

The Remnant Church

Randall Otto

West Grove Presbyterian Church, West Grove, PA, USA

Abstract

The invisible church idea is an apologetic device developed by the Reformers to comply with the creeds' statements concerning a "catholic church" and is based on a conception of individual election that itself may need revision. The Reformed doctrine of an invisible church has no basis in the OT or NT, for in both it is those who unite and persevere in faithful obedience with God through his mediator in the covenant community who are saved. The *invisible church* should thus be replaced with *remnant church*, for the remnant is the *ecclesiola in ecclesia* which public demonstrates election in saving union with Christ, through abiding in him and bringing forth fruit for his glory.

Protestant ecclesiology commonly differentiates between the visible and invisible aspects of the church, the former being the tangible organizational institution of the church and the latter the spiritual organism of the mystical body of Christ. Because Protestantism retains little visible unity with either the Roman Catholic Church or within itself, this distinction was taken up by the Reformers as a way of understanding the statements in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds concerning the "holy catholic church" (Guthrie, 358-60). Furthermore, this distinction has seemed to be required by the classical Reformed doctrine of unconditional election. Simply stated, if God has predetermined who shall be saved from before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), then only the elect constitute the true church. The Westminster Confession speaks of the "the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head," as constituting "the catholic or universal church, which is invisible."¹ On the other hand, the Confession declares, "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 and family of God" (chap. 27).

It is apparent that "catholic" and "universal" are used differently in these two ways of speaking of the church, embracing with the invisible church the totality of the elect according to the divine decree without regard to time, place, or even personal existence, while embracing within the visible church the totality of those in time and space who personally profess faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. While Reformed theologians emphasize that they are not speaking of two churches, but only of two aspects of the one church, the polarity of definitions attributed to "catholic" and "universal" makes it difficult to see their assimilation. The priority given to the

¹ The Scots Confession (1560) antedates the Westminster Confession (1647) in giving confessional status to the catholic church as invisible, "known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen, and includes both the chosen who are departed, the Kirk triumphant, those who yet live and fight against sin and Satan, and those who shall live hereafter" (chap. 17).

invisible church, based on the divine decree before creation, challenges the historical reality of the church, notwithstanding verbal affirmations of the visible church's present existence. Thus, John Leith can say, "the church is 'visible-invisible' in the sense that it is not demonstrably true that the church as the people of God exists" (Leith, 244).

The inclusion within some aspect of the church of those *yet to be born* is, simply put, untenable. How is it possible for someone who *does not exist* to be part of the church? The assertion that existence is *not necessary* to inclusion in the church smacks of idealism or Platonism, making the church sound phastasmal.² Its underlying philosophy eventuates in a-historicity, for if the true church is already made up of all the elect, regardless of existence, then what happens on earth in the human response to God's revelation in Jesus Christ appears inconsequential. The implication is that the church already exists in heaven on the basis of the divine decree, though it will never exist on earth in the actual assembly of God's people. Though Berkhof admits "the Church as the spiritual body of Jesus Christ . . . is essentially invisible at present," having "a relative and imperfect embodiment in the visible Church," his contention that it "is destined to have a perfect visible embodiment at the end of the ages" (Berkhof, 566) is implausible, since the "visible church" pertains to *this world*, to which the elect who have passed into glory will not return! The conclusion would seem to be that the church can never fully appear on earth, but must always remain an otherworldly ideal, a Platonic Form whose actual existence is only imperfectly realized here.

In view of the problems associated with the Reformed distinction between the visible and invisible church, it seems necessary to revise, if not reject it. After reviewing the nature of the church from the OT and the NT, this article will conclude that biblical theology does not allow for an "invisible church," but only a "remnant church."

The Church in the Old Testament

Reformed theology has always insisted on the continuity of the people of God within the old and new covenants. R. L. Dabney, for instance, notes "in the Old Testament a visible Church-State, called *qāhāl* and *'ēdā*" which is "characterized by every mark of a Church," i.e., a "society there organized was set apart to the service and worship of God," "organized under ecclesiastical rulers," which "had the Word and gospel of God," and the sacraments. In answer to the question, "Can the same thing be said of the visible Church catholic which has existed since Christ, under the organization given it by the Apostles?," he affirms, "The Reformed Churches answer, Yes. This is substantially the same with the Church of the Old Testament. The change of dispensation is the change of outward form, not of its substance or nature"

² In "The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel and the Terminology Visible and Invisible Church" (*CTM* 2 [1954]:189), Friedrich E. Meyer notes that Martin Luther said "no one can see or sense the Church. One does not see or experience what one believes, and again what one sees or perceives one does not believe." This "proper distinction between Law and Gospel," which "is foreign both to Rome and to Calvinism," eventuates, then, in the Lutheran distinction between the visible and invisible church, a view Meyer says leads Calvinists as well as Catholics to view "the Lutheran concept of the Church as a Platonic idea."

