of the initial themes. From darkness to light, from fall, judgment, and promises delayed to promises fulfilled, mercy and grace extended, and redemption realized. Discordant notes and chords would be replaced by a symphony of instruments and voices singing praises to our God and King. The nearly forgotten opening scenes of the prequel would be restored and then surpassed.

What, then, is the theme of the New Testament? *The long-awaited redemption of a fallen creation followed by the restoration and fulfillment of all God’s promises and purposes.*

God did not abandon humankind to hopelessness. Already in Genesis 3, after the fall of Adam and Eve, He pledged that the offspring of the woman would bruise the Serpent’s head, ultimately destroying sin and evil (v. 15). He then advanced His plan of redemption through the calling of Abraham (Gen. 12), to whom He promised that a particular offspring would mediate blessings to the world (Gen. 13:15; Gal. 3:15–16). After this promise passed from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob to the tribe of Judah, it then narrowed to the dynasty of King David. In Isaiah’s famous prophecy this same promise of a Redeemer is narrowed to an individual coming king, the Messiah:

The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them. . . .
For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;

And the government will rest on His shoulders;
 And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
 There will be no end to the increase of His government or
 of peace,
 On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
 To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
 From then on and forevermore. (Isa. 9:2, 6–7 NASB)

The redemption plan continued to be revealed throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. Despite human failures—even of those to whom He'd given amazing guarantees of His presence and love—God remained faithful, ultimately sending the promised Offspring—His own divine Son (John 3:16).

When God's Son was to enter the redemption story, God sent the angel Gabriel to confirm that this child, born to a poor family from an insignificant village, was the One through whom the ancient promises would be fulfilled:

You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end. (Luke 1:31–33 NASB)

As the plot unfolded, though, God's narrative took a world-shaking turn. Instead of following the cycle's upward path—the Hero passes through various trials, endures setbacks, and overcomes failures while pressing on toward His reward—God's Chosen One *retraced the descent*, surrendering His life to the executioner. The only being in human history that deserved never-ending life with God voluntarily suffered a brutal death (Phil. 2:5–8).

Even this ironic fate had been foretold in the prophecies of Isaiah:

Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
 And our sorrows He carried;
 Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
 Smitten of God, and afflicted.
 But He was pierced through for our transgressions,

He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him. (Isa. 53:4–6 NASB)

Nevertheless, for God’s matchless Hero, death was not the end. Against all expectations—including those of His despairing followers—Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the grave and stepped out of the tomb more than alive—He was *glorified*. Having died in a mortal body susceptible to sickness, pain, and death, He was raised in a physical but immortal body, incapable of illness, impervious to hurt, and overflowing with eternal life.

Furthermore, through Jesus Christ, God began writing His-story’s final chapter. Those people who became united with Christ by placing their faith in Him could now partake of His glory, sharing the Hero’s reward, and surpassing even the original purpose for humankind that God had established ages ago in Eden.

The Hero’s victorious reentrance into the halls of heaven opened a new chapter in God’s unfolding drama. After the resurrected Savior’s ascension, and prior to His in-the-end return as Judge and King, He sent His Spirit to stir the hearts of His former enemies and call them to His cause. Countless converts from every nation, tribe, people, and language have been and still are flocking to His side (Rev. 7:9–10). Through spiritual union with their King, this kingdom-in-the-making also experiences a shared spiritual communion in the church. Through this spiritual-physical community of the life-giving Spirit, centered on Jesus Christ’s person and work and focused on the glory of God the Father, members of Christ’s body grow in faith, hope, and love. Together they become more and more like Jesus their King, the Spirit working in them to carry out the Father’s redemptive mission in this still-fallen world.⁶

Act IV: Restoration

That brings us to the final resolution, the future restoration of the original creation. In the beginning, humans were expelled from Eden,

unable to experience immortality in a Paradise free from suffering, frustration, fear, and death. At the present time God, through Christ and by the Spirit, is calling to himself a people who will participate in His drama's final chapter. When Jesus returns and renews all things, creation's groaning will be turned to glory as the entire earth is transformed into a new, even better Eden, and all those who've been united with Christ will be made like Him (1 John 3:2).

