

CONCERNING THE INVISIBLE AND THE VISIBLE CHURCH

The Issue: The Westminster standards make a distinction between the invisible and the visible church. The former is defined as “*the whole number of the elect that have been or shall be gathered into one under Christ*“. The latter is defined as “*all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children*“. The question before us are there two churches or is there only one church? The issue is are there two separate churches or is there only one church? The answer is that ideally of course there would be only one church. Ideally all members of the visible church would also be members of the invisible church, of the true church of God. However, the elect are known only to God, who alone is the discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Christ has instructed his church that we are to judge men by their fruits. So those that profess the true faith and live a life that appears consistent with that profession are admitted to the visible church. However it is possible to fool the elders, they are neither infallible nor omniscient. Thus the existence of hypocrites in the church is a reality. It is how we view these hypocrites that determines whether we view the invisible and the visible church as being identical in their composition or membership. Therefore the issue before us is reduced to the question are hypocrites actually members of the visible church?

The church is not a building unless one is thinking in terms of the scripture analogy that likens to the church to a building made up of lively stones with the Lord Jesus Christ as both the chief cornerstone and the wise master builder. Rather the church is an assembly of the saints. Therefore both in the Hebrew “qahal” and the Greek “ecclesia” the root meaning of the word church or congregation is an assembly. The church therefore is composed of people. Therefore if there is only one church the membership of both the visible and the invisible church must be the same. If the membership is different then there are actually two different churches. The invisible church by definition is composed of only the elect. It is admitted that the visible church, composed by definition of all those who “profess” the true religion, is a mixture composed of both elect believers and non-elect hypocrites. It is only by denying that these hypocrites are actually members of the visible church that the one church theory can be maintained. And conversely it is only as it can be established that these hypocrites, for all their unworthiness, still actually are members of the visible church that the two church view can be established. Therefore that is the issue before us.

Historical Reformed Views: The Belgic Confession does not contain the distinction between the visible and the invisible church that we have noted in the later Westminster Confession of Faith. The Belgic Confession also sets forth a doctrine of two churches but they are different from the two churches of the Westminster doctrine. The Belgic Confession speaks of the “*true Church*” and of a “*false Church*“. This “*true Church*” corresponds to the Westminster’s “invisible church” in that it is composed “*of true Christian believers*” who are “*washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit*“. The Belgic Confession’s description of the “*false Church*” is basically a description not of the visible church but of the Church of Rome. It is that light we must understand the statement of the Belgic Confession, “*But we speak not here of the hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it.*” DeBres, the author of the Belgic Confession, is trying to say what all would agree with and that is that hypocrites are not members of the “*true Church*“. That is hypocrites are not members of the invisible church. But because DeBres lacks the formulation of the later

distinction between the visible and the invisible church his statement can appear very confusing. Which church are the hypocrites “mixed in” with? Which church are they externally in? He cannot say they are members of the “*true Church*” for then they would also be in the invisible church. Neither can he say that they are members of the “*false Church*” for that is not the issue. After all there is no hypocrisy in a false believer being a member of a false church and sincerely holding to false doctrine. What his statement cries out for to make any sense is that they are members of the visible church. But, unfortunately, lacking that distinction the statement remains somewhat inexplicable.

In contrast the Westminster position is a model of clarity. The invisible church is composed of all the elect. And the visible church is composed of those who profess the true faith and their children. These “professors” of the true religion can be sincere and true believers, the elect of God in Jesus Christ, or they can be hypocrites and reprobates. The Westminster position is that the two churches are different; they have different memberships. The memberships overlap but are never an identity. In the Belgic Confession the memberships appear to be an identity. In the Westminster doctrine the two churches can be thought of as two coins that are stacked on top on each other but somewhat misaligned. The portion of the two coins that overlap represents the elect of God that are present in both the visible and the invisible church. The portion of the coin that represents the visible church that is out of alignment with the other coin represents the hypocrites in the visible church that are not members of the invisible church. The portion of the coin that represents the invisible church, the elect, and is out of alignment with the other coin represents those elect who are in the invisible church but not in the visible church. The Westminster Confession allows for this saying with respect to the visible church “*out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation*“. They allow that there are elect who will in extraordinary circumstances not have joined themselves to the visible church of Jesus Christ. They allow that there are such, as the thief on the cross, who without baptism and admission into Christ’s church will be in paradise. The Belgic Confession does not allow for that stating, “*We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation...*”.

