

The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches a clear, systematic, and biblical doctrine of the Church in chapter XXV. In it the Westminster divines treated the invisible and visible aspects of the Church, the ministry and ordinances belonging to her, the relation of corruption and purity in the visible Church, and her head Christ Jesus, along with a rebuke of specific erroneous teachings concerning the Church. In differentiating between the “invisible” and “visible” Church, the divines did not teach that there are two churches. Section 4 states, “the Catholic Church has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible.” Clearly then the divines speak of one Church having both visible and invisible aspects. The Confession describes the Church on earth both as being pure and subject to error (sec. 5) at the same time. The focus of this chapter glorifies Christ the Head, who by his power and Spirit insures that there will always be a people on earth who believe in him.

The invisible Church according to our Confession consists of the whole number of the elect who shall ever be gathered to Christ. There is a spiritual unity in Christ of those saints who have passed into glory and those who remain on earth, “gather[ed] together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth;” Eph 1:10. The Belgic Confession of the continental Reformed Churches implies this spiritual union when it speaks of the Church’s spiritual unity in Christ (Art. 27) but it makes no explicit mention of the glorified members in heaven. The concept of an “invisible” aspect to the church is rooted in the secret and hidden providence of God which works faith in the elect by the power of the Holy Spirit, uniting them to Christ. Since no man can see this work, we realize that the true number of elect who are by faith made true members of Christ’s Church (Eph 1:18-23) is *invisible* to human observation. Although we do observe the evidence of the Spirit’s work in our brothers or sisters, we can’t discern it with total certainty. Indeed the Lord reminds us that there will be tares among the wheat in this life (Matt 13:30), that the fellowship of the redeemed will always include some who do not know the saving grace of God, despite all appearances. (1 Jn 2:19) This elect Church is called both Christ’s bride (Eph 5:23) and his body (Col 1:18) in Scripture. The Westminster Confession imitates this language by calling the Church Christ’s “spouse” and “body” under Christ her “Head”. I find it curious however, that the Westminster divines chose the term “spouse” to describe the Church’s relation to Christ, as if he had already taken her as a wife, whereas the Scriptures describe the Church as the bride, the betrothed, the future-wife of Christ.

The visible Church, (meaning the one Church as far as she may be seen by men on earth), consists of all those who profess the true religion and their children according to our Confession. (sec. 2) By “true religion” I understand the person and work of Jesus Christ. All humans on earth who claim to believe in the person and work of Christ as taught in the Scriptures and summarized in such faithful ancient creeds as the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds are to be considered members of the visible church. Although many deny with other false doctrines the same faith that they profess, and thus languish in spiritual ignorance and apostasy, their first claim to believe in Christ as he is revealed in the Bible sets them apart from the world. The divines note that the Church is *catholic* or universal, consisting of people of every nation under the gospel, although she had been confined to one nation in the Old Testament. As God revealed to Abraham (Gen 13:15) and as Peter proclaimed in his sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:39), the children of believers are to be considered members of the body of Christ, based on the promised blessing of God the seed of his people. They are members of Christ (according to appearances, or

“visibly”) unless they actively apostasize at some point in life as Ishmael and Esau did. Our confession teaches that out of the visible Church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. This statement is to be understood in context with the ministry of the Church described in the next section (3). God has ordained the Church to exist on earth as his kingdom, to exercise the keys of the kingdom. (Matt 16:19) God gave her the means of grace, the preaching of the word, the sacraments, and church discipline to awaken, build up and perfect believers until he returns. Believers who cut themselves off from this ministry put their souls in danger because they neglect the means that God has given to preserve and build them in the faith while on earth. The Belgic Confession, Article 28, makes even stronger statements than our Westminster Confession in this regard.

Our Confession then speaks of the ministry of the Church, of her exercise of the keys of the kingdom in her ministry, oracles and ordinances, and the purpose of them. (sec 3) First of all is the statement that Christ gave to the Church all the ministry, oracles, and ordinances which she possesses. The Church has no more power to add ordinances to those which Christ has given her than she does to neglect or delete them. God gave her a charter and the means for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life. But that’s not all. The divines teach (following the Scriptures) that he makes the means effective by His own presence and Spirit in the Church. Not only did Christ give the Church her marching orders, but he gave her all the means she needed plus the very strength and effectiveness to carry them out. According to our Confession, then, Salvation is of the Lord from beginning to end, yet he has ordained for salvation to come about through the secondary means of his Church, which he uses for his good pleasure and for his glory, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this world.

