

Week 25, Wednesday, June 8: Of the Church and Of the Communion of the Saints

Of the Church Richard Bacon rightly quips, “The modern Christian doesn’t have a church ‘home’ so much as a string of church ‘hotel-rooms’.”⁴⁵³ Or as R. Kent Hughes laments, *ecclesiastical, nomadic hitchhikers*.⁴⁵⁴ May our church truly be a home full of loyal family.

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. (a)*
(a) Eph. 1:10, 22-23; Eph. 5:23, 27, 32; Col. 1:18.

We distinguish the “Invisible Church” as “The Church Triumphant” – the wheat (elect of all ages and places) to be separated from the tares within the “The Visible Church Militant” on Judgment Day (See 1 Jn. 2:19 and Rom. 9:6 for this distinction with the diagram enclosure by Rev. Keith Evans). “It is invisible to *us* because it has extension in both time and space.”⁴⁵⁵ The word “catholic” means “universal” to express its global and timeless membership. The Nicene Creed speaks of “One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church”.⁴⁵⁶

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; (b) and of their children: (c) and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, (d) the house and family of God, (e) out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. (f)*
(b) 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Ps. 2:8; Rev. 7:9; Rom. 15:9-12. (c) 1 Cor. 7:14; Acts 2:39; Ezek. 16:20, 21; Rom. 11:16; Gen. 3:15; Gen. 17:7. (d) Matt. 13:47; Isa. 9:7. (e) Eph. 2:19; Eph. 3:15. (f) Acts 2:47.

a. The “Visible Church” also is called “catholic” or “universal”, as its universality too is expressed in one common Head, Spirit, testimony, life, profession, baptism, and reputation.⁴⁵⁷ Christ is advancing His Kingdom of Heaven throughout the world, and it is visibly seen on earth as the “The Church Militant”: “These sections of the Confession teach us (1) the nature of the Church from the divine

⁴⁵³ Richard Bacon, *The Visible Church and The Outer Darkness* (Dallas: Blue Banner Books, 1992), 3.

⁴⁵⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. Chapter, “On Discipline of Church.” “The doctrine of the Church has become progressively weakened and in some cases abandoned by American evangelicals ... Church attendance is infected with a malaise of conditional loyalty which has produced an army of ecclesiastical hitchhikers ... Church hitchhikers have a telling vocabulary: ‘I go to’ or ‘I attend,’ but never ‘I belong to’ or ‘I am a member.’ ... There is a vast herd of professed Christians who exist as nomadic hitchhikers without accountability, without discipline, without discipleship, living apart from the regular benefits of the ordinances ... The tragedy is compounded because statistics indicate that men are far less committed to the Church than women ... Christians who disdain membership, are aberrations in the history of the Christian Church and are in grievous error.”

⁴⁵⁵ Williamson, 187.

⁴⁵⁶ In Robert Reymond’s, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, he aptly organizes his discussion of the attributes and marks of the Church (visible) according to these ancient ecclesiastical categories (837-860).

⁴⁵⁷ Hodge, 324-325.

point of view, and (2) the nature of the Church from the human point of view, but it is not as if there were two different Churches, the visible and the invisible.”⁴⁵⁸

b. The Visible Church is made up of those who “profess the true religion”. This profession is seen in the Church’s visible forms: membership vows, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. If these basic Biblical elements are not part of one’s profession, it is not credible, let alone a profession in any Scriptural notion. Engelsma writes, “I insist that confession of Christ, which is the believer’s unconditional calling, can only be done in and with a true, instituted church of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁵⁹ As it is only visible, only a “credible profession” can be required, that is: “... a profession of the true religion sufficiently intelligent and sufficiently corroborated by the daily life of the professor to be credited as genuine.”⁴⁶⁰ Professors also have “their children” recognized as members of the Visible Church by virtue of Covenant Headship representation (more on this in the section on Baptism).⁴⁶¹ Van Dixhoorn notes: “... children of professing Christians are God’s before they are ours ... the children which [the Israelites who sacrificed them to pagan gods] considered theirs were ‘born for me; they were ‘my children’ (*Ezek. 16:20, 21*). God takes ownership of our covenant children.”⁴⁶²

c. The Visible Church is the “Kingdom of Heaven” (or of God),⁴⁶³ which John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles spoke of as “at hand” in Christ (*Mt. 3:2*). It was inaugurated in their midst due to the incarnation of its King (*Lk. 11:20*) and is now advancing (*Mt. 16:18*) until the consummation of it on the Last Day in Christ’s Second Coming. J.I. Packer gives us our marching orders: “The kingdom is present in its beginnings though future in its fullness ... The task of the church is to make the invisible kingdom visible through faithful Christian living and witness-bearing ... The church must make its message credible by manifesting the reality of kingdom life ... with Christ ... the new internationalism of global church fellowship and global evangelism was born ...”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁵⁸ Williamson, 187.

⁴⁵⁹ Engelsma, *Bond to Join*, 89.

⁴⁶⁰ Hodge, 313.

