

The Doctrine of the Visible and Invisible Church

Helpful Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8oOSZwYG9I>



R.C. Sproul: *The invisible church refers to those persons who are truly redeemed, truly regenerate and spiritually united with Christ. The invisible church is distinguished from the visible church because no man can read another person's heart. We look on the outward appearance, but God alone can read the heart.*

Selected Scripture References:

- Ephesians 1:22–23 *And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, [23] which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*
- Colossians 1:18 *And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.*
- 1 Corinthians 1:2 *To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours*
- 1 Corinthians 12:12 *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*
- Ephesians 4:11–12 *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*
- 1 John 2:19 *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*
- Matthew 7:21–23 *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [22] On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ [23] And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’*
- 2 Peter 1:5–11 *For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, [6] and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, [7] and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. [8] For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. [9] For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. [10] Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. [11] For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

Westminster Confession of Faith: Chapter 25 (Of the Church)

- 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 fullness of Him that fills all in all.

- 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.
- Unto this catholic visible Church Christ has 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 does, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.
- This catholic Church has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. 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.
- The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth to worship God according to His will.
- There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 exalts himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God.

Simply Put Podcast Transcript:

Not everyone who visibly appears in the church actually belongs to God's redeemed people. Today, Barry Cooper helps us make the crucial distinction between the visible and invisible church.

What do people mean when they talk about the visible and the invisible church?

I hope I'm not getting anyone into trouble here, but I have a—well, let's call him a close relative—who has a gift for getting into places he really shouldn't be. He once took me to an airshow when I was a child, breezily ushering me into an area that was intended exclusively for members of the media. When challenged by an official, he nonchalantly flashed a laminated badge—it might have been his library card, for all I know—and the door was duly opened for us. It was like that bit in Star Wars where Alec Guinness waves his hand mysteriously in front of the stormtroopers and says, "These aren't the droids you're looking for," except without a library card, obviously.

Not everyone who identifies as a member of the media is actually a member of the media. And in the same way, not everyone who seems to be a member of God's church is actually a member of God's church. That's what we mean by the visible and invisible church. The visible church comprises all those who claim to be or identify as followers of Christ. The invisible church comprises all those who really are followers of Christ.

Jesus tells a story about this in Matthew chapter 13. A man sows good seed in his field, and his servants are perplexed when the field turns out to have weeds in it as well as wheat. "We thought you only sowed wheat—what's with all the weeds?" The master says rather ominously, "An enemy has done this."

"So, what would you like us to do?" say the servants. "Shall we go and root up all the weeds?"

"No," says the master, "if you do that, you might accidentally root up the good stuff. Let them both grow together. I'll separate them once and for all when the time comes for the harvest."

The thing about wheat and weeds—as I discovered in the mid-1980s during a short-lived stint as a gardener—is that it isn't always easy to spot the difference between a weed and a prize-winning flower. Some of the most destructive weeds look beautiful. And some plants which look very unprepossessing in their early stages grow up to be the most stunning orchids. You really need an expert gardener to know the difference.

That's why it's called the invisible church. That person sitting in front of me on Sunday? I can't tell for sure what she'll grow up to be, spiritually speaking. It's invisible to me. If she tells me, "I'm a Christian," I'm delighted to take that claim at face value, but naturally I can't see into her heart to see if she truly belongs to Christ. That's invisible to all except the Master.

Now, why talk about the visible and invisible church at all? Why is this a useful distinction to make? Well, it's a sobering reminder that, as Jesus Himself said, not everyone who calls Jesus Lord will, in the final analysis, be counted as one of His people.

Matthew chapter 7 verses 22 and 23 are, I think, two of the most frightening verses in all of Scripture. In them, Jesus looks ahead to the day of judgment: "On that day [says Jesus] many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Not everyone in the visible church—those who go to church, take part in the worship, even preach from the pulpit—is a Christian. According to Jesus, there are many people in the church who believe they are Christians and are quite wrong.

We should examine ourselves, as the Apostle Paul says, to see whether we are in the faith. And as Jesus Himself says, the fact that we call Him Lord doesn't necessarily prove that. One of the signs that we are in the faith is that we are hearing His words and obeying them. Not that any of us are able to obey Christ perfectly, of course, but are we sincerely looking to obey Him and repenting when we fall short?

There's plenty of overlap between the invisible and visible church. Ordinarily, a member of the invisible church will also make it a priority to be a member of the visible church. But being a part of the visible church doesn't necessarily mean that we're part of the invisible church.

In John Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we meet a cheery character called Talkative. There's nothing Talkative loves more than to talk about the glorious truths of the gospel. He talks about the need for repentance and faith, the necessity of new birth, and the fact that our good works cannot save us. He knows how to refute false opinions and instruct others. He has full assurance that he is heading for heaven.

But he is mistaken.

What makes Talkative so frightening as a character is that he is absolutely convinced of his own salvation. Talkative has talked such a good talk for so long that he has managed to deceive himself. He has no idea that he is in terrible danger.

So, we should tread carefully. There is a way of talking about trusting and obeying Christ that can come to be a substitute for actually trusting and obeying Christ.