

IN RESPONSE – THE VERY VISIBLE CHURCH

by Dennis Prutow

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Rampant individualism coupled with decisionalism in personal evangelism fosters a de-emphasis on the visible aspects of the church and places priority on the invisible nature of the church. There is a resultant emphasis on the individual's relationship to the mystical body of Christ with a coordinate de-emphasis on the believer's relationship with the visible body manifested in the local congregation. This also results in an aberrant view of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. A Christian college may maintain it is not a church and chapel services are not a substitute for church. But a Christian college may play church by celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in chapel services.

In this series of articles, my hope is to show at least four things in response to this loose and unscriptural view of the Lord's Supper. First, Scripture places priority on the *visible* church, the *visible* body of Christ. Second, Christ instituted the sacraments in the *visible* church. Third, both baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of the covenant administered in the visible covenant community. Fourth, Christ gave the keys of the kingdom to the *visible* church and these keys are used in and through the proper administration of the sacraments.

First of all, Scripture places a priority upon the church as a *visible* body. We see this in at least three ways. One, God forms and organizes a visible body in the Old Testament. Two, Paul writes his letters to specific churches and guides real people in real time. Three, Christ refers to the church as a *visible* body.

Acts 7:38 speaks of Moses "who was in the congregation in the wilderness." Both the Authorized Version and the American Standard Version speak of "the church in the wilderness." This church was quite visible. God formed the people from the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob became Israel. His family went into Egypt during a time of famine. The family grew to a great multitude and was enslaved by Egypt. Genesis tells us this story. God delivered the people from bondage. This part of the story is in Exodus. In the wilderness, God gives His

people specific guidelines for worship. This worship foretells and typifies Christ. Exodus and Leviticus rehearse the worship of the wilderness church. God also organizes this church. He prescribes their order of march and directs their path. The book of Numbers gives the details. The *church* in the wilderness was a very visible body organized by God with set worship.

The New Testament church grows out of and is an extension of the Old Testament church. In the beginning, Christianity was a sect of Judaism (Acts 24:5, 14, 22). When Christians were rejected, they sometimes met right next door to the Synagogue (Acts 18:7). Paul planted churches in several places in Asia Minor. This area became the center of Christianity in the late First Century. Paul did not consider the church primarily an intangible, invisible, elusive body. For example, Paul wrote his letters to concrete groups of people living in certain cities at particular times.

Paul wrote "to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:7). He wrote to particular people in Rome. Paul addresses another letter, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Paul addresses a concrete body of people set aside from the world to serve Jesus Christ, a church, a *called out*, body. We see the same thing in 2 Corinthians 1:1, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia."

Galatians 1:1-2, "Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia." Paul was a real man who wrote to actual visible bodies of people, churches. Ephesians 1:1, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by

the will of God, To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus." Philippians 1:1, Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons." The elders, overseers, and deacons were leaders in the local congregations. Paul had the practice of appointing elders in each of the churches. "When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Colossians 1:2, "To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae." The church was and is very *visible*.

Jesus Christ refers to the church two times. Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ and as the Son of God. Jesus responded, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Christ builds His church on the rock solid foundation of a proper Christian confession. Of necessity, this confession must be made before others, *in the church*. As we shall see, granting admission to the visible church is the use of the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:19).

If individuals betray their confession by living contrary to it and living in sin, they must be corrected. Private sins are dealt with privately, at first. Two or more may have to approach the offender if he fails to listen. Finally, "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). The church is a *visible* body from which those who violate their confession and remain unrepentant are excluded. This exclusion is excommunication. The former brother or sister is considered an unbeliever, an object of evangelism. He or she is no longer welcome to the communion table. The church is a *visible* body. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the church.

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IN RESPONSE – THE SACRAMENTS OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH

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The church of Jesus Christ is a visible body. To be sure, the church has invisible aspects. For example, we cannot see all of the church in the world. Vast parts of the church are not within our view. We also distinguish between the church in the world, the church militant, and the church in heaven, the church triumphant. Although the church is one, we cannot see those who have gone before us into heaven. Finally, the visible church is a mixed multitude. It consists of both regenerate and unregenerate persons. We cannot distinguish between those who are truly and spiritually united to Christ and those who are not. This is an invisible aspect of the church.

There are not two churches in Scripture, one visible and the other invisible. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling” (Ephesians 4:4). “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). “There are many members, but one body” (1 Corinthians 12:20). The one church has visible and invisible attributes.

How do the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper fit into this scheme? First, Christ gave the sacraments to his *visible* body. Second, the sacraments distinguish believers from the world and set them set off as members of the visible body of Christ. Christ commanded baptism. Matthew 28:19-20 outlines Christ’s method for making disciples. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Christ tells us there are two primary steps to making disciples. We must make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them.

