

The Church – Visible or Invisible?

I recently read the story (perhaps apocryphal) of an independent missionary soliciting a donation for his work from an American pastor.

"What church are you a member of?" queried the pastor.

"I belong to the invisible church," the missionary replied.

The pastor persisted: "When does this invisible church meet? Who pastors it?"

The missionary grew incensed, "Well, your church here isn't the true church. I belong to the invisible church!"

"Well, in that case," retorted the pastor, "Here is some invisible money to help you minister to the invisible church."

Our amusement at this story is probably muted if we have encountered someone who shared a glowing testimony for Jesus Christ while spurning the visible church.

As society loses confidence in scandal-ridden institutional churches and Christendom embraces ecumenical unity, the concept of the true church being invisible is gaining popularity. Many feel justified in rejecting formal church membership while claiming a spiritual home in an invisible church.

Is the true Church a visible, organized body defined by conferences, denominations, leaders, ordinances, and congregations that gather for worship? Or is the true Church composed of true Christians, known only to God and united by their genuine faith in Christ?

What Did the Early Church Believe?

Jesus indicated that His church would be visible and identifiable in the world when He described His followers as a *city that is set on a hill (that) cannot be hid* (Matt 5:14). Early believers understood the church as a visible gathering of Christ's followers. The Apostles, having received direction from Christ to build the church, established congregations in every city they visited, and *ordained them elders in every church* (Acts 14:23). These churches were visible, gathered assemblies.

How Did the Concept of an Invisible Church Arise?

Augustine vs. the Donatists

During intense persecution between A.D. 303 and 305, some early Christians recanted their faith or surrendered their copies of the Scripture rather than pay for their faith with their lives.

When the persecution ended, the Donatists, a Christian sect in North Africa, insisted that the traditores (traitors) should be barred from rejoining the church. In addition, the Donatists refused to recognize those ordained by traditores and insisted on rebaptizing members whom the traditores had baptized. The Donatists argued strongly that the church must be entirely pure to be the Body of Christ.

Augustine, the bishop of Hippo Regius and a prominent church philosopher, countered the Donatists by arguing for a mixed church. He proposed that the earthly church contains both true Christians and unfaithful impostors. He argued that since only God can know the heart, the church should not judge who is a true member of the church and who is not. In Augustine's view, baptism and ordinances are administered by Christ through the church, and so were valid even if performed by a hypocritical leader. Augustine's theology laid the foundation of the Roman Catholic Church. ¹

The Protestant Reformation

During the Reformation, various Protestant groups separated from the Roman Catholic Church, and they soon disagreed among themselves on doctrines and practices. Each group claimed to be the true church of Jesus Christ. Eventually, instead of condemning all differing groups, mainstream Protestant churches adopted the concept of the invisible church, which comprises anyone who believes in Jesus Christ. The concept of the invisible church allowed the reformers to justify the practice of a state church in which all residents of a geographical area were required to join the church approved by their state government.

The Early Anabaptists

Facing opposition from both the Catholics and the Reformers, early Anabaptists were tempted to keep their faith hidden in their hearts, rest in the "salvation" of the invisible church, and spare themselves the horrors of persecution.

While Spiritualists of the time professed to worship God and hold correct doctrine in their hearts without openly contradicting the state church, true Anabaptists believed that the New Testament could only be practiced in a "gathered church." ²

Anabaptist leader Dirk Philips wrote: *The church of the Lord, although existing in spirit and in truth, is nevertheless also visible. ... The name church or congregation indicates that it is not only invisible, but also visible, for the term used is "ecclesia," that is, a gathering or meeting or congregating together. ... The apostles, according to the command of the Lord... gathered a church out of all nations (Matt 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15, 16). This was not an invisible body, for they did not write nor send their epistles in a general or indiscriminate way to all people, but specifically denominating the believers and God-fearing people, and designating many places and calling many persons by name. How is it possible for all this to be invisible?* 2

John Horsch wrote: "Is not 'invisibility of the Church' a self-contradictory term? Needless to say, true conversion and walking in newness of life do not result in personal invisibility. ...The early Mennonites held that when the Church is invisible, it does not exist at all."3

While Spiritualists taught that Christians are responsible only to God, Anabaptists believed that each Christian also holds responsibility to and for his fellow church members.