(Dabney, 781). The Scots Confession also emphasizes the continuity of God's "Kirk in all ages since Adam until the coming of Christ Jesus in the flesh" (chap. 5; also the Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 17).

The Reformed emphasis on the continuity of the church in all ages is obfuscated, however, by the introduction of the concept of an invisible church, for the visible covenant community is clearly the only people of God spoken of in the OT. The OT knows of no invisible church, this despite its clear assertions of divine election, that "God has chosen" Israel for his own possession (Deut 7:6-8; cf. Preuss, 27-39; Pannenberg, 45-61). The Hebrew *qāhāl* means "an organized and assembled multitude" of present and existing persons; the LXX generally translates it with *ekklēsia*, though in some 36 other instances it is translated *synagōgē*. The Hebrew *'ēdā* means a congregation or company assembled together by appointment and is generally translated *synagōgē* in the LXX. While all of these words *may* be used of *any assembly*, in the OT they almost always have to do with the covenant people Israel; as such, they are practically synonymous (Schmidt, 527-28; Müller, 1118; Levy, et al, 480). There are few OT texts (e.g., Ps 82:1 [LXX 81:1]; 89:5 [6; LXX 88:6]) where these words are used of an invisible assembly, and these all have to do with the angelic counsel. There is no instance in the OT where either word is used of an invisible assembly of human beings or of an assembly of those who do not yet exist.

In the OT, the *qāhāl* or *'ēdā* of Israel is always a visible body, entered into by means of circumcision. According to the covenant made with Abraham, every male, whether born from Abraham's seed or bought from other peoples, must be circumcised to be a part of the covenant people; an uncircumcised male was cut off from God's people for having broken the covenant (Gen 17:1-14; cf. Gen. 28:3-4; 35:11-12; 48:4 where *qāhāl* specifically refers to the Gen 17 promise of what *will be*, not what *already is* according to a divine decree). Strangers and aliens could be admitted into the covenant people by means of circumcision; on the other hand, those who did not receive this sign of submission to the terms of God's covenant and incorporation into his people were by no means regarded as invisible members of the *qāhāl*.

As the people set apart unto God, Israel was freed from Egypt through the blood of the Passover lamb, which "the whole assembly of the congregation" (*qāhāl 'ēdāth*) of Israel killed and applied to their house's doorposts and lintels (Ex 12:6). The assembling of this people "at Sinai was the immediate objective of the exodus (Ex. 5:1)," for "the great and definitive assembly of Israel was the assembly at Sinai" (Clowney, 1969, 12). This people was given the law on Sinai (Deut 4:10; 5:22) and assembled by Moses to make the tabernacle (Ex 35:1), around which God commanded, "Assemble all the congregation (*haqhāl kāl-hā- 'ēdā*)" (Lev 8:3-4; Num 8:9) for the institution of the priesthood. The priest made atonement in the holy place for "all the assembly of Israel" (Lev 16:17). When, on the other hand, some defied the priesthood instituted by God, "they perished from the midst of the assembly" (Num 16:33) and "sinned at the cost of their lives" (16:38), a fate to which "all the congregation of Israel" would have fallen were it not for the intercession and atonement made by Moses and Aaron (16:41-50). Cut off from the assembly were those who neglected circumcision (Gen 17:14), failed to keep the Passover (Num 9:13), profaned the Sabbath (Exod 34:14), ate blood (Lev 7:25-27; 17:10, 14),

committed various sexual abominations (Lev 18:6-29), worshiped Moloch (Lev 20:2-5), committed incest and engaged in menstrual sex (Lev 20:17-18), as well as the unclean who approached the sacred offerings (Lev 22:3) and the emasculated, illegitimate, Ammonite and Moabite (Deut 23:2-4). The Deuteronomist repeatedly insists on the purging of evil from the congregation (Deut 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19; 22:21-22, 24; 24:7). In short, those who obeyed the covenant from the heart (Deut 10:16) demonstrated themselves to be *set apart unto God*, whereas those who defied the covenant demonstrated themselves to be *set apart from God*. To be cut off from the covenant people was to be cut off from God, judged on the basis of the self-maledictory oath taken in circumcision, and rendered dead as a result of sin.

There was, then, an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, a true remnant church within the larger covenantal body, which embraced the teaching, discipline, and worship of God from the heart. This concept of the remnant is found as early as the flood story (Gen 6:5-8:22), when God saves his chosen from destruction through the waters and the ark, both of which later function as symbols of baptism and the church, respectively. The remnant, first specifically mentioned in Gen 45:7, was the true Israel which, in the paradigmatic words of 1 Kgs 19:18, was comprised of the 7000 “whose knees have not bowed down to Baal.” Thus, although Amos declares great woe to come upon Israel, yet he admonishes the people to seek the Lord, repent of sin, and do what God requires in the hope that “the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15). Though it will not escape unharmed (3:12), Amos promises that a small group will emerge from the coming Assyrian destruction (5:3).

