

# Church, parachurch, or why church at all?

Stephen T. Hague, Aug 2017

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**Questions:** What means did Christ establish

- for the proclamation and preservation of the gospel in biblical history?
- for properly organized and structured worship, reception of the Word of God, and the accountability of discipline and discipleship through offices of authority?
- for properly administering to the needs of the fellowship of believers?

**Answer:** The *visible church* of those who profess faith in Christ and live in obedience to his commands. This was true for OT Israel living under a theocracy and monarchy, the same as it is for the NT visible church today. In the OT, the visible church was characterized by the Priests' administration of the sanctuary worship and application of the Word of God, the Elders and Prophets' ministry of proclaiming and teaching the Word of God revealed and written, and by the kings' service of administrating justice by upholding the law of God and defending the nation. In the NT, the visible church is characterized by the (priestly) administration of the Sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Table, the exposition of the Word (prophetic), and the upholding of the law and protecting the people of God through the administration of discipline properly applied to preserve, protect, and restore by the elders. Further protection and service is provided by the ministry of the Deacons. It is often said that the church is a "human institution," but that is not what it is: it is God's divinely appointed means to accomplish his work of redemption through Christ of his people and his world. (Acts 2:47; 1 Pet 2:9-10; 1 Cor 1:2; Col 1:24)



A serious question then is, why do so many people today abandon the visible church, and membership in the fellowship, for alternatives (such as "para-churches")? Some will answer that they do not need the local church, since they are already members of the universal and invisible church. Perhaps they have been deeply scarred in a local church, or they had some very bad experiences there at some point, or they were in a church that was not orthodox, and they left never to return to a visible and established congregation. In all of these cases, it is easy to understand the rationale and justification for leaving a particularly bad situation.<sup>1</sup> The question is, nevertheless, whether it is wise to exclude oneself altogether from membership in the visible church (or to attach to alternative organizations). The local church is the place where our Lord's Table is celebrated regularly, and where his death and resurrection are remembered and celebrated every Sunday, and where the Word of Scripture is taught consistently and fully, and where structures for training in righteousness (discipleship) are in place, and where the people of God are held accountable to Christ and to one another by one another, and where elders and deacons are called to serve these ends.

Do people often leave the visible church planning to find a better alternative, one of the many more glamorous alternatives (such as "para-churches"), because they sincerely believe the church failed them, and is failing in its mission, because it has so many problems, because there are so many sinners there not living in obedience (2 Cor 11:2-3)? With such claims, the question is do they really believe it will be easier to do the work of the Kingdom outside of Christ's ordained means and visible institution (to use imperfect sinners living under grace), while working with different sinners in different contexts and structures that do not align fully with a biblical model or precedent?

What does Christ command us to do in the visible church? To remember him. To celebrate his Table of remembrance, to establish proper structure of authority, to obey his commands with accountability, to have his word dwell in us richly, to pray together. How is this possible? The best way, perhaps the only way, to experience the blessings of membership in his universal, "invisible" church is to be a member of his visible church. Indeed, I

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<sup>1</sup> There are some difficult cases, nevertheless, as in the underground church in Communist China, and Muslim countries, where open church membership with your name on an official roster, can be a dangerous and unwise practice. This is not what I am addressing, since typically these believers associate closely with a local body of believers, though in secret.

think it would be difficult to rightly claim membership in the universal church unless we are committed to real people in a real locale in a real and visible church under the real authority of elders and deacons given by Christ to serve the mission of the advancement of the gospel and the Kingdom through the visible body of Christ. In this way, our presence and service in the visible church is evidence (yet, not proof of salvation or a proposal of works-righteousness here) of our membership in the universal church. In this way, our membership in a local body of believers is the acknowledgement that we cannot do this alone, nor would we ever want to. It is also an acknowledgment that we do not create organizations that would supplant or replace the mission given to the church. Our belonging is comparable to the marriage of Christ and the Church, as we are in “subjection” to one another in love; this is only possible if we are actually and visibly committed to one another. Love cannot be expressed fully in isolation from the whole body; it is given in the context of the visible church as the practical place to be a light set on a hill (Rom 12:5; Eph 4:25). We have a unity and a bond of peace before the watching world (Eph 4:3; 5:21-32).

