

The Church: A Covenant Community

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We live in a very curious age. We actually have to defend the importance of the local church, not from unbelievers but against those who profess to believe in Jesus Christ. The church has traditionally affirmed the statement in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in...the holy catholic church"¹ — but such a confession seems totally out of place in this day and age. Modern evangelicals denigrate the role and purpose of the "institutional" or visible church. We hear this constant refrain, "I'm a Christian but I don't go to church." This belief is played out in the way people loosely attach themselves to various churches. George Barna's research has shown that church growth has remained virtually stagnant in the past decade.² He notes that there was no real discernable growth but only "a substantial degree of membership movement." In other words, a sort of "Chinese fire drill" has come into play among churches. Many will move from one church to another without the slightest qualm. Others simply do not associate with any particular church but still claim to be Christians. After all, if the church does not meet their immediate "needs" (i.e., "wants"), then they can either stop going to church altogether or simply go to a different one. To make matters worse, some Systematic Theologies do not even give a separate treatment to the doctrine of the church.³

To make matters worse, the Roman Catholic Church has also unwittingly encouraged this tendency. Though quite strong in exalting the function and powers of the visible church, she has philosophically diminished her relevance through writers like Karl Rahner. Rahner believed in "anonymous Christians," viz., men and women are related to the church in their own way, though they are not members of any particular church (an issue of theological proximity to the church).⁴ Being a member of a church is *preferable*

¹ William Perkins rightly perceived the implications behind the statement "I believe IN the holy catholic church" since the papists made much of the preposition, see Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creede of the Apostles* (London: Printed by John Legate, 1611), 369-370. Caspar Olevianus also steers clear of this in *A Firm Foundation: An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*, translated by L. D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 96-97; cf. J. Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.2. We do not mean that we believe *in* the church in the same way we believe *in* God the Father Almighty, etc. Yet, Protestants usually mean, "I believe the holy catholic church." See E. Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity...* (London: Printed by A.M. for William Lee ... 1662), 619. For a modern and excellent defense, see E. P. Clowney, *The Church*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 71ff.

² On this, see <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=133>.

³ E.g., R. V. Sarrels, *Systematic Theology* (Azle, Texas: Harmony Hill, 1978). Men like R. L. Dabney explained why he did not include it, but Sarrels's parachurch predilections are evident throughout his work. Unfortunately, other divines have also neglected this topic in their dogmatic works, e.g., H.B. Smith, W.G.T. Shedd, and A.A. Hodge.

⁴ See K. Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," *Theological Investigations*, VI (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 390-98; "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," *Theological Investigations*, XII (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 161-178. The more liberal Hans Küng offers a useful critique against Rahner's notion of "Anonymous Christianity" in his *On Being a Christian*, translated by E. Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 97-98.

but not *necessary*.⁵ Even the decrees of Vatican II allow for pagans and various false religions to be somehow remotely related to the church without professing any faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶ It is no wonder the church has fallen on hard times. From evangelicals who deny the importance of the church to Roman Catholics who deny an essential or dogmatic need for it, we are forced to reckon with what she is and why professing believers need to be united to her.

What is the Church?

The Church of Jesus Christ differs from all other institutions on the face of the earth. No other institution has been brought into being by the blood of Jesus Christ. No other institution has been granted enduring permanence through all the ages. No other organization is as loved and cherished as the church of Jesus Christ. Though derided by many, she is still the people of God, the precious bride of the Holy Lamb.

In fact, the church herself is a matter of faith. How so? Edmund Clowney's statement explains:

Because...the church is God's creation, not simply a human institution. It is different, even strange. The favourite fantasy of science fiction is true of the church: its members are aliens, even though they lack pointed ears. Their astral home is not another planet, but God's own heaven. It is not surprising that sociologists find the church rather puzzling. Even Christians have extraordinary difficulty in describing the church. Luther claimed that a girl of seven knows what the church is, but that he had to pen thousands of words in order to explain what she understood. The church is different because it is the born-again family of God, the assembly and body of Christ, the dwelling of the Spirit.⁷

Reformers like Luther concurred. Luther argued that the church is in some sense an object of faith because some of the members of the visible church were mystically united to Christ and had genuine vital fellowship (communion) with each other and with Christ.⁸ To believe all that the Bible says about the church takes a great measure of faith. How

⁵ Karl Rahner struggles to explain why it really matters if you are part of the church or not; see *The Church after the Council*, translated by D. C. Herron and R. Albrecht (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), 52-53.

⁶ See *Lumen Gentium* 16. This is admitted by many modern Roman Catholic theologians, e.g., A. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 23-24; E. Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, translated by J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvii-xix. Lest we misunderstand, this is not the musings of a few heretics within the Roman Catholic Church but it is indeed official church dogma as the reference to the *Lumen Gentium* indicates.

⁷ Clowney, *The Church*, 71. Calvin says that we do not need to see the church "with the eyes or touch it with the hands. Rather, the fact that it belongs to the realm of faith should warn us to regard it no less since it passes our understanding than if it were clearly visible. And our faith is no worse because it recognizes a church beyond our ken" (*Institutes*, 4.1.3).

⁸ See B. Hägglund, *History of Theology*, translated by G. J. Lund (Saint Louis: CPH, 1968), 244-245. For a good overview of Luther's view of the church, see B. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, translated by R. A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 277-297, esp. 277-283. L. Berkhof says the same, "The Church in its ideal sense, the Church as God intends it to be and as it will once become, is an object of faith rather than of knowledge. Hence the confession: 'I believe one holy catholic Church'" (*Systematic Theology*, 4th & enlarged ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941], 564-565).

can she be holy when we hear of one scandal after another within her midst? How can she be the bride of Christ when we see so much impurity? How can she be the church of God when there are so many divisions and denominations? It indeed takes much believing faith to accept what God says about her. It is one thing to believe in God whom we cannot see, and quite another thing to believe so many lofty things about the mixed church which we do see. Our own eyes have beheld all her imperfections. It is for that reason we need to believe what God says about the church in his Word, as opposed to what we can see.⁹

The church, as defined by so many divines, is the community of the saints or the faithful (*communio sanctorum* or *communio fidelium*). She is Christ's body and His spouse. Yet, "if the church rather than Christ becomes the centre of our devotion, spiritual decay has begun. A doctrine of the church that does not centre on Christ is self-defeating and false. But Jesus said to the disciples who confessed him, 'I will build my church.' To ignore his purpose is to deny his lordship."¹⁰ This we must always remember whenever we study this important topic. There is always the danger of overreacting to the problems in ecclesiology by overemphasizing the church's importance. With that in mind, we can approach this study on two fronts.

I wish to deal with two major points in this paper. One is the *necessity of membership* in the visible church. The second is the *priority of election* in the visible church. The two are quite related. The first develops the *need for membership* in the visible church and the second addresses the *status of members* in the visible church. The first point argues against the modern disdain for the visible church and the second answers the question of presumptive regeneration and the purists' notions of the visible church. One group seems to say that you don't need the church at all to be a faithful Christian while another group seems to argue that you know you are a Christian *because* you are in the visible church. Both of these positions, we believe, are wrong.

The Necessity of Membership in the Visible Church

Because of the growing tendency among professing believers to deny the necessity of membership in the visible church, we need first to establish this all-important point. Can one make a case for church membership? Can we appeal to a chapter and verse in the Bible that commands us to be members of a visible local church? Actually, we cannot. Just like the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible, so an explicit verse on membership cannot be found. That does not mean that the Bible remains silent on this doctrine. In fact, the Scriptures have much to say about this.

The Bible may not teach everything regarding the *process* of membership, but it does teach the *terms* of membership. Some professing evangelicals, however, do not see any need to be "committed" to a local church. They believe that any casual get together with other believers is all that is required.¹¹ Some are of the opinion that they can move

⁹ H. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 571: "That the church is an object of his faith, the existence and nature and calling of which is to be determined not from experience, not by human philosophy, not by observation of the actually existing churches in the world, but only from revelation, i.e., from the Word of God as contained in the Holy Scriptures."

¹⁰ Clowney, *The Church*, 15.

¹¹ Millard Erickson lists Plymouth Brethren as an example of this position, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 1045-1046. Perhaps we should all heed Calvin's startling statement when he said that "separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ" (*Institutes*, 4.1.10)?

from one church to another much like a consumer seeking a better “deal” in another store. A creative few contend that they are members of the invisible church and therefore they do not to be committed to a local congregation (e.g., some parachurch enthusiasts). It is very difficult to conceive how a professing believer would maintain his membership in the invisible church while decrying any valid need for membership in a local visible church. But such things many of us have heard. Douglas Wilson asks, “How many times have we heard someone claim his membership in the invisible church as his grounds for disparaging the church he ought to be joining?”¹² The Bible does not permit professing believers to make such claims. This modern notion sits well with our culture; yet the Bible’s teaching runs contrary to our contemporary understanding.

What I wish to do in this section is to argue that there is a biblical mandate for membership in the local church. Once a believer understands his or her relationship and obligations to the Bride of Christ, then the saint will be better equipped to fulfill his or her responsibilities. Once we biblically bind the conscience on this matter, the people of God will see the importance of the visible church because of their devotion and submission to their Lord.

Some have argued that we need to discard the visible/invisible distinction (of the church) because they believe this has led to the prevailing denigration of the church.¹³ I do not think that will solve the problem (and I hardly believe most people really know anything about it). Actually, the distinction is a convenient *excuse* and not the *cause* for the low view of the church. I’m convinced that this error is due in part to the neglect of faithful teaching on this matter. To remedy this lacuna, I will give fifteen biblical arguments for church membership (they are not listed in the order of their importance). Overall, they point to one singular idea, namely, that unless one is vitally connected and committed to a local body of believers (where the body possesses biblical leadership that faithfully exercises discipline, a true preaching of the Word, and rightly administers sacraments), the following injunctions and teaching of Scripture *cannot* and *will not* make sense. To put it differently, all these points *assume* that we must be members of a local church, that we must be vitally involved in the life and ministry of a visible congregation.

1. Christ’s relationship to the church & the believer’s relationship one to another

One of the simplest things to consider is the term “church” (assembly) which assumes a visible corporate gathering of believers. She has come into being through Christ’s death. Christ died for the church (Eph. 5:25) and is the head of the church and we are His body (Eph. 1:22, 23). We realize that there is a corporate nature to Christ’s dealings with His people; He does not simply address individuals. If He loved the church and died for her, then we do tremendous dishonor to Him if we do not love her and care for her. Because of Christ, the church has come into existence — individuals are born anew into the body of Christ and are no longer left to themselves. “It is the very nature,

¹² D. Wilson, “The Church: Visible or Invisible,” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. S. Wilkins and D. Garner (Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004), 266.

¹³ Proponents of the “Federal Vision” have so suggested. For example, D. Wilson, *“Reformed” Is Not Enough* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2002), 70: “Modern evangelical Protestants have tended to say that the invisible Church is the real one, which is why we tend to have such a low view of the churches we can actually see.”

therefore, of the Gospel to be not a solitary religion, but a social one. When Christ, through the mighty operation of His Spirit, brings a sinner into reconciliation and communion with Himself, He ushers him also into the fellowship of reconciliation and communion with all other Christians.”¹⁴

There is an organic union in the body of Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that all believers are united to one another — we are all (by faith in Christ) united to Christ (1Cor. 12:12ff.). Paul says of believers, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (v. 27). In other words, when a person becomes a Christian, he is immediately united to other believers. The concept of being “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28) teaches that individual believers by their union with Christ are united to each other, since He is the head of the church. Our new life in Christ *automatically* makes us intimately united to the other members of His body. We know that every child is born into a family; he is irresistibly united to the one that gave him birth and to others born of the same mother. In the same way, a believer born in Christ is automatically united to other members. The indicative precedes the imperative; the believer is united to other believers because he is united to Christ (which we have called the “indicative,” it is what one is in Christ) and therefore, he must manifest or act out that which is true to his new nature (this is the “imperative”).