The visible Church has been at times “less visible” than at other times. (sec 4) As the Belgic Confession notes, during the reign of Ahab, Elijah felt like he must have been the only faithful Israelite left, but God told him he had “reserved unto Him seven thousand men, who had not bowed their knees to Baal.” (Art. 27, 1 Ki 19:18) There must have been similar times in the lives of Beringard, Wyckliffe, and Luther when they felt like they must have been the only ones left who had not given themselves over wholly to idolatry. Yet God had reserved a people to himself, however miniscule they might have seemed to the world. His promise shall always hold true that the “gates of hell shall not prevail” (Matt 16:18) against his Church, meaning that there will never fail be a people on earth, the visible Church, to worship him in spirit and in truth. “Particular churches” on earth, as our Westminster Confession describes, are more or less pure according to three given criteria: the preaching of the gospel, the administration of the ordinances, and public worship. By “particular churches” I understand the various denominations or independent congregations which claim to follow the Christ of the Bible. The gospel is the person and work of Jesus Christ relating to the salvation of man. The “ordinances” include the Christ-given ordinances of baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and church discipline. The Westminster Confession merges the two sacraments and church discipline into one head where the Scots’ Confession and the Belgic Confession (Art. 29) had separated them as two distinct marks of the true church. Only the Westminster Confession mentions the last as one of the marks of “purity” in the church, which is public worship.

Describing degrees of “more” or “less” purity in various “particular churches” brings us to the next section. Section 5 of our Confession teaches that every church in this life is subject both to a mixture of truth and error. Certainly this is a necessary conclusion based on an awareness of our own human sin natures. Even as reborn saints

we must always struggle with sin in this life. (1 Jn 1:8) By extension, the Church corporately struggles with sin, which produces error. This teaching of our Confession highlights a sober reality in the life of the Church. In contrast, the chapters of the Belgic Confession that deal with the Church blatantly omit such an awareness that even the “purest Churches” in this world have some error. I submit that with such statements as, “These two [the true and false] Churches are easily known and distinguished from each other” (Art. 29), the Belgic Confession tends to gloss over the amount of error that persists in even the purest Churches under heaven. Yet we do have marks which God has given us in his word to distinguish between the true church and all imposters, which our Confession calls, “Synagogues of Satan” quoting the book of Revelation. Some particular congregations or denominations of the visible church have become so unfaithful that they are churches in name only, but spiritually they have become daughters of Satan. Yet the divines remind us once more that even if all the professing churches on earth seem to have fallen from the faith, God will always preserve to himself a Church to worship him in obedience.

The final section of this chapter of the Confession states that there is no head of the Church except Jesus Christ. (Col 1:18) The “pope” of Rome, although he claims for himself all the same privileges, powers, and prerogatives that Christ has over his Church, cannot be the head of the catholic Church in any sense. In fact, as the divines here declare, he 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.” Let us consider exactly what the divines are saying here, and the evidence they give in support. Certainly, the apostle John warned us there would be many “antichrists” (1 Jn 4:3), that is, those who teach false doctrine in the name of Christ. But here our Confession specifically says that the pope of Rome is “*that* Antichrist” in the prophetic terms of 2 Thessalonians 2:4. The divines here refer to a particular fulfillment of prophecy that goes beyond the general apostolic teachings about false teachers. As evidence they offer that the pope, though Christ is the only head, takes to himself Christ’s exclusive claim to headship and oversight over the Church in Christ’s place. In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul prophesies of a “man of sin” who would “exalt himself, above all that is called God... in the temple of God.” Let those Presbyterians who prefer to revise or generalize this section of the Westminster Confession note the prophetic description that the divines cite that the Antichrist is to be one who exalts himself over the Church in place of Christ, her only head. Is this not what the prophecy says? Is there any other figure in history who could possibly fit this description as the pope does, who has called himself Universal Bishop and the Vicar of Christ on earth, claiming the power to forgive sins, and leading astray what to this day makes up the majority of professing Christians on earth?

The Westminster Confession of Faith, in chapter XXV, presents a doctrine of the Church which is balanced, biblical, and gives all glory to Christ. Christ is her only Head, her founder, her ruler and the sustainer who makes her ministry effective by his presence and Spirit. The Church is catholic, yet has particular congregations. She is spiritual, yet visible. Her purity, though never perfected in this life, can be measured by her faithfulness in the preaching of the word, the Christ-given ordinances, and her public worship. She is one body, the bride of Christ, both visible and invisible, whom, though particular Churches fall from the faith, and Antichrist exalts himself over her, the Lord himself will preserve and protect. Christ enables her to fulfill her charter to gather and perfect the saints to worship him until he returns.