

“The Church”
(WCF 25.4-6)

WCF 25.4 This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

IV. The visibility of the church varies as her purity varies.

A. The church has been more or less visible throughout history:

1. Give some examples of when the church has been largely hidden:
 - a. During the reigns of unrighteous kings in Judah and Israel: “Then he said, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.’ The LORD said to him, ‘Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:14-18).
 - b. During the Apostolic and Church Fathers era when doctrine took such a great decline and numerous heretical groups sprung up.
 - c. During the medieval and dark ages, when it was cloistered in monasteries.
 - d. During the present age when the truth has been largely buried by television evangelists, heretics, and contemporary Christianity.
2. Give some examples of when the church has been highly visible:
 - a. During the revivals the Lord brought to the Old Covenant Church through Moses, Joshua, the Judges, David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah, etc.
 - b. During the time of Christ and the apostles.
 - c. During the Reformation, Puritan England, and Puritan New England – times of revival in general.

B. What does the Church’s visibility depend on?

1. The purity of our understanding of God’s Word.
 - a. Our understanding of doctrine.
 - b. Our understanding of biblical ethics.
2. Our zeal to maintain these things.
 - a. Our zeal for doctrinal and moral truth.
 - b. Our zeal for true and God-honoring worship.
 - c. Our faithfulness in dealing with those who fall into error or moral sin:
 - (i) Through the pulpit ministry: “I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove,

rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

- (ii) Through self-discipline: “But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come” (1 Tim. 4:7-8).
- (iii) Through brotherly admonition and encouragement: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:23-25).
- (iv) Through church discipline: “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump *of dough*? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:6-7; cf. Matt. 18:15-17).
- (v) Through love:
 - (a) We need to be zealous in maintaining these things without breaking them, such as when we go to war with one another over doctrinal matters, while failing to love each other.
 - (b) We need to fight for doctrinal integrity without disobeying Christ.

- 3. Our zeal to live and maintain these things openly.
 - a. The more we understand the teaching of Scripture and live according to it, the more visibly we will stand apart from the world.
 - b. Where will we find the strength to do this?
 - (i) Through the supply of the Spirit that Christ gives through the means of grace.
 - (ii) The more we have of His Spirit, the more we will love Him, the more zealous we will be for Christ’s honor, the more we will study His Word and do what He calls us to do.

WCF 25.5 The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to His will. V. God will always preserve an expression of the true Church on earth.

A. Is there any church on earth that is perfect?

- 1. Is there any church with that holds perfect doctrine perfectly?
 - a. We’ve already seen that every church varies in relation to their purity of doctrine and zeal to maintain that purity. Every church is a mixture of truth and error, of believers and unbelievers, of varying levels of sanctification.
 - b. Every church will be mistaken on some points of doctrine: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).
 - c. Every church will be a mixture of true and false believers: “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away;

and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples” (John 15:1-8; cf. Rom. 11:17-24).

- d. Why were the NT letters written but to address errors in doctrine and life.
 - (i) The purest churches on earth are not perfect; the only perfect church is in heaven.
 - (ii) We should strive for perfection, but we should not expect to reach perfection.
 - (iii) The purer the doctrine and the more holy zeal there is to maintain it, the less likely unbelievers will want to join with it.
2. Can a church fall far enough away so as to be no longer a true church?
 - a. What must happen before a church is no longer a church?
 - (i) Remember the marks of the church.
 - (ii) If it loses the Gospel, then it is no longer a church.
 - b. Has that ever happened? Can you think of any examples?

B. Will the Lord ever allow the church to become so imperfect as to leave the world with no church, with no Gospel witness?

1. The Lord will always preserve the true church on earth.
 - a. “May his name endure forever; may his name increase as long as the sun *shines*; and let *men* bless themselves by him; let all nations call him blessed” (Ps. 72:17).
 - b. “The children of Your servants will continue, and their descendants will be established before You” (Ps. 102:28).
 - c. “Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18).
 - d. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20).
2. Because of the relationship that exists between the invisible church and the visible church, the latter will never fail from the earth, because the former will not.
 - a. “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Matt. 16:18).
 - b. There will always be members of the invisible church in every age.
 - c. The visible church may become weak and very small, but it will never be completely absent.

WCF 25.6 *There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof; but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God.*

VI. Who is the head of the Church?

A. Jesus Christ is the only head of the Church.

1. Is there any disagreement on this point within the historical church?
 - a. Some argue that since the church on earth has government and laws, and since these must be administered by visible authority, the church must have an earthly visible head, endowed with Christ's delegated authority.
 - b. Rome believes this to be the Pope:
 - (i) "So has Christ – the Head and Spouse – placed over his Church, which he governs by his most inward Spirit, a man to be the vicar and minister of his power; for as a visible church requires a visible head, our Savior appointed Peter head and pastor of all the faithful." (Cat. Rom., part 1. ch. 10., q. 11.; Hodge, *Confession*).
 - (ii) The framers of the Confession believed the office of pope to be antichrist, and that this office was the fulfillment of the antichrist of Scripture (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7; 2 Thes. 2:3-4; Matt. 23:8-10).
 - (iii) We do not necessarily need to see the pope as "the" Antichrist, but he certainly is an Antichrist.
 - c. Erastian Churches, such as those found in England and Germany, believe the head of state to be the head of the church.
 - d. If Christ has delegated His authority to them, then we should obey them. Not to do so would be treason.
 - e. On the other hand, if He hasn't, then their claims to exercise this power is treason against Christ and blasphemous. They are taking away His authority and replacing it with their own.
2. Nothing in Scripture indicates that Christ ever intended to be usurped on earth by any man.
 - a. "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. "And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22).

B. How then does Christ rule in His church?

1. Though His Word – our only infallible rule of faith and practice – and by His Spirit – His spiritual presence that He promised to the members of His church to the end of the world (Matt. 28:20).
2. To this end He has established the office of elder to declare and minister His Word:
 - a. "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).
 - b. "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:1-3).
 - c. "Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17).