

The Doctrine of the Visible Church

Today, we begin a study of the visible church. Our primary text this afternoon will be Romans 9:1-13, which has this theme: Paul teaches that not all members of the visible church are united to Christ.

The first thing to ask in our consideration of the church is the question, What is the church? In the New Testament, the Greek word *ecclesia* is used, which means "called out." In English and other European languages, the word "church" is related to "Lord" (the Greek word *kurios*, meaning "Lord," is similar to the Scottish "kirk"). In Scripture, there is a multi-fold description: body, temple, elect, kingdom, bride. When we think of the church, we think not only of a particular congregation, but of the whole—indeed, of all of God's people in every age.

But, there's a paradoxical nature to the church. It is holy—yet, sin remains. It is united—yet, there is much in-fighting and even schism in what we see manifested around us. Part of the tension is a result of the fact that our salvation is both "already, but not yet"; this is characteristic of the kingdom, also. And part of this tension revolves around the fact that there is, of necessity, a clear distinction between visible and invisible church.

The invisible church is all of the elect in every age. It is invisible in that it is known only to God. And, it is invisible in that it reflects spiritual realities.

The visible church is all of those who profess the faith, along with their children.

The visible is a reflection of the invisible. The invisible is both the ideal and the real.

So what—what's the point of it all? Well, the church visible is a manifestation of God's redemptive purposes in history. Accordingly, church history is world history. And further, this enactment of the church visible portrays the conflict in which the church is engaged, both externally (i.e., against the world and its system) and internally (including the reality of hypocrites being within the church).

As we consider Romans 9, we remember that it is the first part of a three-chapter section, Romans 9-11, which deals with the theme of Israel and the church; or, with Israel and the Gentiles. This is one of the clearest passages with regard to divine sovereignty in salvation, or predestination.

The first major point is Paul's Intense Passion for His Kinsmen's Salvation. Notice his attestation of this in v. 1. "I say the truth in Christ." Paul was deeply concerned to speak the truth. It was the truth about Jesus. More than that, it was the truth as it is found in Jesus. And beyond that, it was in union with Christ that he was speaking the truth. He also writes, "I lie not." This statement is not superfluous or redundant; rather, it was to emphasize the seriousness of what he was saying. He adds, "my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost." Paul had a clear conscience in the matter, and, he was being led by the Holy Spirit.

In v. 2, Paul expresses his feelings: he speaks of the “great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.” He was grieved by what he saw. These two words—grief and anguish—appear together in only two other places in Scripture: Isaiah 35:10 and 51:11.

Then in v. 3, he enunciates a self-curse—an “anathema.” This word indicates being separated from Christ and devoted to destruction. It is used in various places in the Old Testament: Leviticus 27:28, 29; Deuteronomy 7:26; 13, 16, 18; Joshua 6:17; 7:1, 11, 12. Paul is not here saying that he could take the place of the Israelites; but, he is expressing his profound longing for their salvation, even to the point of being willing himself to be accursed. This is similar to Moses’ expression in Exodus 32:32.

By way of application, let me make the following points. First, if we are truly Christians, we should have the same compassion that Paul did. Secondly, not everyone of Israel was saved or would be saved. These Israelites were Paul’s kinsmen “according to the flesh.” This is certainly a reference to ethnicity. The very fact that Paul was willing to be cursed that his “brethren” might be saved, points to the fact that many of them were not saved.

The second major point is Privileges of the Visible Church. Here, Paul lists nine things which are privileges of the visible church.

One, there is the term “Israelites.” Israel means “prince with God” (cf. Genesis 32:28). The term points to the dignity of the Israelites.

Two, Paul mentions adoption, which points to being part of God’s family. We read about adoption in the following passages: Exodus 4:22-23; Deuteronomy 14:1-2; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; and Hosea 11:1. What a great privilege it is to be called by God’s name! Of course, the sacrament of baptism involves the placing the name of the Holy Trinity upon the person when the water of baptism is applied.

Three, there is the glory. This is “the visible manifestation of the invisible God.” There were numerous instances of this glory: Exodus 24:16, 17; 40:34-38; Leviticus 16:2; I Kings 8:10f.

