

Though Invisible, the Church is not Unnoticeable

The church is invisible. Only God can look into a person's heart to see if that person has faith in Christ. Yet, though the church is invisible, we can find where it is present. The means by which the presence of the church is identified are the means by which God produces the church. These means are the gospel and the sacraments. Where the gospel is proclaimed, where the sacraments are administered, there we are assured we will find believers. The gospel has the power to change hearts (Ro 1:16). Where it is proclaimed, there we are assured God is at work bringing people to faith (Isa. 55:10,11). We, then, call the means of grace the marks of the church, because they indicate to us where the church can be found.

Further, where you find believers, you will find fruits of their faith. You will find people holding to Christ and His Word in faith. Jesus said, "*If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples,*" (John 8:31). You will find people confessing their faith in Christ. This is a natural fruit of a Christian's faith. As the apostles said, "*We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard,*" (Acts 4:20). Where the church is present, we will find people holding to Christ in faith and confessing their faith in Him.

We call a visible gathering of people around the gospel the visible church because of the believers in its midst. This is not a church apart from the invisible church. Those believers in a visible gathering are members of the invisible church. That visible gathering of people around the gospel is called church for the sake of the believers in its midst. Yet we are also aware of the fact that there are hypocrites in visible gatherings of people around the gospel. Jesus told the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matt. 13:24-31, 36-43) to illustrate that unbelievers will be present in visible gatherings of people around the gospel. They will pretend to be Christians, but they mask an unbelieving heart by a pretence of Christian faith. That is why the Christian life cannot be an infallible mark for identifying the presence of the church, for the Christian life can be imitated. Ananias and Sapphira tried to imitate the Christian life. However, they were hypocrites whom the Lord exposed in the early church (Acts 5:1-11).

Hypocrites will be present in the visible church. Yet they are not part of the invisible church. Since they have no faith, they do not belong to Christ's church, even if they are associated with a group of believers who gather around the gospel.

Concerning these matters our confessions state:

However, the church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic

organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ. (Ap VII and VIII:5)

Although hypocrites and wicked people are indeed associated with this true church according to the external rites, nevertheless when the church is defined, it must be defined as that which is the living body of Christ and as that which is the church in fact as well as in name. (Ap VII and VIII:12)

Nor indeed are we dreaming about some platonic republic, as some have slanderously alleged. Instead, we teach that this church truly exists, consisting of true believing and righteous people scattered through the entire world. And we add its marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments. (Ap VII and VIII:20)

Therefore, in accordance with the Scriptures we maintain that the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we admit that in this life many hypocrites and wicked people, who are mixed in with these, participate in the outward signs. They are members of the church according to their participation in the outward signs and even hold office in the church. Nor does this detract from the efficacy of the sacraments when they are distributed by the unworthy, because they represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies [Luke 10:16], "Whoever listens to you listens to Me," (Ap VII and VIII:28).