The Scripture Doctrine: What do the scriptures teach with respect to the membership of hypocrites in the visible church? I believe that they clearly teach that hypocrites are actual members of the visible church. One example of this can be found in the following passage,

“Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him. But some of them went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done. Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad. Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.” John 11:45-53

Now it is clear that the Apostle John is not taking the position that Caiaphas was not actually a member much less an office bearer of the Jewish Church, the visible church of that day. He specifically acknowledges that Caiaphas was the high priest that same year. There is no equivocation that he was an imposter and not actually even a member much less high priest in the church. Rather John goes on to state that by virtue of the fact that he was actually the high priest that he made a true prophesy with respect to the death of Jesus Christ, a prophesy that he himself misunderstood because he was a hypocrite. There is no support here for the notion that hypocrites are not to be counted as actual members of the visible church.

In another passage Christ himself clearly affirms that hypocrites are members of the visible church and must be recognized as such. He teaches,

“Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not...But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.” Matthew 23:1-3,13

Now Jesus did not teach that since the scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites that were not actual members of the visible church and could be safely ignored. Rather he recognizes their status as duly appointed teachers in the visible church. He therefore instructs his disciples that they must acknowledge their teaching office and respect them when they teach the laws of Moses. However he warns them not to follow their hypocritical example as they do not practice what they teach. He specifically identifies them as hypocrites and states that they are not in the invisible church for they will not enter the *“kingdom of heaven“*. However their membership in the visible church is both acknowledged and upheld. This does not mean that Christ is teaching that they ought to be in the membership of the visible church. He is merely teaching that until they are duly tried, convicted, and excommunicated, they are, as a practical matter, members of the visible church. Ultimately since the Jewish church would not reform itself and carry out such discipline God himself carried out the required excommunications when he cut off the unbelieving branches and grafted in the Gentile believers in their stead.

Finally we have the example of the Apostle Judas. Consider the following passage of scripture.

“And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease. Now the names of the twelve apostles are these; The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip, and Bartholomew; Thomas, and Matthew the publican; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus; Simon the Canaanite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying...” Matthew 10:1-5

Judas was a member of the visible church having received an external call to the visible church personally from Jesus himself. Secondly Jesus personally appointed him to the office of Apostle in that church. Christ also personally commissioned Judas to preach the gospel. And finally Christ personally empowered Judas to cast out demons and heal the sick. Are we now to believe

that Judas was never a member of the visible church? Are we now to believe that Jesus was not omniscient and didn't know that Judas was a hypocrite? Are we to believe that Jesus didn't know what he was doing and commissioned a person to preach who wasn't even a member of the visible church? To ask these questions is to answer them. Judas was a hypocrite and a traitor but he was a member of the visible church.

Logical Arguments: Imagine for a moment a contemporary analogy. There is a very rich man. This rich man has a daughter. There is a man who is covetous of the rich man's wealth and decides that the way to quick and easy riches is to marry the rich man's daughter. He successfully courts the rich man's daughter and they are married. Is he a true husband to her. No! He is in fact a fraud and a liar. His marriage vows were deceptive and hypocritical. Nonetheless are they actually married? Yes! He is her lawful wedded husband and to deny that would be the height of absurdity. To deny that would make their marriage an exercise in fornication and their children bastards. He is truly her husband although he is not a true husband to her. Even so hypocrites are truly in the visible church although they are not true believers.

Secondly what is the definition of a hypocrite? It is one who pretends to be something that he is not. They are pretending to be true believers. They are pretending to actually be the children of God the elect of God in Jesus Christ. They are pretending to be regenerate persons with saving faith, true repentance, and with the sanctifying influence of God's Spirit in their lives. That is the essence of their claim. That is the essence of their hypocrisy. Their hypocrisy does not consist of pretending to be a member of the visible church. They don't say that they are merely members of the visible church and not going to heaven. They claim to be internally what they have only achieved externally. That is why they are hypocrites.

Practical Consequences: The Westminster Confession teaches with respect to the sacraments "*neither does the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that does administer it*" (WCOF Chapter 27; Section 3). If hypocrites are not members of the visible church then they cannot be actual office bearers in the visible church. Then they cannot actually administer the sacraments. And then no one can actually ever know if they have really been baptized and if they are really being served the Lord's Supper. But that is the Roman Catholic position that was rejected by all the Reformers and that is clearly opposed by the statement of the confession. If we reject hypocrites as being members of the visible church then we have returned to the Roman Catholic position and have made the sacraments subject to the status of those who administer them. The scriptural and the confessional position is that the efficacy of the sacraments depends "*upon the work of the Spirit*" (WCOF Chapter 27; Section 3) and upon the faith of worthy recipients.

Secondly this question also effects our doctrine of excommunication. We excommunicate hypocrites from the church. And when we do so we offer them the promise of restoration to the communion of the church upon scriptural terms. In doing both these things we acknowledge that they were actual members of the visible church. You cannot excommunicate a person who is not a member. If we held the position that hypocrites are not actually members of the visible church then we have to do something else instead of excommunicating them. We would have to retroactively annul their membership from the date of their admission into the church and say that they were never really members. But again this is a Roman Catholic position and reflects

their view of marriage. They do not recognize scriptural divorce. However when a couple wants to divorce they will annul the marriage as if it never existed. This is an unscriptural practice and to carry that principle over to the doctrine of church membership and excommunication is equally unscriptural.