Four, Paul mentions the covenants. There are three covenants in particular that pertain to ancient Israel. First, there is the Abrahamic covenant: Genesis 15:1f; 17:7; 22:15f; 26:1f; 28:10f. Secondly, there is the Mosaic covenant, under which God gave the law. Thirdly, there is the Davidic covenant, by which God established the kingdom.

Five, Paul speaks of the giving of the law, which, of course, occurred at Mount Sinai. As Psalm 147 says, what other nation was so blessed?

Six, Paul writes of the service. This is a reference to the worship of God, especially at the sanctuary or temple.

Seven, there are the promises. Think of all the promises of God in the Old Testament, including those found in these places: Genesis 3:15; 12:3; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; Joel 2:28-29; Amos 9:11-15.

The overarching promise of God to Israel was, “I will be your God, and the God of your seed after you” (Genesis 17:7).

Eight, Paul says, “whose are the fathers.” This is a reference to the patriarchs, particularly Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also David. Indeed, all of the godly forefathers could be incorporated under this phrase.

Nine, it was through them that Christ came. Paul writes, “as concerning the flesh Christ came.” Christ was a Jew, and this was part of the blessing of being an Israelite. And having affirmed Christ’s full humanity (“the flesh”), Paul adds, “who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” This affirms Christ’s full deity, and the “Amen” adds solemnity.

Having seen Paul’s Intense Passion for His Kinsmen’s Salvation, and Privileges of the Visible Church, the third major point is the Profound Distinction Between Outward and Inward Israel.

In v. 6a, we have the preliminary statement. This statement highlights the problem—if the kinsmen of Paul are not saved, then what does that situation do to God’s word with regard to Israel? The answer is that there has always been a remnant regarding whom all of these promises were valid.

In v. 6b, we have the basic premise: “for they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” There is a true Israel—in other words, the elect of God, who are circumcised in heart and born again (regenerated), which have genuine faith. But then there are those outwardly identified with Israel, who are hypocrites. It was, we read, a mixed multitude that came out of Egypt. Even when the church was whittled down in the Noachic flood, it is evident that not all of Noah’s sons were converted. Jesus issued warnings against the Pharisees, as well as to His own purported followers: Matthew 7:13-29. In that last portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of the narrow way which leads to life, in contrast to the broad way that leads to destruction; He reminded them that they must bring forth good rather than bad fruit, or else be thrown into the fire; He warned them that not everyone who professes His name will be saved, and that many will hear Him say, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness”; and He illustrated His pointed remarks by speaking of the foolishness of building a house upon the sand rather than upon the solid rock.

In verses 7 through 13, we see the differentiation regarding children.

First, notice the differentiation between the seed of Abraham and the children of the promise. In v. 7a, there is a contrast between the seed of Abraham, and children (of God). In v. 7b, we read, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called”—i.e., the remnant will come through Isaac, not Ishmael. In v. 8a, there is a contrast between children of the flesh, and children of God. In v. 8b, the text says, “but the children of the promise are counted for the seed”—i.e., the true seed is represented by the children of God, to whom God promises salvation.

Secondly, notice what was said with regard to Sarah. In v. 9, we read that the birth of a child to Sarah was according to promise. Of course, it was Isaac who was the seed of Abraham, through Sarah.

Thirdly, Paul speaks of the situation regarding Rebecca. She conceived by one man, viz., Isaac. But, she had twins, Jacob and Esau. Notice the phrase, “the children being not yet born, not having done good or evil.” This does not deny total depravity, from the womb—that is, from conception. Nevertheless, we are taught here that there was not yet outward manifestation of their sin. And this fact emphasizes God’s sovereign election: “that the purpose of God might stand, not of works, but of Him that calls.” V. 12 says that it was said to Rebecca, “the elder shall serve the younger.” And v. 13 contains the contrast between Jacob and Esau, in which we read, “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” These words are recorded in Genesis 25:23 and Malachi 1:2-3. What awesome, awful words regarding Esau! Consider also that the prophecy regarding Jacob and Esau was spoken before they were born.

By way of applying this text, notice first of all the great privileges given to the visible church. These great privileges imply great responsibility. But, they do not necessarily equate to great blessing. As a matter of fact, they can lead to great curse.

