

One Church, or Many?

Whether the Church Christ Founded Is a Visible Body or an Invisible Fellowship

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I. The Question, and Its Boundaries

Jesus used the word “church” twice in the Gospels, and the first use is a promise: “on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Every Christian communion claims some relation to the thing there promised. The question of this essay is what kind of thing it is. Is the Church a visible, identifiable body—something with an address, so to speak, which a person could locate, join, and be expelled from? Or is it the invisible company of all true believers, known certainly to God alone, present in and across the denominations without being identical to any of them?

The boundaries should be stated at once. This essay does not argue the papacy, the primacy of Peter, or the infallibility of the magisterium; those claims, with Honorius and

the hard cases, are taken up on this site's page on apostolic succession. Nor does it argue against Eastern Orthodoxy, whose churches possess real succession and real sacraments, and whose dispute with Rome is of another kind. The argument here is prior to all of that: whether "the Church" names a body you could find, or a fellowship no one can see. Settle that, and the later questions become live. Leave it unsettled, and they never arise.

II. The Protestant Doctrine of the Church

The Protestant doctrine deserves statement from its own confessions, and at its best it is more careful than its critics allow. The Augsburg Confession, the founding Lutheran document, defines thus: "one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered." Note what that affirms: the Church is perpetual—Augsburg is as committed to indefectibility as Rome—and the Church is located by marks, the pure word and the right sacraments, rather than by communion with a see.

The Westminster Confession, the classic Reformed statement, draws the two-level distinction that has governed Protestant thought since: "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." Beneath it stands the visible church, "which is also catholic or universal under the gospel," consisting of "all those, throughout the world, that profess the true religion, and of their children." And Westminster is candid about what the visible church is worth: it is "the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." But its particular churches are fallible: "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."

From these definitions the practical doctrine follows. The one Church of the creed is the invisible company of the elect. Visible churches are its imperfect local expressions, all fallible, none exclusive. Denominational division, however regrettable, does not break the Church's real unity, which is spiritual; and Rome's claim to be the one Church is refuted by her errors, which the Reformation existed to correct. A Christian's duty is to find a faithful congregation, not the true institution—because no institution is the Church.

III. The Church Jesus Spoke Of

Against this stands the way Jesus actually speaks. "I will build my church"—singular, His own, with a future tense that makes it an institution He is founding rather than a description of believers wherever found. And the second Gospel use settles what kind of

thing He founded: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). That command is unexecutable against an invisible church. You cannot tell your grievance to the company of the elect, and an invisible fellowship cannot excommunicate anybody. The church Jesus describes hears cases, renders judgment, and can be defied—a body with procedure, which is to say, a visible one.

It is also, He says, conspicuous by design: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid” (Matthew 5:14). The metaphors of the Kingdom run the same way—a net holding good fish and bad, a field of wheat and weeds growing together until harvest, a wedding feast with a guest who does not belong. Every one of those pictures is of a mixed, visible company containing false members—which is precisely what the invisible-church doctrine says the true Church cannot be. Jesus’ parables assume what Westminster denies: that the Church Christ owns contains sinners and hypocrites, and is still His.

IV. The Church the Apostles Ran

The apostles ran the kind of church Jesus described. Membership was determinate enough that Paul could order a man expelled from it and later readmitted. Disputes were settled not by each congregation’s reading of Scripture but by a council whose decree began “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” and bound churches that had no delegate there (Acts 15). Elders were appointed city by city, and a letter could be addressed to “the church of God which is at Corinth”—an address, not an abstraction. And Paul names the thing in a sentence that should be more famous than it is:

I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

1 Timothy 3:15, RSV

The pillar and bulwark of the truth. Not Scripture—which had not yet been gathered—and not the invisible elect, who support nothing visibly. The church that holds truth up, in Paul’s sentence, is the one with a household code, officers whose qualifications he has just listed, and an address a letter can reach. A church that can err wholesale cannot be the pillar of anything; a pillar that gives way is not a pillar.

V. The Prayer the World Could See

On the night before He died, Jesus prayed for His future Church: “that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee... so that the world may believe that

thou hast sent me... that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me” (John 17:20–23). The prayer’s logic turns on visibility. The unity Jesus asks for is evidential: the world is to look at it and conclude something. An invisible unity—real only at the level of the elect, compatible with five hundred competing communions—can make the world conclude nothing, because the world cannot see it. Whatever the prayer asks, it asks for a oneness observable from outside; and the standard offered is not modest, but the oneness of the Father and the Son.

VI. Is Christ Divided?

How does the New Testament regard division among Christians? The question answers itself in Paul’s first letter to Corinth, where parties had formed around teachers: “that there be no dissensions among you... Each one of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas’... Is Christ divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:10–13). Paul does not console the Corinthians that their real unity is spiritual and intact beneath the quarrel. He treats the division itself as the scandal, and the question “Is Christ divided?” expects the answer: unthinkable.