⁴⁶¹ Against the Anabaptists, Dickson ably argues these reasons (in part) to include our covenant infants as members of the visible church: “1. ... God commanded infants and little ones should stand before him and should enter into covenant with him (*Deut. 29:10-11*) ... 2. ... infants are called the people of God ... (*Deut. 29:11-13*) ... 3. ... the promise of grace belongs to children as well as to the parents (*Acts 2:39*) ... 4. If children be not members of the visible church, they must be members of the visible kingdom of the devil, for there can be no midst (*Eph. 2:12-13*). And so there shall be no difference between the children of believers and the children of Turks and pagans ... 5. ... infants under the Old Testament had right unto the covenant of grace (*Gen. 17:7, 12*). And children of believers under the New Testament have lost no right to that covenant of grace which children under the Old Testament had, seeing the covenant of grace now under the gospel is not more strictly and sparingly administered than long since under the law (*Heb. 8:6; Rom. 11:12*) ... 6. ... infants are commanded to join themselves to God’s ordinances (*Joel 2:16*) ... 7. ... if Christ while an infant was head of the visible church, then infants may be his members. But the first is true, from Isaiah 9:6. Therefore the second must be true also ... 8. ... they whom the false apostles would have to be circumcised after the manner of Moses (and therefore infants) were called disciples (*Acts 15:10*).” (195-6).

⁴⁶² Van Dixhoorn, 340.

⁴⁶³ Dispensationalists like J. Vernon McGee wrongly make the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God different entities to support their mistaken scheme; compare *Mt. 4:17* with *Mark 1:14-15* to see they are the same.

⁴⁶⁴ Packer, 194-5.

d. There is “no ordinary possibility of salvation” outside of the Visible Church: “... it is a rare thing to find a vital, mature, fruitful believer who is not connected to other believers in Christ’s church.”⁴⁶⁵ This phrase reflects the statement of the early church father, Cyprian, but is qualified here with “ordinary”.⁴⁶⁶ It does not make sense for someone to say they are a Christian while rejecting membership in and service to Christ’s body (1 Cor. 12), refusing to worship Jesus together in fellowship (Heb. 10:24-25).⁴⁶⁷ Jesus saves people to add them to the church (Acts. 2:47). They become “fellowcitizens” with the saints (Eph 2:19). It is a “family” (Eph. 3:15) and the “household of God” (Eph. 2:19). All of these expressions clearly rule out the modern church practice of “me, myself, and I” solo, “John Wayne” Christian life and worship. The words in Hebrew and Greek most often referred to the Church are “assembly” or “gathering”, meaning to call out or summons to be together worshipping and serving before God: “The word ‘church,’ therefore, is a collective term including the whole body of the ‘called ...’”⁴⁶⁸ Individual worshippers are part of the church outside of worship, but only in covenanted relation to the whole and mostly experienced and expressed in its gatherings before Christ.⁴⁶⁹ Speaking of both the OT and NT words and descriptions for church, John Murray writes that “it becomes apparent that the notion of assembly or congregation is in the fore-

⁴⁶⁵ Spear, FOF, 133.

⁴⁶⁶ Sproul, vol. 3, 51. Notice, however, that The Belgic Confession of Faith (of the Dutch Churches that came before the Westminster Standards) offer no qualifying word, although it of course would be understood, and notice what else they say about membership in the visible church: “... this holy congregation ... out of it there is no salvation ... no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ ... it is the duty of all believers ... to join themselves to this congregation ... all those who separate themselves from the same, or do not join themselves to it, act contrary to the ordinance of God.” (Article 28). After stating the visible marks of a pure visible church, “... the true Church ... from which no man has a right to separate himself.” (Article 29). Source: Engelsma, *Bound to Join*, 161-162. As Engelsma ably demonstrates, this is expressed in all Reformed Creeds, such as the French Confession (written by John Calvin) and the Second Helvetic Confession (written by Heinrich Bullinger), which state respectively: “... if they do not take part in it [that is, the church institute], or if they separate themselves from it, they do contrary to the Word of God” and “Outside the Church of God There Is No Salvation ... those who wish to live ought not to be separated from the true Church of Christ.” Engelsma, *A Defense of the Church Institute*, 58-59. Note: Kevin Reed’s writings in contrast, are wrong.

⁴⁶⁷ Dickson, 191, 196-197: “... it hath been foretold in many places of the Old Testament that the catholic church shall be visible (*Psa.* 22:22, 25, 28; 72:8-10; 86:9; *Isa.* 1:2-4; *Zech.* 14:9) ... do not the Enthusiasts, Quakers, and Libertines err who affirm that any man may be a true Christian and be saved, though he live within no visible church? Yes. By what reasons are they confuted? 1. ... the Lord Jehovah in his visible church (ordinarily) commands the blessing, even life for evermore (*Psa.* 133:3) ... 2. The visible church is the mother of all believers (*Gal.* 4:26) ... 3. ... they that are without the visible church are without Christ (*Eph.* 2:12) ... 4. Why are men and women joined to the visible church but that they may be saved (*Acts* 2:47)? 5. ... they that are without the visible church are destitute of the ordinary means of life and salvation (*Psa.* 147:19-20).”

