

THE LARGER AND SHORTER CATECHISMS.

WHAT MAN OUGHT TO BELIEVE CONCERNING GOD

QUESTION # 62.

(Larger Catechism)

Q #62. *What is the visible church?*

A. The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion,¹ and of their children.²

Question 1—*Why is the visible church called a society?*

Answer—The church is called a society because of the communion its members have with one another, 1 Cor. 12:12, 13. It appears from the New Testament that Paul directs his epistles to particular churches, some larger, some smaller, 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; so that we even read of churches in particular houses, 1 Cor. 16:19. Nonetheless, the church is spoken of as singular in number, as if it were one society, Acts 8:3. Paul's claim with regard to himself was that he persecuted not any particular church but all of the churches wherever he went, Phil. 3:6; Gal. 1:13. These he speaks of in the plural, explaining what he meant by "persecuting the church," Gal. 1:22; and this church is characterized by its communion of faith, Gal. 1:23.

Additionally, by "the church" we must understand all the churches, as the apostles and prophets were not sent to any particular church but to every church into which they came, and the pastors and teachers are related to this whole, 1 Cor. 12:28. Thus, when we speak of the church in the singular, we must understand collectively all those which are churches of Christ in the world, Eph. 4:4-6.

Question 2—*Wherein does this church consist?*

Answer—This church is said to consist in the company of believers, for Christ's body consists of those, and of those only, in whom he dwells by his Holy Spirit, Rom. 8:9-11. The church is visible only in the sense that believers are visible:

First, it consists of men and women, in distinction from disembodied spirits or angels, cf. Heb. 12:22, 23. Its members are not those unseen, such as ministering spirits who, unrevealed to our senses, continually minister to the heirs of salvation, Heb. 1:7, 14. We confess that the church on earth consists of visible men and women, Acts 10:44-48.

Second, this church is visible because its members manifest their faith by their works, Jas. 2:18. The fact that they are members of Christ's body becomes notorious, 1 Pet. 2:12. Goodness is an inward quality, and yet it is outwardly manifested, so that the good are known and recognized as such, Matt. 5:16. Thus, though faith is an inward principle, it reveals itself in the confession of the truth and in a holy life, so that believers may be known as a tree is known by its fruit, Matt. 7:17. This visible church consists of all such as, in all ages and places of the world, do profess the true religion, Rev. 7:9. Wherever there are true believers, there is the true church, and wherever such believers confess their faith, and illustrate it by a holy life, there the church is made visible, Ps. 22:27-31.

¹ 1 Cor. 1:2; 12:13; Rom. 15:9-12; Rev. 7:9; Ps. 2:8; 22:27-31; 45:17; Matt. 28:19, 20; Isa. 59:21.

² 1 Cor. 7:14; Acts 2:39; Rom. 11:16; Gen. 17:7.

Third, the church is visible because believers are, by their effectual calling, separated from the world, Jas. 4:4; 2 Cor. 6:17. They have different objects, are animated by a different spirit, and are distinguished by a different life than this world, Phil. 2:15. When the Holy Spirit enters into the heart, renewing it after the image of God, uniting the soul to Christ as a living member of his body, the man becomes a new creature, 2 Cor. 5:17. He renounces the ways of the world, separates himself from false religions, becomes an open worshiper of Christ, a visible member of the church, which is Christ's body, Ps. 2:8; 45:17. The true church is thus visible throughout the world, not as an organization, not as an external society, but as the living body of Christ, Rom. 15:9-12; Isa. 59:21. This true church is always visible, apart from any outward organization, and in the midst of all organizations, so that it can be traced and verified, in all ages and in all parts of the world, Matt. 28:19, 20.

Fourth, this true church is visible in the external church, just as the soul is visible in the body, Jas. 2:26; Matt. 7:16. So, the external church, as embracing those who profess the true religion, with their various organizations and confessions of the truth, make it apparent that the true church, the body of Christ, exists, and where it is, Acts 16:13-15. However, these external communities are not the church any more than the body is the soul, Matt. 10:28; they are its manifestations, and its residence, Rev. 2:1, 8, 12.

Fifth, this church must retain its essential attributes in every stage and state of its existence, in prosperity and in adversity, Matt. 16:18. Yet, it is undeniable that this church has existed in a state of dispersion, for there have been periods when the whole external organization lapsed into idolatry or heresy, Rom. 11:2-5. Thus, the visibility of an external society is not part of that which constitutes the visible church, *cf.* Matt. 26:56. The designation of those as part of the church, or Christians, based upon their profession of the true religion, does not guarantee there is an actual possession of the inward quality, or state of mind, but simply to acknowledge the claim, Rom. 2:28, 29.

Question 3—*Does this visible church consist only of those who profess the true religion?*

Answer—Besides being composed of those who profess the true religion, 2 Cor. 1:1; it also encompasses those who are their children, Luke 1:55. Those who are the children of believers are to be accounted members of this visible church because:

First, the visible church, being the society of those who profess the true religion, do so being moved by the secret impulse of the Spirit of God, 1 Cor. 12:3. This discovery of their election by their profession of the true religion, Acts 13:48; is an indication that the divine promises pertain to them, Rom. 9:4. Now, unto those unto whom the promises belong, it is said they also belong to their children, Acts 2:39.

Second, men stand in a relation to God by way of federal headship, 1 Cor. 15:22; and this federal headship is distributed amongst the families of mankind, Amos 3:2. Thus, there are there both blessings and curses that accrue to the children from their fathers, Ex. 20:5, 6. Conversely, the obedience or disobedience of children can nullify these blessings or curses, Ezek. 18:14-20. Yet, the greatest blessings, the blessings of the covenant, are reserved for those who imitate faithful parents in obedience, Eph. 6:1. With those children, God has promised to establish his covenant, Gen. 17:7. Therefore, the children of believers, being branches from a holy root, are accounted federally holy, heirs of the promises, and members of that visible church, Rom. 11:16; 1 Cor. 7:14.

Third, this visible church professes the true religion because it is the church which hears and obeys that which is revealed in the Word of God, by the hearing of faith, Gal.

3:2, 5. Unto those to whom this Word comes, there is a promise to be claimed, Jer. 32:39, 40.