

ADULT BIBLE CLASS STUDIES
J. Kyle Paisley Memorial Free Presbyterian Church
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Read: 1 Tim 3

The Church -- The Glorious Body of Christ

No.3, *The Church Invisible and the Church Visible*

The Church of Jesus Christ is a *divine* and a *spiritual* institution, the communion of all those throughout time who have rested by saving faith in the person and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The origin of the Church, therefore, is to be traced right back to the Garden of Eden, in that immediately after the fall of man the Lord revealed His gracious covenant purpose to Adam & Eve, a revelation that they believed and received by faith. Thus, the first family on this earth was also the church in its embryonic form.

THE CHURCH INVISIBLE & VISIBLE

As we have already noted, the Bible, in its employment of the word *church*, is clear on the fact that the word sometimes denotes that body of people who are truly elect and redeemed, Eph 5: 25-27. However, Scripture is equally clear in other references in its use of the word that not all encompassed within the church as it appears on this earth are elect and redeemed, Matt 13: 24-30, 47. Consequently, the terms *invisible* & *visible* have been adopted with respect to the Church in order to reflect this distinction in the Bible's use of the word *church*.

Thus, the term *the invisible church* is used to signify the company of the elect, a company known only to the Lord in the final analysis.

The true Church is invisible in the sense (a) that never on earth has the elect from all ages been gathered together in a visible society, Eph 3: 15 -- "*the whole family in heaven and earth*." Note here that the *family* in view are those who are identified with Christ and His Father -- it is the family of faith, the elect of God therefore, thus the word is in the singular, for there is only one such "family". Moreover, this one family is both in heaven and on earth simultaneously. It is actually on the basis of a verse like this that the terms *church militant* & *church triumphant* have been coined. Part of the one family of God is in heaven resting in triumph, while the other part is on earth in its militancy, on the battlefield in the conflict for Christ. Hence, the point is made that the elect of God, the true Church of the redeemed, is invisible in the sense that it has never existed in total on this earth in a visible form.

But the true Church is also invisible in the sense that some are admitted on this earth to the company of professing Christians whose names are not written in heaven, see again Matt 13. Hence, since the tares mingle with the wheat and this state of affairs is, according to the parable, to continue to the end of the age, then the exact number of the redeemed is known only to the Lord, hence, "the church invisible".

This distinction does not mean, of course, that there are two churches but one viewed in two ways. Consequently, it follows that some features that are true of the one are not true of the other. The chief feature is obvious -- to be in a visible society of professing Christians without a saving union with Christ is to be excluded from the final great gathering of Christ's Church in glory; but to be in the company of the redeemed, the church invisible, is to be absolutely sure of heaven.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

It is of great importance to maintain this distinction between the church visible and invisible in order to escape the gross corruptions that have been promoted concerning the Church, especially in Rome's notion of the Church, and in particular, with regard to the *indefectibility* of the Church.

Indefectibility with regard to the Church is the truth that the Church has never ceased to exist after its institution by virtue of her members' union with Christ and their being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As Protestants we believe this truth, but not in the sense that Rome does, and indeed we reject her erroneous theory of indefectibility. On indefectibility Rome teaches that there is at "all times, in unbroken and continuous succession, an organised society publicly and palpably standing out to the eyes of men as the church of Christ." In other words, Rome attaches indefectibility to the church visible, to the earthly society of those who profess to be the church of Christ, and then claim that she alone is that indefectible church.

However, *indefectibility* in the Biblical sense, as defined above, does not guarantee that the Church will have this visible "unbroken and continuous succession" for Scripture reveals that there were times and there will be times when the company of true believers is dispersed & splintered and the visible representation of the Church is barely noticeable. Indefectibility belongs only to the true Church of the redeemed. Genuine believers do not defect from Christ, but visible societies do. The Lord never leaves Himself without a witness, thus the true Church is always alive in every generation. But at times it may be a tiny remnant when so much of the church visible has departed from the faith and is filled with corruption.

There are four other marks of the Church -- *unity, sanctity, apostolicity, and catholicity*. Unity -- there is only one true church; sanctity -- true believers are holy, e.g. they are called *saints*, meaning "holy ones"; apostolicity -- the church continues in the faith and practice of the apostles; and catholicity -- the church is universal in that she embraces people from all nations.

Understood in a Scriptural sense these points may be accepted, but as Rome understands them they are far removed from Scripture. Biblically these marks belong to the invisible church, though the visible church should strive to avoid division, impurity, and apostasy; and should seek to promote the faith on a catholic or universal level. However, Rome claims that as a visible body she alone has these marks without mixture or error. But

Scripture shows as well as history and experience that no visible church society could ever lay claim to the distinction of bearing these marks without failure, least of all Rome whose doctrines and practice are as far removed from the apostolic model as could be imagined.

In the light of these points how is a Christian to recognise a church that can be justly regarded as a sound church and become part of it? There are certain steps to pursue in answering this question --

1. **First, note that the Church is to be "the pillar and ground of the truth."**

1 Tim 3: 15 -- does not mean that the church is the source of the truth, but the upholder and propagator of the truth. The words *pillar & ground* refer to upholding the truth, lifting up the truth so that the world around may see it. Note the context -- i.e., well-ordered church government, with the right men occupying the offices of the church that she might be strengthened to be the pillar and ground of the truth. The point is that the Lord Himself is not the pillar and ground of the truth in the sense that He comes down from heaven to uphold the truth -- He gives His church this responsibility.

2. **On this premise that the church is to be the pillar and ground of the truth there rests the basis for determining whether a church is sound or not**

Remember that "the truth" is the person and work of Christ as is seen in v.16. He is the truth and the faith in who He is and in what He has done. Thus, where Christ is not lifted up as the only Saviour and Mediator then that body has forfeited the right to be recognised as a true church. See ch 4: 1 -- Paul warns of a great apostasy from the faith, from Christ therefore, to turn to error and devilish doctrine. Where such holds sway then the believer cannot be part of such a body.

Some churches have not departed so far or so seriously as others. But there are great causes for grave concern. What is the believer to do in such cases? The key again is in v.15 -- is that church really lifting up the truth and preaching Christ so that you soul is being fed and edified?

Rev. John Greer