⁴⁶⁸ Hodge, 311. Murray writes, “... there is no evidence to support the notion that the *church* is to be defined as the *called-out ones*. The biblical evidence will show that the idea is rather that of assembly or congregation. It would be more correct to say that the church is the *called-together ones*.” “Government in the Church of Christ”, in *Collected Writings*, vol. 1, 264.

⁴⁶⁹ “We are not independent units, of ourselves existent and to ourselves sufficient ...” Murray, “Corporate Responsibility”, in *Collected Writings*, vol. 1, 273.

front.”⁴⁷⁰ It is possible for an extra-ordinary situation in a nation without established churches for someone who receives the Word and believes, but: “... the Church is rendered visible by the profession and outward obedience of its members ...”.⁴⁷¹ The norm of the Church is individuals continuing steadfastly in fellowship (Acts 2:42; 47 says they continued daily with one accord in the temple): “The Christian life, rightly understood, is a life in community.”⁴⁷² The Visible Church is God’s ordained means of “... (a.) the gathering in of the elect from the children of the Church or from the world, and (b.) the perfecting of the saints when thus gathered”⁴⁷³ and thus is to be our chief means of our chief end. Also, we are required as Christians to make a public profession, and we primarily do so by formally uniting ourselves together in public worship of the Triune God, including “taking the sacramental badges of his discipleship”⁴⁷⁴ Williamson emphasizes, “There is a true visible Church ... the true Church does manifest itself in the world.”⁴⁷⁵ Jesus came “in the flesh” and ordained observable visible sacraments to be administered to a visible church membership who also gathered to give a visible witness in visible worship led by visible ministers. All Biblical doctrines find their visible overlap, purpose, and expression in the doctrine of the Church (ecclesiology). The Bible always speaks of saved individuals in the context of corporate covenanted life.

e. Church membership is “still a matter of the utmost seriousness”⁴⁷⁶ to (1) submit to King Jesus under the guidance and accountability of His ordained elders (Heb. 13:7, 17), and (2) commit to mutual Christian service and fellowship (1 Cor. 12). Not to formally yoke yourself visibly to the Vine (Jn. 15) is like saying you are part of the Elks Club without ever joining, while rarely attending and hardly knowing anyone at the local lodge. Extremities die severed from the body. Certifying formal church membership to be received by others is seen in Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:1, 11:28; Philemon 1-2, 16-17. Calvin goes so far as to say that “separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ.”⁴⁷⁷ Van Dixhoorn enjoins: “... people who claim to be believers and refuse to join the church in the face of clear biblical instruction and providential opportunity to do so, should deeply worry us. They are like people who say they are in love but refuse to get married. Usually they want the privileges of the relationship without the accompanying responsibilities. Their refusal to publicly commit to Christ’s church casts doubt on the genuineness of their devotion to him, as does a refusal to publicly commit to marriage.”⁴⁷⁸ Engelsma would agree: “That some seem perfectly content to live apart from the church is astounding. It is as if a finger were content to be cut off

⁴⁷⁰ John Murray, “The Nature and Unity of the Church”, in *John Murray Collected Writings*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, Penna.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977) , 323.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid, 313.

⁴⁷² Spear, FOF, 130.

⁴⁷³ Hodge, 314.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Williamson, 187.

⁴⁷⁶ Ward, 161.

⁴⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.10, 2:1024, as cited by David Engelsma in *A Defense of the Church Institute: Response to the Critics of Bound to Join* (Jenison, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing, 2012) , 50.

⁴⁷⁸ Van Dixhoorn, 341.

from the physical body or as if a bride were happy to be apart from her husband”⁴⁷⁹; “To expect to find and enjoy salvation outside the church is to expect to find salvation apart from Christ.”⁴⁸⁰ Packer notes, “The New Testament assumes that all Christians will share in the life of a local church, meeting with it for worship (Heb. 10:25), accepting its nurture and discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1), and sharing in its work of witness. Christians disobey God and impoverish themselves by refusing to join with other believers when there is a local congregation that they can belong to.”⁴⁸¹ Sproul says, “We must rid ourselves of the cavalier, casual attitude that we who bear the name of Christ can fail to participate in worship or in the fellowship of the body of Christ.”⁴⁸² John Murray’s words are also noteworthy here:

The corporate entity does not exist apart from the individuals composing or comprised in that entity ... If the fallacy of individualism and independentism appears anywhere it is in connection with the church of Christ; at no point does the gravity of the abnormality and offence of individualism become more conspicuous than when it takes the form of discounting the unity and solidarity of Christ’s body. We cannot abstract ourselves from the corporate relationship which inheres in the very notion of the church as the body of Christ, and we cannot abstract ourselves from the corporate responsibility which belongs to the church as a corporate entity. The corporate witness of the church is our witness and the corporate default of the church is our default ... We cannot consider our own individual witness to Christ as independent of the witness which is borne by the branch of the church to which we belong ... we must not take lightly the matter of severing our connection with one denomination and joining another ... it is to desert the corporate responsibility which we

⁴⁷⁹ Engelsma, *Bound to Join*, 47-48.

