

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 62

Halifax, 21 December 2008

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, and of their children.

Introduction:

Last week, Question 61 asked us if all who hear the gospel and live in the church are saved...

- And I showed you from scripture that not all who hear the gospel and live in the visible church are saved, but only those who are true members of the church invisible.
- I urged you not to be presumptuous as so many are who suppose that because they are baptised and connected to the church, their way to heaven is certain.
 - In Hebrews 3 we saw that church members are warned to beware that there is not in any of them a wicked heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.
 - You need to make sure that the kind of faith you have in Jesus Christ is the kind that could never find another place to go!
 - If you really have come to rejoice in Him as the apostle and high priest who reconciles you to God...
 - You won't have anywhere else to go—
 - Where else could you possibly go if you believe that the Son of God has shed His blood to atone for your sins...
 - Where are you ever going to find anything to compare to that?
 - If God has opened your eyes and given you faith in this, you will never depart.
- But we also saw that there are those in the visible church who do not have real faith...
 - Oh yes, there is a certain sort of faith in Christ—but it is only a temporary faith.
 - It is a faith that does not continue to trust God when the day of testing comes.
 - It is only a superficial faith, and soon there is something more pleasing that comes along and it is abandoned.
 - This is what you are warned about in Hebrews.

Now when some people see this they may say,

- Well then what is the visible church?
 - If many of the members are only superficially joined to Christ, how can we know where the church is?
 - What use it to even have a visible church?

- These are the very questions that come next in the catechism...
 - This week, “What is the visible church?”
 - And next week, “What are the special privileges of the visible church?” In other words, “What use is it to be a member if many of the members are not true?”

We are only looking at the first of these two questions this afternoon...

- What is the visible church?
 - And you see the answer from the catechism:
 - “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, and of their children.”
 - You see in this answer that the church is not made up of those who can prove that they are born again, for nobody can do that to others...
 - but it is made up of those who profess the true religion—
 - which profession includes a clear testimony of faith and a walk that is outwardly holy (which is all that we can see).
 - They are a society set apart to God by their confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

For our scripture reading this afternoon, I want to read to you from 1 Cor 1:1-3 where Paul writes to the visible church at Corinth...

- READ 1 Cor 1:1-3.

I. See here the existence of a visible society of holy people...

A. First, I want you to see that it is a visible society...

1. Paul is writing the church of God which is at Corinth.
 - He is not writing to everyone in the city of Corinth, but to the church at Corinth.
 - The word translated church is *ekklhsia* which means “an assembly of called out ones.”
 - It was a common word that would have been used for a town meeting of persons that were called out to transact community business.
2. That this was a visible society is made very clear in 1 Cor 5 when Paul is admonishing the Corinthians not to eat with scandalous church members,
 - but to rebuke them and remove them if they will not repent...
 - In giving this admonition, he makes it clear that the membership of church is visible—that there is a distinction between those who are inside and those who are outside...
 - Listen to what he says in 1 Cor 5:9-13:

- **1 Cor 5:9-13: “I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet *I* certainly *did* not *mean* with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what *have I to do* with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.’ ”**
 - You see here that there is a visible distinction between those who are inside and those who are outside,
 - and that persons who are inside can be removed from the society...
 - and that those who are outside are people of this world and those who are inside are those “named a brother.”
3. That the church is a visible society also appears in other places such as Hebrews 13:17 where the members are told:
- **Heb 13:17: Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.**
 - If these rulers have to give an account for the flock, they have to know which ones are considered a part of the flock...
 - There must be a visible membership

TRANS> But notice that this is not only a visible society,

B. It is also a holy society.

1. The word holy is ‘*ἅγιος*’ *hag’-ee-os* in Greek...
 - And it speaks of what is pure, set apart from all that is corrupt and defiled and sinful...
 - God is, of course, declared to be holy again and again in scripture...
 - And because He is holy, everything that comes before Him must also be holy or His wrath will break out against it.
 - Now of course, fallen human beings don’t admire such an attribute of God,
 - but it is the one that makes Him the most God-like and beautiful.
 - It is His glory to have nothing whatever to do with sin.
- Therefore, the whole Bible gives us instructions about how we, who are sinners, can approach a holy God.
 - In the Old Testament, elaborate rituals are prescribed—baptisms with blood and with water—offerings and all sorts of other things...