Today

In many debates of doctrine and practice, two miles of ditch line every mile of roadway. On one extreme are the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and some Lutheran churches, each declaring itself to be the one true visible church that conveys salvation through administering sacraments.

On the other extreme, most Reformed Churches, Pietists, many Evangelicals, non-denominational churches, and a host of individualistic "self-churchers" emphasize the hidden nature of salvation to the detriment of visible brotherhood and church accountability.

Does It Matter Which I Believe?

Understanding the nature of the church is essential for understanding salvation, church discipline, and church membership.

Overemphasizing the visible church often leads to complacency and legalism. If simply joining the church saves me, I need not die to myself and be truly born again. If being a church member assures my salvation, I may hide for years as a hypocrite. If my denomination or conference affiliation is the most important part of my identity, I can attend church on Sunday and live as I want through the week.

Overemphasizing the invisible church erodes church membership, accountability, and attendance. If I can be spiritual but not religious, then I no longer need my local church. If simply proclaiming Jesus as Lord seals my salvation, then no local church has the right to direct my practical life. If belief

in Christ alone saves a person, then my neighbor who believes in Christ but lives in adultery must be part of the invisible church, too.

Does Scripture Support a Visible Church?

1. Verses like 1 Corinthians 1:2 address a physical gathering of believers: *Unto the church of God which is at Corinth.*
2. The early church gathered regularly to worship and practice visible ordinances (Acts 2:42).
3. Christ authorized Biblical accountability and discipline in Matthew 18:15-20: *Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* Paul encouraged corporate discipline in 1 Corinthians 5.
4. Writing to Timothy, Paul spelled out qualifications for specific leadership positions in the visible church (1 Ti 3:1-13).
5. The Hebrew writer admonished believers to gather visibly: *Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together* (Heb 10:25).
6. Paul calls the visible church *the church of the living God* (1 Ti 3:15).

The entire New Testament, from the Sermon on the Mount through Christ's messages to the seven churches of Asia, instructs a visible Body of Christ.

Does Scripture Support an Invisible Church?

1. God knows the hearts of men and who is saved (Matt 7:21).
2. Various New Testament passages refer to the believers being "in Christ," a spiritual, inner reality. A person is saved by faith in Christ's death and resurrection and then joins a visible church (2 Co 5:17).
3. Salvation requires repentance, faith, and an inward transformation fully understood and judged by God alone (Rom 8:27).
4. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well that true worship transcends physical location (John 4:23-24).
5. Jesus told Pilate, *My kingdom is not of this world* (John 18:36). He also said, *The kingdom of God is within you* (Luke 17:20-21).

The Church: Invisible and Visible.

Scripture teaches both visible and invisible aspects of the one true church. There are not two churches with two different memberships. There is one Body functioning on this earth and flourishing in eternal reality. Just as an arced line is concave on one side and convex on the other, the true church is

simultaneously visible and invisible. It is not the Church: invisible or visible, but rather the Church: invisible and visible. The visible and invisible aspects harmonize in Christ's perfect plan for His Body.

The visible church reflects the reality of its invisible core. The growth of the invisible church should lead to the growth of its visible component. True Christians join the invisible church comprising believers of all generations and locations. They are instructed in Christian living and then baptized into a visible congregation, where they are held accountable. In obedience to Scripture and their Lord, they gather in visible local bodies to nurture each other in the faith.

The church exists invisibly because the saving work of Christ takes place in the heart. The church exists visibly because the Lord called it to work out that salvation in practical life and show the saving Gospel to the world.

The visible church should demonstrate the unity and love of its invisible core. No earthly church is perfect, so we cannot expect flawless visible church life, but we find unity through our commitment to the Body of Christ and growing in our likeness to our perfect Head. Because the visible church impacts the eternal standing of souls, we must stay faithful to a Bible-obeying local church and proclaim the Gospel to the world.

Christ will soon return visibly to take His Bride to the marriage supper of the Lamb. He will claim those whose lives in the visible church prove their fidelity to its invisible core.

~Lyndon Martin

Sources:

1. "Augustine and the Challenge of Donatism." Credo Magazine, April 2025. <https://credomag.com/2025/04/augustine-and-the-challenge-of-donatism/>.
2. Michael S. Martin. Cup & Cross (Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers, Inc., 2005), 249-251.
3. Edward Yoder. Lessons in Christian Doctrine: Part Three (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1939), 8,9.