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WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Most Christians take it for granted that they should be active members of the local church. We can remember sermons that have helped us to understand Christian teaching, and have urged us to live faithfully for Christ. We can recall the spiritual help that the Lord's Supper and the prayers of the church have given us. We think of the fellowship that we have enjoyed with God's people—their encouragement and support in the hard times and in the good times.

This, of course, is no accident. Every Christian can testify to the many ways in which the church has been helpful to his or her Christian growth because God has designed the church and the Christian life to work together in just this way. In Colossians 2:19, the apostle Paul tells us that the church is like a human body with “joints and ligaments.” Christians are bound together like the joints and sinews of the human body. It is “through the body's joints and ligaments,” Paul says, that the “whole body” while “holding fast to the Head,” that is Jesus, “grows with a growth that is from God.”

The church is not only crucial to the Christian life but it is also crucial to God's redemptive plan and purpose, decreed from eternity and executed in history. There is, therefore, hardly a page

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of Scripture that does not, in some way, teach us about the church, or the people of God.

Before we look at the specifics of the government of the church, let us consider three interrelated lines of biblical teaching about the church. The first line to consider is the church in the history of redemption. In other words, what place do the people of God have in God's plan to redeem sinners by the work of his Son? The second line is an important distinction that the Scriptures use to discuss the people of God. This distinction has come to be known as the "visible" and "invisible" church. Because this distinction is both important and easily misunderstood, we want to give some thought to it. The third line is membership in the church. We will take up this biblical line of teaching by asking and answering two questions. First, is membership in the church necessary for Christians? Second, just who are the members of the church?

THE CHURCH IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

One People?

You may be wondering why I have been using the word "church" to describe the people of God in every age of redemptive history. Does the word "church" apply to Israel under the Old Testament? Perhaps you were under the impression that the church was born on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

When we examine the Scriptures, we find out that God has had a single people throughout the history of redemption. He did not replace Israel with an entirely new people, the church. Rather, to borrow the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the "people of Israel [was] a church under age" (19.3).

What is the biblical evidence that God has had a single people across redemptive history, frequently called "Israel" under the Old Testament, and "church" under the New Testament? How do we know that Israel and the church are the Old Covenant and New Covenant titles of God's one people, respectively? One passage that helps us is Romans 11, in which

Paul is dealing with a serious pastoral question. Does the fact that many Jews in Paul's day were rejecting the gospel mean that "God has rejected his people" (11:1)? Paul answers emphatically in the negative. He does so in two ways.¹ He urges, first, that Israel's fall is not total (11:1–10): "at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (11:5). Second, he reasons that Israel's fall is not final (11:11–32). He envisions the "full inclusion" of Israel (11:12). Specifically, "a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved" (11:25b–26a). Reformed commentators differ on exactly what Paul is envisioning in these verses, but Paul's basic point is clear.² God has not reneged on his commitments and promises. He is faithful and trustworthy.

Paul stresses that Israel's unbelief is not without purpose. By Israel's unbelief God is bringing salvation to the nations, for "through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous." "Their trespass means riches for the world," "their failure means riches for the Gentiles," and "their rejection means the reconciliation of the world" (11:12, 15).

The apostle uses a striking picture to help us understand what he means. He compares the people of God to an olive tree at Romans 11:16b–24. Some of the "natural branches" were "broken off because of their unbelief" (11:21, 20). Here Paul is thinking about the unbelieving Jews. Those Jews who rejected Christ as he was offered to them in the gospel were cut off from the people of God. Other branches, Paul says, "were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree" (11:17). Here Paul is thinking of Gentiles who, by the grace of God, have come to faith in Christ. They have been brought into the people of God. Notice how Paul summarizes his point at Romans 11:24: "For if you [Gentiles believers] were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive

1. The following distinction comes from John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 2:75.

2. For a recent survey of opinion, see Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 710–39.

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tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.”

This passage has many things to say to Christians today. It encourages us to pray for the salvation of unbelieving Jews. It rebukes Christians who boast in their position in the church as they witness the “broken branches” (see 11:19–23).

In addition to these matters, Paul’s picture in Romans 11 teaches us an important truth about the people of God: God has always had one people in redemptive history. There is one root that supports the branches (11:16b, 18). Certain branches are broken off, and “wild” branches are grafted in, but there is only one tree. To put it another way, in providence God has removed unbelieving Jews from his people and has included believing Gentiles within his people. He did not chop down one tree and plant another! God has always had a single people to call his own.

The epistle to the Hebrews gives us another picture to illustrate the same point.³ After a breathtaking opening unfolding the splendor and majesty of the person and finished work of Jesus Christ (1:1–4), the author proceeds to argue for Christ’s superiority. Jesus is superior to the angels (Heb. 1–2). In Hebrews 3–4, we learn that Jesus is superior to Joshua. In Hebrews 5–7, we learn that he is superior to the Levitical priests of the Old Testament era. In Hebrews 8–10, we learn that his work is superior to anything realized under the Old Covenant tabernacle and temple systems.

In Hebrews 3, the writer stresses that Jesus is superior to Moses.

