

CHAPTER 25

OF THE CHURCH

The invisible church defined

“1. The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.”

In our belief the “catholic” church is a good term, meaning the universal church of Jesus Christ, the spiritual fellowship of all true believers. When we say that this church is invisible, we mean that it has no humanly visible organization that defines who are members and who are not. Visible church organizations have people in them who are in the true church and others who are not.

The true church includes all who have been saved through Christ’s blood. We do not limit the church to only the New Testament dispensation. God’s people in the Old Testament were called the church also. The Greek term for “church” (*ekklesia*) is used for them in the Greek version of the Old Testament and in the Greek New Testament (Acts 7:38; Heb 2:12, quoting Ps 22:22). We believe that the New Testament church receives the same promises as the Old Testament covenant people (Rom 11:15-27).

The Bible uses various figures of speech to describe the church:

- Body of Christ (Eph 1:10, 22-23; Col 1:18; cf. 1 Cor 12:12-27)
- Bride of Christ (Eph 5:23, 27, 32; Rev 19:7-9)
- Fullness of Christ (Eph 1:23)

The visible church defined

“2. The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world, that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

The visible church is the people of God in the outward spiritual organization ordained by God. We believe the visible church started with Abraham, including all his household (Gen 17:7). We see with him for the first time the three requirements of a church: (1) the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, (2) the administration of the sacraments, and (3) the administration of church discipline. In the Old Testament the visible church was limited to Israel; now it is expanded to all nations.

The visible church includes all who profess the true religion (1 Cor 1:2), along with their children (Ezek 16:20-21; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor 7:14).

When premillennialists say with the traditional wording of our confession, that the visible church “is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ,” they mean that true believers are members of that kingdom, receive spiritual benefits of that kingdom, and will rule with Christ in the promised kingdom when he returns to the earth (Exod 19:6; Jas 2:5; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). They do not believe that the visible church is the total fulfillment of the prophecies to Abraham and to David, which prophecies will be fulfilled after Christ returns and raises the dead.

The Bible describes the church as the house and family of God (Eph 2:19; 3:15; Heb 3:1-6).

While it is possible to be saved without being part of the visible church, ordinarily no one who refuses to join the visible church can be confident of his salvation. God commands us to openly profess our faith and enter the fellowship of the church (Acts 2:47).

Duties of the visible church

“3. Unto this catholic visible Church, Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.”

Note the duties of the visible church:

- The ministry (serving and disciplining the people of God)
- The oracles of God (preaching and teaching the Bible)
- The ordinances of God (administering the sacraments)

Note the purpose of these duties:

- To gather the saints (evangelism)
- To perfect the saints (discipleship)
- To continue doing this in this life to the end of the world (continuing ministry)

Note the effect of these duties:

- God is present by his Spirit.

- These duties have God's promise.
- God makes these duties effective in hearts.

The visible church thus is God's normal instrument in his spiritual work among his people (Eph 4:11-13).

Purity of the church

We are commanded to be pure, as God is pure. This purity is to be both personal and ecclesiastical. The next two sections deal with this requirement.

Variations possible

"4. This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them."

In its history the visible church has had periods of great faithfulness and holiness (as the early centuries, the Reformation period, etc.), and periods of great apostasy and wickedness (as the dark ages, modern apostasy).

Also, during the same time, various churches will differ among themselves in truth and holiness. An example is the churches in Asia when John wrote Revelation (Rev 2-3). In our day we see worldly, unbelieving churches, along with dedicated, persecuted churches.

The best and the worst churches

"5. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to his will."

Even the best Christians and churches are imperfect, and have some error (1 Cor 13:12; cf. Rom 7). And often church organizations degenerate so badly that they become non-Christian, and even anti-Christian. For many centuries the Roman Catholic Church burned Bibles (and Christians), and today liberal churches in the World Council of Churches support idolatry and various anti-Christian causes.

The head of the church

“6. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the Church, and the claim of any man to be the vicar of Christ and head of the Church, is unscriptural, without warrant in fact, and is a usurpation dishonoring to the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Jesus Christ alone is the head of the church (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18). No one else rightfully can claim this position (Matt 23:8-10; cf. Diotrephes in 3 John 9-10). Certainly it is wrong to place the pope as the head of the church, the representative of Christ; the Bible does not teach it, and history disproves it. Likewise it is wrong to place the secular ruler (as the king or queen of England) over the church.

American Presbyterian churches have changed the original wording of the Confession regarding the pope:

“Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof: but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God.”

Many Protestants believe those verses speak of the future political Antichrist, who will rule over the world in the last days.

The principles of this paragraph are spelled out in our Bible Presbyterian *Form of Government*, chapters 1-2.