- And in the New Testament, the blood of Christ is seen to be the thing that sanctifies sinners so that they can approach God.
2. And so it should come as no surprise to see in 1 Cor 1:2 that the church of God is made up of those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus...
- a. Understand that the word sanctified is ‘*agiazw*’ *hag-ee-ad’-zo*
 - You see how similar it is to ‘*agiov*’ *hag’-ee-os*.
 - The word *sanctify* means to make holy.
 - So one who is a member of the visible church is one who is sanctified in Christ Jesus...
 - They are living under Him as the head of the church—as the one who shed His blood for us to make us holy so that we could approach God.
 - b. And you see that they are not only sanctified in Christ, but also that they are “called saints.”
 - In the NKJV it says, “called to be saints” but the words “to be” are in italics because they are not in the original...
 - so it literally reads “called saints.”
 - Now you need to know that the word “saints” is the translation of the word ‘*agiov*’ *hag’-ee-os* in the original...
 - The word that means holy...
 - So the church of God at Corinth is made up of persons who are called saints or called holy ones.
 - c. And I want you to understand that everyone in the visible church is called a saint, a holy one.
 - It is not a special class of more saintly persons—but all who are members...
 - Even the ones who are false are still set apart in Christ—they are set apart from the world by Him and are called holy for as long as they remain in the church...
 - And, as we saw last week in Hebrews 10:29, if they do not truly value the blood of Christ by which they were sanctified as a holy thing,
 - they are all the worse for having been sanctified by it!
 - Heb 10:29: **“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?”**
 - You see that they were visibly set apart by the blood of Christ, but did not really have any regard for His blood.
 - For this their condemnation is all the greater!

- d. But despite the presence of hypocrites,
 - the visible church is holy because Christ sanctifies it by His blood.
 - God is honoured because all who are part of His assembly are acknowledged to be so by the sanctification of Jesus Christ and so are called holy.

TRANS> So you see that the church is visible and you see that it is holy, sanctified by Jesus Christ.

C. And now thirdly, I want you to see that it is a society of those who call on the name of the Lord.

1. You see that at the end of verse 2...
 - 1 Cor 2:2: **"...with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours."**
2. We ran into this expression a few weeks ago when we studied question 60 about the impossibility of salvation for those who have never heard the gospel...
 - We looked at Romans 10 where it talks about the need to confess with the mouth the Lord Jesus and to believe in the heart that God raised Him from the dead...
 - And then it says, "Whoever call on the name of the Lord will be saved."
 - And it asks how they can call on Him if they have never had the gospel preached to them?
 - But you see, this calling upon the Lord is both an inward thing and an outward thing.
 - It is done with the mouth when one confesses Jesus as Lord and Saviour,
 - and it is done with the heart when one believes.
 - The visible church is made up of those who at least outwardly call on the name of the Lord...
 - we cannot see what they do in the heart, but we see what they do with their outward profession...
 - And if they call on the name of the Lord, we receive them.
3. We know that persons who outwardly call on the name of the Lord are considered members of the visible church because such persons,
 - if they later prove to be hypocrites, are to be removed from the church.
 - In Acts 8:13, Simon the Sorcerer is to believe and he is baptised,
 - but only a short time later he is cut off as one who is judged to be "poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity" in verse 23.
 - He is just one example of a person who was received by profession and then removed when his profession was shown to be false.

TRANS> So there you have the visible church as visible, called holy, and consisting of those who, at least outwardly, call upon the name of the Lord.

II. Now I want you to see the universal nature of the church—that it is made of persons from all ages and all places of the world who profess the Lord.

- For this, we will take as our scripture reading Romans 15:7-13.
- A. You can see in this passage that Christ comes to the Jews to confirm the promises made to the fathers...
1. Essentially the promise is that God would be their God and they would be His people...forever...
 - Jesus Christ confirmed this promise by shedding His blood for them to atone for their sins.
 - Having done this, they, who trust in Him, are assured of their everlasting acceptance with God and of their full pardon...
 - He also confirmed the promises of God by pouring out His Spirit upon them after He had ascended into heaven to be with them forever...
 - The Spirit working in them forever to make them God's own people.
 2. This is the promise that God made all through the Old Testament,
 - That though they were sinners, yet He would be their God and they would be His people.
 - Just how this would be done was at last made clear when Jesus died and rose again.
 3. It all begins as soon as Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden for their sin...
 - a. Right then and there, God promises that He will set the seed of the woman at enmity with the seed of the serpent...
 - There will be two kinds of people in their world...
 - Those who remain in bondage to sin, Satan, and death...
 - And those who are redeemed and so become their enemies.
 - Right away, we find sacrifices involving the shedding of blood being offered to atone for sin in view of God's promised redemption...
 - And you have a holy people who call on the Lord, looking to Him for salvation...
 - And you have the wicked rejecting God's salvation and approaching God on their own terms.
 - The seed of the woman is the church and the seed of the serpent is the world.