Nevertheless, there are some who say that membership in a local visible church is unnecessary. Actually, I would suggest that the term “invisible” (or universal) church is meaningless without a visible representation on the earth. Otherwise, it is nothing but some abstraction, a concept. So, this is sometimes people’s logic, “Oh, I belong to the invisible church that is universal, and which is by the way unseen (since invisible), and so it is unnecessary that I join a local congregation.” If this be the case, then it must be presumed your church is inactive and non-existent to anyone’s observation from the outside. And, for those who do not abandon the local visible church with such reasoning, it can lead to the rationalization to create something “new,” an alternative to Christ’s institution, to make the Kingdom hope more appealing and exciting, or just more glamorous than our boring edifices and structures and services, or to provide a more biblical alternative to what was seen as mostly dead church traditions or outright unbelief within the majority of denominations. Yet, scripture teaches that we are to be members of the visible body, interdependent on one another (Rom 13:5; Eph 4:25; 1 Cor 12:12-27).

The so-called “para-church” organizations that proliferated during the later sixties and seventies, and continue today, often were seen as ways to address the perceived failures, lacks, and omissions of the visible church. Indeed, in many cases they were a response to the failed project of the Liberal and mainline churches that for a generation had largely abandoned the gospel. Succumbing to the unbelief of a purely socially oriented gospel, rejecting much of historic Christian doctrine, they bore the fruits of such theology in catastrophic spiritual (and physical) death around the world. In this context it not surprising that “para” organizations developed to seek to redress this state of affairs, but they typically went outside the organized and visible church and became “alongside,” an alternative. Offering what appeared to be exciting new opportunities to serve the Kingdom and the gospel of Jesus, they created focused ministries to the many and various needs of the world, such as evangelism, discipleship, worship, and serving the poor and oppressed. These para-church organizations have done a tremendous amount of good in the world, but too often the cost to our ecclesiology, and the strength of the believing visible church, has not been acknowledged. Since these organizations are not churches, having no official establishment of biblical structures and patterns and protections of the church, they have been subject to the many cultural and social forces prevailing in the broader culture. They have also been subject to all the same trials every organization of humans struggles with, yet doing so without biblical restraints (and training) on doctrine, authority, and morality. They so often supplant the Christ-given visible church’s responsibilities, and forsake proper structures for those of the business model or non-profit models, and in many cases a very-much-for-profit model. Because they usually lack proper biblical officers, authorial checks and balances, such organizations are governed by strong personalities who can generate tremendous capital and interest around the causes of the organization, sometimes, and much too often, creating a sub-culture prone to the cult-of-the-personality, or sectarian style structures and strategies, and in some cases cultic, or cult-styled, local and national leadership teams. I claim no expertise on these organizations, but my observation over the years is that the most of them focus on the youth and young adults, and often at the local level they are led by the theologically untrained and immature. This being the case, the larger they become, the more insidiously authoritarian they become in order to control the inevitable chaos. To varying degrees they must compete with one another, in strictly business fashion, vying to appeal to the diverse interests of the young in the hopes of gaining new members by offering a product more satisfying than the other alternatives to the youthful yearnings and

aspirations of those they recruit. In sum, I hope that this brief reflection on church and para-church organizations stimulates some reflection on the question of what is the church and how we understand those organizations that are not churches and yet which often supplant the church, Christ's established and authorial means to fulfill his work. The visible church is Christ's institution called to the Great Commission, to convey the gospel of the Scripture to the world, to train in righteousness, to disciple the nations, to properly celebrate the Lord's Table, to baptize, and to guard all these things through biblical discipline.

Now, we must also consider that it is possible for the *visible* building (belonging to a "visible" church) on the street corner can be just as invisible to the neighbors as the so-called invisible church without a building, but that is another matter regarding the (oxymoronic) "dead church." In this latter case, it is oxymoronic to think that a true church living in obedience to Christ could possibly be dead since they are energized by the Living Christ and his word of the Gospel and the hope of the gospel. If they are truly alive in Christ, and living in love and grace together, the neighbors will know. A visible church that is invisible to all around it has a spiritual problem, even if it is still present as a visible church. We would not say it is not part of the visible church, only that it is seriously failing in its calling and mission.