Secondly, consider the great grace of God. We see this, for example, in the miraculous birth of Isaac. We see it also in the very fact of a remnant. And note also the unbelievable statement: it is not, “Esau have I hated,” but, “Jacob have I loved.”

Thirdly, remember the great sacrifice of Christ. All of these promises we read about in this passage are “Yes and Amen!” in Him. But in order for that to be the case, He truly was made accursed, and hung on a tree.

The second text we want to consider is Joshua 24:14-28. In Romans 9, we saw that there was a distinction between visible and invisible church, and that not every member of the visible is actually, genuinely united to Christ. In Joshua 24, we see that the visible church consists of those who profess the true religion, together with their children.

As we begin to look at this text, we would note that the doctrine of the church is one of the key, foundational doctrines of the Christian faith. The church is the reason for redemption. The church’s preservation is a major theme in Scripture and history. Even the divisions with regard to the church and ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) are an indicator of the importance of the matter, for you don’t normally fight over things of no consequence.

We once again want to point out the crucial, necessary distinction between the visible and the invisible church. The invisible church consists of all the elect in every age. It is the true church—both the ideal and the real. It is invisible in that it is known only to God. It is that group which is vitally united to Christ—those who are actually saved. It is that group for which Christ died.

The visible church consists of those that are outwardly identified with Christ, but not necessarily inwardly so. It is that group which enjoys great privileges as the covenant people of God—as we saw from Romans 9. It is a group which therefore has great responsibility, the members of which need to take heed because of the great danger of hypocrisy.

More positively, wherein consists the visible church? It consists of those who profess the true religion plus their children.

Consider the background for Joshua 24. The book of Joshua is about conquering the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, who was Moses' successor. The people of God prepare to take the land. They are circumcised at Gilgal. Then, the captain of the host of the Lord appears to Joshua. The fortress city of Jericho is conquered. But then, there is sin in the camp, resulting in initial defeat at the hands of Ai, and the exposing of the sin of Achan. The Gibeonites trick the Israelites, yet become their servants. During a battle, the sun and moon stand still in the valley of Aijalon. The land is divided among the tribes, and six cities of refuge are established.

Towards the end of the book, Joshua encourages the children of Israel, and challenges them with regard to following the Lord. In Joshua 23:11, we read: "Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the Lord your God." The Israelites' professed loyalty would determine whether they would remain a church—that is, a manifestation of the visible church.

With that as a backdrop, the first major point from our text is, Those Who Profess the True Religion. And the first thing to consider in this regard is the matter of professing. Their profession has several facets. First, there is their serving the Lord (v. 14). Joshua exhorts them, "Now therefore fear the Lord." This is not to be a slavish fear, but, a reverential fear. This fear is with respect to His awe and worship. This concept of fearing the Lord underlines the solemnity and seriousness of professing the faith.

Their fearing the Lord is to be "in sincerity and truth." This twin phrase could be saying essentially the same thing twice; or, "truth" could refer to the objective nature of things. Fearing the Lord also means putting away false gods—gods "which your fathers served," on the other side of the flood and in Egypt. This means on the other side of the Red Sea, and in the land of Egypt (cf. Ezekiel 23:3, 8, 19, 21, 27). The "serving" here is equivalent to worshipping—serving by means of worshipping. Notice also that it is Yahweh (the LORD) whom they are to serve.

Secondly, profession of the Lord means choosing the Lord (v. 15). This is in contrast to choosing false gods. Two phrases are employed: the gods your fathers served, which looks to the past; and the gods of the Amorites, which looks at the present. Notice that following the Lord entails a choice. This is not to imply some sort of equality between Yahweh and the false gods. False gods are no gods. Joshua's terminology is clearly rhetorical. Nor does this language imply "free will" in the common understanding of that phrase—that is, the idea that man has the native ability to choose God apart from God's grace. Nevertheless, choosing the Lord is still an outward manifestation of an inward choice, to serve the Lord.

Thirdly, profession means claiming Him to be their God (vv. 16-18). In v. 16, the people profess, "God forbid . . ." In vv. 17-18, there is a profession of God's greatness in redemption. And in v. 18b, there is profession of allegiance.