What this means is that there is no such thing as a “lone Christian” unattached and unrelated to a local body of Christ. The Bible envisions every child of God to be intimately and spiritually united to one another. The union is a *spiritual* union—it is invisible but nonetheless real. It does not matter how I *feel* about the union; it is integral to my relationship to Christ. To deny our union to one another is to deny our new birth in Christ. That spiritual union must materialize in concrete ways and the most important manifestation is his willingness to be identified with the visible local church. Just as no newborn child is without a mother, so a professing believer is not without other believers. His very existence is corporate in nature; he is born again into a family. If he is united to Christ, then he is united to other believers and therefore he must visibly exhibit this reality.

Paul says that “we are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25). No other institution can make such a startling claim. No one else can foist this kind relationship on a person. The reason the Bible can do this is because we are new in Christ and therefore a new set of relationships determines our existence. To be a member of a church is in fact a humble declaration that Christ has united me to a new group of people who also love and obey Him.

2. *The Lord’s Supper*

On the face of it, both the institution and the meaning of the Lord’s Supper indicate that believers must *come together*. Our Lord said, “Take this, and divide it *among yourselves* (εἰς ἑαυτοὺς)” (Lk. 22:17). The institution of the Supper assumes a corporate dimension. Subsequently, in post resurrection accounts where the Supper is either implicitly (Acts 2:42ff.; Jude 12) or explicitly celebrated (1 Cor. 10-11), it once again is in a corporate context. Believers *gathered together* to celebrate the Lord’s Supper (1Cor. 11:18, 20, 33). The institution and the practice teach us that the Lord’s

¹⁴ J. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 1:19.

Supper is always a corporate matter. That is why our divines have rightly and vigorously argued against private celebration of the Supper (against private communion).

Furthermore, the Lord's Supper signifies not only our union with Christ but also our union with each other. The emphasis is on our participation in the body and blood of our Lord (1Cor. 10:16ff.) but 1Cor. 10:17 also suggests that the loaf signifies our union with each other. The "we" in the verse is offset by the "one" bread and body. The one loaf symbolizes how the *many* believers are *one* body.¹⁵ Regarding this verse, Matthew Henry aptly states, "Those who truly partake by faith have this communion with Christ, and one another; and those who eat the outward elements make profession of having this communion, of belonging to God and the blessed fraternity of his people and worshippers. This is the true meaning of this holy rite."

We may all affirm our oneness in Christ, but some have suggested that it is particularly in the Lord's Supper we recognize this truth with the greatest clarity. "Precisely in the Lord's Supper Paul locates the ground of all believers' being one: Because there is one loaf and because all believers share that one loaf, they, though many, are one body (10:17)."¹⁶ This important observation had been made before by Zwingli. For all the faults heaped on Huldreich Zwingli's (for his view of the Lord's Supper), he nevertheless got this one right. Though he did not limit the Supper to expressing our unity in Christ, he nonetheless clearly emphasized it.¹⁷ He also observed that the Supper had been called a "gathering" (σύναξις) by some.¹⁸ Here, even the "memorialist" recognized the ecclesial dimension of the Supper.¹⁹

So, the very existence of the Lord's Supper and its celebration assume that believers are to gather *together* and recognize first their union with Christ *and* second their vital fraternal relationship to each other. The only way to make sense of the Lord's Supper is to assume that believers were continually coming together. The pattern was so fixed that abuses arose (in Corinth). The one who stays home on Sunday morning and is not vitally connected to any local visible church, cannot rightly obey our Lord because he does not recognize his vital relationship to his fellow brothers. The Lord's Supper does not make sense unless we assume that believers are regularly and consistently gathering together.

3. "One another" Passages

The biblical commands and injunctions teach us that every believer must relate to one another visibly. In other words, all the injunctions in Scripture about loving one

¹⁵ Cf. D. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 477-478; G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 469-470.

¹⁶ J. P. Sampley, "First Letter to the Corinthians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 664. Of course, we must not be silly as L. S. Thornton who said that "there is no Christ without the Church" (cited in A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 768).

¹⁷ H. Zwingli, *In Search of True Religion: Reformation, Pastoral and Eucharistic Writings*, translated by H. W. Pipkin, Huldrych Zwingli Writings, vol. 2 (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1984), 140ff. Cf. W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 225.

¹⁸ C. N. Heller, ed., *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: The Heidelberg Press, 1929), 231ff.

¹⁹ Though I cannot get into this debate here, it is quite certain that mere memorialism does not do justice to Zwingli's position. He seems to have changed his view of the Supper and it became more positive in his latter years; cf. W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, 250ff.

another (Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 1Pet. 1:22; 1Jn. 3:11; 3:23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2Jn. 1:5), being kind, compassionate and forgiving one another (Eph. 4:32), speaking to one another (Eph. 5:19), submitting to one another (Eph. 5:21), bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), agreeing with one another (1Cor. 1:10), serving one another in love (Gal. 5:13), encouraging one another (1Th. 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:25), admonishing one another (Col. 3:16), accepting one another (Rom. 15:7), spurring one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24), not slandering one another (James 4:11), living in harmony with one another (1Pet. 3:8), offering hospitality to one another (1Pet. 4:9), etc. cannot be fulfilled in any real measure if the professing believer is not visibly united to a local body of Christ.

We say *local* body of Christ because some have argued, as mentioned, that they are members of the invisible church and so they hop around from one church to another. Yet, a person cannot reasonably argue that the injunctions above will have any definite manifestation, can he? How will he admonish, spur, bear their burdens and be hospitable while flitting about from one church to another? Our Lord has said in John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Men cannot recognize the love within the community of believers if there is no community to which they are vitally connected. Surely, these injunctions assume that the believer is actually a part of a local church.

But here, we must also notice one of the great benefits of being a member of a local body of Christ. Not only is he called to "one another" (if we can use this as a verb) believers but he himself will become the beneficiary of the command. He too will be loved, have his burdens lifted, served, accepted, spurred on toward love and good deeds, etc. What benefits a person forfeits when he disregards God's plain teaching on this matter!

So, we see that these commands can only make sense if we regularly meet with a local body of believers. The casual care one might display without being affiliated to any fixed local church can hardly measure up to the depth of love and commitment these verses require.

4. Recipients of Paul's Letters

Rudolph Schnackenburg has made a very astute observation: "Not a single New Testament author wrote as a mere private individual, but all took up their pens only as members and for the benefit of the society to which they professedly belonged and impelled by motives which concern all who believe in Christ."²⁰ Though we cannot agree with him when he says that the church gave birth to the New Testament, we can nonetheless see how *both* the writers of the New Testament and the recipients of their writings were all members of various churches—congregations which were interconnected with each other through their union with Christ.

We do not have the modern notion of "unaffiliated Christians" in the Bible. Paul wrote to the *church* in Corinth (1Cor. 1:2), the *churches* in Galatia (Gal. 1:2), Thessalonica (1Th. 1:1), etc. He speaks of the church even if he does not address her immediately as a church. The saints who are mentioned in Rom. 1:7 are not specifically addressed as a church (at least not in the beginning of the epistle), yet it becomes clear

²⁰ R. Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), 9.

near the end of the letter that he refers to them as a church in Rom. 16:5. In that verse, Paul writes of the local (house) church that existed in Rome (“Greet also the church that meets at their house.”). Rom. 16:1, 4, 16, 23 speak freely of various members from other churches. The same is true of the Colossian church where they are viewed as faithful brothers (1:2) and yet eventually addressed as a church (1:24; cf. 4:16). The greetings to the Ephesians do not state that it is a church but certainly no one would deny it is.²¹ It is especially the case in Acts 20:17 where Luke says, “From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.” What we see from Paul’s letters to various cities is that churches existed in those cities; he was writing to believers *in churches* and *not* to believers who were not in churches.

It is apparent that Paul assumed believers to be attached to a local body of saints in their particular cities. He could count on their presence and attachment. Given some of the practices among many in our generation, one wonders if Paul could address anyone in our local regions. Greetings were sent from one church to another (1Cor. 16:19, 20). An individual believer did not stand on his own (even Philemon 1:2). What does “went back to their own people” mean (NIV, Acts 4:23, πρὸς τοὺς ἰδίους- literally, “to their own”)? Doesn’t this also imply that believers were connected to the people of God? Here, Peter and John already had a body of believers to whom they could return. Sadly, many today cannot return “to their own” because they have no “their own” to whom they could return.²²

So the New Testament letters assume that churches existed all around the Roman empire. The very epistles read by so many in our generation testify against them; they neglect the church context *in* and *to* which Paul wrote. Think about it, could Paul actually write to them (the unaffiliated “professing” Christians)? If he wrote a letter to the believers in their city, would they ever hear it? No, because they are not in the necessary ecclesiastical context to receive it.

5. Church Officers

The appointment of church officers also argues for the existence of a visible body that is not fluid. If the elders are to oversee the flock, then there must be a definite flock for them to oversee. They cannot oversee a nameless or faceless herd of people. A shepherd does not shepherd one group of sheep one week and then a different one another week. So, we read this of the elders in Acts 20:28, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” God the Spirit has made the elders overseers of the church of God. Elders “direct the affairs of the *church*” (1Tim. 5:17). They can only function by overseeing a local church. Just as a lifeguard exists to oversee a specific beach or pool, so elders have been raised up to oversee a local congregation.

²¹ Why would he speak so much about the role of the church in the epistle, 1:22; 2:19ff.; 3:10, 21; 4:15-16; 5:22-33, etc.? Clearly the Ephesian group was a church; no one has ever denied this.

²² We could list other epistles but one more example will suffice. It is interesting that Christ addresses the seven *churches* of Asia Minor and not mere individuals. His final revelation to the world began with his searching and stirring assessments of the seven churches. Our Lord was concerned about *churches* because He is the one who is in the “midst of the lampstands” (Rev. 1:13). Of course the lampstands, the seven golden lampstands (1:12) were the seven *churches* (1:20).

The epistle to the Philippians is addressed to the saints “together with the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). Hebrews 13:17 further demonstrates the intimate relationship between the leaders and the church whom they shepherded: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”²³ They are called to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” in 1 Peter 5:2. The shepherding or oversight is restricted to those “among you” and not to the unknowable members of the invisible church.

The presence of this office argues that a definite body of believers was overseen. An elder does not oversee the invisible church but a local visible congregation. Prior to the existence of elders and deacons were the Apostles themselves. Yet, even the “ministry” of apostles “existed for the sake of the community,” says Adolf Schlatter.²⁴ We must remember, the apostles existed to build up the church (2Cor. 10:8) and that “God has appointed in the church first apostles ...” (1Cor. 12:28). Any appeal to the apostles without embracing their relationship to the church would be wrong. The apostles were appointed by Christ to build up the church. The elders and deacons were also set apart to serve the churches.