- b. Then in Genesis 12, you have the calling of Abraham (or Abram as he was then).
- And to him, the Lord renews the promise of salvation,
 - declaring to him that as the nations just now tried to bless themselves at Babel by united human effort—
 - to make a name for themselves and to make themselves secure...
 - which effort was foiled by God confusing their languages...
 - So now *the Lord* would bless Abram...
 - making his name great and blessing those that bless him and cursing those that curse him...
 - And He promises that in His seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed...
 - that is the promise of blessing to the Gentiles!
 - They cannot bless themselves, but God will bless them with His salvation!
 - There can be no blessing for anyone unless they are reconciled with God.
- c. And so God secures His promise to Abraham,
- giving to him the sign of circumcision to set him apart from the world as a member of the visible church—
 - as one who is part of God's holy nation and as one who calls on the name of the Lord.
 - And so the promise of salvation is given to Abraham and his seed,
 - and they become the visible church until the Gentiles are added in the day of Christ.

TRANS> And notice what Romans 15 says about the Gentiles...

- B. They are brought to glorify God for His mercy (His mercy promised in the covenant) to Israel.
1. They do not obtain some separate blessing, but they are blessed with the mercy that was promised to Israel that is now given in Christ.
 - The Jews, headed up by Christ, are now seen to go among the Gentiles, confessing among them what God had done...
 - The Jews go among Gentiles praising God for Jesus Christ and the good news concerning Him...(Romans 15:9)
 - And then the Gentiles are called to rejoice with His people.
 - You can see that in Romans 15:10-11.

2. In verse 12, you see that Christ becomes their Lord also.
 - He reigns over them and they hope in Him, just as believing Israel does.
 - It is one and the same covenant as Paul also testifies in Galatians 3 when he declares that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile...
 - In Gal 3:26-29, he says:
 - Gal 3:26-29: **For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**
3. The promise in view is the promise of salvation given to Abraham in Genesis 12 that would spill over to the Gentiles.
 - So the visible church expands from Israel to include all the nations—all who call upon the name of the Lord.
 - It is now a world-wide kingdom including persons from all places of the world who profess the Lord.
 - The church does not begin with the Gentiles,
 - but the Gentiles are grafted into the church that was visible in Abram and his seed, even Israel.

III. And now lastly, I want to show you that the church is made up not only of all those from every nation who profess the true religion, but also of their children.

- A. The question the members of the church must ask is this: How does the Lord look at our children?
 1. We are no longer of Satan, but through God's mercy are redeemed in Christ and are numbered with His people.
 - We are called saints, being sanctified in Christ Jesus.
 - We are among those who profess Him and who call upon His name.

TRANS> But how does the Lord regard our children?

2. There are only three possibilities...
 - a. Either He regards them as of Satan until they are old enough to profess him and be added to the church...
 - b. Or He regards them as members of the church with us as we train them up in the Lord as those who call upon Him...
 - c. Or He regards them as something in between—born in sin, but not accountable for it—which seems impossible since they suffer and die which God would not allow unless He had charged them with sin.
 - So really there are only the two possibilities.

- Either they are members or they are not members of the visible church.

TRANS> The only way to answer this question about the status of children is to see what God says and does concerning them.

B. And what we find is that the Lord always deals with households.

1. Right from the beginning, he promises the woman that He will put enmity between her seed and the serpent's seed...
 - And we find Cain and Abel offering sacrifices to God, calling upon His name as those who are redeemed.
 - They are not offered this status as God's people, but it is given to them...
 - given to them until it is forfeited by the apostasy of Cain...
 - demonstrating that he is of the seed of the serpent...
 - and bringing forth children that are also of Satan.
 - But you see, the gracious presumption is that Cain and Abel both belong to God until the contrary is demonstrated.
2. The same presumption is seen again in the time of Noah...
 - a. Noah finds grace in the eyes of the Lord—
 - He is one who is sanctified and one who calls on the name of the Lord, looking to Him for His promised salvation...
 - And his sons are included in that salvation with him.
 - b. They are included until apostasy is found in Ham, at which time he is cut off and a curse is placed upon him.
 - He is no longer of the promise but of the curse because of apostasy.
3. But this gracious inclusion of the children of the visible church is most clearly seen in the calling of Abram...
 - a. The apostasy at Babel has cut off the families of the earth from the Lord,
 - but He comes to Abram to promise salvation first to him—
 - then to his seed (his offspring) and through His seed (that is, Christ)—
 - and then to the nations.
 - b. God gives Him circumcision as the sign of the covenant between Him and Abraham...
 - And in giving it, He commands that it be given to all his sons and even to his servants...
 - The gracious declaration is that they are part of the covenant...
 - that even as the Lord is Abraham's God, so He is the God of his descendants.