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses

3. Hebrews does not claim to be written by any particular individual. For centuries, the church has been unable successfully to identify its author. For this reason, I will refer to him as “the writer” or “the author.”

was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. (Heb. 3:1–6)

In saying that Jesus was “faithful to him who appointed him,” the author does not suggest that Moses was unfaithful. On the contrary, he affirms that “Moses also was faithful in all God's house.”

Even so, Jesus excels Moses. How is this the case? Jesus is “the builder of the house” (3:3). As such, he has more glory than the house itself and, by implication, than the servant of the house, Moses.⁴ Further, while Moses “was faithful *in* all God's house as a servant” (3:5, emphasis mine), Jesus is “faithful *over* God's house as a son” (3:6, emphasis mine). Moses is the servant-in-the-house. Jesus is the son-over-the-house.

But what exactly is this house? The writer tells us in verse 6: “and we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.” The house, in other words, is the people of God.

Notice that there is only one house in this passage. Moses served in this house, and Jesus stands over this house, but it is the same house. God has had one and only one people throughout redemptive history.

That God has one people throughout redemptive history helps us to understand some of the ways in which the New Testament writers address Christians. The apostle Peter, for instance, says of believers that they are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9a). These are precisely the ways in which God addressed Israel in the Old Testament, as, for example, Exodus 19:5, 6: “you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples . . . and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The apostle Peter, furthermore, can greet the church in these terms: “to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia,

4. In stating “the builder of all things is God” at verse 4, Hebrews once again affirms the deity of Jesus Christ.

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Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). Paul likely addresses the church as the “Israel of God” at Galatians 6:16.⁵

How is it that the apostles can speak this way? It is because the Scriptures understand there to be a single people of God across redemptive history. In light of that reality, the titles that the Old Testament ascribes to Israel can just as easily be ascribed to the church.

The Church in God’s Plan

The Scriptures not only tell us that God has had a single people across redemptive history. They also tell us that the church has a crucial place in God’s unfolding redemptive plan. We will not take the time to develop the point at length, but just as God has had one people in redemptive history, he has also had in redemptive history a single plan to redeem sinners.⁶ One plan, one people. One purpose to redeem, one body of the redeemed.

This purpose to redeem was first announced in the Garden of Eden, after Adam sinned against God by eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God says to Adam and Eve, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Many Christians have rightly seen this passage as *protoevangelium*, which is Latin for “the first announcement of the gospel.” In dim and shadowy terms, God is announcing his plan to save sinners. He will do so by raising from Eve a descendant, whom the New

5. The verse reads, “And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” There is debate concerning whether Paul has in mind two groups, the church and ethnic Israel (“all who walk by this rule” and “the Israel of God”) or a single group, the church (“all who walk by this rule,” that is, “the Israel of God”). If Paul has in mind a single group, the church, then he has applied the title “Israel” to the church. Given that Paul has been throughout Galatians arguing that believers in every age are the children of Abraham, it is unlikely that he would conclude his epistle by “split[ting] up Jews and Gentles and includ[ing] only Jews under the privileged title the ‘Israel of God.’” Michael F. Bird, *Introducing Paul* (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 50.

6. See O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), and *Covenants: God’s Way with His People* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1987).

Testament tells us is Jesus Christ.⁷ Although Satan would “bruise [Jesus’] heel” at the cross, Jesus would “bruise [Satan’s] head” at the cross and in his resurrection. In other words, Jesus would deal Satan the mortal blow (see Rom. 16:20; Heb. 2:14–15).

The rest of the Old Testament is commentary on this verse. Who is this offspring? How will he come into the world? How will he defeat the devil and save God’s people? One way that God develops this promise throughout the Old Testament is through a series of covenants that he makes with his people. His covenant with Noah, his covenant with Abraham, his covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, his covenant with David, and the “New” Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah all tell us increasingly more about God’s purpose to save sinners through Jesus, and bring us closer and closer to the arrival of Jesus, who would bring to fulfillment God’s redemptive plan.

One of the things that we learn as we study the progress of God’s plan to save sinners across redemptive history is that God was at work to do more than to save sinners individually. To be sure, God does save sinners individually. Each person must, for himself, repent and believe in Christ according to the gospel. To be a true Christian, he must be personally indwelt and empowered by the Spirit of Christ. It is in this sense that the saying is true, “God has children but he does not have grandchildren.”

At the same time, God stresses throughout redemptive history that he is saving sinners as a body, as a multitude. As Stuart Robinson put it in his classic work *The Church of God an Essential Element of the Gospel*, “It is set forth as a distinguishing feature of the purpose of redemption, that it is to save not merely myriads of men as *individual men*, but myriads of sinners, as composing a Mediatorial body, of which the Mediator shall be the head.”⁸ In other words, the church-as-the-church is an indispensable part of God’s plan to save sinners.

7. As Geerhardus Vos correctly observes, since the “serpent” in view is a single individual (the devil), we should understand the promised “offspring of the woman” in terms of a single descendant, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 42.

8. Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858; repr., Willow Grove, PA), 34.

