

**“The Church”**  
**(WCF 25.1-2)**

**WCF 25.1 The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.**

**I. The invisible church is comprised of the elect of all ages.**

**A. What is the Church?**

1. What does the word “church” mean?
  - a. The word in Greek is *ecclesia*.
    - (i) *Ecclesia* is composed of two words: *kaleo*, which means “to call”; and *ek*, which means “out,” or “out of.”
    - (ii) Compounded, the word means those who are called out – out of the world, to Christ, by faith, through the Gospel.
  - b. The One who does the calling is the Holy Spirit.
    - (i) By His almighty power, He calls those who are dead to life. We call this effectual calling – the outward call of the Gospel which is also made effective through the inward call of the Spirit.
    - (ii) “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Romans 8:28-30).
2. What does the word “catholic” mean?
  - a. Catholic means universal.
  - b. It views “the church as one body, composed of many members, existing in different places and at different times.”
  - c. Consequently, it is “very improperly applied to that corrupt and schismatic body, the Church of Rome” (Hodge, *Confession*).
3. What are the different senses in which the word church is used in Scripture?
  - a. It can refer to the whole body of Christ of all ages: “He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything” (Col. 1:18).
  - b. It can refer to the whole body of Christ now living: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase” (Acts 9:31).

- c. It can refer to that part of the body residing in a particular city or province: “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thes. 1:1).
- d. It is used in the plural to refer to the several congregations of a province: “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also” (1 Cor. 16:1).

**B. Taking these things into account, how can we define the Church?**

1. We can do so in two ways:
  - a. As God sees it: the true members of the church, of the Covenant of Grace, the elect (the invisible church).
  - b. Or as man sees it: those who profess the true religion along with their households (the visible church).
2. What is the invisible church?
  - a. Definition: “The whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof.”
    - (i) It is everyone the Lord has chosen to save from all eternity.
    - (ii) Part of whom is gathered in every time frame:
      - (a) All who have trusted in Christ through the promises, types and shadows.
      - (b) All who trusted Christ at His coming and since.
      - (c) All who are currently trusting in Him.
      - (d) All those yet to be born who will trust in Christ.
    - (iii) But all of whom will one day be glorified in heaven (Rom. 8:30).
  - b. Can any of its members be seen now?
    - (i) Those who are alive now who are true believers can be seen.
    - (ii) Those who have died in Christ or who are yet to live cannot be seen.
  - c. If the invisible church can be seen, why is it called invisible?
    - (i) Because only God knows who they are for certain.
    - (ii) We can be mistaken as to whom they are – we may think some to be a part of it who aren’t, and some not to be a part who are.
  - d. What are some of the ways the invisible church is represented in Scripture?
    - (i) As Christ’s bride: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:25-27).
    - (ii) As Christ’s body: “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23).

- (iii) As the fullness of Christ: “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). The church is the fullness of Christ in the sense that as Mediator and King, He would not be complete without a church, which is His kingdom.
- e. Who is the head of the church?
  - (i) It is not the pope.
  - (ii) It is Jesus Christ:
    - (a) “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body” (Eph. 5:23).
    - (b) “He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything” (Col. 1:18).
- f. Why is the invisible church called universal?
  - (i) Because no one has a monopoly on it.
  - (ii) It is not confined to one nation (as it was under the Old Covenant).
  - (iii) It is not confined to one denomination, notwithstanding the claims of the Roman Church.

**WCF 25.2 The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion;(1) and of their children:(2) and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ,(3) the house and family of God,(4) out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.(5)**

**II. What is the visible church? The visible church is comprised of all who profess the true religion, and their household.**

**A. Why is it called the visible church?**

1. It is not an altogether different church, but that portion of the invisible church which may be seen.
2. But there is not a one-to-one correspondence.
  - a. There are those within the visible church making profession who are not true believers.
  - b. There are those outside the visible church who are true believers.
  - c. There is overlap, but not equivalence.

**B. How may the visible church be recognized?**

1. What are the three marks by which a true church may be recognized?
  - a. The preaching of the Gospel.
  - b. The right administration of the sacraments.
  - c. Church discipline.
2. Can there be a church without the Gospel?
  - a. No, for the Gospel is the power of God to salvation (Rom. 1:16). If there is no Gospel, there can be gathering of the elect.