⁴⁸⁰ Engelsma, *In Defense of the Church Institute*, 63. He clarifies (much to the chagrin of many house churches he criticizes), that “Informal or even formal gatherings of a religious nature on Sunday do not constitute a church ... What makes a church is the *offices of Christ* in an assembly of believers and their children ... the Belgic Confession, in Article 30, says about the church that it ‘must be governed by the spiritual policy which our Lord has taught us in his Word,’ namely, that there are pastors, elders, and deacons.” (64). He later writes, “Christ has promised to be present to his people in the ministry, oracles, and ordinances, making them effectual means unto salvation. He has not promised to be present, and to save, apart from them.” (78). He helpfully points out that Paul calls the instituted church a congregation of believers and their children with the “bishops and deacons” (87), that is, official church officers: look at Philippians 1:1 with 4:15. Thus, Paul’s main focus with Titus and Timothy is the immediate ordination of qualified elders in every church in every city. Infant fellowships were churches, but they would have stunted or had abnormal or no growth without the natural establishment of formal leadership.

⁴⁸¹ Packer, 202.

⁴⁸² Sproul, vol. 3, 71.

avow in our local situation if we do not apply it in the broader context of the church as a whole.⁴⁸³

WCF 25:3: *Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.*
(g)
(g)1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11-13; Matt. 28:19, 20; Isa. 59:21.

Jesus gives ordinances and oracles of ministry for the “gathering and perfecting of the saints”. Such growth will not happen outside the gathering. The nature and order of Biblical church government (Presbyterianism) will be discussed in the upcoming chapters on Church Censures, Synods, and Councils (30 and 31). Here, let it suffice to generally comment that “visible association and organization are necessary to the church. There are institutions to be administered and government exercised.”⁴⁸⁴ Here, we see that the marks of a true church are (1) the sound preaching of the Word, (2) the proper administration of the Sacraments, and (3) church discipline.

WCF 25:4: *This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible.(h) 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.(i)*
(h)Rom. 11:3-4; Rev. 12:6,14. (i)Rev. 2-3; 1 Cor. 5:6-7.

The Visible Church is never perfect in this life (again due to a mixed multitude, as well as progressive sanctification until heaven). There are times in history where it is “more, some times less

⁴⁸³ John Murray, “Corporate Responsibility”, in *John Murray Collected Writings*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 274-277. Further, independency is so dangerous for each individual: “... in the long run, and often in the short run, the ‘perils of independency’ destroy the independent congregation and, thus, deprive the saints of the means of grace and salvation.” (Engelsma, *In Defense of the Church Institute*, 71). Considering how things have played out since the writing of this book and the fellowship of one of Engelsma’s main critics he is answering (in 2015), his words waxed prophetic, along with these: “No teacher of the people of God, though the holiest and soundest, can endure as a faithful pastor and teacher apart from the government *of himself* by the office of the ruling elder. He is too weak, and Satan is too cunning ... That man who exalts himself as the teaching authority of Christian house churches, or of Christian house fellowships (pale, manmade imitations of Christ’s church), apart from the office of elder, Christ himself will bring to ruin.” (137). “Let the self-styled teachers and rulers of the house church take heed ... Outside the office of pastor and teacher, you have neither authority nor competency to perfect the saints, to do the work of the ministry, to edify the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). Christ does not speak through you. Christ regards you as his rival. Teaching apart from any oversight of the office of elder, you are not guided and protected by the government of Jesus Christ.” (138). “Rejecting the Christ-ordained rule of a body of elders does not mean that you are subject to *no* ruler, but that you are now vulnerable to *any* ruler. The leader of the house church, or house fellowship, is your ruler. Answerable to no one, his rule can easily become the tyrannical, destructive rule of the cult leader ... You are now at the mercy of a man.” (139). Richard Bacon similarly criticizes the “home church” devoid of the offices and oracles of Christ: “The apostle distinguished in First Corinthians 11:22, 34 and elsewhere between the church of God and the home. Churching at home is a contradiction – the primary meaning of the word ‘church’ is ‘assembly’.” (49). As well, it includes “called out”.

⁴⁸⁴ Murray, “Corporate Responsibility”, 326. Later citing Scriptures such as Rom. 12:4, 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 20, and Eph. 4:4, he adds, “... we may not attempt to escape from the implications of this oneness, and the obligation incident to it, by taking refuge in the notion of the invisible church.” (332) We do not appreciate his disdain elsewhere for the Confessional and Scriptural (Rom. 9:6) invisible-visible church distinction; still, here he is helpful.

visible”. And particular churches are “more or less pure”. Proper doctrine and worship also is “more or less purely in them”. The *Confession* does not encourage being “less pure”, but it does emphasize the vital life of the Visible Church and the importance of understanding our unity and union with true churches throughout all lands. We should be eager to seek unity with others, and major on the majors together. Our own church has its “lesser” areas of purity, and we should consider what we can tolerate for the sake of participating in a denomination. Presbyterianism most simply is a plurality of governing elders in a local church which naturally expresses itself in a union of a plurality of ministers with representative elders from their sessions within a larger Presbytery (see Acts 15, 21). There are too many A.W. Pinks today: “If a believer were to separate from a church [or denomination] because of any and every imperfection he could belong to no visible church at all.”⁴⁸⁵ Ward cautions, “... failure to acknowledge the relative purity of any particular church in her pilgrim life on earth leads to schism by those seeking a purity which cannot be attained, or else it leads to sectarianism.”⁴⁸⁶ “A Reformed church is always reforming.”⁴⁸⁷ Note in the back of your *Westminster Confession of Faith* is, “A Solemn Acknowledgement of Publick Sins, and