This is where the modern sentiment opposes the biblical model. Nobody wants oversight, accountability, etc. It is this gracious pastoral oversight most modern men and women cannot stand. Each one desires to do what he or she wants to do. Many do not want an elder to step in and hold them accountable. But the office does not exist for show, nor does it exist without a purpose. The office of elders has been divinely prescribed because our Lord wanted them to rule and shepherd local bodies of His people.

6. *Spiritual Gifts*

Surely, we know that spiritual gifts have been given to the church for her edification (1Cor. 14:5, 12, 19, 26: “All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.”). There is a logic here that is unmistakable. God, we are told, is the one who gives spiritual gifts (1Cor. 12:4-11, 28). Furthermore, God gives them for the “common good” (1Cor. 12:7) and for the edification of the church. The divine intention has been to equip individual members for the purpose of building up the whole church. Not only is each individual given spiritual gifts, but he is also given the very context in which he is to use them, namely, in the church.

If one is not intimately connected to the church, then the gifts have been wasted. Most of all, not only are their gifts wasted but they have resorted to the opposite spectrum. They are *not* in the church to edify but rather, they go from church to church to grab, drain, etc. The question for many is not, “What can I do to edify?” but rather, “What is *THIS* church doing for *ME*?”

Furthermore, if God has given such spiritual gifts to each member for the edification of the whole body (1Cor. 12:7), then one cannot act as if his personality or idiosyncrasy somehow exempts him from using his gifts to build up some member in the body of Christ. The possession of the gift is a charge, a stewardship. He must seek to use it for the benefit of the whole body.

²³ I will address the issue of “submission” to elders later on.

²⁴ A. Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period*, translated by P. P. Levertoff (London: SPCK, 1955), 25.

We must think about this. The gifts of the Spirit have been given for the sole purpose of edifying the body. How in the world can that be done when he or she rarely darkens the doors of a local church? I guess one can view himself as a privileged superstar whose occasional presence is good enough. None of us is a superstar and our gifts must be used in the local body of Christ. There simply is no way we can say we are believers possessing spiritual gifts (since all believers do) and yet keep aloof from the visible body of believers. Burying our gifts like that will receive a strict accounting. So, once again, the very nature of spiritual gifts and the other things we have already mentioned assume that believers are members of a local church.

7. Old Testament Precedent: God Always Has a People

The Old Testament saints were by nature in a HUGE church. None of them could pick and choose; by birth, they were joined to Israel. If the New Testament church of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Israel and we are now the Israel of God, then we have here a model or paradigm— God has *always* had a people for Himself. God's way in history was and is to have a people for Himself. In 1 Samuel 12:22, Samuel says, "it has pleased the LORD to make you *a people* for himself." In the NT, we read that God sent Jesus "who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself *a people* for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). This is God's way in history. God delights to have a people for Himself and this passion of God has never ceased. So in 1 Peter 2:9 we are told "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light..." Peter consciously describes the church in Old Testament terms — the very labels used to describe Israel (Ex. 19:6; Is. 43:20-21; Hos. 1:6, 9: 2:1) are used to describe the church in the New Testament.²⁵

In other words, as God has always worked with a people in the Old Testament, so He does in the New Covenant. God has not suddenly turned individualistic; He did not stop dealing with a corporate body, but instead, that important theme has expanded — from one small nation to the whole world. Believers in the New Covenant are automatically thrust into "the people of God" or the church. God does not convert and then leave the believer to fend for himself. He uses the church to proclaim His Gospel and He converts and brings them into fellowship with Himself and with His people. "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2:10).

To become a member of the visible church fits into God's ancient ways. This is the way He has always worked. He is always possessing a people for Himself. The individual who does not wish to be a part of the visible church is virtually stating that he does not wish to fit into God's revealed ways. That is rebellion.

8. Church discipline in Mt. 18

Another more interesting theme addressed in the New Testament is that of church discipline. Notice, I say *church* discipline. Since this is such a neglected "mark" of the church, one can understand why this passage might not register with most people. I

²⁵Cf. Clowney, *The Church*, 29-30.

wonder if our low view of the church is not in some great measure rooted in our neglect of this practice? Surely, if all churches exercised this, there wouldn't be this sort of disdain among professing believers. Nonetheless, this practice assumes a body of believers to which each member is committed. To be expelled or excommunicated *assumes* one was in the body of Christ.

Mt. 18:15-20 is the classic passage on church discipline. Believers have used this as a means of restoring a relationship between two people and there is something to be said about that. But it goes a few steps further. It is not a passage merely exhorting us to confront someone but a passage which teaches us to *pursue* someone who has sinned against us so that they will *listen to us* or *heed* what is said (this verb ἀκούσῃ is used four times in the passage).²⁶ The final and last course of action is to view the unrepentant member of the church as a “Gentile and a tax collector.” Paul is even more explicit. He says, “Let him who has done this be removed from among you” (1 Cor. 5:2).

The only context in which this teaching can be practiced is in the church. Jesus makes that explicit in Mt. 18:17 (“tell it to the church”) and Paul clearly has in mind the Corinthian Church from which the immoral individual is to be expelled. Perhaps this is why some do not wish to become “members” — they prefer to have a loose and nonbinding association with a local congregation. In so doing, they remove themselves from the pale of the local church's ecclesiastical authority. Clearly this is a sinful attitude and practice. But nevertheless, implied in our Lord's command to exercise discipline is the willingness of the member of His body to be subject to it. The very nature of this command assumes that believers want to be in the church and are part of the local church.

9. *Hebrews 10:25*

Many pastors and faithful members of the church appeal to the great Hebrews passage to argue for church membership and attendance. In a sense, this is one of the most explicit passages in the New Testament. The NIV translates Hebrews 10:25 as, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” In a very subtle way, the NIV is not helpful here. Though it is useful to have it translated as a complete verse, yet it ends up actually ripping it away from the whole emphasis of the passage.

The active verbs are found in vv. 23 and 24. Grammatically, the participle in v. 25 “not neglecting to meet together” (μὴ ἐγκαταλείποντες) depends on the active verb in v. 24, “let us consider” (κατανοῶμεν) and remotely to the active verb in v. 23 “let us hold fast” (vv. 23-25 are one sentence).²⁷ Verse 24 therefore regulates verse 25 (as most translations seem to do, ESV, KJV, NASB) which means that the way we stir up one another to love and good deeds is by meeting together. Furthermore, it is also connected

²⁶ Two forms of the verb are used here. Verse 17 has the more intensive form. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988-91), 2:785: “παρὰκούω here means, as it does uniformly in the LXX, ‘hear without heeding’ ... It expresses a deliberateness not so clearly conveyed by the μὴ ἀκούσῃ of v. 16.”

²⁷ Cf. P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 528; W. L. Lane, *Hebrews*, WBC (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991), 2:289-290.

to verse 23. We hold fast to our confession of hope and stimulate one another to love and good works by meeting together and encouraging one another.²⁸

One great concern of this epistle (or exhortation, 13:22) is to warn them against turning away. The exhortation to hold fast is his great burden lest they shrink back and are destroyed (10:39). Meeting together is calculated to arrest this decay, this shrinking back, this backsliding. But, it appears that the recipients, to whom the writer of Hebrews was writing, were not assembling together and this neglect suggested to the writer that they were about to defect.

Not only is membership in the church assumed throughout the New Testament but we see from this verse that a failure to assemble in worship may portend “the danger of apostasy.”²⁹ F. F. Bruce summarizes this quite well: “Under the various pressures which were being brought to bear upon them, to withdraw from the society of their fellow-believers was to court spiritual defeat; only by remaining united could they preserve their faith and witness.”³⁰ To forsake the assembly courts spiritual defeat; to assemble together enabled them to persevere in their faith.

Some people think they are better off when they are not connected to a church. They believe they are safer and can get along in life quite well. The writer of Hebrews believes that we fight a proclivity to leave the God we love by meeting together and by encouraging one another. In this verse, we see how assembling with the saints in worship actually serves as a counter measure to apostasy.

This verse should be used to encourage such people to attend church and to become a member, but we must also show them that the verse is set in the context of the writer’s strong exhortation against spiritual defection. We should help them to see that when they habitually and faithfully assemble with the saints, they are in fact fortifying themselves against falling away while at the same time strengthening themselves to hold fast.

10. God’s purpose for the church

The “institutional” church has ALWAYS existed. The people of God (however wicked and sinful) have always existed - those who are not members are greatly out of step with God’s rich purpose in history (see #7). The only point I would like to make is that God has an overarching purpose for the church. The church in the New Testament is not an accident (contra Dispensationalists) but integral to what He had revealed in the Old Testament.

Stuart Robinson has argued brilliantly that the visible church is “an essential element of the gospel.”³¹ He argues that God’s eternal purposes become visible in the church. It is the “external manifestation” of God’s purpose “in time.” The visible Church, Robinson asserts, “is an important, if not a necessary, means of revealing to men the whole counsel of God.”³² His observations are insightful and we would do well to

²⁸ For a good overview of the meaning of the word “meeting together” or “assembling,” see P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 417-418.

²⁹ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 415.

³⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 258.

³¹ The full title of the work is *The Church of God: An Essential Element of the Gospel*.

³² S. Robinson, *The Church of God* (1858; reprint, Greenville, SC: GPTS Press, 1995), 40-43.

consider them in the light of where our generation has gone in this subject. Robinson expands upon the significance of the visible church to God.

It is Jehovah's vineyard, well fenced, indeed, but oftentimes having vines therein that bring forth wild grapes. It is Jehovah's garden, well cared-for and well tilled, but in which many of the fig-trees may be barren. It is the wheat-field, which the husbandman has carefully sown, yet in which tares grow up with the wheat. It is the great net, as an instrument in the hand of Jehovah for gathering his chosen ones out of the great deeps of a world of sin; but the very operation by which he gathers the good must, in the nature of the case, gather the bad with them also. It is a heap of choice wheat in his threshing-floor, from which the chaff is yet to be winnowed. It is a rich vineyard, leased out for a time to husbandmen who may be wicked enough to beat away the owner's servants,—yea, even to slay his son and heir. It is, in short, a body called out of the world, yet in which are many called more than are chosen.³³

Notice Robinson's words, he says that the church is "Jehovah's vineyard" — God is planting it and cultivating it, though it is a mixed body. That is what He is doing in world history. He has been manifesting His eternal purposes by cultivating the church in this world. Robinson says that the church is the means of revealing to men the whole counsel of God. That is true but there is more to it than that.

Paul, in Eph. 3:10, quite astonishingly teaches that the church is the means by which God expresses His manifold wisdom. He said that his own apostleship was a gracious gift to him by which he announces the unsearchable riches of Christ (v. 8) and makes known what was previously hidden (v. 9) — "so that *through the church* (διὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας) the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (v. 10). What Paul is saying in this verse is that somehow, God is revealing His rich wisdom to the heavenly beings through the church. As Peter T. O'Brien says, "What is amazing, however, is that this enlightening of the principalities and powers in the heavenly places is effected *through the church*."³⁴ The question is, how? What exactly does the church end up revealing by her very existence?