The remnant idea becomes prominent in Isaiah, where a remnant will return to God in repentance and to the land in redemption (Isa 7:3; 10:20-22; 11:10-16; 17:5-8; 28:5; 30:17-19; 37:4, 31-32). Micah speaks of those who are to be gathered from exile as a remnant (4:6-7), as are those delivered from the Assyrians (5:6-8). It is “the meek and humble, who trust in the name of the Lord” who constitute “the remnant” to be saved (Zeph 3:12-13).

Jeremiah, too, assures the redemption of the “remnant of my flock” (Jer 23:3-4) from exile. God would save “the remnant of Israel” (31:7), though if it returned to Egypt it would forfeit his mercies and be destroyed (42:9-22). Thus, while the post-exilic community viewed itself as the remnant (Hag 1:12, 14; 2:2; Ezra 9:13-15; Neh 1:2-3; 7:72), its life of peace and prosperity was contingent on perseverance in truth and justice (Zech 8:1-17; cf. Deut 4:27; 28:62). “The thought of a preserved remnant leads to a more individual and spiritual emphasis. Like the communities gathered about the prophets in the days of apostasy, the remnant will appear as a band of disciples maintaining the truth of God (Isa 8:16-18)” (Clowney, 1969, 21).³ “The Old Testament Remnant is representative of the Church in Israel, witnessing to the presence of God with and for the people and to the fulfilment of God’s purpose with all Israel” (Campbell, 82).

³ Gerhard F. Hasel believes Isaiah “does not know the distinction of a ‘secular-profane’ and a ‘theological’ remnant motif,” but only of a holy and purified remnant (*The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1972] 401).

The Church in the New Testament

The Reformed emphasis on the continuity of the people of God from old covenant to new is borne out well by Stephen's allusion in Acts 7:38 to the *ekklēsia* in the wilderness wanderings (Deut 9:31). The Christian view that the resurrection of the crucified Jesus restores "the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6; 2:14-36) and fulfills the Abrahamic covenant (Acts 3:18-26) leads ineluctably to understanding the new covenant church, with Dabney above, as "substantially the same with the Church of the Old Testament," "the change of dispensation" being "the change of outward form, not of its substance or nature."

Just as was true in the OT, so in the NT there is one people of God visibly gathered and present.

The local connection is not the decisive point. This is shown by the further references to the *ekklēsia* in Judaea, Galilee and Samaria. It must also be emphasized that the singular and plural are used promiscuously. It is not that the *ekklēsia* divides up into *ekklēsiai*. Nor does the sum of the *ekklēsiai* produce the *ekklēsia*. The one *ekklēsia* is present in the places mentioned, nor is this affected by the mention of *ekklēsiai* alongside one another (Schmidt, 505).

There are numerous local manifestations of the church, but they are not merely parts of a greater whole, but rather the whole represented in each community. Thus, for example, "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2) may be said to be the representation of the whole church as it is visibly present in Corinth. "The one church was located in many places and he [Paul] could refer to these congregations either as churches or 'the church'" (Craig, 16).

"If the Church is to be in very deed the Church, it must never cease to look at itself in the light of its ancient Palestinian prototype" (Mackay, 68). Just as in the OT covenant community entrance was contingent upon identification with God in the self-maledictory oath of circumcision and maintained through the yearly Passover sacrifice in faithful obedience from the heart, so in the NT entrance is based on identification with the death of Jesus Christ in baptism and is nurtured through the sacrament of Holy Communion in faithful obedience from the heart. Reformed theology has seen in the new covenant sacraments the fulfilment and abrogation of the old covenant sacraments. Thus, the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) says that, with the advent of the messiah, "the sacraments of the old people are surely abrogated and have ceased and in their stead the symbols of the New Testament are placed – Baptism in the place of circumcision, the Lord's Supper in place of the Pascal Lamb and sacrifices" (chap. 19).

Furthermore, as in the old covenant, so in the new the unclean and immoral are to be cut off (1 Cor 6:9-11; Rev 21:8, 27; 22:15). Thus, Paul commands the Corinthian congregation to expel the immoral individual from the church (1 Cor 5:1-13). In handing this man "over to Satan so that the sinful nature may be destroyed," there was yet hope that "his spirit be saved on the day of the Lord" (5:5). This one, and all who impenitently engage in immorality, demonstrate that they are not truly brothers with whom one should eat or have fellowship (5:9-11). Those who sin and refuse to repent are to be regarded as outside of Christ and pagans (Mt 18:17) until they do repent, when they may then be restored to the fellowship of God's people (2 Cor 2:5-11). To

be outside of the church, the holy temple and household of God (Eph 2:19-21), is to be “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). Thus, as Cyprian, the third-century bishop of Carthage, said, “outside the church there is no salvation.”