⁴⁸⁵ Williamson, 191. See his and others’ advice: “... one should never leave a particular denomination as long as it is possible to remain without compromising obedience to Christ. The conditions necessary to such uncompromised obedience are these: (1) the denomination as a whole must still profess the true religion in its essential integrity, (2) there must be an unrestricted right to contend for the truth against such errors as are present, and (3) there must be an active engagement to defend the truth and to seek the purity of the Church” (191). “... it is proper to leave a true church that is much less pure to join a true church that is much more pure, provided the motive is the glory of God, the welfare of one’s spiritual concerns (and that of his children), and a testimony against error” (192). Clark: “... a study of history shows clearly that the scandal of Christendom is not the multiplicity of small denominations, but the corruption of one big denomination. Those persons who value organizational union over doctrinal and moral purity can readily achieve satisfaction. Let them repent of the schism of Luther and Calvin, and return to Rome.” (WPB, 94). Ward: “The mere presence of some errors or abuses will not be sufficient to cause us to withdraw from a church. The nature of the errors, the insistence with which they are advocated, and the freedom or otherwise we have from compliance, will be relevant in deciding whether or not we can remain in the body.” (163). Following many disclaimers against premature separation, David Engelsma writes, “The ground for leaving a church is that the church seriously and impenitently errs concerning the marks of the true church”, *Bound to Join*, 142. Richard Bacon warns, “The men of both the Reformation and the Second Reformation established a principle so foundational that it is now unassailable: it is rarely, if ever, lawful to separate from a true church.” (*The Visible Church and the Outer Darkness*, 10). He also keenly addresses our modern problem of men choosing to rule over themselves *ex cathedra* from their living room chairs: “The plea that Separatists make, whether on the basis of the priesthood of the believer or the sheep hearing the voice of the shepherd, is ultimately an appeal to private conscience as the last and highest court of the church ... Separatists and Independents invariably elevate the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer to a sort of papacy of the believer.” *The Visible Church and the Outer Darkness*, 15. He adds, “... such a high opinion of one’s own ideas must almost inevitably lead to doctrinal errors, for these men lack contact with and respect for the position and authority of the larger church.” (16).

⁴⁸⁶ Ward, 162.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 163.

Breaches of the Covenant”, where the sins confessed and forsaken as “error, heresy, and schism” include “namely, Independency” and “Libertinism”.⁴⁸⁸

David Engelsma of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America (known for their adamant scruples) rightly points out to those who would feign a purer religion in utter isolation:

There was false doctrine in Israel, but there was also the preaching of the truth, so that for many years God continued to work in Israel the salvation of the elect ... In the New Testament, there was false doctrine in Corinth—the denial of the bodily resurrection of the saints—but this did not make Corinth a false church simply by virtue of this fact. There was heresy in the Galatian churches—the teaching of justification by faith and works—but this did not make them false churches at once.⁴⁸⁹

... churches in which there were serious errors and that were departing from the truth of the gospel ... The apostles did not at once call the faithful believers and their children to separate from those churches and organize new churches. But they rebuked the sinning churches and

⁴⁸⁸ P. 367. Also Anabaptism, Antinomianism, Arminianism, Socianism, Familism, Scepticism, and Erastianism. Objectors to this understanding should read David Engelsma’s *Bound to Join* and *In Defense of the Church Institute* as well as Richard Bacon’s *The Visible Church and the Outer Darkness* and their similar discussions about how Paul countenances churches like Corinth and Galatia, and Christ the churches in Asia, as true visible churches not to be abandoned but reformed. Dickson similarly argues that true churches can be mixed with error without being synagogues of Satan to be disowned: “... the seven churches of Asia to which John did write are accused of mixture and errors (*Rev.* 2:4-5) ... did not the Donatists of old, and Separatists now, err who maintain that hypocrites and wicked men do pollute and defile the worship of God, not only to themselves, but also to others that worship with them; and that therefore we must separate from communion in the worship of God because of them? Yes. By what reasons are they confuted? I. ... the church of the Jews in Christ’s time was very corrupt (*Matt.* 15:7; *Mark* 7:6-8). And yet both by his practice and his command, he would not have his hearers to separate from it. For he both observed the feasts and preached in their synagogues (*John* 8:1; *Luke* 4:15; *John* 10:22). And he commands his hearers to observe what the scribes and Pharisees bade them do (*Matt.* 23:2-3) ... 2. ... the apostle is so far from commanding separation from the church of Corinth that he praises their meetings (*I Cor.* 5:4; II:20; I4:23), notwithstanding of the many gross scandals which were among them (*I Cor.* I:II-13; 5:I-2; I5:12-13) ... 3. ... the apostle calls the Galatians ‘the church of Christ’, ‘brethren’, and the ‘children of God’, who were yet in some measure removed from God to another gospel ... And yet since it was a constituted true church, it was his judgment there should be no separation from it, notwithstanding of all the foresaid faults ... 4. ... the church of Ephesus was a true church, though they made defection from their first love. So was the church of Pergamos, though they were in it who held the doctrine of Balaam. So was the church of Thyatira, notwithstanding that they suffered Jezebel, that called herself a prophetess and taught the servants of Christ to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols [*Rev.* 2] ... 5. ... there can hardly be a church where there are not some hidden hypocrites: nay, where there are not some who are known to be such by the minister. Yet such are not to be excluded, as Christ himself teaches (*Matt.* I3:24-31; see verses 47 and 48 of the same chapter) ... 6. If the worship be polluted to some for the faults of others with whom they worship, then must the Word and sacraments have their efficacy and worth from the persons that worship, and from the dispensers of them, which is absurd ... 7. ... wicked and evil men do not pollute the worship to others but to themselves only; as it appears from the man that wanted the wedding garment (*Matt.* 22:II). And from those who did eat and drink unworthily at the Lord’s table. Such do not eat and drink damnation to others, but to themselves (*I. Cor.* II:27, 29).” (201, 205-207).

