

Invisible Faith will have Visible Fruit

The book of Acts from beginning to end is a testimony to the power of the means of grace as the mark of the church. Where the gospel was preached, there was Christ, there was the Holy Spirit, and there the church was created and preserved. All of the epistles as well make the same point. Paul so often begins his epistles with an address to the believers, to the saints, in such and such a place. Just exactly who those saints were could not be known by one and by all. But the presence of the gospel guaranteed that there were believers in that place.

Accordingly, the visible church is the company of those who are gathered around the gospel. Where the gospel is, there the visible church will also be. Those who are members of the invisible church by faith will almost always be members also of the visible church. Again, that does not mean that all members of the visible church are likewise members of the invisible church. For it is faith in Christ as Saviour that makes one a member of the invisible church. That's an important point to keep in mind, lest one falsely imagine, as indeed so many do, that their seat in heaven is secure simply because they belong to a visible church. They make faith in the church a substitute for faith in Christ. Jesus warned against such a misplaced faith in the strongest possible terms. Consider the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-23. He was outwardly a member of the church, indeed a very good member. But inwardly he worshipped his wealth. Consider the two men who went up to the temple to pray in Luke 18:9-14, from our Gospel for today. Both were members of the visible church. But one, for all of his outward virtue, did not long for and receive forgiveness. Rather, he trusted in his own merits for his salvation. In John 8:31-47 Jesus confronted those Jews who trusted that their physical descent from Abraham and their outward connection with the people of God made them automatically heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

In so many of His parables about the kingdom of God Jesus warns against a false trust in mere outward association with the gospel, as though just being around the Word of God made one a child of God (e.g., Matthew 21:28-22:14; all of chapter 23; 25:1-30). To put it another way, membership by faith in Christ in the invisible church is what makes us want to belong also to the visible church; it's not membership in the visible church that makes us members of the invisible church, but just the other way around.

It is sad but true that even among those who appear to be the best members of the church, even among pastors and teachers of the church, there are those who are not members of the invisible church. They either are hypocrites or teachers so false in their teaching that they deny the essential elements of the gospel by which alone faith is created and sustained. And so Jesus warns us all to be on our guard against both hypocrisy and faith-denying, faith-killing false doctrine. He could not have said it more clearly or more powerfully than he did in Matthew 7:21-23: "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father, who is in heaven.*"²² *Many will ask Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, in Your name driven out demons, and in Your name performed many miracles?'*"²³ *Then I shall tell them frankly, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who do what is evil!'"*

Precisely because it is possible for people to deceive themselves into thinking that they are members of the invisible church simply because of their outward connection to the visible church body, Peter joins in Jesus' warning against becoming mere mouth-Christians who are devoid of any of the fruits of faith. Such a one, Peter says, "*is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure*" (2 Peter 1:9-10). The only way to do that is to remain constant in repentance, which confesses our always-absolute need for our Saviour and then in faith trusts in Jesus' perfect life and substitutionary death in payment for our sins. Such a faith will seek to give evidence of its presence in the exercise of a Christian life, in a struggle against sin, and in a devotion to sound doctrine drawn from the Word of God.

To put it another way, the invisible faith will have visible fruit. The appearance of fruit alone does not make one a member of the invisible church; that membership is by faith alone-visible fruit in the hypocrite or the self-deceived is rotten to the core, even though the core cannot be seen, no matter how good it looks on the outside. Nevertheless, it is at the same time true and important that true faith will produce true fruits of faith. Their quality and number may vary, but fruit there will always be.