The spouse of Christ cannot be adulterous; she is uncorrupted and pure. She knows one home; she guards with chaste modesty the sanctity of one couch. She keeps us for God. She appoints the sons whom she has born for the kingdom. Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church (Cyprian, 423).

John Calvin similarly emphasized the necessity of the (visible) church, saying that, “for those to whom he [God] is Father the church may also be Mother” (Calvin, 1012). “For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels. . . . Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness or any salvation” (Calvin, 1016).

Becoming simply an outward member of the covenant community, however, is insufficient. Paul reminds the Corinthians that their forefathers in the wilderness all proleptically underwent baptism and experienced communion with Christ and yet displeased God and were judged (1 Cor 10:1-5). Citing Ps 95:7-11 and the judgment of the exodus generation in the wilderness, the writer of Hebrews warns, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (Heb 3:12). Instead, he urges daily encouragement against the deceitfulness of sin and perseverance in the faith: “we have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly [*eanper kataskōmen*] till the end the confidence we had at first” (Heb 3:14). The third class condition in the Greek here indicates a significant chance of failure, leading William Lane to say, “the readers are reminded that perseverance until the time of the actual realization of the promise and entrance into the eschatological rest prepared for the people of God is required of those who are ‘partners with Christ’” (Lane, 88). Surely among the epistles the most oriented toward the OT, it is noteworthy that the book of Hebrews accents the necessity of perseverance for entering into God’s Sabbath rest: “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience” (Heb 4:11).

Admitting the continuity of the old covenant ecclesia with the new places the onus for demonstrating the existence of a discontinuous innovation such as an invisible church upon its proponents. There does not seem, however, to be any instance of the use of *ekklēsia* in the New Testament which *requires* the meaning of an *invisible assembly*. The Westminster Confession cites Col 1:18 and Eph 1:22-23, 5:23, 27, 32 in support of the idea, but the OT background to these verses disconfirms their support of an invisible church. In Ephesians 5, the marriage relation of Christ to the church is

the antitype of that relation of God to Israel (Isa 54:1, 5-6; 62:4-5; Jer 2:2-3, 32; Ezek 16, 23; Hos 2:19-20; Mal 2:14). The pre-exilic references to Israel as God's wife bemoan her unfaithfulness, acting as a prostitute, resulting in God's giving Israel a certificate of divorce (Jer 3; Ezek 16; Hos 2) by sending her into exile. While God promises the restoration of Israel, this promise pertains to *the remnant*, which returns in repentance. It is these to whom God says, "The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit – a wife who married young, only to be rejected" (Isa 54:6). If "the writer [of Ephesians] has adapted Paul's picture of the Corinthian church as a pure bride for Christ from 2 Cor 11:2 with its language of presentation and applied it to Christ's relationship to the universal Church" (Lincoln, 362-63), the need for perseverance in union with Christ is implicit, since Paul is in 2 Corinthians 11 presenting the possibility that these believers may be deceived "just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning" and thus "be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor 11:3). Here, then, just as in the Old Testament, the covenant community must take heed not to fall into spiritual adultery, but to remain faithful to her betrothed, Jesus Christ, so that she may indeed be presented as a pure virgin to him" (2 Cor 11:3) and be his "radiant church" (Eph 5:27). Ephesians 5 thus speaks in the language of "realized eschatology" (Lincoln, 363) of that which is in process throughout history.

It must be noted that there is no clear parallel in Ephesians to the notion of the preexistence of the redeemed bride. The emphasis in this letter is more on the Church's being created through Christ's reconciling death (cf. 2:15). To call Christ the Savior of the body does not necessarily imply that the latter was in existence before its salvation. It need mean no more than that those who at present make up that body were at one time in a situation from which they needed to be saved (cf. 2:1-5) (Lincoln, 371).

Much the same may be said of the "body" language earlier found in Eph 1:22-23 and also in Col 1:18. Earlier Paul had spoken of the church as a body in which there are particular gifts given to particular individual for particular functions (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-30). If, as some suppose, the image of the body is in these two instances specific to the respective local assemblies, there is nonetheless no universalization of the concept of ecclesia in Ephesians and Colossians if, as stated above, the one church is located in many places and local congregations may be called *churches* or *the church*. As Schmidt has said, the sum of the *ekklēsiai* does not produce the *ekklēsia*. Rather, the one *ekklēsia* is present in each place, for wherever Christ is present among his people, there also is his church, visible and ordered. Surely the image of the body underlying the use of Eph 1:22-23 and Col 1:18 implies this much. Thus, Hort warns, "it is a serious misunderstanding of these Epistles to suppose, as is sometimes done, that the Ecclesia here spoken of is an Ecclesia wholly in the heavens, not formed of human beings," since Paul clearly emphasizes that this is "the spiritual union of men actually on earth with One called their Head in the heavens" (Hort, 148-49).