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How do we see this in the Old Testament? We have already seen it in Genesis 3:15, the “first announcement of the gospel.” God says here, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.” We argued above that this verse is prophesying Jesus’ victory over the devil. The verse is also saying something else. God is going to put a spiritual division within humanity. Some will be aligned spiritually with the devil. Others, by grace, will be aligned spiritually with God. We see this division and the conflict that results in Genesis 4, where we read of Cain slaying Abel. The apostle John comments on this grim event: “We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3:12). Cain was spiritually aligned with the devil, while Abel was spiritually aligned with God.⁹

After Abel was murdered, God raised up Seth in his place (Gen. 4:25). In the generation of Seth’s son, Enosh, we read, “people began to call upon the name of the LORD” (Gen. 4:26). That is to say, people began to gather publically to worship the LORD.¹⁰ God’s promise to redeem sinners established a people who would be set apart from the world and who would offer him true, sincere worship.

The covenant that God makes with Noah (Gen. 6, 9) reflects the serious spiritual dangers in which the people of God found themselves. God judges the earth and delivers Noah and his family in view of the people of God’s sinful intermarrying with unbelievers.¹¹ God institutes this covenant for the preservation and for the spiritual well-being of his people.¹²

9. We see this in Genesis, when Abel, in an act of worship, brings an offering to God. Moses comments, “And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (4:4b–5a). It is not just Abel’s offering that the LORD regards, it is Abel himself.

10. Compare Ps. 116:17, where the psalmist says, “I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.” Since “call on the name of the LORD” is in parallel relationship with “offer[ing] the sacrifice of thanksgiving,” and the latter is an act of worship, we may conclude that “to call on the name of the LORD” is an act of worship also.

11. That is, the “sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them” (6:4). The “sons of God” likely refers to the people of God, and the “daughters of man” likely refers to the world of unbelievers.

12. See further Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 109–25.

It is the covenant that God establishes with Abraham in Genesis 17, however, that preeminently illustrates the importance of the church to God's redemptive plan. In fact, Robinson has termed this covenant the "ecclesiological covenant" (that is, a covenant that fundamentally relates to the church).¹³ In this covenant, the people of God are "visibly and formally set apart to become the special people of Messiah."¹⁴ It is at this point in the history of redemption, Robinson observes, that "the promise of the Messiah, the Victor over Satan, takes the definite form of the Deliverer, Lawgiver, and Ruler of a people."¹⁵

Furthermore, this covenant anticipates God's plan to extend the gospel, through the promised offspring of Abraham, to the entire world (cf. Gen. 12:1–3). Circumcision, the sign of God's covenant, was at that time administered even to members of Abraham's household who were not physically descended from him (Gen. 17:12–13). In this small way, we catch a glimpse of God's purpose to establish a redeemed people from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev. 7:9).

As Robinson observes, the Abrahamic covenant sets the stage for the rest of the covenants of redemptive history.

The covenant with Abraham is specifically with him, as representative and head of a separate society. The covenant made through Moses is with this society itself, now actually existing. The covenant with David stipulates for a King, who shall rule over this peculiar society as its perpetual head. And when, in the fullness of time, the King manifests himself, it is not claiming directly the headship of the world at large, but of a kingdom not of this world. His mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to sit upon the throne of David.¹⁶

In other words, the Mosaic covenant (Exod. 19) orders the life of the society that God has brought forth from Abraham. God's covenant with David (2 Sam. 7) specifically promises that the people of God shall be

13. Robinson, *The Church of God*, 42.

14. *Ibid.*, 43.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 42.

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ruled by a king descending from the line of David. The New Testament tells us that to Jesus “the LORD God will give . . . the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32). Jesus is the one whom God had promised to David that he would “establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:13).

Although Jesus rules the whole world as the Son of God, he exercises a special and distinct rule over his people as their Mediator and Head.¹⁷ It is to this rule that Paul refers when he writes, “and he is head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). It is this rule that God’s covenant with David envisioned. It is this rule of which the prophets so elegantly speak (see Isa. 9:1–7; 11:1–16; 33:17–24; Mic. 4:1–5; Ezek. 34).

The New Testament informs us that this people will be drawn not simply from ethnically Jewish persons. This people will be drawn from the “nations” to whom Jesus sends his disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). The apostle John shows us “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb” in praise and adoration of Christ (Rev. 7:9). Surely in Jesus the blessing of Abraham has come to the nations (Gal. 3:14)!

The New Testament does not lose sight of the place that the church-as-the-church has in God’s plan of redemption. We have already seen Paul relate the church to Christ as a human body to its head (Col. 2:19; see also Eph. 1:21–22; 5:23). In Matthew 28, we saw that Jesus reigns over his people as their king. And so Paul writes, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13–14). Believers have exchanged the hard service of their former master, the devil, for the joyous service of King Jesus. The church, furthermore, is a family. We are the “household of God” (Eph. 2:19). As sons and daughters of the living God, every Christian is a brother to every other Christian.

What’s more, the New Testament describes the people of God as the bride of Christ, their bridegroom (Mark 2:18–20; Eph. 5:22–33; 2 Cor. 11:2). Our great hope, as the people of God, is “the holy city,

17. Thus, we distinguish the “essential dominion” of God from the “mediatorial dominion” of Christ. We shall have more to say on this in the next chapter.

new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). Redemptive history began with a promise of and to the church (Gen. 3:15). Fittingly, redemptive history closes with that promise wondrously fulfilled in Christ.