The context appears to show that God's wisdom is revealed in displaying how He reconciled and unified humanity in the body of Christ (2:13-16; 3:3-6). The church appears as "God's pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future." The uniting of "Jews and Gentiles in Christ was ... God's masterpiece of reconciliation, and gave promise of a time when not Jews and Gentiles only, but all the mutually hostile elements in creation, would be united in that same Christ."³⁵ So O'Brien says, "The church is not only the pattern, but also the means God is using to show that his purposes are moving triumphantly to their climax."³⁶

The fixed visible presence of the church in this world serves as a prism of God's

³³ Ibid., 52-53.

³⁴ P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 245-246.

³⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Epistles to Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 321-322, 262, cited in O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 247-248.

³⁶ O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 248.

wisdom that declares to these rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms that He has indeed reconciled all things, the Jews and Gentiles and, therefore, in principle all hostile forces. The church is the visible emblem in this world of God's wisdom. The redeemed and reconciled community of believers is God's vehicle (notice the clause "through the church") of disclosing to all of creation that full reconciliation has been accomplished (1:20-22). Lincoln is surely correct in saying that "by her very existence as a new humanity, in which the major division of the first century world has been overcome, the Church reveals God's secret in action and heralds to the hostile heavenly powers the overcoming of cosmic divisions with their defeat."³⁷

What does all this mean? It means that God still has a purpose for the church in this world (contra Harold Camping).³⁸ The church can be (in a very broad and loose sense) a "sacrament of salvation in the world" because she serves as a trophy of God's wisdom— a visible declaration of His sovereign merciful salvation.³⁹ Or, in the words of Schlatter, the church is "the visible token" of God's sovereign action.⁴⁰ Here, through this redeemed motley community, God is declaring to the world that He is wise in the way He has redeemed so many diverse people. So, people who wish to deny the importance of being connected to the visible church are actually opposing God's masterpiece that He created to declare His manifold wisdom. In fact, they are implicitly saying that they do not wish to be part of God's revealed way of manifesting His wisdom. This is either blatant rebellion or arrogance. Either way, it is opposed to what God teaches in the Bible.

11. Called to Submit to Elders

We have already argued that the existence of the office of elders assumes that a local congregation must exist for them to oversee. The other related argument is the Bible's teaching regarding the members who must submit to these overseers. Since the elders cannot exist or function without the visible church, neither can members submit to them without being in the visible church.

In 1 Thess. 5:12-13, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to *esteem* the elders *very highly in love* (ἡγείσθαι αὐτοὺς ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ) because of their work. They are the ones who "labor among you" (τοὺς κοπιῶντας ἐν ὑμῖν). Here, the elders were working *among* the people because they did not exist independently of the church. Furthermore, in Heb. 13:17, the church is instructed to *obey* (πείθεσθε) and *submit* (ὑπαίκετε) to their elders. This idea of submission is once again reinforced in 1 Peter 5:5 — "Likewise, you who are younger, be subject (ὑποτάγητε) to the elders."

These commands of esteeming, obeying, and submitting are quite explicit. How does one get around them? These verses strike at the heart of our Western democratic

³⁷ A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), 187.

³⁸ Cf. H. Camping, *The End of the Church Age... And After* (Oakland, CA: Family Stations, Inc., 2002).

³⁹ The phrase is taken from E. Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, translated by J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 13; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 9, 48; K. Rahner, *The Church after the Council*, 51ff. There are some hints of truth in his view but overall, Schillebeeckx's view (as well as Rahner's "transcendental Thomism") is mired in the typical speculative philosophy of modern Roman Catholic theologians. I am using the word "sacrament" in a very general way (i. e., a sign) and *not in any true sacramentarian sense*.

⁴⁰ Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period*, 26: "[T]he church was not the outcome of human organization or external circumstances... [but] the work of Jesus, the gift of Christ to his own, the visible token of his sovereign action."

sensibilities because we pretend to be our own persons, fundamentally unaccountable to anyone. Not only does the office of elder demand the functioning existence of a local visible church, but these commands necessitate the same ecclesiastical context. The office itself necessitates the existence of a local congregation; the commands to esteem, obey, and submit demand the same.

There is probably nothing more offensive to our easy-going society than a call to submit to fallible men. Submit to *them*? Certainly, there are other men who are smarter, more gifted, better looking, etc. Yet, these commands assume that the elders are faithfully laboring among the people and that they are being diligent. Nonetheless, those who believe they can get along without the visible church simply have no way of heeding these commands. Their autonomous spirit greatly conflicts with these biblical commands. It is true that instruction may help, but on this point, a basic sinful rebellious spirit may be at work.

There is one more thing that we must not overlook. In Hebrews 13:17, the commands to *obey* and *submit* are coupled with the reason for doing this. Why? The answer is: “For they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account.” Those who submit to these leaders receive the benefit of godly men who will oversee the welfare of their souls. Someone else will be held responsible for the church members. Even as each individual will stand before Christ, so the elders will also have to give an account for his dealings with each soul of the congregation. Who would not want to receive this benefit? It can only come to those who are willing to join the church and submit to her leaders.

12. Christ's Custom is our Example

In Luke 4:16, we are given a rare picture into the habit or custom of our Lord. Luke makes it known that our Lord was regularly committed to prayer, but only in this verse does he give us insight into the regular practice of our Lord. Our Lord regularly attended synagogue worship: “And as was his *custom*, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath Day, and he stood up to read.” We must remember that he was a better teacher than all of them. He no doubt heard horrible expositions and witnessed great hypocrisy in the assembly but that did not stop him from regularly attending the local worship service. He could have reflected on the Word of God all day long on the Sabbath and avoided gathering in the synagogue, but that is not what He did. He who could have gotten along quite well (theoretically speaking) without such public means of grace (He who knew no sin) customarily went to the synagogue to fulfill all righteousness. We are sinful and always needing the means of grace — shall He attend when He didn't need it (as much as we) and we neglect it and presume to be self-sufficient? “Though even with respect to his human nature, Jesus was far advanced in knowledge, wisdom, etc., above anyone else who imparted instruction in the synagogue, he did not stay away.”⁴¹

One liberal commentator observed, “Jewish readers at least would assume that a pious Jew automatically attended the synagogue on the sabbath.”⁴² Such an assumption

⁴¹ W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 235,

⁴² C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 268. J. A. Fitzmyer also points this out in *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1:530: “Luke alone among the Synoptic evangelists stresses Jesus' habitual

would have been well founded. Joel Green says that “Jesus regularly demonstrated his piety by attendance of the synagogue on the Sabbath.”⁴³ Green rightly connects Christ’s fulfilling of the Law with Jesus’ regular attendance in synagogue worship. His righteousness and piety were demonstrated in part by regular attendance to the means of grace. As the Mediator, His active obedience included his synagogue worship. It seems quite strange to assume that such piety is not required of us. Christ’s custom should shame us if we are not regularly attending public worship.

Is it not curious that those who need it the most are also the ones neglecting it the most? Our Lord, of all the people, regularly went to synagogue worship. It was part and parcel of His active obedience. Are we better than He? This may not argue directly for church membership but let a professing believer admit that he should be in worship on a weekly basis. They customarily neglect worship in the church while Jesus customarily attended worship in the synagogue.

13. The Preaching of the Word of God

We are all familiar with the importance of “preaching” and have all benefited from it. Most likely, many of our readers have been converted through this means. We take it for granted, but we must recognize the hidden assumptions behind preaching.

Apart from evangelistic preaching, Paul’s admonitions to Timothy about preaching assume an ecclesiastical context. Paul admonished Timothy to preach the Word, in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:2ff.; cf. 1 Tim. 5:17). One does not preach into a void, but everything in the Pastoral Epistles assumes a church context, especially when we read of the necessity of preaching. Timothy’s pastoral ministry assumes he is addressing a normal body of believers (1 Tim. 3:15). If the elder who labors at teaching is worthy of double honor, where is that honor recognized (1 Tim. 5:17)? Presumably it entails in some measure his wages (1 Tim. 5:18). This does not come out of thin air; it comes from a body of assembling believers over whom this elder exercises his gifts. The ministry of preaching and the full pastoral ministry taught in these epistles assume that the preacher has a regular body of believers to whom he must “teach and urge these things” (1 Tim. 6:2c) and “remind them of these things” (2 Tim. 2:14), etc. Furthermore, when Paul appeals to Timothy to “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13), was he not assuming that Timothy had a definite body of professing believers? What does “public reading of Scripture” mean except doing something similar to what our Lord did (cf. Luke 4:16) and what Paul either witnessed or

frequenting of the synagogue; he thus presents him conforming to the general Jewish custom described by Josephus...”

⁴³ J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 209. Nolland does not explain why Jesus’ custom refers only to the teaching and not to his attendance. You cannot have the former without the latter. The conjunction καὶ suggests that on this particular occasion, he stood up to read and that the custom refers to the previous phrase. Since this was his first recorded public appearance in the synagogue as the Mediator (but not as a private individual), we must assume that public teaching was not yet His custom. For Nolland, see *Luke, 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35A (Waco, TX: Word, 1989), 195. The older commentator Meyer believes the custom points to the practice of attendance, H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospels of Mark and Luke*, translated by W. Dickson (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), 308: “The Sabbath visit to the synagogue was certainly His custom from His youth up.” Also, F. Godet, L. Morris (Tyndale), Stein (NAC), Hendriksen (NTC), Geldenhuys (NICNT), Liefeld (EBC), M. Henry, etc. all believe that this is a reference to Jesus’ regular custom of participating in synagogue worship.

did in the synagogue (Acts 13:15; 17:2, 10ff.)?⁴⁴ This was the common practice among Jews, reading and then exhortation and Timothy was encouraged to press on with this practice in the church of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

One more curious bit of support comes from Paul's first letter to Corinth. Preaching was evidently present because Paul exhorts the wives to refrain from speaking in worship services (1 Cor. 14:35). Here, in this context, Paul tells them to "ask their husbands *at home*. For it is shameful for a woman to speak *in church*." In this verse, Paul distinguishes between being at home (ἐν οἴκῳ) and being in church (ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ). What is permitted in one arena is not permitted another. The two are not the same. He is telling them that there is such a thing as assembling and hearing the Word of God preached in the church. This simple distinction once again assumes that being at home is not the same as being in church, which is what many modern church deserters are assuming.

Those who regularly avoid the public preaching of the word are resisting the very ordained means God has given to the church for their own growth.⁴⁶ This command to preach assumes that a body of believers assembled to sit under its ministry. Some may say, "Well, I watch preaching on TV." or "I listen to sermons on the radio." That is good but that is not what went on in the NT. They really assembled to hear God's Word preached; it was not a *virtual* assembly and a *virtual* sermon. How can that preacher personally encourage and warn you when he doesn't even know you? It is true, God may still use those opportunities, but that is in spite of the person's disobedience. We find that even the simple command to preach many times assumes an ecclesiastical context. There must be a body of believers to whom the preacher may continually preach which implies that a fixed body of believers existed.

14. Growth also involves the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:15, 16)⁴⁷

Sanctification is something that God brings about in the life of an individual believer (cf. 1Thess. 5:23). We are all aware of the Bible's teaching regarding this important doctrine. God addresses individuals and individually sanctifies them. But, there is also a corporate aspect to sanctification. The great passage in Eph. 4 assumes the context of a local body of believers. Each part works properly to make "the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (4:16). This point is very similar to the one we made regarding the use of spiritual gifts. On this point, the focus is not on the *exercise* of those gifts but rather on the *effects* of their use.