⁴⁸⁹ Engelsma, *Bound to Join*, 32-33. He also notes here as earlier that churches that tolerate or advocate the well-meant offer are not false churches necessarily. Interesting that he also notes here that Reformed Christians ought to find belonging to a Baptist church “intolerable”.

called them back to the truth and to a godly manner of life. The same was true of the Lord's handling of the churches in Asia Minor that were departing.⁴⁹⁰

WCF 25:5: *The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error:(k) and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. (l) Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to His will.(m)* (k)1 Cor. 13:12; Rev. 2-3; Matt. 13:24-30, 47. (l)Rev. 18:2; Rom. 11:18-22. (m)Matt. 16:18; Ps. 72:17; Ps. 102:28; Matt. 28:19-20.

The *Confession* continues to recognize that “the purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error”. But it here recognizes there will be a point when branches of the Visible Church so degenerate into “synagogues of Satan” that the remnant must transfer membership if reform efforts fail. Certainly, churches that ordain women and homosexuals as pastors should be abandoned, as should those that deny the virgin birth, the “five solas”, the resurrection, heaven, the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, and the deity of Christ. R.C. Sproul warns us, “We are not to be visibly identified with an apostate body.”⁴⁹¹ There are many mainline denominations that fit this description. Yet be encouraged that “there shall be always a [true] Church on earth” (Matt. 16:18).

WCF 25:6: *There is no other head of the Church, but the Lord Jesus Christ;(n) 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.(o)* (n)Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22. (o)Matt. 23:8-10; 2 Thess. 2:3-4, 8-9; Rev. 13:6.

This comment, “there is no other head of the Church, but the Lord Jesus Christ” might help interpret and qualify issues raised earlier about ch. 23:3-4. Only Christ rules over the Visible Church, and not through the Pope (Popery), nor through a Bishop (Prelacy), and not through the King of the State

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid, 119-120. Richard Bacon concurs, emphasizing as Engelsma does also that the visible church is called the *household of God* (Eph. 2:19), “A corrupt steward in a house does not make the house corrupt, any more than tares in a whet field makes it into something else.” (Bacon, 32). “Before speaking to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus spoke first to His disciples (Matthew 23:1) and explained that it is reformation and not revolution that we must desire ... Christ placed a difference or distinction between separating from the wickedness *in* a church and separating *from* the church.” (43). “The apostles continued to attend the temple and the synagogues until they were cast out of them. Over time it would prove to be the method, especially of Paul, to go first to the synagogue and only after being cast out of the synagogue to separate from it. Why? Because in the synagogue was Moses’ seat.” (44). “We must remember that mere contact with sinners does not cause us to become sinners (First Corinthians 5:10) ... There have been times in the history of redemption during which sinners have outnumbered saints even in the visible church [Ask Elijah]. If we live in one such time, we will find no solution in deserting our posts in the face of the enemy.” (46). “A careful examination of all that was out of order in the Church at Corinth reveals a church defective in its understanding of the gospel its administration of the sacraments and church discipline. Yet, for all its difficulties, Paul did not hesitate to refer to it as a true church ... Paul made no excuse for the Church at Corinth and left them no room to make excuses for themselves, but neither did he counsel any in the church to depart due to the wickedness and corruptions which remained in it.” (48).

⁴⁹¹ Sproul, vol. 3, 57.

(Erastianism), but through the plurality of elders in congregations and presbyteries.⁴⁹² While Reformed churches today shy away from identifying the Pope as the Antichrist, we do not. In the papist system, the office of the Pope “exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God” by usurping Christ’s authority as mediatorial prophet, priest, and king.⁴⁹³ Van Dixhoorn informs us that “... for decades permission was granted for church officers to take exception to this final line ... It was finally removed from mainstream American editions of the confession in 1903, and a similar revision ... has been adopted by subsequent confessional American Presbyterians.”⁴⁹⁴

Van Dixhoorn also helps see the connection and transition of thought between these two chapters. “In moving from chapter 25 to chapter 26 the Westminster Confession of Faith shifts from the topic of the headship of Christ with his whole church to the union of Christ with every Christian.”⁴⁹⁵