CHURCH “VISIBLE” AND “INVISIBLE”

It is at this juncture that we need to remind ourselves of another line of biblical teaching. This line has been described in terms of the “visible/invisible church” distinction. This is a longstanding distinction in Christian theology, and is expressed in chapter 25 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The invisible church “consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all” (WCF 25.1).

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; and of their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25.2).

It is important to recognize that the Westminster Standards are not claiming that the Scriptures teach that two churches exist, one invisible and one visible. They are not saying that the Christian must choose to which church he wishes to belong. Nor are they saying that the invisible church is “immaterial” while the visible church is “material.”

How then are they different? First, the visible church is universal in nature. It is, however, the church as you and I see it in our generation. The invisible church, also universal, is spread across many generations. Second, one is a member of the visible church either by professing Christianity or by descending from a parent who professes Christianity. One is part of the invisible church by the eternal decree of God. Third, the numbers of the visible church increase or diminish. The numbers of the invisible church are fixed and never change.

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Fourth and particularly important for our consideration, there are some members of the visible church who are not true members of the invisible church. One may profess faith insincerely and be reprobate, not elect. Furthermore, some members of the invisible church are not yet members of the visible church. Let us take up one example. Consider people who become genuine Christians later in life. Earlier in life, God had not yet regenerated them. We do not expect such persons at that point to have made profession of faith. When God does regenerate them, they will most certainly make profession of faith. For the time that they are unregenerate, however, we do not expect that these members of the invisible church will be part of the visible church.¹⁸ Although they could not know it until they were regenerated and came to believe in Christ, as elect persons, they were all the while members of the invisible church.

Notice that the composition of the invisible church is fully known only to God. You, having made your calling and election sure, may be assured that you personally are part of the invisible church. You have no certain knowledge, however, of others who may be part of the invisible church. Of this body, “God alone judges with certainty concerning its members.”¹⁹

The composition of the visible church, however, is based upon profession and descent. These are matters that you and I may see. These are matters that human beings can judge to be credible or not. Of this body, “man is also the judge.”²⁰

In summary, there is overlap but not identity between the visible church and invisible church. Those who profess and possess faith belong to the invisible and the visible church. Those who profess faith only and are reprobate belong to the visible church only. Persons who are elect but not yet regenerate belong to the invisible church but not yet to the visible church.

Where do we see this distinction reflected in the Scriptures? The apostle Paul recognizes this distinction within Israel. In Romans 2:28–29,

18. Unless, of course, they happen to descend from a parent who professes Christianity.

19. Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892; repr., Greenville, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005), 16.

20. *Ibid.*

he says that it is possible to be a physically circumcised Jew, and yet not a true member of God's people: "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God."

Paul is not disparaging circumcision. He is not saying that it is bad to be circumcised. In fact, later in Romans Paul says that ethnic Israel enjoyed great privileges (Rom. 9:1–5). What Paul is saying is that one may be physically circumcised without being spiritually circumcised. In other words, one may have a mark on the flesh that we call circumcision. But he might not have a heart made new by the gracious working of the Spirit of God. There are Israelites, Paul says, and then there are *Israelites*. There are those who have only the sign of the covenant. And then there are those who have both the sign and the saving or redemptive benefits of the covenant. What Paul has described here is what the visible/invisible church distinction expresses.

Or consider Paul's argument later in Romans 9:6–18, where he applies this distinction to the history of the Old Covenant people of God, Israel. In Romans 9:6, he declares, "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." He remembers from Genesis that the promised offspring will be reckoned through Isaac not Ishmael: "it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring" (Rom. 9:8). God's true people, Paul goes on to argue, are not determined by biological descent or human activity. All that counts is the sovereign choice of God: "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy . . . he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills" (Rom. 9:16, 18). Under the Old Covenant, then, there were two ways to reckon Israel. There were those whose claim to be Israelites was based only upon physical descent. True Israelites, however, while numbered among the visible people of God under the Old Covenant, were chosen and saved by a sovereign and merciful God. Once again, the visible/invisible church distinction expresses this biblical reality.

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The visible/invisible church distinction is therefore biblical. But why is this important? It is so for at least two reasons. First, this distinction helps us to understand apostasy, that is, a person turning away from the faith that he or she once professed. Perhaps this is something that you have witnessed for yourself. A person gives every appearance of being a zealous Christian. He is in the pew every Sunday morning and Sunday evening. He is knowledgeable in the Scriptures. He seems to radiate the peace, joy, and love that belong to God's children. And then one day, he turns his back on Christ and his church. It is almost as if he has become a different person.