Paul teaches us that each member of the body of Christ must work properly:

⁴⁴ For a defense of "public" reading as opposed to private, see G. W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 207. Also, I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 563: "The reference is not to private study but to public reading to the believers (Neh 8.8). The reference may be to the reading of the law and prophets, as in the synagogue. It is the earliest reference to the reading of the OT in the Christian church..."

⁴⁵ For this practice in synagogue worship, see E. Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, translated by S. Taylor and P. Christie, vol. 2, 2nd div. (1890; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1890), 75ff.

⁴⁶ This problem also existed during Calvin's time: "Many are led either by pride, dislike, or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous" (*Institutes*, 4.1.5).

⁴⁷ I am indebted to one of the attendees of this Conference for this insight. To my shame, I have forgotten who it was that drew my attention to this point.

“when each part is working properly, [it] makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” Though there are some debates among commentators as to the actual translation and meaning of these verses, the general point seems to be quite simple. Leon Morris’s explanation well summarizes that central point: “Each of us is to fulfill his or her proper function, neither slacking on it so that our work is left undone, nor taking over functions that properly belong to someone else. The body will never reach its proper development without this balance, but when all the parts — the variety of its members — are working properly together in this way, this ‘makes the increase of the body.’”⁴⁸ Every member of the church mutually contributes to the growth of the whole — each true member is indispensable. An older commentator highlights the *contact* each member must have with each other: “In any case the sense is clear. Each part as it is brought into contact with other parts, fulfills its own office and contributes to the growth of the whole.”⁴⁹ The growth of the whole body is intimately connected with the mutual proper working of each individual member.

We can certainly read sermons that are better than what the local preacher might be preaching on a given Sunday (we are all painfully aware of this). We can hear more stirring preachers on the television each Lord’s Day. But these preachers have been given to the church so that each part can work together. The whole body is “joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped.” In other words, it is true that the preachers are executing their gifts for the benefit of the whole church but what is the stay-at-home professing believer doing with his gifts? At best, he is burying them.

The person’s unwillingness to get into the thick of it with the visible body of Christ deprives him and the whole church. Not only does he fail to exercise his own spiritual gifts but he in fact diminishes the total growth of the whole. Paul is in a way saying what so many of us have said, viz., the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The one who obstinately refuses to join the church cannot grow in the way he could were he constantly in a committed relationship to a local visible body of Christ. Both he and the church stand to gain when he becomes committed and both he and the church stand to lose when he withdraws. There is something in the body of Christ that helps each member of the body of Christ to grow in a way a self-contained individual can never match.

Since Paul argues that a growth of the whole body is intimately related to the functioning of each member, and since each member has been gifted by the ascended Lord (v. 7, “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”), each professing believer must be in the visible church to utilize his gifts. One does not contribute to the growth of the whole with whom he is *not* involved. Only in a committed relationship to the visible body of believers on a regular and consistent basis can the truth of these verses come to pass.

15. *The problems in the churches*

Though this may appear to be a minor (and enigmatic) point, it may prove to be one of the more important points for some. Let me explain. Some of the complaints I have heard either directly or through other pastors are that the church is hypocritical,

⁴⁸ L. Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 132.

⁴⁹ B. F. Westcott, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1906), 65.

ingrown, weak, boring, etc. Why should they be committed to this one local church when they know such and such member is a hypocrite? Why should they be members of the other church down the street when they are so weak and struggling? The mega-church across town is too superficial and they feel like they will be neglected and besides, it is across town. You can't expect us to travel thirty minutes to go to church (never mind the fact that they travel that distance each morning to go to work)? These and a host of other arguments have been used to denigrate the visible church and to avoid membership in any of them.

My response to that is *phenomenological*. Let us look at the phenomenon itself. Does not the existence of problems in the churches (those mentioned in the Bible) beg the question regarding membership? Let me explain. We read of the schism in Corinth (1Cor. 1:10ff.), the growing heresy in Galatia (Gal. 1:7), the influence of Hymenaeus and Philetus in Ephesus under Timothy's ministry (2Tim. 2:17), the strife in Philippi (Phil. 1:2ff.), the weird heresies in Colossae (Col. 2:16ff.), the growing defection among Hebrew Christians the writer of Hebrews mentions (Heb. 3:12; 4:1; 6:6ff.; 10:39, etc.), the "Gnostic" type of influence in the church to whom John writes (1Jn. 4:2-3), false teachers against whom Jude and Peter warn (Jude 12; 2Pet. 2:1ff.), etc. All these churches had problems, lots of them. To top it off, very few churches (only Smyrna and Philadelphia) escaped strong rebukes from the Lord of the Church Himself when He addressed the seven churches in Asia Minor. The phenomena, the sheer existence of these problems, teach us something of the nature of the early church. She was never pure and this mixed body was always weak and fraught with problems, from within and from without.

Yes, there may be problems in the churches but that did not stop them from being churches. Paul did not stop addressing them as churches because they were impure. The very concrete problems in the churches meant that a visible body of professing believers was functioning together. You cannot have these problems when people do not constantly mingle. Paul dealt with real people in real visible local churches filled with real problems. He addressed them as saints and called them his brothers in Christ. They did not cease to be churches because they had problems. The church consists of broken lives turned upside down by the grace of Jesus Christ — perfection cannot be found on this side of heaven.

How does this support church membership? The New Testament, after the resurrection of our Lord, teaches that a body of believers worshipped and labored together. Problems arose *because* they obeyed Christ in meeting together. In other words, all the problems with which the people of God struggled came about because they worshipped together, had elders, and were attempting to be committed to each other. If the contemporary professing believer wishes to follow the Bible, then he must be involved in the life and ministry of a local church because much of what is written in the New Testament assumes the church context. The problems in the New Testament mean that the saints will always have problems when they meet as churches. It is certainly true that we can avoid "the problems" in the church by just avoiding her but then again, we would be disobeying the Lord of Glory to gain our personal peace and comfort. This may not be a strong selling point for most but obedience to Christ is never a big selling point in our generation. We ask, "What's in it for me?" rather than, "What would Christ have me do?" That is not to say there are no personal benefits but that must never be *the*

determining motive in our lives. In a sense, we are called to be committed to believers who have problems and these problems reveal that the body of believers is attempting to assemble in the name of Christ.

Those who stay away from local churches and belittle them because they are so impure and weak must surely be arrogant.⁵⁰ For all her weaknesses, she is at least seeking to obey what Christ has commanded. Didn't the apostles still work with the established churches, impure and weak though they were? Are we better than they? Does the person think he or she will be "tainted" by worshipping with one's inferiors? "[N]either the vices of the few nor the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith there in ceremonies ordained by God. For a godly conscience is not wounded by the unworthiness of another, whether pastor or layman; nor are the sacraments less pure and salutary for a holy and upright man because they are handled by unclean persons."⁵¹ So, next time someone accuses the church of being hypocritical, agree with him because such problems actually show that the church is trying to obey! Better a hypocrite in trying to obey than a hypocrite in willful disobedience. Better still the man who sincerely obeys His Lord.

The Benefits of Church Membership

We have spent some time defending the importance of the visible church. A professing believer must be connected to a local body of believers where he submits to her leadership, receives God's Word, and celebrates the Lord's Supper. Let us briefly explain a few of the benefits one can derive by being a member of a local church. We can say that we should be members because this is what the Bible teaches. This is sufficient. But we also notice a few other things that are beneficial.

A covenant community

In our broken world, men and women hunger for genuine relationships. Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow said that there is a "search for community" in America.⁵² The technological advances have brought about great isolation. We live in neighborhoods where we barely know our next door neighbors; our work associates may be the only community many know and, to make matters worse, our mobile culture has ripped young adults from their own families and towns.⁵³ We can expect such things from modernity.

The wrong response is to set up a social agenda to draw people into the church — many churches have done that. The church has become a social magnet where many people come for a sense of community, and some churches provide them with a host of activities. We are not even to pander to these noble desires.

What the church needs to be is to be the church. "The church, according to Scripture, is not a religious club, a voluntary association of like-minded Christians who cultivate friendship and engage in joint projects. It is rather the institution of Christ and of the Spirit, formed by his power and governed by his Word."⁵⁴ In acting this way, we

⁵⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.16.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.19.

⁵² R. Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 21.

⁵³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 33-36.

⁵⁴ Clowney, *The Church*, 58.

become a light in the midst of a dark generation. If they are drawn, they are drawn not because there are dynamic activities in the life of the church but because there is genuine life and real loving care for each other while seeking to glorify their Redeemer Jesus Christ. The great benefit of being a member of the body of Christ is that we have Christ and each other and the brethren we know now will be with us forever. A covenant community has emerged and we are members of that supernatural community. This, we may say, is a superb side benefit!

Extra ecclesiam non sit salus

“Outside the church there may be no salvation” (or more simply, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Cyprian’s old maxim has always been maintained by the church. Protestants believe that the reference to the church is a reference to the communion of the saints. Our Scottish forefather David Dickson rightly argued that there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside of the visible church.⁵⁵ The great William Perkins taught the same.⁵⁶ Of course, this same statement is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith: “The visible church...out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” (25:2) We may think that this position only represents the men of old. Certainly no protestant really believes that? But we do. It is the classic protestant position. Edmund Clowney gives a good contemporary statement:

Since salvation is only in Christ, there is a sense in which there is no salvation outside the church of Christ, for those whom the Spirit unites to Christ, he unites to all others who are in Christ. When he makes God our Father, he makes us brothers and sisters in the family of God. All who know God’s salvation know it as members of the body of Christ. Since the Spirit dwells in the church and fills the church with gifts for witness, nurture and worship, the church may well be called the mother of the faithful.⁵⁷

Here is one of the greatest blessings of being a member of Christ’s church. We are in the very community in which He *ordinarily* saves. It is His covenant community comprised of His redeemed people. We are with that group of people He has set apart for Himself and the very vineyard He cultivates for His name’s sake. The Spirit draws men first to Christ and then by the nature of their new life in Christ they are irresistibly drawn to the visible body of Christ. We find the true members of the invisible church in this visible body of Christ.⁵⁸ Or, as John Macpherson said, “The invisible Church exists here and now, yet not only by itself, but only in the visible.”⁵⁹ The external indication of one’s true faith in Jesus Christ is ordinarily found in the visible church.

Let us illustrate this point. Let us say that I maintain that I am a devoted fan of the Philadelphia Eagles. How would you know if this is true? You would expect me to be at

⁵⁵ D. Dickson, *Truths victory over error...* (Edinburgh: Printed by John Reid, 1684), 245-246.

⁵⁶ W. Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole or Creede of the Apostles* (London: Printed by Iohn Legate, 1611), 418; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.4: “it is always disastrous to leave the church.”

⁵⁷ Clowney, *The Church*, 57.

⁵⁸ J. Macpherson, *Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1898), 417 says: “The invisible Church, that is, the Church according to its true inner nature, is conceived of as possessing really the distinguishing notes of the Church—one, holy, catholic, true, in which alone is salvation.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 418.

all the games; you would expect me to talk about them (quite frequently) and you wouldn't be surprised if you saw me wearing their jerseys and found bumper stickers all over the back of my car. My professed devotion must find concrete expressions. Similarly, a professing believer will manifest his faith in Jesus Christ by being a member of a local church. Though being a member in a church does not automatically make one a true believer, yet we expect true believers to be in the visible church. The professing believer is in God's visible vineyard in which true members of the invisible church are found. Therefore, the great benefit of being in the local church is that the believer has manifested one of the *simplest* signs of being a true child of God.