Some closing thoughts by Thomas Watson:

From *The Ten Commandments*: “THE third way to escape the wrath and curse of God, and obtain the benefit of redemption by Christ, is the diligent use of ordinances, in particular, ‘the word, sacraments, and prayer’” (211). “Give great attention to the word preached. Let nothing pass without taking special notice of it. ‘All the people were very attentive to hear him.’ Luke xix 48. They hung upon his lips. ‘Lydia, a seller of purple, which worshipped God, heard us, whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.’ Acts xvi 14” (213). “The devil gives many hearers a sleepy sop, so that they cannot keep their eyes open at a sermon. They eat so much on the Lord’s-day that they are more fit for the pillow and couch than the temple. Frequent and customary sleeping at a sermon shows high contentment and irreverence of the ordinance ... it is the devil’s seedtime ... Matt xiii 25 ... Be serious and attentive in hearing the word” (214).

⁴⁹² Here Dickson, a contemporary of the Divines and writer of its first commentary several years later helps us understand what we have discussed in properly understanding the Confession’s meaning in relation of church and state and government calling synods or assemblies per earlier comments on 23:3 and later on with 31:2: “Do not likewise the Erastians and others, as Arminians, err who make the supreme magistrate the head of the church? Yes. By what reasons are the confuted? I. ... the Protestant religion, as it is contained in the *Harmony of Confessions* [written by Theodore Beza], especially in the Confession of Faith recorded in the first parliament of King James the Sixth, lately ratified and confirmed, doth not acknowledge any supreme head or governor in the church, neither ... potentate, save the Lord Christ, from whom alone all subordinate power and authority is derived to the officers of his own church ... 2. ... if the supreme magistrate be a church officer, he must derive his power from Christ, and must be a spiritual and ecclesiastic head and governor, not a civil only. And if such, then Christ hath devolved his own place and office upon him, which is without Scripture proof ... 3. ... if the supreme magistrate be head of the church, he must have a right to this title, either by human law or by a divine warrant. Laws of a nation cannot make him head of the church, because such laws cannot make him an ecclesiastic and spiritual officer.” (203).

⁴⁹³ Dickson gives the following arguments (I share in part) for properly understanding the identification of the Pope as the Antichrist: “1. ... he is not one single man, but an order and race of men, succeeding to one another in that same state and office; which you will see by comparing *1 John* 4:3 and *2 Thess.* 2:7-8 together. 2. His coming is after the manner of Satan (*2 Thess.* 2:9). 3. As to his name, he calls himself a Christian, but in very truth [he is] an adversary to Christ; and by consequence, one that denies Jesus to be the Christ; (*Rev.* 17:14; 19:19; *2 Thess.* 2:8; *1 John* 2:23). 4. He sitteth in the temple of God as God (*2 Thess.* 2:4). 5. He ruleth in the great city and exercises dominion over the kings of the earth. 6. He deceiveth them that dwell on the earth with lying wonders and miracles (*2 Thess.* 2:9; *Rev.* 13:14-15) ...” (204).

⁴⁹⁴ Van Dixhoorn, 348.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 349.

“Of the Communion of the Saints”

WCF 26:1: *All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head by His Spirit and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory:(a) and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces,(b) and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.(c)*

(a)1 John 1:3; Eph. 3:16-19; John 1:16; Eph. 2:5-6; Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:5-6; 2 Tim. 2:12. (b)Eph. 4:15-16; 1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Cor. 3:21-23; Col. 2:19. (c)1 Thess. 5:11, 14; Rom. 1:11-12, 14; 1 John 3:16-18; Gal. 6:10.

What is “communion”? A.A. Hodge defines it as “... a mutual interchange of offices between parties, which flows from a common principle in which they are united.”⁴⁹⁶ Our fellowship with Christ means He shares with us in all our experiences (inside and out, negative and positive).⁴⁹⁷ This union is legal (by Christ’s Federal Headship representation), filial (Christ is our Brother and makes His Father our adoptive Father), and vital (our ongoing source of spiritual life and love infused by His Spirit). By virtue of our union with Christ, we have union with one another. “... this chapter ... has no adequate counterpart in other Confessions”,⁴⁹⁸ which demonstrates its authors’ deep concern for the life, fellowship, and mutual growth of believers as a family (this term is also used in the Apostle’s Creed). We stand and live as a united people who are obliged to serve one another’s “mutual good, both the inward and the outward man”. Such service reflects the ministry of the Word and prayer by the pastor and elders, and the ministry of mercy by the deacons. Notice all the Scriptures given that use the word “together”. We are family. Family loves and cares for its members.

WCF 26:2: *Saints by profession are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God; and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; (d) as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities, and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.(e)*

(d)Heb. 10:24-25; Acts 2:42, 46; Isa. 2:3; 1 Cor. 11:20. (e)Acts 2:44-45; 1 John 3:17; 2 Cor. 8-9; Acts 11:29-30.