The emphasis here on the visibility of the saints should not, however, be construed as a diminution of the communion of the saints. It is *possible*, though not absolutely necessary, to view a few NT uses of *ekklēsia* as having reference to the communion of the (visible) church on earth with the (departed and thus no longer physically visible) church in glory, traditionally referred to, respectively, as the

Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. For example, in Heb 2:12, in a context of “bringing many sons to glory” (v 10), the exalted Lord Jesus is said to sing God’s praises in the *ekklēsia* (quoting Ps 22:22 [21:23 LXX]). Lane believes “the writer of Hebrews locates here a reference to the exalted Lord who finds in the gathering of the people of God at the parousia” (Lane 59); if this is so, the emphasis remains on the gathering together, as Paul says in 1 Thess 4:13-17, of those who have fallen asleep with those who are still alive and remain in order to celebrate and behold together the victory of Christ over the forces of darkness (cf. Matt. 24:31; 2 Thess 2:1). In so doing, they celebrate and behold the victory and communion they have shared as members of Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the church of the firstborn, to which first-century believers still in the flesh had already come (Heb 12:22-23).

The heavenly Jerusalem, this church of the firstborn, is not, however, a merely “an eschatological, heavenly gathering,” but rather a present fellowship of the saints on earth with the other manifestations of the church, whether in other parts of the world or in glory. This fellowship is found particularly in the sacrament aptly called holy communion. Thus, the Directory for Worship (W-2.4005) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) says that in the Lord’s Supper, the people of God call upon the Holy Spirit “to lift them into Christ’s presence,” “to bind them with Christ and with one another,” and “to unite them in communion with all the faithful in heaven and on earth” (among other requests). This communion of saints is such that even within a particular community on a common Lord’s Day celebration such as Worldwide Communion Sunday, each communicant does not actually see all other communicants, either (as is probable) within his own particular gathered assembly or (as is certain) other gatherings of different denominations within that same locale or, or course, throughout the world. To acknowledge this is not, however, to suggest that those other unseen members of the church are thereby *invisible*. They *are* visible but, limitations upon the human ability to process space and light waves beyond a certain range prohibits this seeing. The Directory for Worship beckons the church to see by faith the church *in toto* as it participates in the sacrament of holy communion. As Elisha prayed for his servant, “O Lord, open his eyes so he may see” (2 Kgs 6:17), so the church must pray that it would be enabled to see much more of “the great cloud of witnesses” which Heb 12:1 says surround it.

The church has existed from the dawn of redemptive history and continues throughout time and on into glory. While there are manifestations of the church which are imperceptible to the saints on earth due to the limitations of their flesh, the church remains rooted in history and actuality, both in its earthly and its glorified manifestations. The church is one in fellowship, a communion of saints past and present (but not future, since existence is necessary to the church!), which is best appreciated in the sacrament of holy communion, the foretaste of the eschatological banquet when God brings “all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph 1:10). It was, after all, in the breaking of bread with the risen Lord that the eyes of the two in Emmaus “were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:31).

The Church and the Question of Predestination

The question of predestination has for many been largely rendered moot by the advances in quantum physics which demonstrate that indeterminism and chaos

predominate on the sub-atomic level. They emphasize the centrality of chance, novelty, and the openness of the future to the realization of creation and God himself. Thus, John Polkinghorne maintains, “cosmic history is not the unfolding of an inexorable divine plan. An evolutionary world is to be understood theologically as a world allowed by the Creator to make itself to a large degree,” with God guiding the process in a continual creation (Polkinghorne, 42-43). Others, however, are not so confident that the indeterminism of sub-atomic physics can be applied to the large-scale structures of the universe. Indeed, the indeterminism of quantum mechanics has thus far largely resisted such broad application, for the causality of classical Newtonian mechanics still appears operative on the large scale. The apparent irreconcilability and necessary accommodation of sub-atomic indeterminism with large-scale determinism parallels a similar theological tension between the indeterminism of human free will and the determinism of divine predestination. “If physics can learn to live with so-called deterministic chaos, perhaps theology can accept a providential freedom of God that accommodates the determinism of divine predestination and the indeterminism of human and divine freedom without denying the inevitable tension between the two or subsuming one under the other” (Worthing, 138). Contemporary advances in physics notwithstanding, it seems the biblical doctrine of predestination still warrants serious attention.