I end with one more illustration to prove the same point. Let us for the moment (only for the sake of our illustration) accept the Dispensational rapture theories and adopt Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* version. The rapture is supposed to take away all the true believers and remain with Christ for seven years before the literal millennial reign. How many of those raptured Christians do you think were members of the church? In other words, when the end comes, will he find His people being part of the church or simply on their own? I am confident that an overwhelming majority would be members of a visible local church. Not everyone in the visible church will be raptured but most of raptured Christians will be in a visible local church. This now takes us to the next point. If the visible church is so important, then can we conclude that membership in her will pretty much ensure my salvation? Not exactly!

The Priority of Election in the Visible Church

We have just argued for the importance of the visible church and how we must be members in that covenant community. The Bible assumes that we are vitally connected to the local church. We cannot make sense of all its teaching unless we assume that we are committed to and established within a body of believers. Now we want to make some distinctions within the body. We are going to "piggy back" on Dr. Morton Smith's lecture on the distinction between the visible and invisible church.

As we know, the word "church" (ekklesia/qahal) when referring to God's people, signifies an actual assembly, a people of God assembling in His name.⁶⁰ Usually, the word "church" is used in reference to her *visible* manifestation, as opposed to her invisible qualities.⁶¹ The church is not bricks and mortar but rather the people of God. It can be a reference to the elect of God who are known only to God (the invisible church) or to the visible professing churches.⁶² Between the two, there is a *priority* given to the

⁶⁰ See Clowney, *The Church*, 30ff. Cf. J. Y. Campbell, "The Origin and Meaning of the Christian use of the Word EKKLESIA," *JTS* 49 (1948): 130-142; P. T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 89ff. We must avoid attributing too much importance to the etymology of "ekklesia" and "qahal." This root fallacy is faithfully exposed in J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 107ff., especially 119-129. Surprisingly, the older J. Mason avoided this error in his *Essays on the Church of God* (New York: Robert Carter, 1843), 3-5.

⁶¹ For this argument (though it overreaches), see J. Murray, "The Church: Its Definition in Terms of 'Visible' and 'Invisible' Invalid," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 1:231-236. John Macpherson's statement is balanced: "The apostles speak ordinarily, not exclusively, of particular local churches" (*Christian Dogmatics*, 415).

⁶² J. Bannerman lists five different referents for the word "church" (*The Church of Christ*, 1:6-14) while Turretin lists only three in *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, translated by G. M. Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: R&R Publishing, 1992-1997), 18.2.7.

invisible church, though the *emphasis* is on the visible. There is a *causal* and *logical* priority given to election within the visible church and both the Bible and the history of the Reformed perspective bear this out. In other words, we find that the doctrine of election must still play a *functional* role in our ecclesiology.

The priority of election in the Bible

Most divines recognize that the church in its more visible and institutional form began with Abraham.⁶³ That is not to say that God did not have a people for Himself until Abraham, but instead, a more formal covenantal and visible family was set apart with Abraham. Stuart Robinson called it “an ecclesiological covenant.” In other words, a particular family was set apart from the rest of the families, whereas previous covenants did not separate so visibly from the rest. Furthermore, the covenant made with Abraham became an organizing theme for all subsequent covenants, even the New Covenant.⁶⁴ Even if such an analysis may not be conceded by all, it cannot be denied that the Abrahamic covenant dominates the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Many references to Abraham and the covenant God made with him fill the Bible (both in the Old and New Testament).⁶⁵ It is the pattern which Paul follows in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 & 4. We are told in Gal. 3:8 that the Gospel we are taught was previously preached to Abraham. In Rom. 4:11, Paul says that Abraham was a “father of all who believe.” So the Abrahamic covenant is very important in understanding God’s way of dealing with His people.

What covenantal feature do we learn from Abraham and subsequent patriarchs? Geerhardus Vos emphatically states, “The first outstanding principle of divine procedure with the patriarchs is the principle of election. Hitherto the race as a whole had been dealt with.”⁶⁶ Though that is not the only element that was significant in the Abrahamic covenant, it is nonetheless a significant feature.

From this election the visible church grew and expanded through Abraham’s seed. Yet the entire subsequent generations were not co-extensive with God’s election. In this particular visible church God reveals that He continues to elect; in other words, God chooses some within His visible covenant community. God told Isaac that the older would serve the younger. Paul, commenting on the story, cites Mal. 1:2, 3, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Rom. 9:11-13). That principle never abated. As the visible church apostasized under Ahab’s rule, God still preserved a people for himself, “a remnant chosen by grace” (Rom 11:5; cf. 1Kings 19:18). From Abraham’s call to the election within that line of the covenant, we continue to see the priority of election in God’s dealing with the visible church.

⁶³ This can be seen in S. Robinson, *Discourses of Redemption* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1866), 75ff.; T. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology*, 28ff.; E. Morris, *Ecclesiology: A Treatise on the Church and Kingdom of God on Earth* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1898), 20ff.; J. Mason, *Essays on the Church*, 28ff.; D. Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church* (rpt., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 3-43; P. Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (rpt., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, nd), 1:287-296.

⁶⁴ Robinson, *The Church of God*, 50-52.

⁶⁵ Stuart Robinson says that there are around one hundred references to the Abrahamic covenant compared to some eight to ten references to the covenants made with Adam and Noah, see his *Discourses of Redemption*, 76.

⁶⁶ G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 89.

Paul summarizes this remnant theme by unequivocally stating, “For they are not all Israel who are of Israel nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham” (Rom. 9:6-7). What makes the difference? Paul states that it is “God’s purpose of election” (Rom. 9:11).

Calvinists understand and appreciate the theme of election in the Bible. But we tend to recognize it only in terms of our soteriology (our doctrine of salvation). We must *also* see it ecclesologically, in terms of how God deals with His visible church. We must not rip the truth from its context. God adds to the visible church but even within the visible church, there is a remnant according to God’s election.

The church is called “the body of Christ” (Rom. 7:14; 1Cor. 12:27), “the church of God” (Acts 20:28; 1Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:13), “the church of the living God” (1Tim. 3:15), “household of God” (Eph. 2:19; 1Tim. 3:15; 1Pet. 4:17), “people of God” (Heb. 4:9), whom Christ has purchased with His blood. At the same time, we read that some members of the church went out from the church because they were not really of the church (1Jn. 2:19). One Reformation divine succinctly observed that we need to distinguish between two things, “to be *in* the church, and to be *of* the church.”⁶⁷ Or more clearly, “All who are in the church are not therefore of the church.”⁶⁸ Paul warns against those who will rise up from among the Ephesian church to twist the gospel in order to draw away the disciples (Acts 20:30). Jude speaks of wicked men who have “crept in unnoticed” (Jude 4) while Peter writes about the false prophets who rose up among them (2Pet. 2:1). In Amos 9:10, God speaks of “the sinners of my people” and in Revelation our Lord rebukes the church in Pergamum because they had “some there who hold the teaching of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14-15). So in both Testaments, the church was a *mixed* church; not everyone in the visible church is considered God’s elect. God’s covenant people in the New Covenant were never co-extensive with the elect or, to put it another way, the invisible church is not co-extensive with the visible church.⁶⁹

The priority of election in Reformed Theology

This priority of election has been marvelously developed within Reformed theology. When we say that this was a priority in the visible church, we are not arguing that predestination is the organizing principle in Reformed theology.⁷⁰ Rather, it helped them to qualify the way they viewed the church.

The marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*) among the divines were three: the true preaching of the Word, the right administration of Sacraments, and the faithful exercise of Discipline (or the Ban). But we must remember that discipline is necessary for the well being (*bene esse*) of the church, though not indispensable for her being or existence

⁶⁷ Wolfgang Musculus, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, translated by John Man (London: Imprinted by Henry Byneman, 1578), 613 (emphasis added).

⁶⁸ W. à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, translated by B. Elshout (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992-95), 2:13.

⁶⁹ The Roman Catholic NT scholar Rudolph Schnackenburg aptly summarizes this point in *The Church in the New Testament*, 156: “Even the New Testament people of God as it is assembled in the Church, and continues to assemble, is not yet identical with the community of the elect which enters into the perfect kingdom of God....” Not everything Schnackenburg says is safe but he can be quite perceptive and helpful.

⁷⁰ As Muller so powerfully demonstrates in R. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

(*esse*). That seems to have been Calvin's position as well as others (like G. Bucanus).⁷¹ If discipline was a mark of the church, then this clearly teaches us that the church is mixed. With this I think all would agree. Even those who argue for a pure church would concede that even their visible congregations are not composed of only the elect of God.

Some in our Reformed tradition argued very forcefully that the visible body of Christ was quite thoroughly mixed (*corpus permixtum*).⁷² Johnnes Wollebius (1586-1629) divided the militant church between the "visible and invisible." He was quite blunt and argued that the visible church included reprobate as well as the elect.⁷³ John Downname, on the other hand, distinguishes between the "outward Church" and the "Church of God's Elect."⁷⁴ For these men, the visible church was never considered to be coextensive with the elect of God. Robert Baillie (1599-1662), a Scottish commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, said that the visible church

is such a body whose members are never all gracious, if we believe Scripture; It is an heterogeneous body, the parts of it are very dissimilar, some chaffe, some corne, some wheat, some tares; a net of fishes good and bad; a house wherein are vessels of honour and dishonour, a fold of sheep and goats, a tree of green and withered branches, a table of guests, some with, some without a wedding garment; in a word, every visible Church is a society wherein many are called, few chosen...⁷⁵

Unlike the Independents (Congregationalists) and Baptists, Presbyterians believed that the visible church was not a pure communion. The Reformed churches accept men and women on the basis of credible confession and not on the basis of their regeneration. So, being in the visible church was itself never the infallible sign that one was a believer. They all recognized that within the visible church existed members of the invisible church. Clear to them was that some in the visible church were internally called and the rest only externally. For that reason, Reformed divines gave greater emphasis to the invisible church. They recognized that God's mysterious election still had precedence over what they could only judge externally in the visible church.

On the other hand, though Roman Catholics did not absolutely deny the invisible church, they nevertheless greatly minimized the Scriptural emphasis on the invisibility of the church. They in turn, accentuated the visibility of the church.⁷⁶ They argued that "the

⁷¹ See P. D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, New Foundations Theological Library (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 29-35; Bucanus, *Institutions of Christian Religion*, translated by R. Hill (London: Printed by George Snowdon, 1606), 515.

⁷² See Appendix A: *On the Mixed Church*.

⁷³ J. Wollebius, *The Abridgement of Christian Divinitie*, 3rd ed., translated by A. Ross (London: Printed by T. Mabb for Joseph Nevill, 1660), 204; similarly, see Turretin, *Institutes*, 18.3.1-6.

⁷⁴ J. Downname, *The Summe of Sacred Divinitie* (London: Printed by William Stansby, 1625), 343ff., esp. 354-355, etc. Downname also uses the term "visible church" as well.

⁷⁵ R. Baillie, *A Dissuasive from the Errours of the Time* (London: Printed for Samuel Gellibrand, 1645), 159-160.