In this sense, the visible church and each member is Christ's "letter to the world" (2 Cor 3:2). As Francis Schaeffer was known to say, in regards to Jesus' words on love, that the world will know that the Father has sent the Son on the basis of the love they have for one another. This we know will never be perfect, but that is no excuse for our sin, nor our attempts to replace Christ's institution with something else; it is a recognition that we must live under grace and discipline together as apprentices of the Servant of servants who is teaching us to love God with a perfect love, as we learn to forgive one another with our presently imperfect love. As his disciples we seek to do his will, but we are still in training with much to learn. As someone else put it, we are learning the impossible task (impossible to us on our own) of *loving as God loves and to love what God loves*. I conclude that the best place, and most difficult, to do this is in the place Christ Jesus himself instituted, and that is his visible church (Eph 1:22-23; 2:16; 4:2-6, 12-13; Col 1:18; 2:19; 3:15). The practicality of this should be evident; the best place to love and serve, using our differing gifts, is in the context of our families and in the family of believers, the visible church. In this way, Christ's church is to be as a light set on a hill, the salt of the earth (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 7:7; Eph 4:7-8, 12).

"We cannot hope to restore the world if we are constantly reinventing the church."  
J.K.A.Smith, *You Are What You Love*, p. 178

"There is one body and one Spirit . . ." Ephesians 4:6

<p>The visible church of Christ, is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered, according to Christ's ordinance in all those things of necessity are requisite the same. Article XIX, <i>The Thirty Nine Articles</i></p>
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The church "hath always three notes or marks whereby it is known: pure and sound doctrine, the sacraments ministered according to Christ's holy institution, and the right use of ecclesiastical discipline." E.S.C. Gibson, *The Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England*, p. 495.

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"The congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel."  
Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, pp. 222-223.

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**The Confession of Faith, Glasgow: Francis Orr and Sons, 1856.**

Ch XXV *Of the church*

I. 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; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.

II. 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 together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house of the family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

III. Unto this catholic church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.

IV. This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less pure in them.

V. 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.

VI. There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalted himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God.

### ***Ch X Of Church Censures***

The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath herein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.

II. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, by virtue of whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word of censures; and to open it unto censures, as occasion shall require.

III. Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for deterring of others from like offences; for purging out that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

IV. For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition, suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season, and by excommunication from the church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.

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Below are some summary notes, typically succinct, from a much beloved seminary professor I had way back in time. They remind me of how important and necessary the organization and structure of the visible church really is.

R.Dunzweiler, ST notes for Systematic Theology IV (at BTS)

#### What is the Church?

In its broadest sense the Church may be defined as follows:

- the people of God of all ages, from Adam to the last person who will be savingly united to Christ and the benefits of His redemption;
- all those saved by grace through faith on the ground of Christ's atoning work;
- all those whom God has foreknown, predestinated, called, justified, and sanctified;
- all those who have been born of God, who have become members of God's redemptive family, who are indwelt by the Spirit of God;
- the whole body of professing believers in God's salvation, manifested in local gatherings with their officers and ministers, and carrying out the functions of ministry of the word, right administration of the ordinances, and proper exercise of discipline.

Categorization of the functions of the Church

1. The prophetic function

- a. Preaching
  - b. Teaching
  - c. Counseling
  - d. Reaching out in evangelistic and missionary activity
  - e. Attempting to influence our society and culture
2. The worship function
    - a. Assembling for worship
    - b. Conducting worship services
    - c. Conducting form ceremonies
    - d. Administering the ordinances/sacraments
    - e. Corporate prayer
  3. The fellowship function
    - a. Sharing the understanding of Scripture
    - b. Sharing Christian experience
    - c. Sharing hospitality
    - d. Sharing leisure-time activities
    - e. Sharing of special social occasions
  4. The stewardship function
    - a. Stewardship of human resources

#### The scriptural pattern of local church government

The scriptural pattern is:

- a. Rulership and oversight and superintendence by bishops-elders-pastors
  - (1) Bishops-elders-pastors who rule
  - (2) Bishops-elders-pastors who rule and labor in the Word and teaching
- b. Administration of temporal matters by deacons

God has given us this pattern in Scripture, and nowhere do we find a blanket allowance for the institution of some other form or pattern that we might think is better. To the contrary, we find that this pattern has been given to us in order that we may know how to conduct ourselves in the church (I Timothy 3:15).

- b. Stewardship of material resources
    - (1) Money
    - (2) Physical Property
5. The discipline function
  6. The civil responsibility function