

CHAPTER 3

THE VISIBLE CHURCH

Definitions

Invisible church

WCF 25:1, WLC 64-65

The invisible church is the entire body of the elect. It is “invisible” in that it cannot be distinguished certainly, nor is it contained in a visible organization.

In addition to the biblical designation “church,” this invisible church is referred to in these terms:

“The body of Christ” (Eph 1:10, 22-23; Col 1:18; cf. 1 Cor 12:12-27)

“The bride of Christ” (Eph 5:23, 27, 32; Rev 19:7-9; cf. Ezek 16; Hosea)

“The fulness of Christ” (Eph 1:23)

The invisible church is the direct result of the terms of the covenant of redemption. In return for his active and passive obedience, Christ will receive an eternal kingdom, and a people for his name. These people are his church, united to Christ in his death, resurrection, ascension, and glory.

Visible church

WCF 25:2, WLC 62

The visible church is the entire body of those professing the true religion, along with their children (Acts 2:39; 1 Cor 7:14). In the NT dispensation, it does not automatically include spouses or servants (1 Cor 7; Phlm).

Often this term refers to the visible organization to which professing Christians belong, in order to carry out the biblical injunctions to preach the word, administer the sacraments, and administer discipline.

Current identity of the visible church

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that it is the only true church, based on its history, unity, and supposed apostolic succession. A recent article by Scot McKnight (“From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic,” *JETS* 45:3 [Sep 2002] 451-472) delineates four characteristics of the Roman church that some evangelicals find attractive and that have led some to join that church: certainty, history, unity, authority. In these areas the Catholic church claims a transcendence that the Protestant churches lack.

The Protestant Reformers defended their doctrine of the visible church by referring to Gen 17, when God established the visible church with Abraham. That passage includes the primary requirements for the visible church: preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and discipline of membership.

Reformed Protestants recognize that the visible church consists of all who profess the true religion, together with their children. While there are many denominations of churches, all who perform the necessary functions are true churches of Christ.

Purity of the visible church

Church purity as a goal

WCF 25:4-5, WLC 61

Because of sin’s remaining influence in every Christian, no Christian church is perfect, and no church can be certain that it excludes hypocrites.

Yet this necessary mixture in the visible church does not justify complacency; the church is instructed to make the effort to keep itself pure in doctrine and life.

One can see a parallel in the case of an individual Christian. While he is never free from sin in this life, he is commanded to hate sin and turn from it, “perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

God himself desires the purity of his church (cf. Eph 3:14-21; 5:25-27).

Manner to obtain the purity of the church

The following Scriptural methods for obtaining church purity are listed in the general order of severity, it being preferable to exercise church discipline as mildly as possible to bring about the needed repentance or change.

Preaching of the word and prayer

The ministry of the word itself to the congregation or to individuals is used by God to bring conviction of sin, conversion, and increasing sanctification. Likewise, God answers the prayers of the minister, elders, and people for one another's spiritual needs.

This should be the normal mode of church discipline. By preaching on subjects which are related to the life of the church, the minister prevents many potential problems arising in the first place.

Church discipline in receiving members

Those who do not give a "credible" (believable) profession of faith are not to be allowed to join the church. A credible profession includes the absence of open, scandalous sin; an acceptance of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith; and a profession of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Cf. Simon in Acts 8:9-24

In the case of adults, baptism follows conversion; cf. Acts 2, etc.

Churches are to be built with genuine materials, 1 Cor 3:10.

Church discipline in matters of life

Church members who live in open and scandalous sin are to be disciplined, and if necessary, put out of the church.

Note in these cases, as in others, the progressive stages of discipline: admonition, rebuke, suspension, excommunication. An additional possible penalty for church officers is deposition.

Offense and rebellion (Matt 18:15-20)

Immorality (1 Cor 5:1-8, 9-13; cf. restoration after repentance, 2 Cor 2:5-11)

Indolence (2 Thess 3:6-15)

Cf. OT examples of church discipline ("being put out of the congregation")

Church discipline in matters of doctrine

Those who teach false doctrine should not be allowed to teach or lead in the church. Those who deny essential Christian doctrine are not to be permitted to be members of the church, but are to be publicly exposed and opposed.

Note frequent warnings against false teachers in the NT; e.g., Matt 7:15; Acts 20:28-31.

Examples of apostolic warnings and actions against false teachers: Rom 16:17-18; Gal 1:8-9; 5:7-12; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11.

Note also that the doctrines involved in these examples touched the vitals of Christian faith. The apostles allowed much latitude in secondary or questionable issues. The Christian needs a balance of toleration for differences among Bible-believing Christians, and intolerance for deviations from orthodoxy springing from unbelief of Scripture.

Church separation as a last resort

If a church has deteriorated to the extent that it is disobedient to Christ in doctrine or life, and it refuses to allow discipline to correct the error, that church has forsaken Christ as its head. If that error is fundamental to Christianity, that church ceases to be a true church of Jesus Christ, even if it maintains an outward appearance to be such. It is the duty of Christians in such a case to separate from that apostate body and to form or join with a true church of Christ.