⁷⁶ For example, see the Roman Catholic theologian Gustave Weigel, "Catholic Ecclesiology in our Time," in *Christianity Divided: Protestant and Roman Catholic Theological Issues*, ed. D. Callahan, et al. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 177-191, esp. 186-190.

visible Church is first, then comes the invisible.”⁷⁷ Protestants, on the other hand, recognize the priority of the invisible over the visible.

Why is this *seemingly* trivial distinction so important? The reason is quite simple. To prioritize the visible church prepares the way for making one’s affiliation with a visible church more important than being spiritually united to Christ; one’s church membership tends to be more important than one’s genuine relationship to Christ. Freidrich Schleiermacher makes an unusually brilliant observation: “Protestantism makes the relation of the individual to the Church dependent upon his relation to Christ: Catholicism makes the relation of the individual to Christ dependent upon his relation to the Church.”⁷⁸ If election is not a priority in ecclesiology, then church membership, rather than faith in Christ, becomes the badge of my salvation.

External and internal relations to the covenant

When we distinguish between the visible and invisible church, we are not speaking of two different entities but rather the “same Church under two different characters.”⁷⁹ Our divines believed that some were *externally* related to the covenant while the elect of God were *internally* related to the covenant. Samuel Rutherford believed that all the members of the visible church had externally covenanted with God. They were all externally called by the Gospel, but not necessarily internally called. He further explained that God’s grace is so extensive that He used the hypocrites and reprobates in the visible church to beget children so that He might internally place these children in the covenant to fill up the number of the elect.⁸⁰

Such distinctions were found in many Puritans like Thomas Blake, David Dickson, Patrick Gillespie, Edward Fisher, John Ball, Wilhelmus à Brakel and Thomas Boston.⁸¹ In the nineteenth century, Thomas Peck and Stuart Robinson also maintained this distinction.⁸² These men did not argue that there was an external covenant per se, but rather, members of the visible church were only externally *related*.⁸³ Many professing

⁷⁷ J. A. Moehler, *Symbolism or Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholic and Protestants as Evidenced by their Symbolical Writings*, translated by J. B. Robertson (London: Gibbings & Company, 1906), 330-334. Cf. J. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:16-17; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 18.7.1-21.

⁷⁸ Schleiermacher, *Christlicher Glaube*, Band i. § 145, cited in Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:38.

⁷⁹ J. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:29. David Smith *incorrectly* describes the Reformed position as teaching “two churches.” He also seems to correct his overstatement, see his *All God’s People: A Theology of the Church* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996), 336-337.

⁸⁰ S. Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened: Or, A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (Edinburgh: Printed by Andro Anderson, for Robert Broun, 1654), 107-108. In other words, the children born to the non-elect will fill (by God’s election) the number of God’s elect.

⁸¹ T. Blake, *Vindiciae Foederis* (London: Printed for Abel Roper, 1658), 267ff.; D. Dickson, *Therapeutica Sacra* (Edinburgh: Printed by Evan Tyler, 1664), 90ff.; P. Gillespie, *The Ark of the Testament Opened* (London: Printed by R. C., 1661), pt. 2, 150-153; E. Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 9th ed. (London: Printed for Nath. Hillar, 1699), 47; J. Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London: Printed by G. Miller, 1645), 213; T. Boston, *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston* (1853; repr., Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1980), 1:615; 7:196.

⁸² T. E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology*, 16-17; Robinson, *The Church of God*, 69, cf. 40-43. John Macpherson also seems to have held this position, *Christian Dogmatics*, 417-418.

⁸³ This distinction has been carefully delineated by à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:457ff. He, like most Reformed divines, defended the view that members can be externally in the church and externally related to the ordinances, 2:14; 3:41.

believers had access to the ordinances of the church and all its privileges, but were fundamentally hypocrites; they are known to be hypocrites by God, though not in the eyes of man.⁸⁴

Berkhof raises some concerns over this language.⁸⁵ It may not necessarily be the best distinction, but it does do justice to the phenomena recorded in the Bible. Our forefathers all wrestled with these phenomena in Scripture. God's word made it clear that within the visible covenant community some were chosen and some were not. They also recognized that within their own congregations, the same principle applied. To explain this particular phenomenon, they suggested that some were *externally related* to the covenant while the members of the invisible church were *internally in* the covenant.

This distinction may appear to be arbitrary, but something of this teaching can be found in Scripture. Paul explains that a true Jew is the one who is circumcised *inwardly* and not just *outwardly* (Rom. 2:28). Physical circumcision is insufficient. Paul teaches that within the covenant community, some received only the external mark of the covenant but not the realities to which the sacrament points. It is this reality our Reformed tradition sought to clarify. The Reformers and the generations who followed them noted these two characteristics of the one church. Though it may not be the most satisfactory distinction, it does explain how some could be in the covenant and not be of it. To my reckoning, no other distinction has been as satisfactory as this.

Who are its members?

This leads us to the next point. If the visible church is composed of elect and non-elect, then who should be allowed in this visible church? Since it is mixed, does it matter? The obvious answer is, "Of course it matters."

Some of the older divines included angels as members of the church. There was some debate over the status of unbaptized infants, in particular, were unbaptized infants of the saints (*infantes fidelium*) members of the church?⁸⁶ Some of the answers related to those questions are interesting and there were some significant differences, but they all (except the Baptists) agreed that the members of the church definitely consisted of professing believers and their seed. The Independents and the Presbyterians also differed from each other. The Independents believed that one needed something more than a credible profession of faith; they had to be born again saints.⁸⁷ The Presbyterians argued

⁸⁴ W. à Brakel strongly disagrees with the view that external members should have a right to the sacraments (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 2:7). The Dutch church has an interesting history which struggled against the influence of Labadism (influence of a French Jesuit, Jean de Labadie (1610-74), who became Reformed and ended up teaching that only regenerate believers could be members of a church. See *Appendix B: On Labadism*.

⁸⁵ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 284-285. Dr. Pipa agrees with Berkhof's position, "A Response to 'Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation'," in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. C. Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 276-278.

⁸⁶ Regarding angels, see Richard Field, *Of the Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Printed by William Turner, 1635), 1ff.; à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 2:98-99; on the other hand, Bucanus denies that angels are part of the church, see *Institutions of Christian Religion*, 511. For unbaptized children, see H. Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics*, translated by G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), 658-659; Turretin, *Institutes*, 18.4.1-18.

⁸⁷ Cf. Z. Crofton, *The Virtue and Value of Baptism* (London: Printed for Dorman Newman, 1663), 11ff. Crofton shows that "a profession of saving faith" is required and not "the saving profession of faith" or "profession of sincere grace." This explains why we so often have "baptized hypocrites" (pp. 11-12).

that Scripture only required a credible profession of faith along with obedience (cf. Shorter Catechism, #95).

We believe that Scripture supports the Presbyterian viewpoint.⁸⁸ Men and women were easily added to the church as soon as they professed faith in Christ. They received into the church people like Simon the magician (Acts 8:9ff.), Ananias and Saphira, etc. In Acts 2:41 we read that three thousand souls were added to the church. The terms of membership seemed simple and perhaps far quicker than what we might practice. But just because they were added to the church did not mean that one could assume without exception that they were all true believers. Our Lord tolerated Judas, though He knew Judas was unregenerated. This is quite remarkable.

In 2 Cor. 13:5 Paul challenges the Corinthians who seem to profess one thing and live another with these words: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” He did not assume that the saints in Corinth were necessarily all saints. He said that there had to be “factions” among them “in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1Cor. 11:19). He was writing to the “church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1Cor. 1:2; cf. 2Cor. 1:1). In Rom. 8:9, Paul may in fact be suggesting that all the addressees of the letter may not in fact be believers. He uses two conditional words (εἴπερ, *if indeed* or *if after all*) translated as “if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you” (ESV). The other sentence begins with the conditional “But if anyone...” (unfortunately, the ESV and RSV avoid this). Though Paul may not be doubting the authenticity of their faith, he is raising the possibility that some in the church may not be true believers.

The point is that Paul could call them saints since they were admitted on the basis of their profession of faith, but at the same time, he could question the genuineness of their faith. He could call them to live up to their profession, noting that a failure to do so would raise doubts as to their genuine state.

The status of members

We now come to the main thrust of this portion of the essay. If indeed it is true that there is a distinction to be made between the visible and the invisible church, and if it is true that election is the singular cause of this distinction, then what is the status of each member of the visible church? Are we to doubt their genuine faith, or should we simply conclude that they are all genuine believers because they are all in the visible church? Does believing in the priority of election in the covenant destroy assurance? Or, do we assume that the professing believer and his seed are true believers?

We can correctly affirm that the covenant is not coextensive with election.⁸⁹ The proponents of the Federal Vision eschew election as having any real valid role in church membership. We must maintain the legitimate priority of election in the body of Christ.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ See D. Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church*, 307-312.

⁸⁹ The Dutch tradition has reflected deeply on this issue. Kuyper and others have argued that covenant and election are pretty much the same thing. Many have not embraced this position. See J. Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election* (Pella, Iowa: Inheritance Publications, 1995) and J. Faber and K. Schilder, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism & Extra-Scriptural Binding—A New Danger* (Pella, Iowa: Inheritance Publications, 1996) on this debate.

⁹⁰ For example, see Perkins, *Apostles Creede*, 371ff.

As some of you know, many are arguing that we must assume that our covenant children are believers and assume that all visible members are genuinely united to Christ. They argue that there is an “objectivity” to the covenant and for all intents and purposes, this meant that being in the visible church meant you were God’s elect.⁹¹ Steve Wilkins says, “Election was not something hidden or unknown to the apostles or the prophets but something that could be rightly attributed to all who were in covenant.”⁹² Furthermore, he argues that those who are in the covenant receive all the blessings of being united to Christ—undifferentiated grace is conferred on every member in the church.⁹³ Therefore, those who fall away cease to be God’s elect. So, if you depart from the visible church, your elect status changes. For example, Steve Wilkins says, “The elect are those who are faithful in Christ Jesus. If they later reject the Savior, they are no longer elect — they are cut off from the Elect One and thus, lose their elect standing...They were really and truly the elect of God because of their relationship with Christ.”⁹⁴ Wilkins and other men who may agree with him, have collapsed and unified what the Bible has kept separate. The testimony of Scripture, we have seen, never equates election with the visible church. More often, the doctrine of election is seen in the sphere of the visible church (especially in the Old Testament and Romans 9).

For Wilkins, covenant membership is more prominent than election. Covenant membership (by which he means being a member of the visible church) is virtually co-extensive with election. One can cease to be elect when one becomes a covenant breaker.⁹⁵ But this is a grave error. We must remember that God knows those who are His (cf. 2 Tim. 2:19, “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.’”) because not everyone in the church is His.

Being in the visible church is important and our God requires it. However, we have argued that being in the visible church is not sufficient. One can be in the church and not have Christ. Because that is the case, Christ must be pressed upon the hearts of all who hear in the church. Wilkins and others habitually call people to be faithful to the covenant, persevere in the covenant, etc. but that is not Scriptural language.

Romans 9, the great text on the doctrine of God’s election, is very helpful here. Paul does not argue (after developing God’s sovereign election in Israel’s history) that the Israelites failed because they did not persevere in the covenant or were not faithful to the covenant — instead, they did not attain what they were pursuing “because they did not pursue it by faith” (9:32). Here, the covenant people of God did not believe. The covenant people did not have faith in Christ.