- b. Every so-called “church” that either doesn’t preach the Gospel or has a Gospel that is so polluted so as to be no Gospel at all is no church.
3. Can there be a church without the right administration of the sacraments or church discipline?
    - a. Yes.
    - b. These are not necessary for the being of the church, though they are for the well-being of the church.

**C. What are the attributes of the visible church?**

1. The church is one, as we’ve seen.
2. The church is holy: that is what we are in Christ, and what we are called to be in our lives: “That He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:27).
3. The church is catholic (universal): It is not confined to one nation or one denomination.
4. The church is apostolic: built on the doctrine/teaching of Christ and the apostles (Eph. 2:20).

**D. Who are the members of the visible church?**

1. Those who profess the true religion.
  - a. Only God can see the hearts of men and knows their true state; we do not.
  - b. What is required then for membership in the visible church is a credible profession of faith.
    - (i) That one knows the Gospel and believes it.
    - (ii) That one believes himself to be a Christian.
    - (iii) That one lives a life consistent with the Gospel.
2. And their children.
  - a. God has always been a God to those who profess the true religion and their seed.
    - (i) He dealt not only with Adam, but with Adam’s offspring.
    - (ii) He saved not only Noah, but Noah’s household from the flood.
    - (iii) He was a God to Abraham and his seed.
    - (iv) He was a God to the entire nation of Israel.
  - b. The same is true in the New Covenant.
    - (i) Children of believers are considered holy: “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy” (1 Cor. 7:14).
    - (ii) They are included in the promise the Lord made regarding the outpouring of His Spirit, a promise which pertains only to the church: “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:39).

- (iii) God promised to be God to the children of believers throughout their generations forever: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7).
- (iv) Jesus said the kingdom of heaven belongs to the children of believers and laid His hands on them and blessed them.
  - (a) “But Jesus said, ‘Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’ After laying His hands on them, He departed from there” (Matt. 19:14-15).
  - (b) “And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they *began* rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, ‘Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these’” (Luke 18:15-16).
- (v) They are addressed as members of the covenant under its obligations:
  - (a) “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth” (Eph. 6:1-3).
  - (b) “Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord” (Col. 3:20).
  - (c) This is a repetition of the obligation Old Covenant children were under.
- (vi) In the Old Covenant, God was a God to Abraham as believer and his offspring; and in the New Covenant, He is God to the spiritual seed of Abraham and their offspring.

#### **E. What is the relationship of the visible church with Christ?**

1. The visible church is the visible representation of His spiritual kingdom on earth. “This visible Church is called “the kingdom of heaven” on the earth” (Hodge).
2. It is also called His household:
  - a. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household” (Eph. 2:19).
  - b. “Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ *was faithful* as a Son over His house -- whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (Heb. 3:5-6).

#### **F. Can a person be saved apart from the church (outside the church)?**

1. Since the church alone is entrusted with the only message that God uses to save, apart from her ministry, there is no salvation: “I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, *I write* so that you

- will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:14-15).
2. “Since, then, the universal visible Church consists of all the professors of the true religion in the world, to say that out of it there is ordinarily no possibility of salvation is only saying—(1) That God has never in any way revealed his intention of saving any sane adult destitute of the personal knowledge of Christ. (2) That an unexceptional experience in heathen lands leads us to the conviction that none in such a condition are saved. (3) That God has very emphatically declared that those who deny his Son before men shall not be saved. (Matt. 10:33.) (4 ) That every man who hears the gospel is commanded to confess Christ before men—that is, to become a public, visible professor of the true religion. (Matt. 10:32.) The conditions of salvation laid down in Rom. 10:9,10 are—“If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe with thy heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believes unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”
  3. “There are obviously various ways in which Christ may be publicly acknowledged and confessed. In *some* way every person having the love of Christ in his heart will confess him. But our Confession intends in these sections to teach further that ordinarily, where there is the knowledge and opportunity, God requires every one who loves Christ to confess him in the regular way of joining the community of his people and of taking the sacramental badges of his discipleship. . . And that when providentially possible every Christian heart will be prompt to obey in this matter, is self-evident. When shame or fear of persecution is the preventing consideration, then the failure to obey is equivalent to the positive rejection of Christ, since the rejection of him will have to be publicly pretended in such case in order to avoid the consequences attending upon the public acknowledgment of him” (Hodge).