It is generally suggested that Augustine originated the idea of an invisible church based on his doctrine of predestination. “As he worked out his doctrine of predestination,” says Kelly, “he was led to introduce a refinement on this distinction between the visible and invisible Church,” coming at last to the conclusion that “the only true members of the Church” “could be ‘the fixed number of the elect’,” including “in its ranks not only present-day Christians, but all who have believed in Christ in the past and will do so in the future” (Kelly, 416, 413). Yet, inasmuch as a computer search of the *ANF* and the eight volumes of Augustine’s writings in the *NPNF* yields *no instance* of the phrase “invisible church,” it seems valid to question the existence of such a concept in the early church or in Augustine. Certainly Catholic theologians, among others, dispute the notion that Augustine originated the idea of an invisible church: “the dicta of St. Augustine do not postulate a twofold church – either one separate from the other, or one within the other – but can be verified in the existence of a single Church containing diverse and seemingly disparate elements” (Grabowski, 212). How the “disparate elements” in the “single Church” cohere “one within the other” remains unclear, however. Certainly Paul views them as “one within the other,” for the true Jew “is one inwardly” by “circumcision of the heart,” differentiated from the larger covenant people who are Jews only “outwardly” through circumcision which is “merely outward and physical” (Rom 2:28-29). Although Augustine’s ecclesiology is not uniform, it appears best to see it in terms of the *ecclesiola in ecclesia* wherein the essential church, truly Christ’s body, is joined by others who are “inside the house, but remain alien to its intimate fabric. They belong to the *catholicae ecclesiae communio* and enjoy the *communio sacramentorum*; but it is the just who constitute ‘the congregation and society of saints’, the ‘holy Church’ in the strict sense of the words” (Kelly, 415-16).

This does not mean, however, that the true church for Augustine was invisible. Rather, he argued that “the authentic bride of Christ really does consist, as the Donatists claimed, exclusively of good and pious men, but that this ‘invisible

fellowship of love' is only to be found in the historical Catholic Church, within whose frontiers good men and sinners meanwhile consort together in a 'mixed company'" (Kelly, 416). Thus, when Augustine says, "many who seem to be without are in reality within, and many who seem to be within yet really are without," he is speaking in the first instance of those who "are Jews inwardly in the circumcision of the heart," some of whom "live according to the Spirit, and enter on the excellent way of charity," others of whom when "overtaken, the affection of charity is but a little checked, and not extinguished," though there are still others who "are yet carnal, and full of fleshly appetites [who] are instant in working out their progress . . . and they strive most watchfully that they may be less and less delighted with worldly and temporal matters." The latter, on the other hand, are those who have received baptism and yet "live wickedly, or even lie in heresies or the superstitions of the Gentiles" (Augustine, 477). Similar sentiments are expressed in other of Augustine's writings, particularly *The City of God*.⁴ When, however, Kelly suggests that Augustine had "two conceptions" of the Church, one "as a historical institution" and the other, "the true Church of those really devoted to Christ and manifesting His spirit," he may be setting up a false dilemma, for the true Church exists within the larger, *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, and is demonstrated by love for Christ and perseverance in the faith. The criticism that Augustine's doctrine relieves "the notion of the institutional Church" of "any validity" (Kelly, 416-17) must be countered by the bishop's belief "that those who were destined by God for salvation must before death find their way by baptism into the fold of the Catholic Church. For this he laboured, and this explains both his eventual reluctant agreement to the use of force by imperial officers to compel Donatists into the Church, and his opposition to the death penalty for those who refused" (Jay, 89).

The reality of inward transformation by the Spirit must be outwardly evident, lest the claim of salvation be in vain. Life lived in the Spirit is distinctively different than life lived in the flesh, bearing the fruits of the Spirit instead of the acts of the sinful nature (Gal 5:16-26). The type of fruit borne in life is a visible and tangible demonstration of the nature of the tree. John the Baptist required those coming for baptism to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Mt 3:8). He warned, "every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Mt 3:10), words which Jesus reiterated (Mt 7:17). People may be known by the fruits their lives bear. Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Mt 7:20; 12:33). This fruitfulness is, moreover, contingent on remaining in Christ. "Every branch in me," in outward relationship, "that bears no fruit" is cut off and thrown into the fire (John 15:2; the third class conditions in vv 6-7 again indicate the real possibility of apostasy). Remaining in Christ, enduring, persevering, continuing in that vital

⁴ In *The City of God* 18.47, for instance, Augustine asserts "there have been certain men even of other nations who belonged, not by earthly but heavenly fellowship, to the true Israelites," citing the example of Job. That Job in Uz, living in second millennium B.C., could, as Abraham in Ur, have received in this embryonic stage of redemptive history revelation from God so as to be "blameless and upright" (Job 1:1) does not militate in any way against thesis of this article. Rather, as in the case of the other patriarchs, the tribe, of which Job was the head and chief of the assembly, would have functioned as a particular church, further attesting to the truth (also found in Abraham) that God's call in the church was early extended to both Jew and Gentile.

relationship with him (John 15:4-5) is necessary to the fruitfulness which evinces the reality of that union (cf. also Eph 5:9; Phil 1:11; Col 1:6; Heb 12:11; 13:15; Jas 3:18).