Revelation 21:3–4 describes the glorious coming reality:

Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. (NASB)

Thus, between Genesis and Revelation—from the Garden to Glory—God's unparalleled story unfolds. Every person and event moves history and humanity *forward* toward a final goal—restoration. God's grand narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration truly satisfies our restless longings for purpose and meaning and also fulfills our heart's desire for acceptance in meaningful relationship. As Augustine once prayed, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."⁷

The timeless story also provides an ultimate answer to human injustice and inequality, as Christ's kingdom will be an eternal golden age of peace and prosperity for all (Isa. 11:1–9). Likewise, it offers vital, unshakable hope to those who now are hurting, and lonely, and lost. The concrete promises and detailed visions God has preserved for us throughout the Scriptures provide healing hope to those struggling with anxiety, fear, despair, and depression. When a person's gaze is drawn from his or her temporary groaning to the certainty of future everlasting glory through resurrection and restoration, the words of the apostle Paul ring true:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be

set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. (Rom. 8:18–25 NASB)

The good news about God’s story is that anyone can become a part of it. Jesus of Nazareth is truly God in the flesh; He truly died and was raised from death, and He truly offers a new identity and new future for all who trust in Him alone for salvation. And those who embrace in faith the Hero of this story will have a share in the restoration of all things.

He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.” Then He said to me, “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son” (Rev. 21:5–7 NASB).

You Are Here

The two parts of this book take us up to the ultimate chapter of God’s story. Here we move from the fall and the work of redemption . . . through the intermediate mission of the church . . . to the eventual effects of restoration.

In Part One, “Created in Christ Jesus: Church, Churches, and the Christian Life,” we discover the rescue operation of the church and the Spirit’s ongoing work of remaking the members of Christ’s body into the image of their King. This transitions us from redemption in the theoretical and historical to redemption in the practical and present.

In Part Two, “When He Returns: Resurrection, Judgment, and the Restoration,” we will come to understand the major contours of God’s plan for final consummation. His redeemed people as well as

this fallen creation both have an incomprehensibly wonderful future in His plan and purpose.

As we explore the biblical, theological, and historical foundations of ecclesiology, sanctification, and eschatology, we'll be able to look back at the entire sweeping narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, and join the heavenly chorus praising God for the great things He has done . . . and will yet do:

“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. (Rev. 19:6–8)

PART ONE

CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS

Church, Churches, and the Christian Life

BY NATHAN D. HOLSTEEN

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Nathan D. Holsteen and Michael J. Svigel, eds., *Exploring Christian Theology*
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HIGH-ALTITUDE SURVEY

Spy novels have gripped me for as long as I can remember.

I inherited a love of reading from my parents, and as a young man I cut my teeth on novels written by authors like Alistair MacLean. I read everything I could get my hands on. I even read *H.M.S. Ulysses*.

But nothing in MacLean prepared me for my first Robert Ludlum novel: *The Bourne Identity*. You may remember the basic story: a man found floating in the Mediterranean regains consciousness after he's pulled up by fishermen. But he has amnesia and so cannot remember who he is—in fact, he can't remember anything about his life. The men take him to a doctor, who finds a piece of microfilm surgically implanted in his hip. That leads him to a secret bank account in Zurich. And so the tale begins. As the man follows one clue to his identity after another, he's drawn deeper and deeper into a danger-everywhere existence of which he has no memory.

That thriller's intricate plot line simply blew me away. I still remember my head spinning as I tried to assess and assimilate all the info, seeking to figure out, right along with Jason Bourne, *who in the world IS this guy?*

Unlike that masterpiece of espionage, the book you now hold in your hands is not a mystery. You won't have to wade through multiple shootouts or miraculous escapes before discovering the essence of ecclesiology (the study of the church) and sanctification (developing a life of holiness). In the pages to follow we're going to explore these two major areas of theology, and I won't be trying to persuade you that my personal views on either or both are precisely correct. Yes, I have personal views that I teach and preach, but for this book our goal is

to introduce you to the unity and diversity of evangelical perspectives. (Again, if you're unfamiliar with these words or others, remember there's a glossary of terms in the back.) In the book's first half, I want not only to share a taste of the uniqueness of various views but also to draw you back to the center of evangelicalism by highlighting the principles that bind together the different strands of our diverse tradition.

In yet another departure from the *Bourne Identity* pattern, I also want to clue you in right up front to our major themes. You already know that in Part One we'll focus on ecclesiology and sanctification; I'd like to prepare you for the actual claims you're going to encounter.

First, an orientation to ecclesiology.

To many Christians, the doctrine of the church does seem mysterious, perhaps approaching opaque. Even some professional theologians shy away from venturing too far into this realm. But I believe it can be presented in a fairly simple fashion once we've acknowledged the appropriate starting point. And just as for Jason Bourne, that starting point is to ask, "Who am I?"

Bourne began to assemble a comprehension of his lost identity by observing his own skill set and by trying to ascertain how the people around him helped clarify who he was. We're going to do something like this in approaching the doctrine of ecclesiology, and when we do we'll find that all aspects of our spiritual skill set—and every spiritual relationship we have—point always, only, inexorably, to one person: Jesus Christ. This means the way to start wrestling with ecclesiology is to stop wrestling. Every datum points to Jesus. To put it another way:

Who I am can only be determined in relation to who Jesus is—the God-man, our Redeemer, my Savior.