Fourthly, profession means vowing to serve the Lord (vv. 21-24). What we have here is essentially a swearing to be the Lord's and to serve Him. The oath is reinforced by means of witnesses. Today, we have affidavits. That is what we have here.

Fifthly, profession involves covenanting to be His (vv. 25-27). What is a covenant? In its most basic meaning, it is an agreement with respect to two or more parties. With regard to our relationship with God, He has established His covenant with His people. Indeed, He has imposed His covenant—it is not a matter of mutual negotiation. We know that the basis of our relationship with God was the covenant of works, which, when man fell, was replaced by the covenant of grace. The New Covenant, which is the final phase of the covenant of grace, finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and is sealed with His blood.

There were times when God's people re-ratified the covenant (which is what you have here). For example, the covenant was re-ratified under Moses (Exodus 24:3-8; Deuteronomy 29:1), under Joshua (Joshua 8:31ff), and under Hezekiah (II Chronicles 29:10).

Notice the particulars of this covenant. Joshua set them a statute and an ordinance (v. 25): i.e., there is law involved, which means that there are responsibilities. There were witnesses: the covenant was written, and, there was a visual witness (the great stone). This is true today—people join the church by means of covenant. There are witnesses—including the written testimony, and the sacrament of baptism. And there are obligations.

But now we must consider what is being professed, which is, the true religion. As recounted in this text, the first thing that this involves is professing the Lord. In contrast to false gods and polytheism, professing the true religion means monotheism. It is also Yahweh or Jehovah who is the true and living God. And, He is holy. Secondly, we profess His redemption. Thirdly, we profess His providence. And fourthly, we profess His judgment.

All these items mentioned are necessary. However, they are not exhaustive. To profess the true faith is to profess all that the Bible teaches.

So, the first major point has to do with those who profess the true religion. However, the visible church also includes their children.

Notice the phrase, "as for me and my house." What we have in these words is a principle of representation. This was already evident in 23:2 and 24:1. Joshua was saying that even if the tribes of Israel went another way, he would lead his clan, his family, in the way of the true religion.

This covenantal principle is found throughout the world. If a king went to war, it involved the whole nation. If a leader professes faith, he often is able to lead the whole tribe or nation likewise to profess faith. One of the noteworthy kings who did so was Clovis I, king of the Franks, who converted to Christianity in AD 496. As a result of his profession of faith and baptism, Christianity swept through much of what is modern France and Germany, replacing the heresy of Arianism (which denies the deity of Jesus Christ). All of European history to this day has been affected by the conversion of Clovis.

This “household” concept therefore involves all the members of the household—including children. This is what we read in Genesis 17:9-14. We see it also in Acts 2:39; 16:15; and 16:31.

In v. 28 of Joshua 24, there is the phrase, “every one unto his inheritance.” This is a future-oriented concept, which, of necessity, includes the children. This is another indication that the children of professing believers are included in the visible church.

By way of application, let me make three points.

First, membership in the visible church is based upon the outward manifestation and relationship, not the inward reality. In the case of children, said membership is based upon their being part of a household that is of the faith. In the case of adults, it is based upon profession, not conversion or regeneration or salvation.

Secondly, this truth regarding the visible church is found throughout Scripture. In Genesis 9:18ff, we would note that even with the church being reduced to a small number of people (after the Noahic flood), the apostasy appears very quickly. Exodus 12:37-38 indicated that the Exodus from Egypt included children, as well as a mixed multitude. In Numbers 16 and 21, we have the revelation that in the wilderness, the fact that not everyone who professed the faith was saved—a fact that became painfully obvious. And in Acts 8:18-24, we see Simon Magus, who had professed the faith and was baptized, but who swiftly showed that he did not have genuine faith.

Thirdly, in practical terms, there are several things to remember. One, the elders cannot read the heart; and, it is therefore not their place to try to do so. All that elders may do is to judge the credibility (believability) of a profession of faith. Two, the visible church is not in vital union with Christ. The visible church is a reflection of the true, that is, the invisible church. Three, therefore do not depend upon the outward manifestation, but examine yourself inwardly. And four, be sure to conduct that self-examination in accord with the warnings found here in Joshua 24.