A concession is owed here, because Catholic apologetics has sometimes wielded a figure—thirty-three thousand denominations—that will not survive scrutiny; it counts national jurisdictions and administrative units, not doctrinal traditions, and the honest number of genuinely distinct traditions is far smaller. The argument does not need the number. It needs only what no one denies: that Protestants of good faith, reading the same Scriptures with the same seriousness, have arrived at incompatible doctrines of baptism, the Supper, justification, and church order, and have separated over them—and that on the invisible-church theory this state of affairs, though lamentable, breaks nothing essential. Paul’s question presses on exactly that comfort. A theory on which permanent, principled division among Christians leaves the Church’s unity intact is a theory that has redefined unity until it cannot be broken—and a unity that cannot be broken is also one that cannot be seen, which is what the Lord’s prayer asked it to be.

VII. The Invisible Church Examined

Consider the invisible church on its own terms. It is, first, unfalsifiable by construction: since its membership is known only to God, nothing observable—no division, no heresy, no collapse of any visible body—can ever count against its unity or holiness. A church defined so that no evidence could embarrass it has purchased safety at the price of meaning. Second, it is parasitic on the visible: every mark Augsburg names—the Gospel taught, the sacraments administered—is something only a visible community does. Preaching is audible; baptism is wet. The invisible church, to be encountered at all, must borrow the very visibility the theory denies is essential. Third, it is historically late. The

Fathers speak incessantly of the Church—Ignatius, Irenaeus, Cyprian, Augustine—and their Church is always the concrete, worldwide, bishop-ordered communion; the idea that the true Church is an invisible subset within it was forged in the sixteenth century to answer a specific emergency: how to leave the existing Church while claiming not to have left the Church. It is not a discovery about the Church's nature. It is the doctrine required by the act. The Catholic answer was put in one sentence by Charles Journet, the last century's great theologian of the Church: "If it is revealed that the Church is made in the image of Christ, that she becomes one with him, that he loves her and treats her as his own Body, one sees how vain it is to want to separate, in the name of Scripture, the cause of Christ from the cause of one visible Church."

VIII. Indefectibility, and a Familiar Premise

Both sides of the Reformation debate, it should be noticed, affirm that the Church cannot perish—"one holy Church is to continue forever" (Augsburg); "there shall be always a Church on earth" (Westminster). The promises require it: the powers of death shall not prevail; "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20). The dispute is whether the indefectible Church is visible. And here the Protestant position pays a cost that this site, of all places, is bound to point out. The Reformation's claim is that the visible Church, over centuries and at the highest level of its ordinary teaching—on justification, on the sacraments, on worship—fell into errors grave enough to require separation. That is not the Watchtower's claim of a total apostasy; mainstream Protestantism has always insisted the medieval Church still baptized validly and carried the creed. But it is the same argument in a softer key: the promises of Christ are compatible with the visible Church going wrong, essentially and for ages, until a later movement recovers what was lost. Grant that logic, and nothing in it stops at 1517. The Watchtower runs the identical argument to 1919, and this site's page against the Great Apostasy answers both at once: a Church that could teach saving error for centuries, while remaining the only Church there visibly was, makes the promise of Matthew 16:18 mean nothing that anyone could ever hold Christ to.

IX. Then Where Is It?

If the Church is visible and cannot have failed, where is it? The old creed gives the marks: one, holy, catholic, apostolic. The argument of this essay has been about the first mark; the fourth is argued on the apostolic succession page; and the claim of the Catholic Church is that the four are found together in her, and together nowhere else. The way to test that claim is historical, and the honest way to put the test is Newman's. John Henry Newman, still an Anglican, set out to vindicate his own communion by the history of the early Church, and the history converted him. His verdict, from the introduction to the book that

resulted: “To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.” Whatever one makes of the aphorism, the invitation inside it is fair: read the second century—Ignatius on the bishop and the Eucharist, Irenaeus on the succession of teachers—and ask which present-day communion those writers would recognize as their own. The essay on the Great Apostasy makes that case in detail; it does not need repeating here.

X. What Is at Stake

The Church’s own teaching, with its notes: Christ founded the Church in order to continue His work of redemption for all time—*de fide*. The Church founded by Christ is an external visible commonwealth—the certain teaching of theologians. She remains and will remain the institution of salvation, founded by Christ, until the end of the world—likewise certain. The Catechism’s treatment of the one Church subsisting in the Catholic Church, and of the real but imperfect communion of other Christians with her, completes the picture: the Church’s claim is not that grace stops at her borders—the Council said the opposite—but that the one Church of the creed exists, findable, and has never ceased to.