What are we to make of such persons? The Scriptures teach that no true child of God can ever completely or finally fall away from the state of grace.²¹ Jesus says that of all whom the Father gives him, he will lose none, and he will raise them up on the last day (John 6:39). Believers, Peter says, are "by God's power being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5). The Scriptures assure us that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

At the same time, Scripture also teaches that sometimes persons profess faith when they do not possess faith. An example is Simon, described in Acts 8. When Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, the Bible says that "even Simon himself believed" and "after being baptized he continued with Philip" (Acts 8:13). Simon, however, later asked the apostles if he could purchase from them the ability to give the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:19–20). Peter gives Simon a stern rebuke (Acts 8:21–23). After telling him to repent, Peter says that Simon is "in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:23). What the Bible is saying is that Simon made a profession of faith even though his heart had been unchanged by the grace of God. For Simon, it was only a matter of time before his true character made itself known to those around him.

21. See here the summary of biblical teaching at WCF 17 and WLC 79. See the helpful treatment of Robert Peterson, *Our Secure Salvation: Perseverance and Apostasy* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009).

When we see people turning away from Christ and the church, we do not know what will happen to them in the future. It may be that they will repent and return to fellowship with God's people. It may be that they will continue in their rejection of Christ. In either case, we can be sure that no true child of God will ever completely or finally fall away. If they are true Christians, then God will restore them. If they are not, it may be that God will convert them. Or it may be that God will leave them in their sins. Here, the visible/invisible church distinction helps us to understand both the Bible's teaching on the perseverance of the saints and the Bible's recognition that sometimes members of the visible church reject the faith they once professed.

This distinction is important in a second way. It gives background to the way in which God calls the church to receive adult persons into her membership. The church judges a person's Christianity on the basis of what he or she professes to believe and the life that he or she is living. On that basis the church admits a person into its membership. In Presbyterian circles, this is sometimes called a "credible profession of faith." By "profession" we mean "an intelligent *profession* of true spiritual faith in Christ, which is not contradicted by the life." By "credible" we mean "that which can be believed to be genuine" not "that which convinces." It is "not a positive judging of his conversion, but determining negatively that there's no reason for pronouncing him not to be a Christian."²² At no point has the church had infallible knowledge of the hearts of those seeking membership. This is a knowledge that God has not given to us.

Therefore the church, by design, is not a society of exclusively regenerate persons. It is our hope and prayer that the church will be pure, her members renewed by the grace of God. Membership in the church, however, is reckoned by profession not regeneration. This fact is good for every Christian to know. Church membership is not a declaration that I am a regenerate person. It is, rather, a declaration that the faith that I profess and the life that I live are credible or believable.

22. Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (1879; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 645–46.

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It is not an infallible assurance that I am a Christian. It is an assurance that fellow Christians regard me as a Christian.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

We are now ready to take up a third line of biblical teaching, that of membership in the church. We have two questions before us. First, is church membership necessary? Does a Christian *have* to be a member of the church? Second, what is the biblical definition of a member of the church? Whom does Scripture say may be admitted to the membership of the church?

Is Church Membership Necessary?

Is it necessary to join the church? We have seen above that the Christian draws great benefit from the service and fellowship of his fellow Christians. We have seen that the Scripture envisions the believer as one part of a much larger body, joined to its directing head, Jesus (Eph. 4:11–16; Col. 2:19). It is certainly profitable to join the church. But is it necessary?

Some Christians today challenge the necessity of church membership. On occasion this is done in theory. Some have reasoned, “I am a member of the invisible church, why then do I need to join the visible church? Surely membership in the visible church is redundant.”

More often, however, this is seen in practice, when people simply fail to join the church. They may attend services, Bible studies, and participate in church-sponsored activities, but they are not recognized members of that body. They do not see the importance of joining the church and so do not take steps toward church membership. Compounding the problem is that there are certain congregations in the United States that neither require nor have church membership. One might say, “If these churches do not require me to join them, then why should I join the church?”

Situations like these send us to the Scriptures. Does the Bible require church membership? If so, why does it obligate Christians to join the church?²³

23. Throughout this discussion we will be speaking of the individual Christian's relationship to the local congregation. Of course, when believers join the church, they are not merely

Scripture does in fact require church membership of believers.²⁴ If we look for a single verse that says “you must join the church,” we will be disappointed. Rather, Scripture shows us the necessity of church membership in a different way. In showing us what the Christian life is, and what the church is, it leads us inescapably to the conclusion that Christians must join the church.

We see this conclusion in at least six ways. First, remember the Great Commission, which we discussed in the Introduction. Jesus commissions his disciples to “go and make disciples” of the nations. They are to do this in two ways. They are to baptize them, and they are to teach them everything that Jesus had commanded them to teach others. The Great Commission, we saw, does not end at conversion. It is just beginning at conversion. The Great Commission consists of both the ingathering *and* the perfecting of the saints.

But how is the Great Commission to be executed? The book of Acts gives us an answer to this question. In the Introduction, we observed a certain pattern to the work of missions from Acts, in which the Word is preached by men who are gifted and called by the Spirit, and sent out by the church. When the Holy Spirit blesses the preaching of the Word, men and women respond in faith and repentance. They then begin a common life together. In Acts 2:42, we read that the early disciples “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching,” and also shared a common life together (Acts 2:46). Luke comments that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (2:47). In other words, when a person professes faith in Christ, he is “added to” the existing body of believers. That is to say, he joins the church.

This is the pattern that we see again and again in Acts. The Word is preached, people profess faith, and they gather locally into congregations

part of that local body. They are members of the whole body of believers. See further our discussion in chapter 5.