You are bound by your profession to “maintain a holy fellowship and communion”, for your worship attendance and participation in fellowship and service blesses others, and your lack thereof hinders them: “Being part of the body of Christ carries both benefits and obligations.”⁴⁹⁹ Such mutuality should go beyond our own congregation through communications and financial support. Pay attention to the frequent “one another” phrases in the NT epistles. Sproul expresses what our communion in Christ together should be: “We weep with those who weep, and we rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15). That is communion, and that is the essence of biblical community.”⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁶ Hodge, 321.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid, 324.

⁴⁹⁸ Spear, 135-136.

⁴⁹⁹ Spear, 137.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid, 68.

WCF 26:3: *This communion, which the saints have with Christ, doth not make them, in any wise, partakers of the substance of His Godhead; or to be equal with Christ, in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous. (f) Nor doth their communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or property which each man hath in his goods and possessions. (g)*
 (f) Col. 1:18-19; 1 Cor. 8:6; Isa. 42:8; 1 Tim. 6:15-16; Ps. 45:7 with Heb. 1:8-9. (g) Exod. 20:15; Eph. 4:28; Acts 5:4.

Our mystical union with Christ should be understood as covenanted, relationally united persons (such as marriage's legal bond), not a mixing of natures with the Godhead.⁵⁰¹ R.C. Sproul points out that "communion" means "with-union", and notes that the difference between Christianity and pagan mysticism is that we do not lose our personal identity (and responsibility) in the deity, but rather gain "a heightened understanding of the self as it relates to God".⁵⁰² He also notes, the *Confession* makes it clear that, "There is a difference between community and communalism. We are to show love and concern to our neighbors, but that does not require us to divest ourselves of private property."⁵⁰³ Giving our possessions to others is always volitional, never coercive (Acts 5).⁵⁰⁴

Some closing thoughts by Thomas Watson:

From *The Ten Commandments*: "Faith ... gives us union with Christ, and by virtue of this we have communion with him and his body and blood" (224). From *The Good Shepherd*: "It is Satan's great design to set his cloven foot among God's people to make division and contention among the sons of Zion. The devil's best music is discord. Oh! Let all Christ's people, His sheep, flock together, and associate in love. Those who hope to meet together in heaven should not fall out by the way. Unity is the great music in heaven. There is unity in the Trinity—and unity among saints would be a great blessing on earth. For Christians to unite is their interest and wisdom; union is their strength, union is their glory and their ornament ... Let the sheep of Christ unite together. When the saints are harmoniously united, then they adorn their blessed Shepherd, the Lord Jesus."

Suggested Readings:

- "The Visible Church: It's Nature, Unity, and Witness", J. G. Vos: http://bluebanner.org/assets/pdfs/THE_VISIBLE_CHURCH_ITS_NATURE_UNITY_AND_WITNESS.pdf
- *The Visible Church and the Outer Darkness*, Richard Bacon: http://www.fpcr.org/blue_banner_articles/visible1.htm
- *Built upon the Rock: A Study of the Doctrine of the Church*, Richard Bacon (see PECA's website)
- "The Relationship of the Reformed Churches of Scotland, England, Western & Eastern Europe from the 1500's to the 1700's", Chris Colburne, <http://www.epc.org.au/historical/the-relationship-of-the-reformed-churches-of-scotland-england-western-eastern-e-4.html>
- *Bound to Join and A Defense of the Church Institute*, David Engelsma (the latter a defense of the former)

⁵⁰¹ Dickson, 208: "... the union of the saints with Christ is by faith, not indeed by a personal union (*Eph.* 3:17).

⁵⁰² Ibid, 62-3. See also John Robbins' *Trinity Review* article, "Union in Christ" (Sept., 2004).

⁵⁰³ Sproul, vol. 3, 76.

⁵⁰⁴ Dickson, 209: "... the eighth command [*Exod.* 20:15], which is of perpetual use to all men, supposeth a distinction and propriety of goods. For if all goods were common, it were impossible to steal ... there should be no giving of alms; there should be not hospitality, which is contrary to the apostle (*Eph.* 4:28; *Heb.* 13:2)."

- “Belgic, Bound to Join, and an Extraordinary Situation” (defense of Engelsma’s book in response to a critique by Kevin Reed), Nathan Langerak: <http://standardbearer.rfpa.org/articles/belgic-bound-join-and-extraordinary-situation>
- *The Church*, Edmund P. Clowney (Note: we reject his view on women in the deaconate)
- “What is the Church?”, JC Ryle: http://www.tracts.ukgo.com/ryle_what_is_church.pdf
- *A Well Ordered Church: Laying a Foundation for a Vibrant Church*, William Boekestein and Daniel Hyde
- *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*, Jonathan Leeman
- *What is A Healthy Church*, Mark Dever
- “Union in Christ”, *The Trinity Review* (September, 2004), John Robbins (see PECA’s website)
- PRPC lecture on Revelation 12:1-6, “Belong to the Visible Church (the Mother of Christ and His Seed)”, on sermonaudio.com/puritanchurch in The Revelation series.
- PRPC sermon: “Church Membership is Mandated and Matters”: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=95212051557645>

Assigned Readings for Wednesdays, June 29 and July 6: Of the Sacraments and Baptism

- WCF 27 and 28 and corresponding Scripture references
- LC 161-167 and corresponding Scriptures
 - SC 91-95 and corresponding Scriptures