What is at stake is whether “the Church” in the creed refers to anything. A Christian who confesses one holy catholic Church while holding it invisible confesses something no one has ever seen, joined, obeyed, or been corrected by—a Church that makes no demands because it has no voice. The Church Jesus described hears cases and renders judgment; the Church Paul knew held councils and issued binding decrees and was the pillar of the truth; the Church of the martyrs had bishops whose names their persecutors knew. That Church can be found, which means it can be submitted to, which is the uncomfortable point of finding it. An invisible Church asks nothing. The visible one asks everything, beginning with the admission that it, and not my judgment of it, is the pillar.

Endnotes

1. The Augsburg Confession (1530), Article VII, in the English of thebookofconcord.org: “one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.” Renderings of the Latin vary—“purely taught” in some translations—and a Lutheran reader may know the article in another wording.
2. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter XXV, sections 1, 2, 4 and 5, quoted exactly. The phrase “out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” is Westminster’s own, said of the visible church.
3. Scripture quotations are RSV: Matthew 16:18; 18:17; 5:14; 28:20; John 17:20–23; 1 Corinthians 1:10–13; 1 Timothy 3:14–15; Acts 15:28.

4. On the parables of the mixed Kingdom—the net (Matthew 13:47–50), the wheat and weeds (13:24–30, with Jesus’ own interpretation at 36–43), the wedding garment (22:11–14)—as descriptions of a visible community containing false members, see Augustine’s anti-Donatist writings *passim*; the Donatists were the ancient party who defined the Church by the purity of its members.

5. The “thirty-three thousand denominations” figure derives from a misreading of the World Christian Encyclopedia’s count of national jurisdictions; it is conceded here as inflated, and the argument is made without it.

6. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), Introduction: “To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant,” following his observation that “the chief, perhaps the only English writer who has any claim to be considered an ecclesiastical historian, is the unbeliever Gibbon.” Text as at newmanreader.org.

Three replies are owed before the historical test. First, that Ephesus fell: granted—particular churches can fail, and Revelation itself threatens Ephesus with a removed lampstand. But the Catholic claim never was that every see is indefectible; it is that the Church as such will not fail, and that one see received a promise the others did not: Christ prayed for Peter by name that his faith fail not, and told him, so strengthened, to strengthen the rest (Luke 22:32). The fall of churches without the promise says nothing about the one with it. Second, “my kingship is not of this world” (John 18:36): not of it—but emphatically in it. The same Lord who said so had just founded a community with officers, discipline, a treasury, and a table; His kingdom is not worldly in origin or weaponry, which is what He tells Pilate, not incorporeal. And Luke 17:20 denies observable signs of arrival, not visible existence: the kingdom already “in the midst” of the Pharisees was standing there bodily. The unity Jesus prayed for was to be visible enough that the world could conclude something from it—“that the world may believe” (John 17:21); invisible unity persuades no one. Third, that honest division beats enforced uniformity: Catholic unity is not uniformity—the Church holds two dozen rites, a dozen theological schools in permanent argument, and religious orders founded to disagree with one another; what she asks is one faith, not one voice. The choice offered—truth at the cost of unity, or unity at the cost of truth—is one Christ declined to offer: He prayed that His disciples be one as He and the Father are one, and the Father and the Son do not achieve their unity by parting over doctrine. Paul calls the Corinthian parties not honest diversity but carnality (1 Cor. 3:3–4). The graveyard is not the only alternative to the battlefield.

7. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (1955; TAN reprint, 1974): “Christ founded the Church in order to continue His work of redemption for all

time. (De fide.)”; “The Church founded by Christ is an external visible commonwealth. (Sent. certa.)”; the Church “remains and will remain the Institution of Salvation, founded by Christ, until the end of the world. (Sent. certa.)”

8. Catechism of the Catholic Church 811–870, especially 816 (subsistit in, quoting Lumen Gentium 8) and 819 on elements of sanctification outside the Catholic Church’s visible bounds; cf. Unitatis Redintegratio 3.

9. The parallel between the invisible-church argument and the Watchtower’s Great Apostasy claim is developed on this site’s page Was There a Great Apostasy?, where the patristic evidence is set out; the parallel is one of logical form, not of degree, and the difference is stated in section VIII.

10. Charles Journet, *The Theology of the Church*, trans. Victor Szczurek (Ignatius, 2004), quoted exactly from the digital edition held in the site’s reference library.

For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§811–822, “The Church is one”—including subsistit in and the elements of sanctification beyond her visible bounds. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2/234/>.

The Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran definition of the Church, quoted in both panels.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, the Reformed doctrine of the invisible and visible church, in its own words.

An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, by John Henry Newman—the Introduction, where history did its work on him.

Letter to the Smyrnaeans, by Ignatius of Antioch—the earliest surviving use of “the catholic Church,” c. 107. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0109.htm>.

Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, by Ludwig Ott—the graded propositions on the Church’s foundation, visibility and indefectibility.

The Theology of the Church, by Charles Cardinal Journet.

the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

1 Timothy 3:15

* * *

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the Church as a visible body, in answer to the doctrine of an invisible church*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.