24. For a helpful and thorough treatment of this subject, see the unpublished paper by Mark Herzer, “The Church: A Covenant Community.” At the time of writing, this paper is available online. See also Wayne Mack, *To Be or Not to Be a Church Member? That Is the Question!* (Amityville, NY: Calvary, 2004); Wayne A. Mack and Dave Swavely, *Life in the Father’s House: A Member’s Guide to the Local Church*, rev. and exp. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), esp. pages 15–52.

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or assemblies ruled by Christ through a government of his appointment (Acts 14:23). Their lives, individually and corporately, are governed by Christ through the Scriptures. There is no occasion in the Acts of the Apostles when an individual Christian lives a solitary existence, isolated from other believers. Christians, by definition, join themselves to the body of believers.

Second, many commands given to Christians in the New Testament assume church membership. Let us look at two examples. The New Testament commands believers to give due submission to church leaders. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, Paul says, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” This command assumes that the Thessalonian believers had an acknowledged relationship with leaders in that church. Their leaders are “over them,” are called to “admonish” them when necessary, and should receive the “respect” and “esteem” of those whom they serve. How did this relationship come into existence? It came into existence when the Thessalonian believers committed themselves to join the church at Thessalonica.

Or, consider Paul’s exhortation at Colossians 3:13: “bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive”; or at Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Christians have defined obligations to “one another.” Whom does Paul have in mind when he says “one another”? The answer is found in the greeting of the letter: “to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae” (Col. 1:2). The “one another” is the church at Colossae. Paul has in mind a specific and defined body of believers who have certain commitments and obligations to one another in that body. It is church membership that makes possible and gives rise to these commitments and obligations. Paul simply does not envision, here or anywhere else, free-floating Christians flitting from one congregation to the next. He

assumes that Christians exist in the committed relationships that church membership solemnizes.

Third, Jesus' teaching about discipline in the church assumes the necessity of church membership. He tells his disciples at Matthew 18:17b of an unrepentant sinner, "and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." By Christ's commandment, a person who persists in his sins should be confronted about his persistence in sin. If he remains impenitent, the one to confront him is the "church," that is, the assembly of the elders of the church.²⁵ If a person is not a member of the church, if he has no formal relationship with the church, then on what basis can the "church" confront him about his sin? The discipline of the church assumes church membership.

Paul makes the same point in his first epistle to the Corinthians. At 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addresses a church which has failed to confront one of its own about a serious, scandalous, and persistent sin. What does Paul tell the church to do? "Let him who has done this be removed from among you" (1 Cor. 5:2). This is to be done when the church is "assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus" and "with the power of our Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:4). The aim or goal of discipline is not punitive but restorative: "you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5). Once again, this exercise of church discipline would be incomprehensible if the offending party were not a member of the church. He could not be "removed" from the church were he not already in the membership of the church.

Fourth, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper assumes the existence of church membership. Paul, again writing to the Corinthians, makes it clear that not everyone is entitled or permitted to come to the Lord's Table and so partake of the sacrament (1 Cor. 11:17–34). He gives

25. By *church*, Jesus does not refer to the congregation as such. He means, rather, the assembly of the elders. We will return to this point more fully in chapter 3. In light of these considerations, T. David Gordon has helpfully suggested translating the Greek word *ekklēsia* at Matthew 18:17 as "assembly," rather than "church." See his unpublished paper "When 'Church' is a Judicial Assembly."

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specific directions to the church as to how the Lord's Supper is to be observed. He warns persons against "eating the bread or drinking the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner" (1 Cor. 11:27). Each person must "examine himself . . . and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" lest he bring "judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:28–29).

Notice the assumptions behind Paul's argument. Paul assumes that the Lord's Supper will be administered only in the church, when the church gathers for public worship (see Acts 20:7). He also assumes that those who approach the Lord's Table are professing Christians. This is what Paul has already stated at 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, namely, the Lord's Supper signifies the union of believers with Christ, and the unity of the body of believers.²⁶ But how is a person to be recognized as such a person in union and communion with Christ and in fellowship with other believers? The biblical pattern, we have seen, is that they formally join the church. This attachment to the church—church membership—is precisely what is assumed in the church's observance of the Lord's Supper. Without church membership, that which the Lord's Supper signifies (the fellowship of believers) would be, on biblical terms, meaningless.

Fifth, the passages discussing Christian growth that we considered above (Eph. 4:11–16, Col. 2:19) require church membership. The growth of the body, Paul says, requires "each part . . . working properly" (Eph. 4:16). Further, believers are joined to one another in the way that the parts of the human body are joined to one another. It is not simply that believers share in one another's gifts and graces. It is that they do so committed and bound to one another. How does this commitment and binding come to expression in the church? Church membership.