Now, that statement points to the central principle for all protestant evangelical ecclesiology. This principle, while clearly related, is distinct:

There is no authentic ecclesiology apart from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

As we all know, the nature of that saving relationship is that it's invisible—no one can "see" someone else's genuine faith. No bright halo hovers above the heads of authentic saints. There's no tiny blue

LED planted in a believer's ear to show that he or she participates in a saving relationship with Jesus. And which congregation or denomination a person belongs to doesn't yield the answer either—genuine Christians participate in some pretty dead churches, and non-Christians hang out in some vibrant churches. One of my heroes, John Calvin, made this same observation when he taught that “every church is a mixed body.”¹

You may have heard it said that “Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship.” Sometimes people use this cliché to dismiss the visible church from their lives and focus just on their personal, private, individual experience with the cool Guy named Jesus. But that misuse—or even abuse—shouldn't deter us from something nevertheless true about the cliché. While it isn't an excuse to dismiss the visible church as irrelevant, our invisible spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ is what makes the visible church eminently relevant.

Ecclesiology: A Community Son-Centered and Spirit-Formed

It may sound overly simplistic, yet I believe the following observation provides a high-level overview of ecclesiology: the study of the church, properly speaking, must start with the invisible saving relationship between the Redeemer and the redeemed. That is, the community of the redeemed is Son-centered. Jesus Christ is the center and source of the church, which is the community of the redeemed under His headship. With this basic statement, all evangelical Christians would agree.

But there's more that unites evangelicals with respect to the doctrine of ecclesiology. The community is definitely Son-centered, and it's also Spirit-formed. The Holy Spirit of God forms the church of Jesus Christ. (This, we'll see, is the message of Scripture and the consistent affirmation of evangelicals throughout history.) As a result, the church finds its unique identity as the community of the redeemed because of an invisible relationship with Jesus Christ. Then we recognize that only because of the Spirit's ministry do we have invisible union with our Savior and visible unity with His people.

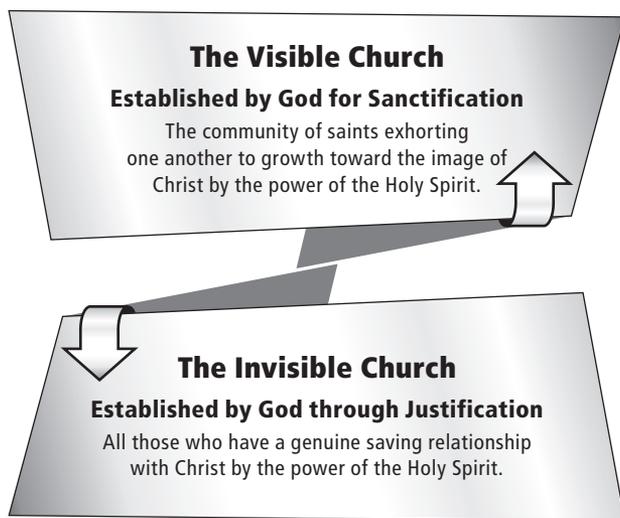
These are the emphases of an evangelical ecclesiology:

The church is Son-centered and Spirit-formed.

Sanctification: A Life Son-Centered, Spirit-Formed, and Community-Minded

As to providing a high-level overview of the doctrine of sanctification, the convenient truth is that it starts in much the same place as ecclesiology. To return again to Jason Bourne, once he began to answer “Who am I?” he also began to formulate an answer to “What do I do now?” Only when we realize the former can we offer a reasonable approach to the latter.

This is precisely why the principle that undergirds ecclesiology also undergirds sanctification: *the study of sanctification, properly speaking, must start with the invisible saving relationship between the Redeemer and the redeemed.* Once again, this is the starting point, precisely because no one can even dream of living the Christian life unless he or she is already united to Christ in salvation. That is, authentic sanctification flows out of genuine justification. (By the way, we look at justification in much more detail in another volume in this series; for now, we’ll focus on the relationship between justification and sanctification.)



Sanctification is not me-oriented, it’s *we*-oriented. Its focus is Christ, by the power of the Spirit—but its *purpose* is community-oriented.

And I don't mean a geographical community; I mean the body of Christ. Sanctification, as the growth in holiness of individuals who are in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, has as its purpose the strengthening of His body, the church. As justified individuals grow in fellowship with Christ and with one another through the work of the Spirit in the context of their local church communities, the worldwide body of Christ also grows in holiness, magnifying Christ's name and bringing glory to God the Father.

That's it. That's our high-altitude overview. All that remains is to work out the consequences of these two basic affirmations:

- *The study of the church, properly speaking, must start with the invisible saving relationship between the Redeemer and the redeemed.*
- *The study of sanctification, properly speaking, must start with the invisible saving relationship between the Redeemer and the redeemed.*