Part of the doctrine of the visible church has to do with the importance and necessity of it, particularly the importance and necessity of church membership. For this point, please look at Acts 2:47b. That text says, “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” In this text, we see that Dr. Luke demonstrates that everyone who believes in Jesus should be a member of the visible church.

We have already noted that the Bible is filled with the doctrine of the church. It is the church--that is, the elect of God--that is the purpose of redemption. We are saved not just individually, but as a body.

Let us again note that there is absolutely essential distinction to be made between visible and invisible church. The invisible consists of the entire number of the elect in every age. The invisible is both the real church and the ideal church. The visible is a universal (world-wide)

institution. It is comprised of those who profess the true faith, along with their children. It approximates the invisible church--it is a reflection of the invisible church. The church visible is not in vital union with Christ; membership in the institutional church is not a guarantee of genuine faith. Indeed, members of the visible church are warned consistently in Scripture of the danger of hypocrisy.

Given the fact that membership in the church--that is, the visible church--is not necessarily an indicator of true faith, then why should we care about whether we are church members or not? After all, if the institutional church is filled with hypocrites, then why in the world would anyone who is spiritual want to belong? If the visible church is not per se in vital union with Christ, then what is the big deal? Is it not therefore true that belonging to a church has nothing to do with one's eternal destiny? In point of fact, might it not be the case that belonging to a church, with all of the possibilities for hurt and disappointment, actually is detrimental to one's spiritual health?

And yet, Scripture clearly tells us that church membership is important and necessary.

The book of Acts documents the triumph of the gospel, from Jerusalem, the ancient capital of Israel and the heart of Judaism, to Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. But, along with the gospel, goes the visible expression of it, viz., the institutional church.

Notice with me, first of all, the context for our text, which is Acts 2. This chapter recounts what happened on the Day of Pentecost. This was 50 days after the resurrection. There was a mighty manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This included a sound from heaven of a mighty rushing wind, cloven tongues of fire, and glossolalia (speaking in tongues). At Jerusalem, Jews, from every nation, had gathered. They had come for the feast. This event on this occasion is a foretaste of the fact that the church was no longer going to be confined to one place or one language.

On this Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter preached a powerful sermon. He proclaimed with regard to the prophecy of Joel. He preached regarding the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Christ. He pressed upon them the necessity of faith and repentance, and of uniting with the church via baptism.

What was the reaction by those who had gathered? They were pricked in their heart (v. 38). And they and their children were baptized (v. 39), thereby demonstrating that children of believers are included in the visible church.

There were several results that arose from this reaction. First, there was a switch from one organization to another. Consider v. 40, which says, "save yourselves from this perverse [wicked] generation." This is a reference to the old Jewish church. Now, that corrupt institution was being rejected and the new church was being established.

Secondly, baptism implied church membership, as seen in v. 41: "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about 3,000 souls were added to them."

Thirdly, the church had four basic characteristics, as seen in v. 42: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

The first characteristic, which is foundational, is apostolic doctrine. The church is founded upon doctrine—upon teaching. The second characteristic is that of apostolic fellowship. We see the practical manifestation of this in vv. 44-45: "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need." The third characteristic was that of breaking of bread. Although it is possible that this is a reference to eating a common meal, most commentators would maintain that this is a reference to the Lord's Supper. The fourth characteristic is that of prayers. Notice the plural, "prayers." This is a reference to public prayers. We could also view this as a metaphorical way to refer to the entire service of public worship: notice v. 47, which speaks of "praising God and having favor with all the people."

Fourthly, in terms of results, there were outward signs and miracles.

And fifthly, there was an effect upon the society. In v. 43, we read of the "fear" that came upon everyone. In v. 47, we read of the "favor" which the early church enjoyed. The point is that the church is a public institution, and that its activities had an effect upon the public.

And now we come to the text itself, the end of v. 47. The first clause says, "and the Lord added to the church daily." Notice that this was the Lord's work. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *kurios* would be equivalent to Yahweh or Jehovah. Here, the word is probably a reference to Jesus Christ. In any case, this term shows that the adding to the church was not primarily a human enterprise.