Sixth, the responsibility of the elders of the church requires church membership. At Hebrews 13:17a we read the following command, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will give an account." The church's elders, or "leaders," are those who have oversight over the

26. Herzer, "The Church," 6.

“souls” of the congregation and, at the judgment day, must “give an account” to Christ for those souls. But unless the elders are in a defined relationship with a specific group of Christians, how can they oversee them, much less give an account for them? Without church membership, the elders of the church would be unable to fulfill their God-assigned task.²⁷

In conclusion, the New Testament requires church membership of every professing Christian. Church membership underlies the government, discipline, worship, and life of the church. One is not at liberty to claim membership in the invisible church without also joining the church visible. Christian discipleship requires that one become a member of the church.

Who Are the Members of the Church?

We have seen that it is necessary to be a member of the church. We have seen that one attaches himself to the church by profession of faith. One final question is to consider more precisely who the members of the visible church are.

Above we quoted the Westminster Confession of Faith’s definition of the visible church, which mentions two groups of people. There are those who make credible professions of faith, and there are the children of those who have made credible professions of faith.

Few object to receiving into the membership of the church persons who are able to profess the Christian faith and to adorn that profession with godly living. Some have objected, however, to acknowledging the children of such persons as members of the church. This objection explains one difference between Presbyterians and Baptists. Both acknowledge one another as Christians. Historically, Presbyterians and Baptists have agreed theologically on far more than they have differed. They differ, however, concerning whether the children of professing believers, as such, are members of the church. Presbyterians say “yes,” while Baptists say “no.”

27. I am grateful to T. David Gordon for alerting me to this argument.

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What is the biblical evidence that the children of professing believers are by birthright members of the church and entitled to the church's recognition of their membership? As with our study of the necessity of church membership above, the answer to this question will not be found in a single verse. We must look at Scripture's teaching and consider some implications that surely follow from that teaching.

We begin with the covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis 17. God intended this covenant to confirm the promises he had made to Abraham in Genesis 12 (see Gen. 17:5–6). This covenant embraced Abraham and his children such that Abraham and his children were recognized as part of the visible people of God. On this basis, Abraham's male children were to receive the covenant sign of circumcision: "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Gen. 17:7), and "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised" (Gen. 17:10).

Further, the covenant that God made with Abraham is an evangelical covenant. That is to say, this covenant administers the promises of the gospel. This is Paul's reasoning in Galatians 3:8: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" Paul quotes here the promise that God makes to Abraham in Genesis 12. He further describes God's declaration of this promise to Abraham as "preaching the gospel beforehand." It is this promise that God designed the covenant of Genesis 17 to administer.

Not only was the promise evangelical, but the sign of the Abrahamic covenant is evangelical also. This is evident from Paul's description of circumcision at Romans 4:11: "a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith" (compare Rom. 4:1–5). In signifying justification by faith alone, circumcision served to point Abraham and his children to the promise by which he—and believers in every age—was saved.

God has not nullified this covenant. This covenant embraces New Testament believers. This is why Paul calls believers “Abraham’s offspring,” and “sons of Abraham [through faith]” at Galatians 3:29 and Galatians 3:7. Paul calls the blessings of the gospel that New Testament believers presently enjoy the “blessing of Abraham” (Gal. 3:14). It is as “Abraham’s offspring” that we are “heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29).

But if the Abrahamic covenant continues, what of the covenant sign of circumcision? What has become of circumcision? Under the New Covenant, the Scriptures argue, baptism has replaced circumcision as sign and seal of the covenant of grace. This is what Paul argues at Colossians 2:11–12.

In him you also were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

What is Paul saying here? He is saying that believers have been “circumcised” by the “circumcision of Christ.” This is not physical circumcision. It is “made without hands.” That is to say, it is a work of God. This circumcision Paul describes in terms of the “putting off the body of flesh.” Here, Paul is saying that the believer has a new relationship with sin (“the body of flesh”). Sin no longer has dominion over the believer. It no longer sits in the driver’s seat, determining the believer’s thoughts, choices, and actions. This is why Paul can say that the “body of flesh” has been “put off” (compare Col. 3:9, “you have put off the old self with its practices”). This “putting off” or “circumcision” describes what took place at the believer’s regeneration. Compare what we saw Paul say at Romans 2:29: “but a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.” God has made the believer, once alive to sin and dead to righteousness, now, in Christ, dead to sin and alive to righteousness.

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But “circumcision” is not the only way that Paul can here describe this decisive change in the believer. He says that believers have been “buried with [Christ] in baptism” and “raised with him.” So fully has God united believers with Jesus in his death that Paul can say that they were “buried with him.” God has so united believers with Jesus in his resurrection that Paul can say that they were “raised with him.”

But Paul says that believers have been “buried with [Christ] *in baptism*.” Is Paul talking about water baptism here? No. Paul is not primarily thinking of physical baptism any more than he is thinking of physical circumcision in Colossians 2. “Baptism” is Paul’s way of talking about the decisive change that God has wrought in believers such that they have a brand new relationship with sin and with righteousness: “in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Just as spiritual circumcision once had its counterpart in physical circumcision, so we may infer that spiritual baptism now has its counterpart in water baptism. That is to say, circumcision once served as sign and seal of the regeneration of the Old Testament believer. Now, baptism serves as sign and seal of the regeneration of the New Testament believer. We have the same grace represented under different signs.