The visible church began with a separation:

Gen 12:1, “The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.’”

Gen 17:1, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.’”

Israel in the OT was to separate from the ungodly nations around them, Exod 19:5-6; cf. 1 Pet 2:5, 9. In Lev 18:3-5; 19:2, note that the concept of “holy” is “set apart,” “separated to a sacred purpose.” (Cf. doctrine of sanctification notes)

Lev 18:3-5, “You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.”

Lev 19:2, “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.’”

The church in the NT, likewise, must separate from bodies which deny the true faith. Note the example of Paul's practice and teaching:

	<u>Paul's practice</u>	<u>Paul's teaching</u>
In Corinth:	Acts 18:7	2 Cor. 6:14 - 7:1; 11:2
In Ephesus:	Acts 19:9	Eph. 5:25-27

Acts 18:7, "Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God."

Acts 19:9, "But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus."

In both cases Paul compared the relation of the church to Christ with that of a pure bride to her husband, which illustration fits well the reality (as in Rev 19:6-9)

[For a good development of this theme, see Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church Before the Watching World*, esp. ch. 2, "Adultery and Apostasy—the Bride and Bridegroom Theme"; see also Gary Cohen, *Biblical Separation Defended*; the entire issue of the *WRS Journal* 4:1 (Feb 1997) is related to this matter.]

"The Strange Case of Fuller Theological Seminary"

The heading for this section is the title of Chapter 6 of Harold Lindsell's book, *The Battle for the Bible* (1976). Lindsell had been the vice-president of Fuller and one of its original professors. Lindsell later traced out further developments at Fuller in a second volume, *The Bible in the Balance* (1979; see Ch. 5, "Fuller Theological Seminary: A Seminary at Bay"). For an excellent and detailed history of the philosophy, beginning, development, and theological drift of Fuller Seminary, see George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (1987). Marsden's book is a case study in the attempt to hold on to orthodox, Reformed doctrine, while at the same time rejecting the option of ecclesiastical separation.

In the 1930s and 40s classic Fundamentalists reacted to the takeover of the major denominations by Modernism in two ways. Some chose to separate and establish new churches. Presbyterian leaders in the USA included J. Gresham Machen, Gordon H. Clark, Carl McIntire, and J. Oliver Buswell, among many others. They were labeled separatists. They established such churches as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Bible Presbyterian Church. Similar movements took place among other denominations as well, as the Baptists and the Methodists. These men established seminaries such as Westminster Theological Seminary and later Faith Theological Seminary, both near Philadelphia. In 1941 the American Council of Christian Churches was formed, enabling these new separatists churches to work together in various ways

and to oppose the Modernism of the liberal churches and their Federal/National Council of Churches of Christ. Since then all these organizations have maintained a strict and consistent stand for the infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture and the other fundamental doctrines of Christianity.

The other reaction, detailed in Marsden's book, was that of inclusivism. While these leaders believed and defended the fundamental doctrines against Modernism, they insisted that the Fundamentalists should not leave the mainline denominational churches, but should fight from within. Eschewing the label Fundamentalist, they became known as Evangelicals. These men included Harold J. Ockenga (who coined the term "New Evangelical"), Carl F. H. Henry, Billy Graham, Wilbur Smith, and Harold Lindsell. As opposed to the separatist ACCC, the new evangelicals formed the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, which was to provide a fellowship for evangelicals, whether or not they were members of Modernist churches. In 1940 Wheaton College fired its president J. Oliver Buswell, because he was a separatist and they wished to work with a broader base. Graduates from Wheaton and other schools were seeking a seminary that was sympathetic to Fundamentalist doctrines but rejected separatism.

Financed by funds from the Charles E. Fuller radio broadcast, "The Old Fashioned Revival Hour," Fuller Theological Seminary was established in Pasadena, California, in 1947. Harold J. Ockenga was its first president, and most of the new evangelical men listed above were on its faculty. From the first the seminary tried to maintain orthodox doctrine and still earn the respect of the scholarly liberals. They emphasized scholarship and interaction with liberal theologians. They worked hard to have their graduates received into the mainline churches, especially the Presbyterian Church USA. To do this, they had to compromise in various ways. Gradually their faculty changed, until it was evenly divided between those who believed in the inerrancy of Scripture and those who denied it. In 1962 ("Black Saturday" was December 1) the division became clear and belligerent. Through political maneuvering the anti-inerrantist side won, a new president was elected (David Hubbard), and the inerrantists soon thereafter were either pushed out or voluntarily left the faculty. The fascinating details are documented in Marsden's history.

Subsequent to the takeover in the faculty and administration, the seminary still tried to maintain its public posture of being for the infallibility of the Bible, but soon they changed their doctrinal statement and moved beyond that point, as faculty members began to deny various other biblical doctrines. Now it is generally known that Fuller Seminary is more neo-orthodox in theology.