The term disciple means apprentice. An apprentice attaches himself to a master for a specific period of time to learn a particular vocation. The master is Christ. The time period is all of life. The vocation is the Christian life or calling. The apprenticeship begins at baptism. At baptism, the process of teaching begins. This teaching continues until we all reach and the church reaches “the measure of the

stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

How did the apostles implement the Great Commission? Peter proclaimed Christ on Pentecost in Jerusalem. Acts 2:41 declares, “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.” To what were these three thousand souls added? They were added to the visible body of believers in Jerusalem. They were added to the church. They were added to the church by way of baptism. Baptism was the doorway, the entrance, to the visible church.

Acts 2:42 adds, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” The visible body of believers met together for fellowship and teaching. Acts 2:47 notes, “And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” The visible body grew as God added *to their number*.

Christ also commanded the apostles to remember His work with the Lord’s Supper. Paul makes this quite clear.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

Paul gave these directions to the Corinthian Christians as they gathered as the church. There were obvious problems. Note 1 Corinthians 11:18, “For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it.” Paul deplored divisions in the visible body. “Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you de-

spise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?” (1 Corinthians 11:20-22). The church the Corinthians despised and for which they showed contempt was the visible body of Christ in Corinth. It was the visible church Christ commanded to come together in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament for the visible church.

We may confirm this by noting the parallels between the Old and New Testaments. The sacraments of the Old Testament were circumcision and Passover. Baptism replaces circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12). The Lord’s Supper replaces Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7). Who was eligible to come to the Passover table in the Old Testament? Scripture is clear. “If a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it” (Exodus 12:48). Those who were not identified as part of the visible church in the wilderness by circumcision were not eligible to partake of the Passover. The Passover was reserved for those who were part of the visible body. In like manner, persons not part of the visible body of Christ with membership in a local church, by baptism and confession of faith, are not eligible to come to the table of the Lord’s Supper. This is the clear parallel.

Paul therefore exhorts, “But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28). A person coming to the Lord’s Supper must examine himself to see if he rightly judges the body of Christ. He must understand and accept the death of Christ for sinners. He must understand, accept, and receive the bread and cup as signs and seals of the work of Christ on behalf of sinners. He must understand the visible church as the body for which Christ died. He must identify himself with Christ, with the bread and cup signifying Christ. He must himself with the visible body of Christ and distinguish himself from the world.

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IN RESPONSE – SACRAMENTS OF THE COVENANT COMMUNITY

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We maintain the church in Scripture is primarily a visible body with invisible attributes. We further maintain the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of the *visible* church. Because this is the case, we also maintain, it is improper for institutions such as Christian schools and colleges to administer either the sacrament of baptism or the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In this lesson, we take third step in confirming this truth. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of the covenant administered in the visible covenant community.

First of all, both baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace. Westminster Confession of Faith 7.3 teaches,

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [the covenant of works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the Covenant of Grace, whereby He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

In the Old Testament, circumcision is the sign and seal of the Covenant. God commanded Abraham, "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised" (Genesis 17:10). The connection of circumcision with the covenant promises of God should be obvious. Paul explanation further in Romans 4:11. Abraham "received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them." Circumcision was a sign and seal of God's covenant.

As already noted, baptism replaces circumcision in the New Testament. Paul equates them in Colossians 2:11-12. "In Him [Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by

the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." Baptism therefore becomes the sign and seal of God's covenant promises in the New Testament. It is the doorway into the *visible* covenant community (Acts 2:41).

In addition, the church is the covenant community of God. God commanded Moses to tell Israel camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, Exodus 19:4-6,

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.

Peter applies Exodus 19:5-6 to the church (1 Peter 2:9).

Moses joins the people to God in covenant. The people vow to keep covenant with God by obeying His statutes and judgments.

Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exodus 24:6-8).

Moses read the book of the covenant to the people. The people promised, vowed, to obey the requirements of the covenant, God's statutes and judgments. Moses then joined the people to God by the blood of the covenant.

Hear again the words of Jesus with regard to His blood and the cup He gives us in the Lord's Supper. "In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in

remembrance of Me.'" (1 Corinthians 11:25). The Lord's Supper is also a sign of God's covenant. It is a sign and seal of the blood of the covenant that joins us to God.

God gives us a beautiful picture of this relationship in marriage. Marriage is a covenant relationship (Proverbs 2:17, Malachi 2:14). A man and woman enter into this covenant by taking vows. Paul says of marriage, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). The covenant of marriage therefore reflects God's covenant with His church.

In addition, the privileges of the covenant are for those *visibly* within the covenant. Marital intimacy is one of the privileges of the marriage covenant (Hebrews 13:4). It is heinous sin for a spouse to defile the marriage bed with a relationship outside of marriage.