This is precisely what we see in the New Testament. Christ commissions his disciples to “baptize” those who respond in faith to the gospel (Matt. 28:18–20). Later in the New Testament, we see that after persons make public profession of faith, they are baptized (Acts 2:38 with Acts 2:41; 8:12; 16:14–15, 31–33). Circumcision is no longer required of God’s people (see Acts 15). Baptism does the job now that circumcision did prior to the coming of Christ.

This observation brings us to our final point. The children of believers during the Old Testament were, by divine command, to receive the covenant sign of circumcision. In the same way, the children of believers during the New Testament are, by the same command, to receive the covenant sign of baptism. In both cases, they are entitled to the sign of the covenant because they are by birthright members of the church.

But do we have any indication that the New Testament recognizes the children of believers to be members of the church? We do. Notice what Paul says at Ephesians 6:1–3.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

Which children does Paul address? He addresses the children of believers in the church at Ephesus. How does Paul address these children? He addresses them as among “the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1). That is to say, he addresses them as members of the congregation. Why does he call the members of the church at Ephesus “saints” or “holy ones”? Paul here is not saying that they are all inwardly holy. He is saying that they are, by calling, set apart from the world, and set apart for God.

Children, then, are members of the church and, as such, are called to pursue holiness. In Ephesians 6:1–3, Paul tells the children of the congregation how they ought to live in light of that calling. In Ephesians 6:4, Paul tells the fathers of these children to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” These children, in other words, are called to be students in the school of Christ, to be disciples of Jesus.

Consider what Paul argues at 1 Corinthians 7:14: “the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of your husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” The children of at least one believer are “holy” not “unclean.” In light of our conclusions from Paul’s statements in Ephesians, we may say they are “holy” in precisely the way that Paul called them holy in Ephesians 1:1. They are, by calling, set apart from the world, and set apart for God.

One might object, “But Paul says that the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Are you saying that unbelieving spouses should join the church simply because they are married to a believer?” In reply, observe the concern that Paul addresses in this passage. His main

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concern is the ecclesiastical standing of the child of a spiritually mixed marriage. Which spouse—the unbelieving or believing—determines that child’s standing? Paul replies that the child ought to be recognized as a member of the visible church because of his relationship with his believing parent. In what sense are unbelieving spouses “holy”? They are “holy” in the sense that they are the ones through whom these “holy” children have come into the world.²⁸

One final set of passages showing the recognition of the membership of children in the church and their entitlement to the sacrament of baptism are the “household baptisms” of Acts. We read that Lydia “was baptized and her household as well” (Acts 16:15). The Philippian jailor “was baptized at once, he and all his family” (Acts 16:33).

This is precisely what we expect to see. In Genesis 17, we saw that professing believers and their households received the covenant sign to indicate their membership in the church. In these New Testament passages, we are seeing professing believers and their households also receive the covenant sign to indicate their membership in the church.

One might object that there are no children, much less infants, mentioned in either of these baptisms. We may reply that it is not necessary for the Scripture to tell us precisely who was or was not part of that household. The important point for what we are trying to show is that the “household” was baptized upon the profession of faith of the head of that household.

One might also object that in Acts 18:8 the Scriptures say that Crispus’s “entire household” believed. Does that not imply that the members of the jailor’s household and Lydia’s household believed also? Not necessarily. Whether or not the household believed, they were entitled to the sign of baptism once the head of the household made profession of faith. They were entitled to that sign because they

28. Charles Hodge paraphrases Paul’s statement in this way: “[T]he pagan husband, in virtue of his union with a Christian wife, although he remained a pagan, was sanctified; he assumed a new relation; he was set apart to the service of God, as the guardian of one of his chosen ones, and as the parent of children who, in virtue of their believing mother, were children of the covenant.” Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Robert Carter, 1860), 116.

were members of the church by virtue of their relationship with the person professing faith.

In summary, the Scriptures recognize the children of a believing parent to be, by virtue of that relationship, members of the church. In other words, these children have an acknowledged relationship with the church; they stand under its government; they have privileges and responsibilities attending that membership.²⁹

In saying that these children are members of the church, we are not saying that they are regenerate or will certainly become regenerate. We would not say this of any member of the church, whether under the Old Covenant or under the New Covenant. We are saying that, as the children of believers, they are entitled to certain privileges and have certain responsibilities.³⁰ They are owed the prayers, instruction, and admonition of their fellow church members. What should these children be taught? They should be taught that they are sinners in the sight of God, that they justly deserve the punishment of God for their sins, and that they need the cleansing of Christ's blood and the renewing of the Holy Spirit. They should be taught Scripture's pattern of mind and life that is pleasing to the Lord. They should be taught to turn to Christ in faith and repentance, and to live lives pleasing to him.

We have surveyed Scripture's teaching on the importance of the church in redemptive history. We have considered the biblical "visible/invisible church" distinction. We have considered why membership in the visible church is necessary for Christians, and why the Scriptures consider the children of believers to be members of the church. We are now ready to take a closer look at the government of the church.

29. I owe this three-fold definition to David F. Coffin Jr.

30. There are certain privileges that they may not exercise until they demonstrate the maturity and spiritual qualifications that Scripture requires for those privileges. One such privilege, of course, is admission to the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11).