But notice also that this was definitely a reference to the visible church. We know this for several reasons. One, the invisible church consists of all of those elect in every age; you cannot add to that number. Two, this "adding" was done daily, whereas the invisible church is from eternity. And three, in v. 41, the adding to the number is tied to baptism, which is administered outwardly, is performed in history, and has been given to the visible church.

Having considered the first clause, "and the Lord added to the church daily," consider then the second clause: "such as should be saved." The phrase is perhaps more accurately rendered, "the ones being saved"—it is a present participle, and it is plural. What this definitely indicates is that the ones who experience salvation were being counted as church members.

We will go on, Lord willing, to conclude our consideration of the visible church in the next session.

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As we continue our study of the importance and necessity of church membership, let me bring some other considerations to your attention. At this point, I will make use of some of the observations made in an article entitled, "Church Membership: Option or Command?", authored by Mark R. Brown in the October 1996 edition of *New Horizons*, the Orthodox Presbyterian magazine.

Here are Biblical reasons to join the church.

(1) God commands it. He tells us in His Word to be baptized (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:41); baptism and church membership go hand-in-hand, since baptism is the identifying mark of being in the church--i.e., being one of the people of God. Further, Christ has promised to build His church (Matt. 16:18); and we are the building blocks of the temple (I Pet. 2:5; Eph. 2:19-22).

(2) The analogy from the Old Testament church holds true in the New Testament era. Israel was God's covenant people, bound to Him via the covenant, of which circumcision was the sign (Gen. 17:7, 10). Not to be circumcised was to be cut off from the people of God (Ex. 4:24-26; 12:43-49). In the New Testament, baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Therefore, if we do not want to be cut off from God's people, we need to have the sign of the covenant, baptism, which implies church membership.

(3) Without membership, it is impossible to follow or to carry out various Biblical commands. For example, you may not partake of the Lord's Supper without being baptized (Ex. 12; Acts 2:41-42); but, as have seen, baptism and church membership imply each other. Also, you cannot submit to the elders (Heb. 13:17) without being a member (cf. I Thess. 5:12; Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:2; I Cor. 5:12). Indeed, there can be no church discipline without church membership (Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 5:12). Moreover, you cannot show the special love for those who are of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10) if you are not part of that household of faith. Plus, there can be no officers unless there is membership; therefore, in order to do things decently and in order, church membership is necessary (cf. I Cor. 14:40); similarly, no one could vote without being a member. And finally in this regard, of not being able to carry out various Biblical commands apart from church membership, remember that the goal of evangelism is discipleship; however, discipleship implies being under the discipline of the church.

(4) There is a public and corporate nature to one's confession of faith. No man is an island; and no Christian is to be a drifter. Conversion implies being added to the body of believers and disciples (Acts 2:42, 47; 11:26; 14:21-23). Profession entails public vows, as we have seen with regard to Joshua 24. Profession of faith also means covenanting to be the Lord's, and that is a public and corporate matter.

And here are a couple of spiritual reasons to join a church.

(1) Why would anyone who loves the Lord, despise His church? Jesus has established the church for His glory and our good. Why would we turn our backs on it?

(2) This is one of the reasons why it is the case that apart from the visible church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

To conclude this portion, let me make two points of application.

(1) You should join or be a member of the church which is the most Biblical, and where submission to the elders' rule can be cheerfully and willingly given. In God's providence, there are numerous churches today which one could join. But if man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, then we should be part of that branch of the church which most brings glory to our God and Savior.

(2) Because Christ Himself established the institutional church, we therefore owe to her our allegiance and support, and to be a member thereof is the sacred duty of all who are saved.

We now want to consider the importance of the visible church from another angle, viz., with respect to the administration of the sacraments. May just anyone take it upon himself to administer the sacraments? No, absolutely not. The Bible teaches that ministers of the gospel should administer the sacraments.

Consider with me various examples where people on their own have attempted to administer the sacraments. As a baby is about to die in the hospital, a nurse quickly baptizes the infant before it expires. A group of "Jesus People" parks their Volkswagen van with paintings of flowers on it beside the road to share bread and wine as communion. A young person who has just come to faith in Christ is taken by her fellow high school students to a swimming pool or to the ocean and they baptize her. An astronaut who has just landed on the moon takes a bit of bread and juice, given him by his minister, and has communion on the lunar surface. At a retreat, a Christian school decides to hold a communion service to celebrate their unity in Christ. Is the Lord pleased with these administrations of the sacraments? No, He is not. He has revealed that only ministers--those duly authorized and set apart by ordination--should administer the sacraments.