Thirdly this error with respect to the non-membership of hypocrites in the visible church carries over to the doctrine of infant baptism. God's covenant with Abraham was with Abraham and his seed after him. The Apostle Peter proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost that "*For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call*" (Acts 2:39). Based on such scriptures the Westminster confession states that the visible church is composed of all those who profess the true religion and their children. But if we deny that hypocrites are actual members of the visible church than we have basically unchurched our children and become Baptists. Then we have to hedge our bets if our children are actually in the visible church and wait to see how they turn out, which is exactly what the Baptists do. We do not know whether our children are elect. We do not know whether when they grow up if they will walk worthy of their baptism or become reprobate like the circumcised Esau. But we believe that our children are externally holy (1 Corinthians 7:14), that they are covenant children, and that we are to admit them into the visible church in the hope of God's covenant mercies making their profession a reality by his grace. But all that is on the chopping block if we deny that and any and all unconverted are not actually members of the visible church.

Finally the failure to clearly maintain the distinction between the visible and the invisible church can lead to other errors as has been documented in church history. In the 1660's the New England Puritans instituted a strange practice which has been termed the "Halfway Covenant". Under this "covenant" they baptized the children of non-church members on the basis of the faith of the grandparents. Why was this done? The grandparents had been church members and had led outwardly godly lives. They had raised their children in the faith and these children professed the true faith, attended church regularly, and also led outwardly godly lives. However they had never become members of the church. Why were they not church members? They qualified according to Westminster standards. They professed the true faith and their lives were consistent with that profession. The reason they didn't join was because the standards were seemingly set so high. The ministers were constantly preaching that they must attain a level of experimental religion that many felt they could not attain. They attended church regularly, worshipped God publicly and in family worship, lived their lives as best they could according to the revealed will of God, but didn't feel that had reached the level of spirituality required for church membership. They probably felt like many Christians, like the Apostle Paul, when he said of himself *that "the good he would he did not, but the evil that he hated, that he did"*. And one more thing that they felt was that their children ought to be baptized according to God's covenant. And since they could not attain to the standards that were being preached for church membership they had their children baptized on the basis of their grandparents' church membership. Now this was patently wrong. It would be like circumcising Esau's children because Isaac was a godly man. The children should have been baptized on the basis of their parents' faith and the parents should have been admitted into church membership. The ministers had been trying to do the impossible. They had been trying to ensure that none but the elect were admitted unto Christ's church. That is a noble goal, it is the ideal, but it is beyond the ability of man. Only God can discern the heart. That is why our Lord told his apostles, "*By their fruits ye shall know them*". All the elders of the

church can do is to examine a man's fruits; all they can do is examine his faith and practice, his beliefs and his Christian walk. And if these constitute a credible profession of faith then all such ought to be admitted into church membership. If baptized members of the church are so faithful and godly that they cannot be made the subjects of church discipline then should they not be admitted to full communicant membership? The Puritans were not lax, they believed in church discipline. The fact that they were willing to baptize the children of such persons is a strong testimony in favor of the claim that they were qualified for church membership. And this whole sad and unscriptural event in the history of the church underscores the importance of maintaining the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. When we fail to do so and the elders start to play God then serious errors can develop.

Objections: One argument against hypocrites being members of the visible church has been made from the following text.

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us” (1 John 2:19).

The argument goes that the Apostle John is teaching that hypocrites and apostates were never really members of the church. But what church is the Apostle talking about here? We have to go back to the antecedents of the pronoun “us”. These antecedents are found in the following passage.

“I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one” (1 John 2:12-14). The assembly of people of whom the apostates were never a part is that assembly composed of those “*sins are forgiven*“, who “*have overcome the wicked one*“, who “*have known the father*“, and in whom “*the word of God abideth*“. That assembly is not the impure visible churches of the present world but clearly the invisible church, the assembly of the elect of God, sanctified in Christ Jesus. All the Apostle John is teaching is that apostates are not part of the invisible church.

Conclusions: In conclusion we can say that the distinction between the invisible and the visible church is a logical and necessary one. We can also conclude that this distinction is not just an invisible and a visible aspect of the same church with the same membership. We can conclude that the membership rolls of these two churches are significantly different. Finally we can conclude that hypocrites actually are members of the visible church regrettable as that may be.

We can also conclude that this is an important distinction with significant ramifications with respect to other doctrines. We can conclude that to err in this point is to compound that error with additional errors.