Paul makes bold the distinction between how people in the church *used to live* before coming to Christ and how they *now live* in Christ (Rom 6:19-22; 1 Cor 6:9-11; Tit 3:3-8), as do Peter and other biblical writers (1 Pet 2:9-12; Jas 2:14-26, *e.g.*). A life lived in persevering faithfulness to God in Christ and the church is required to demonstrate the reality of salvation. Those having “hearts sprinkled clean” from guilt and “bodies washed with pure water” in baptism are to “hold unswervingly to the hope” and “not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,” *for* if they “willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb 10:22-27). Having warned of the perils of apostatizing from God and his church, the writer concludes, “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Heb 10:36). As the Westminster Confession puts it (chap. 17), “They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace: but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”

Then, however, the Confession conditions this perseverance of the saints “not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election,” it passes too easily over numerous passages which warn against failing to persevere and which obviously place responsibility upon the human being to remain in Christ. Granting this may be done only be personal appropriation of the power of God, there is still no denying human responsibility. Divine election is thus demonstrated by human perseverance in the faith and fruitfulness for Christ, both of which necessitate a visible relation to the body of Christ, the church. Just as there cannot be invisible Christians, so there cannot be an invisible church. “Like the nation-state America, the church is a public, cultural, visible, political presence in the world” (Clapp, 56).

Classical Reformed theologians insist that the inscrutability of divine election necessitates an invisible church. “Limiting the church to its visible aspect erases the reality of God’s election. Since the Lord knows his own sheep, given him by the Father, we may say that the church invisible is the church as God sees it” (Clowney, 1995, 109). This is, however, to make election secret and incapable of outward validation. The assumption that one cannot know who the elect are on the basis of how they live hardly meshes with the biblical emphasis on fruitfulness and righteous living. The exhortation to “make every effort to add to your faith” the virtues of goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love is done in order “to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:5-11). As the Puritans were so famously aware, a righteous life founded in a heart of love and obedience to Jesus Christ is the only proof one can have of election. “In the order of causation, a man is not a saint because he is good, but if he is a saint he is caused to be good. In more conventional language, he is elected” (Miller, 96-97).

The inscrutability of the divine decree to election should not become the basis for the inscrutability of the people of God. Election is, fundamentally, the purpose of God to call out a people unto himself in whom he will dwell. God’s choice of Israel “out of

all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut 7:6) was not based on anything in them, but only on God’s love and faithfulness to his covenant. The realization of God’s covenant of love was contingent, however, on Israel’s paying heed to God’s law (Deut 7:11-12). The people of God, if they are to remain his people, must be visibly of God: “The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you” (Deut 28:9-10). Election must be visible to be actual and eternal, not presumed and lost.

While the emphasis here on the visible validation of election coheres with classical theology’s conceptualization of the doctrine in predominantly individualistic terms, it is even more appreciable within the contemporary, and probably more biblically faithful, understanding of election in corporate terms (cf. Klein, *passim*). In the latter, while there is acknowledgment of God’s call upon individuals to fulfill certain functions, election unto salvation is viewed as belonging to *the covenant community, the people of God* who worship and serve him from the heart. This is in keeping with the OT portrayal of God’s election of Israel and the continuity that is requisite for the NT conceptualization of the new Israel of God, the church.

This election does not have individual emphasis in Paul, any more than it did for Israel in the Old Testament or the Early Jewish period. Rather, it implies a covenant-relationship through which God chooses for Himself a whole people. This collectivism is of supreme importance for the understanding of the implications of “election in Christ” (Shedd, 133).

The first-century Mediterranean person did not see himself in Western individualistic terms, but in relational terms, as members of a group, such as a family, village, or nation. This elucidates the “numerous corporate metaphors employed to describe the church – the body of Christ, house (temple), bride, people of God, and ‘in Christ.’ Christians find their identity as members of this inclusive organism” (Klein, 260).

Passages such as Eph 1:4 should therefore be interpreted not in individualistic terms, but in corporate terms: “God chose *us*,” the church, “in Christ before the foundation of the world.” “In God’s eternal purpose the believers are contemplated as existing in Christ, as the Head, the Summary, of the race. The *eklogē* has no separate existence, independently of the *eklektos* (Luke ix. 35, xxiii. 35). The election of Christ involves implicitly the election of the Church” (Lightfoot, 312). God gave a people to his Son in the covenant of redemption, so that all those who are united with Christ, the federal head and representative of the new race, have eternal life as a gift of God’s grace. “Whereas in Judaism it was the nation, or the faithful remnant, which was the primary subject of election, for AE [the author of Ephesians] the elect group consists of all, both Jews and Gentiles, who in being reconciled to God have been reconciled to one another (cf 2:14-17) and who form the body of Christ. The Church is elect” (Best, 120). Although people are not Christians simply because they associate with the covenant community of the church, they cannot be Christians if they do not identify with the corporate body in the sacrament of baptism, in regular worship, and in the fellowship of the risen Christ in the sacrament of holy communion. While there will always be those who have the outward association without the inward grace, the inward grace of being *justified with God* will be manifested outwardly in *just living*

before God (Otto, 131-45). Those who are true to God will manifest it through to the end (cf. Matt 10:22). This remnant will persevere and be saved.