It is ironic that Lindsell's stinging criticism of the change at Fuller is seconded by its founding president, Harold J. Ockenga, who endorsed *The Battle for the Bible* on its jacket. However, Ockenga at that time still followed the inclusive policy, being president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Boston, a school firmly in the new evangelical camp.

Fuller Theological Seminary provides a very instructive example of what happens when the decision is made not to separate from churches which have departed from fundamental Christian doctrines. When a believer disobeys God's command to separate, God does not

support him. Rather, that act of disobedience leads to further compromise and eventual loss of one's Christian testimony. May God help us to be faithful, and to receive the reward from God for building his church with "gold, silver, and costly stones" (1 Cor 3:12).

Government of the visible church

This subject is studied carefully in the pastoral theology department. Here we will simply summarize the six arguments concerning church government found in Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church, Which Is It?* Witherow enumerates six biblical principles of church government:

Office-bearers were chosen by the people

Examples:

Acts 1:23, "So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias."

Acts 6:5, "This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism."

Perhaps Acts 14:23, "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust." An NIV footnote gives two other possible translations: "Paul and Barnabas ordained elders," and "Paul and Barnabas had elders elected." The Greek participle χειροτονήσαντες *cheirotonesantes*, from χειροτονέω *cheirotoneo*, may have the idea of "putting forth the hand," and some think this refers to voting by the congregation, rather than to Paul's and Barnabas's putting forth their hands. However, the nominative case of the participle agrees with the implied subject of the sentence, Paul and Barnabas.

The office of bishop and that of elder are identical

The two Greek terms are ἐπίσκοπος *episkopos* (overseer, bishop), and πρεσβύτερος *presbuteros* (elder). These terms are used interchangeably in the NT several times:

Acts 20:17, 28, "From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. . . . Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

Titus 1:5-7, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be

blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.”

1 Pet 5:1-2, “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serv_{ing} as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve.”

(ἐπισκοποῦντες *episkopountes*, “serv_{ing} as overseers,” has a {C} rating in UBS)

This fact agrees with the salutation in Phil 1:1, “to all the saints . . . with the bishops and deacons.”

There was a plurality of elders in each church

Acts 14:23, “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”

Phil 1:1, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.”

Probably Titus 1:5, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.”

Ordination was an act of the presbytery—i.e., a plurality of elders.

Acts 6:6, “They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”

Acts 13:3, “So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

References to Paul's ordaining the evangelists Timothy and Titus (2 Tim 1:6, “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands,” and Titus 1:5, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.”) should be compared with the mention of Timothy's ordination by the presbytery (1 Tim 4:14, “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders [πρεσβυτέριον *presbyterion*] laid their hands on you”). As an apostle, Paul had authority to ordain to the special and extraordinary office of evangelist, while the presbytery could ordain him to the Christian ministry in general (office of teaching elder; cf. 1 Tim 4:11, 13; 5:17).

The assembled elders from the various churches exercised rights of government and received appeals.

Acts 15:2-6, “This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

“Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’

“The apostles and elders met to consider this question.”

Acts 15:22-23, “Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers,* To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.”

*Note that the Greek does not have an “and” before “your brothers,” as in the KJV (UBS {B} rating); the letter came from the apostles and elders.

Acts 16:4, “As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.”

This system of graded courts was taken over from the Jewish system of synagogues and sanhedrins.

Christ was recognized as the only head of the church.

Eph 5:23, “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.”

Col 1:18, “And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”

Church officers themselves were quick to point out this fact:

Paul—2 Cor 1:24, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.”

Peter—1 Pet 5:3, “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

Hebrews author—Heb 13:17, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

(Greek for “leaders” is from ἡγέομαι *hegomai*, “preside over,” not ἡγεμονεύω *hegemoneuo*, “be governor, rule”)

John—3 John 9-11, “I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

“Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.”

Thomas Witherow’s conclusions

Witherow evaluated three basic types of church government by these six criteria. He concluded that the heirarchical form of church government (as that of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England) met none of these requirements. Independent church government met three of the six requirements. And Presbyterian government satisfies all six. He concluded that Presbyterian government was the most Scriptural form.

Activities of the visible church

The Bible Presbyterian *Form of Government* states that the visible church’s power is “ministerial and declarative” (1:7). The essence of that statement is spelled out in WLC 63, and especially in WCF 25:3, which outline is followed here.

Duties of the church

Ministry of God, administer the word and government

Oracles of God, declare the word

Ordinances of God, administer sacraments

Purpose of the church

Gather the saints, evangelism

Perfect the saints, Christian nurture

Continue to the end of the age, training next generation

Effect of the church

God is present by his Spirit

Church has God's promise of support

God makes these activities effective in the hearts of the saints

The visible church is God's normal means in his spiritual work among his people,

Eph 4:11-13, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."