An illustration may help here and I’ll end with this. Let us say that we want to go to Indiana from Philadelphia. We need to be on I-70. However, we are traveling south on I-95, on the east coast. Will I ever get to Indiana? No. No matter how faithful I am in driving and how hard I look, I won’t get there. Why? Because I’m on the wrong road. Going South as faithfully as I can will not get me to Indianapolis. I need to go West, not

⁹¹ Cf. D. Wilson, *"Reformed" Is Not Enough* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2002), 63ff.

⁹² S. Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism and Salvation,” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. S. Wilkins and D. Garner (Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004), 56.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Cf. Wilkins, “Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation,” 66-67.

South.

It appears that that Wilkins and his ilk simply cannot raise the question of being in Christ or not. In other words, they cannot question the genuineness of someone's faith when issues of assurance arise. That question, for them, is solved.⁹⁶ The individual in question may be going down the run road working with a false understanding of his true spiritual state. Nonetheless, they cannot ask the question found in 2 Cor. 13:5 where Paul challenged the Corinthians who seemed to profess one thing but lived another: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" He did not assume that the saints in Corinth were necessarily all saints. The proponents of the Federal Vision can only say, "You are baptized and in the covenant – be faithful to the covenant." We must ask with Scripture, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" It is true, Paul was probably expecting a positive answer with this question.⁹⁷ But as one commentator notes, "Yet we must also allow...a possible allusion to some Corinthians who need to be exposed as falsely professing Christians."⁹⁸

Conclusion

What I have argued first of all was the importance of the visible church, and I have shown that Scripture does not make sense unless we assume that each professing believer is a member in a local congregation. Secondly, we have seen that both the Bible and Reformed theologians have taught that election must play a critical and functional role in understanding the visible church. Priority was given to election simply because not all members of the visible church are true children of God. The assurance for the believer is not to appeal to his membership, baptism, etc. His assurance is Christ and faith in Him. We must never let individual's assurance of salvation rest on external things (though they can help to encourage it). It is indeed *extra nos* (outside of ourselves) but it is not in the objectivity of the covenant but on Christ and Christ alone.

APPENDIX A

On the Mixed Church

Our dear Reformed Baptist brothers would not agree with the following statements. They attempt to keep the church as absolutely pure as possible (from a human standpoint) but that is an impossibility. If the visible church is not mixed, then we can equate her with the invisible church. If the visible church is mixed (as they would tend to admit), then she cannot assume that her terms of membership will preserve her from impurity any more than those of a Presbyterian church. The following quote shows (along with what is found in the body of the text) how one of the early Puritans viewed this.

⁹⁶ Wilkins says, "What we do know is whether or not a man is in covenant with God....If he has been baptized, he is in the covenant with God and is obligated to walk in faithfulness, loving the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength." ("Covenant, Baptism, and Salvation," 66-67)

⁹⁷ Almost all commentators seem to interpret it this way (Hughes [NICNT], C. K. Barrett [HARPER'S], Furnish [ANCHOR], Garland [NAC], Harris [NIGTC], etc.).

⁹⁸ M. J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 922.

The Church is Militant either in deed or in shew onely and profession, those indeed belong to the Militant Church which are called according to purpose, viz. the truly faithfull and elect. Those are the true Members of the body of Christ, who by faith are united to Christ, and ingrafted in him, who are partakers of the holy Ghost, who draw grace and spiritual life from Christ, *Rom.* 8.9. *Colos.* 2.19. *Ephes.* 5.25, 26, 27. but the wicked and hypocrites onely in name and profession belong to the Church, for they have no true Communion with Christ, they no more belong to the mystical body of Christ, than a wooden thigh or dry arme to a body of a natural man. For they want life, sense and motion, and receive no influence from the Head, they are (as is commonly said) in the Church, not of the Church, 1 *John* 2. 19. Hence arose the distinction of the Church into Visible and Invisible. The Invisible Church consists only of those who are endued with true faith and holinesse, but these are known to God and Christ alone, 2 *Tim.* 2. 19. *John* 10. 14. therefore in respect of us, that Church (which alone truly and properly is the Church on earth) is called Invisible.⁹⁹

Leigh's point is something we have underscored. The gospel hypocrites, argues Leigh, are in the Church "onely in name and profession." Another similar statement comes from Perkins who says, "First of all I call it a mixt company, because in it there be true believers and hypocrites, elect and reprobate, good and bad. The Church is the Lord's field, in which the enemy soweth his tares: it is the corne floare, in which hath wheat and chaffe: it is a band of men, in which beside those that be of valour and courage, here be white-livered soul-diours."¹⁰⁰ He believed that the visible church was a mixed company.

A necessary question arises from this discussion. Are the reprobates or the unregenerate in any sense *in* the covenant? Are they *partakers* of the covenant? If not, then is the church truly a mixed body since only covenant partakers can be members of the church? David McKay believes that there were two positions on this topic. He argues that men like à Brakel, Kuiper, and John Murray did not define the church as a mixed body.¹⁰¹ Regarding the hypocrites, McKay says (adopting à Brakel's point), "Although the Church treats such people as members, they are not in a covenant relationship with Christ and receive no spiritual benefits from him."¹⁰² He believes that men like Rutherford and later Bannerman taught that the non-elect are in a real external covenant relationship with Christ while à Brakel and others did not. Was there such a difference?

McKay's understanding of Rutherford depends upon John Macpherson's fine *The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology*. In it, Macpherson cites Rutherford's *A Peaceable and Temperate Plea* (1642) and also *The Due Right of Presbyteries* (1644). In looking at the original sources, Macpherson's broad representations (on which McKay depends) seem to be accurate. The problem with defining the church as McKay does seems to be a simple one (and one that Rutherford himself makes). If by definition the visible church always consists of the elect then it stands to reason that any and all visible

⁹⁹ E. Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity...* (London: Printed by A.M. for William Lee ... 1662), 622.

¹⁰⁰ William Perkins, *Creede*, 433. Similarly, S. Rutherford, *A Peaceable and Temperate Plea for Paul's Presbyterie in Scotland* (London: Printed for Iohn Bartlet, 1642), 94: "So also the kingdome of Heaven or visible Church is a draw net, wherin are good and bad fishes, a barne-floore, wherin are chaffe and good wheat."

¹⁰¹ D. McKay, *The Bond of Love: God's Covenantal Relationship with His Church* (Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Pub., 2001), 205-208.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 207.

churches have the elect in them. But that simply cannot be true. We must say with Rutherford, "So say wee, the Church of visible professors, as they are such, are not the redeemed of Christ, and Temples of the holy Spirit, but in so far as they are Believers and the elect of God."¹⁰³ Rutherford makes it clear they ought to be *de jure* saints by effectual calling but in reality or in fact (*de facto*) they are not.¹⁰⁴ Kuiper actually seems to agree with this.¹⁰⁵ It is true, we should strive to make the church pure but we must not conclude that the visible church is pure. We must define the church in terms of genuine life rather than mere superficial profession but at the same time we must not presume that all her members are all regenerate. Furthermore, since the reprobates in the visible church are only externally related to the covenant, the benefits they received are non-salvific though sufficient to hold them inexcusable. They are partakers of the covenant but only externally; they receive benefits from the covenant but non-salvifically.

Wilhelmus à Brakel's concern was to avoid a "twofold membership relationship" (external and internal). He was willing to view the one same church as containing members who possessed different spiritual conditions but was not willing to accept a "twofold membership relationship." In other words, one could not *state* that he was *only* an external member of the covenant — that would be hypocrisy. All are presumably (by profession) united to Christ. But he was willing to fundamentally view the church as being mixed though he did not believe that the church should be defined in those terms.¹⁰⁶ For example, we can define marriage as a "husband and wife always fighting" or as "a loving sacrificial relationship between husband and wife." The former is unacceptable while the latter is preferable. No one really seems to argue for a strict "twofold membership relationship" with any vigor. I don't think there is such a sharp difference between McKay's two views.

In addition, Rutherford was combating the Independents who only accepted regenerate members while à Brakel seems to have wrestled with nominal Christianity. If seen in this way, then the matter is one of emphasis rather than opposition. Our concern is to show that in the end, however we define terms of membership, the church is still a mixed body. Both à Brakel and Rutherford argued that the church was mixed. The two might have defined the church differently on account of this phenomenon. But the difference seems to be only a matter of emphasis.

APPENDIX B

On Labadism

The Dutch church resisted Labadism, though some of the more pious ones recognized legitimate concerns in Labadism. These brethren did not want to open the church door up to mere externalism and sought vigorously to reform the church.¹⁰⁷ A

¹⁰³ S. Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries or, A Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland* (London: Printed by E. Griffin, 1644), 247.

¹⁰⁴ Rutherford, *A Peaceable and Temperate Plea*, 94-95.

¹⁰⁵ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publications Company, nd), 28: "But what of the glory of the visible church? Consisting as it does of believers and unbelievers, it must of necessity be far less glorious than is the invisible church. That is a sad fact."

¹⁰⁶ W. à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 2:8.

¹⁰⁷ See the standard on the Second Reformation by J. R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*, American University Studies: Series 7, Theology and Religion, vol. 89 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1991).

generation after the Second Reformation, men like Jacobus Frelinghuysen were accused of being Labadist.¹⁰⁸ It appears that Frelinghuysen believed that though one was a visible member of the church, he or she needed to be born again to participate in the Lord's Supper.¹⁰⁹ Though Labadists were separatists, their concern for purity and lively religion was embraced by many leading Dutch pietists. But the Labadists did push things too far. "The Labadists and Pietists, on the other hand, manifested a tendency to disregard the visible Church, seeking a Church of believers only, showing themselves indifferent to the institutional Church with its mixture of good and evil, and seeking edification in conventicles."¹¹⁰ Similar assessments can be found in two other Dutch writers.

Kersten, for one, says, "The attempt of *De Labadie* resulted in a complete failure. De Labadie (who died in 1674) wanted to establish at Middelburg a congregation consisting of true believers only. Even in principle this action of De Labadie must be condemned because it was contrary to the Word of God, and its bitter fruit has proved that it was wrong."¹¹¹ Heyns makes a similar sweeping assessment: "Relation of the Circle of the Visible to that of the Invisible Church. — Should these two groups be identical? Should they completely coincide? Opinions concerning this vary. The Labadists assert that the Church must provide for this, and that it can also provide for this, for they believe, as do the Pietists, that regeneration is objectively cognizable. The Church has therefore no right, according to them, to accept any others as members than those who appear to be regenerated persons. That this is in conflict with the Scriptures is evident from the parable of the True Vine, John 15:1-7, from that of the Draw-net, Matt. 13:47-50, and from other passages of Scripture."¹¹²

Labadism is virtually an attempt to abolish the distinction between the visible and invisible church. When one does that, one can easily equate salvation with being in the visible church and that is an error we must avoid at all costs.

¹⁰⁸ J. Tanis, *Dutch Calvinistic Pietism in the Middle Colonies: A Study in the Life and Theology of Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen* (The Hague: Matinus Nijhoff, 1967), 159.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 145ff. For the historical aspects of this view in Frelinghuysen, see R. H. Balmer, *A Perfect Babel of Confusion: Dutch Religion and English Culture in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 103-116.

¹¹⁰ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 561.

¹¹¹ G. H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine* (USA: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Company, 1980-83), 2:470.

¹¹² W. Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1926), 148.