The implications of this ecclesiology are significant and can only be briefly delineated here. Chiefly, it emphasizes that those who are truly united to Christ by faith will demonstrate that relationship by active and faithful commitment to the worship and service of the church. One does not belong to Christ simply by virtue of intellectual assent to particular doctrines, even if that assent is to sound doctrine. Mere intellectual assent (*notitia*) is not saving faith, but only a truncated version of it. Saving faith involves personal union of heart, soul, and mind with Christ, being *in him*, which of necessity means being in his body, the church. Thus, there truly is no salvation outside of the church. To hope for salvation by invoking membership in an invisible church is, to use another of Cyprian's metaphors, to hope for salvation through an invisible ark. As in Noah's day no one was saved apart from taking his place in the actual ark, so throughout history no one can be saved apart from taking his place by faith in the church.

This emphasis on the centrality of the visible church as the only church also puts real teeth into church discipline. If those claiming the gospel but living defiantly have recourse to membership in an invisible church by virtue of their presumed personal election, they may have little concern for the actions of church discipline. As Kelly suggested, if the doctrine of the invisible church "is taken seriously the notion of the institutional Church ceases to have any validity" (Kelly, 417). People may claim to believe the gospel but feel little need to belong to the church and even less need to heed the admonitions of the governing authorities of the church. Obedience to valid church authority is imperative, however, for in the NT, as in the OT, it signifies obedience to God; church authorities act as God's representatives, "keeping watch over your souls as men who will have to give account" (Heb 13:17). To be cast outside of the church community in the NT, as in the OT, is to be outside the pale of salvation. The only hope for those "cut off" or excommunicated is to repent and be restored to the elect body. This view is in keeping with the Reformed doctrine of the office of the keys (Mt 16:19), whereby through the proclamation of the gospel and Christian discipline true believers are assured of the benefits of Christ. Believers are assured "that as often as they accept the promise of the gospel with true faith all their sins are truly forgiven them by God for the sake of Christ's gracious work. On the contrary, the wrath of God and eternal condemnation fall upon all unbelievers and hypocrites as long as they do not repent" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 84). Those who evidently and impenitently fail to live according to the gospel call forth the church's discipline, climaxing in excommunication from the body and from Christ himself.

Christ commanded that those who bear the Christian name in an unchristian way either in doctrine or in life should be given brotherly admonition. If they do not give up their errors or evil ways, notification is given to the church or to those ordained for this by the church. Then, if they do not change after this warning, they are forbidden to partake of the holy Sacraments and are thus excluded from the communion of the church and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ. However, if they promise and show real amendment, they are received again as members of Christ and of the church" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 85).

As the Heidelberg Catechism clearly implies, the disobedient who remain impenitent have no valid claim of salvation, regardless of the soundness of their professed doctrine. They may have been outwardly a part of the elect body and so have considered themselves elect, yet be lost, unless they repent and bring forth fruits of repentance. Even those who have at one time lived in faithfulness and then depart from the faith and church should fear having “shipwrecked their faith”; because they have failed to hold on to the faith and a good conscience, they, with Hymenaeus and Alexander, are “handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim 1:19-20). Hence, the warnings throughout Scripture against falling away from the faith and the community (e.g., Heb 5:11-6:12).

Salvation, then, is a gift of God’s grace founded solely in the sinless life, atoning death, and life-giving resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the head of the new Israel; yet “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (Rom 9:6), but only those who embrace the faith of Abraham are his offspring (Rom 9:8-9; Gal 3:16-18). They are the true Israel, the remnant, who have entered into the covenant community, accepted its terms, and live in obedience from the heart.

Conclusion

The invisible church idea is an apologetic device developed by the Reformers to comply with the creeds’ statements concerning a “catholic church”⁵ and is based on a conception of individual election that itself may need revision. The Reformed doctrine of an invisible church has no basis in the OT or NT, for in both it is those who unite and persevere in faithful obedience with God through his mediator in the covenant community who are saved. The *invisible church* should thus be *replaced* with the *remnant church*, for the remnant is the *ecclesiola in ecclesia* which public demonstrates election in saving union with Christ through abiding in him and bringing forth fruit for his glory.

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⁵ Alister McGrath suggests that the distinction between the visible and invisible church owes its origin to Martin Bucer, though he offers no proof (*Historical Theology* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1998] 206).

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