- That is what God expressly declares.
 - The children are considered members of the church until such time as they apostatise...
 - And such apostasy happens...with Ishmael and then with Esau.
 - But these children all start out, by God's gracious appointment, as counted among His people—
 - as members of the holy nation.
- c. And as they are a holy nation,
- Those who do not keep God's covenant are to be cut off...
 - Anyone who no longer confesses hope in God's salvation or who refuses to walk in God's ways is to be cut off...
 - just as we saw in 1 Corinthians 5 which quotes from the OT...
 - Remove the wicked man from among yourselves...
 - They are to be cut off from the covenant community...
 - no longer regarded as members of the visible church.
 - But from birth until apostasy, they are to be counted as the seed.

TRANS> That is the way God dealt with His people in the Old Testament.

- And in the New Testament, when Christ comes to confirm the promises made to the Fathers in the Old Testament and to expand them to incorporate the Gentiles,
 - there is no mention of any change in God's inclusion of children with their professing parents.
 - After all, the promise Christ confirms is the promise God made to Abraham that He would be God to him and to his descendents...
 - And that He would pour out His Spirit on all from the least to the greatest.
 - That they would be His people and that He would be their God.
 - There is no indication that children are cut off...

C. Instead we see that children are still counted as members of the visible church until apostasy is found in them.

1. This is seen in Acts 2:38-39.

- Peter is explaining to his Jewish audience that Christ has come to bless them as God had promised...
 - And that He has poured out His Spirit on all flesh, from the least to the greatest.
- And in calling them to repent and be baptised in the name of Christ, the mediator of the covenant,
 - He uses language that was very familiar to them—

- language that can only be understood one way if the Old Testament is taken into consideration...
 - He says,
 - “The promise is to you and to your children”
 - Now he is talking about the promise of the Holy Spirit and of the forgiveness of sin through Christ.
 - And he is getting ready to incorporate them visibly into Christ with the sign of baptism...
 - and he tells them that the promise is for them and their children.
 - We can only expect that they would take this the way it had always been understood...
 - That their children who could not yet speak for themselves were to be incorporated with them into the covenant community now headed up by Jesus Christ.
 - That even as their children had always been included with them, so now they were to be included until such time as they showed themselves to be unworthy by apostasy.
 - For Peter to mention their children only as if to say,
 - “your children will be blessed to if they come to Christ” would serve no purpose...
 - Of course that would be true—
 - All who could hear the call and respond were invited to come...
 - but Peter mentions children who were not of sufficient age to come—and he says they are included with their parents...
 - You and your children.
 - And then he also mentions another classification of persons...
 - the Gentiles, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.
 - The promise of the Spirit is given to Gentiles—all Gentiles to whom the gospel is brought—all who are called...
 - The promise is not to those who are never called, but it is to all others even as it is to the Jews and their children to whom Peter is speaking.
2. In addition to this, there is that special assurance given in 1 Cor 7 to those who were converted, but whose spouses were not converted.
- a. What becomes of the children of such a union?
 - Are they to be counted as the seed of the serpent or the seed of Christ?

- Are they to be regarded as holy (saints) or as unclean?
- b. Paul explains in 1 Cor 7:14 that the Lord graciously,
 - instead of declaring the household to be unclean because of the unbeliever
 - rather declares it to be holy because of the believer.
 - If it were not so, he says, your children would be unclean, but now they are holy!
 - They are considered saints, holy ones, *agiazw hag-ee-ad'-zo*
 - The same word we saw describing the members of the visible church at Corinth in the 1 Cor 1:2.
 - They are counted as holy until they demonstrate otherwise...
 - They are included as members of the visible church.

TRANS> And now we shall look at one more passage to demonstrate the inclusion of children with the parents as members of the visible church...

3. And that would be in Mark 10:13-16 where parents are said to have brought their little children to Jesus...and Jesus is said to lay His hands upon them to bless them.
 - a. In this passage, the disciples are rebuking the parents for bringing these little ones, but we are told that Jesus is greatly displeased about this!
 - This was no empty ritual that was going on here!
 - When Jesus blesses His people, blessing comes upon them!
 - b. And Jesus gives the reason that these little children are to be brought to Him by their parents...
 - Mark 10:14 He says,
 - “Let the little children come to Me and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.”
 - Now I have actually heard those desperate for an argument to exclude children from the church that the only reason Jesus admits them is because they are excellent role models of receptivity...
 - for He does indeed present their example to all as model members of His church...
 - But He is certainly not excluding them as members by making them members who are worthy of imitation!
 - Far from it!
 - His whole point is that the children are not to be excluded because “of such is the kingdom of God.”
 - Not just people like them, but them!

- His whole argument is that they are to be brought because they are members of His kingdom...
 - If they were not, Jesus would not bless them...
 - When the Syro-Phoenician woman brings her demon possessed child to Jesus,
 - He refuses because these are not members of His kingdom...
 - But after she pleads with relentless faith, He gives her the blessing.

Conclusion:

So this is the visible church...

- It is composed of all who profess Christ from all ages and places together with their children...
 - Next week we will look at the benefit of belonging to the visible church.