In like manner, intimate communion with Christ is epitomized by feasting upon Christ in the Lord's Supper. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16, American Standard Version). Communion in the Lord's Supper is a communion of the body of Christ with the Savior. As already shown, this body is not an amorphous, elusive, invisible body. The body of Christ is a very *visible* body.

Baptism is the doorway into the covenant community. Baptized people confess their allegiance to Christ and profess their intent to obey His will. They take membership vows. In so doing they enter the covenant community. They are then privileged to come to the Lord's Supper. If the analogy with marriage holds, Communion, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is only for the visible covenant body of Christ bound to God by the blood of the covenant and by vows committing the people to obey God (Exodus 24:7-8, 1 Corinthians 11:25). This supper is a communion of the *visible* covenant community reserved for members of this *visible* covenant community.

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IN RESPONSE – THE SACRAMENTS AND THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

by Dennis Prutow

We have maintained the church is principally a visible body. Christ instituted the sacraments in this visible body. This visible body is a covenant community. As signs and seals of the covenant, the sacrament of baptism admits to the covenant community. The Lord's Supper celebrates the communion the covenant community has with Christ. As a final step in the argument that the Lord's Supper is only to be administered in the visible church, we look at the Scriptural notion of the keys of the kingdom.

Christ speaks of the keys of the kingdom in two places. The first is Matthew 16:19 after Peter makes his great confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Christ says to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Here the keys appear to relate to entrance into the kingdom since they are directly associated with Peter's confession of Christ.

In Matthew 18:18, Christ broadens the references of the keys to the disciples. Christ speaks of the operation of the keys without mentioning them directly. "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Christ associates this binding and loosing with church discipline and the removal of a person from the visible body who violates his confession and remains unrepentant.

We note the close connection between the church and the kingdom. In fact, Westminster Confession of Faith 25.2 equates the church and the kingdom. "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...."

This is important to grasp. It goes back to our first point regarding the visible church. Matthew Henry observes, "The power here delegated is a spiritual power; it is a power pertaining to the kingdom of heaven, that is to the church,

that part of it which is militant here on earth....¹ This spiritual power is twofold. "Christ's ministers have a power to admit into the church; *Go, disciple all the nations, baptizing them*; those who profess faith in Christ, and obedience to Him, [they] admit them and their seed [as] members of the church by baptism."² There should be little doubt Matthew Henry speaks of the *visible* church and admitting men and women to the *visible* church by profession of faith and baptism.

Matthew Henry goes on to say, "They have a power to expel and cast out such as have forfeited their church-membership, that is binding; refusing to unbelievers the application of gospel promises and the seals of them...."³ The seals of church membership are the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. To expel someone from the visible church, because of their refusal to repent of given sins, is excommunication. The privilege of coming to the Lord's Supper, to Communion, is removed.

Calvin agrees, Christ says that ministers of the Gospel are like gate-keepers of the kingdom of heaven because they bear its keys. And secondly he adds that they are endowed with a power of binding and loosing which is effective in heaven. The metaphor of 'keys' fits in well with the office of teaching, as Christ says in Luke 11:52 that the scribes and Pharisees, as interpreters of the Law, likewise have the keys of the kingdom of heaven.... This second metaphor or similitude strictly denotes the forgiveness of sins.⁴

Henriksen sees the same two sides of the use of the keys. "By means of the preaching of the gospel he was opening the door to some (Acts 2:38, 39; 3:16-20;

4:12; 10:34-43), and closing them to others (3:12)."⁵ He adds, "*Discipline* was also exercised by the Twelve, and here again the role of Peter is emphasized" (5:1-11).⁶

What does this mean? The church is principally a *visible* body. It is a visible body united to Christ in covenant. The covenant is expressed in the promises of God to the community of believers and the promises, vows, made to God by the people. The signs of membership in this body are the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christ gives the keys of the kingdom to this visible body, the church. Through its ministry, the church admits men and women to its membership by way of the door of baptism. Through its ministry, the church invites men and women to confirm and seal their communion with Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Through its ministry, the church has the power to exclude men and women from its membership who violate their profession of faith and refuse to repent. Those excluded from membership are excommunicated; the church bans them from participation in Communion, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is *not* to be administered by institutions that are not churches. We have in mind Christian schools and Colleges. Such institutions are *not* representative bodies of the *visible* church. They are therefore *not* institutions for which or within which Christ instituted the Sacraments. They are *not* bodies bound to Christ by way of Covenant expressed in vows made to God in response to His promises. They are therefore *not* bodies that properly administer the sacraments as marks of membership in the covenant body. Finally, they are *not* bodies within which the keys of the kingdom are operative. And the keys of the kingdom are intimately connected to the sacraments.

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¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Westwood, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 5:233.

² *Ibid.*, 234.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, 3 vols., T. H. L. Parker, trans., D. Torrence and T. Torrence, Eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1972), 2:187.

⁵ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 650.

⁶ *Ibid.*