We need to remind ourselves what a sacrament is. A sacrament is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. It employs visible signs. By it, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers. Sacraments are means of grace. Negatively, we can say that they have no intrinsic power; and further, that the grace that is conveyed is not automatic: unlike Roman Catholicism and its notion of *ex opere operatum*, faith is necessary in order to receive the grace. Positively, we would note that the sacraments must be mixed with faith. The sacraments must be applied by the Holy Spirit to the elect. The sacraments are more than mere memorials; by them, the truth of the gospel is effectively conveyed to the soul.

Look with me at I Corinthians 4:1. As we consider the exegesis of this text, we would first of all note the context. I Corinthians deals with many problems in the church. Among the issues was the status of Paul as an apostle, and the unity of the church (in contrast to a party spirit).

The verse itself begins by saying, "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ." The term for ministers originally meant an "under-rower." The term indicates servants, not lords. However, these officers still have dignity, as servants of Christ.

Other Scriptures which are relevant are the following: Matthew 24:45; I Corinthians 3:5; 9:17; II Corinthians 6:4; and Colossians 1:25-26.

Now, what is the specific meaning of this term in this verse? In one sense, all believers are ministers of Christ, in that they are His servants. But, "minister" usually implies ordained office. And that is certainly the way the term is used here.

The verse goes on to say, "and stewards of the mysteries of God". The Greek word *kai*, translated "and", here essentially means "even". What is a steward? A steward is one who is responsible to his lord, to carry out numerous duties. Other Scriptures which demonstrate this meaning would include Luke 12:12; Titus 1:7; and I Peter 4:10.

The phrase "of the mysteries of God" leads us to think about what is intended by the term "mystery." A mystery is usually a divine secret, represented by signs and figures which have to be interpreted. In Matthew 13:11, Jesus speaks of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. I Timothy 3:16 speaks of the mystery of godliness. Ephesians 3:4 speaks of the mystery of Christ.

This term, "mysteries of God," basically refers to the mysterious doctrines and institutions of Christ--i.e., Word and sacraments.

We therefore conclude that Paul, in his official capacity, along with others in their official capacity, had the responsibility to administer Word and sacraments. Since we do not have apostles today, their successors, the pastor-teachers of Ephesians 4, are the ones today who are authorized to do so. And there is no Biblical evidence that anyone other than a duly ordained person may do so.

Now let us look at examples of this doctrine that only ministers should administer the sacraments.

With regard to baptism, the foundational text is Matthew 28:19, where Jesus gave the Great Commission to His apostles not only to preach but also to baptize the nations. In John 1:26 and 3:22-23, we see that it was John the Baptist, who was a prophet--a minister of the Word--who baptized. In Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12-13; 10:47; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; and 19:5, it was apostles who performed the baptisms. Paul speaks in I Corinthians 1:16 of having baptized people.

With regard to the Lord's Supper, I Corinthians 11:23 and Luke 22:19-20 speak of Jesus having administered communion. In Acts 2, the Lord's Supper is administered under the authorization of the apostles.

As we take an overview, we would note the following. One, no women administered the sacraments. No youth or children did, either. Nor, as far as is evident, did any laymen. The one possible exception to that would be the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch by Philip, who was previously identified as being a deacon. However, Philip is also later identified as an evangelist, and that is certainly the role to which he was called by the Spirit when he was directed into the desert in order to proclaim the gospel to that Ethiopian official.

But what does this all mean? What would be the purpose or the point of having only ministers administer the sacraments? This question leads us to an explanation of the practice.

First of all, there is the issue of orderliness. It is important while administering the sacraments to avoid confusion. When everyone has authority, no one has authority. Here, I Corinthians 14:40, "Let everything be done decently and in order," is relevant. But not only to avoid confusion, but also for the sake of uniformity, it is important that a minister administer the sacraments. This is true not only denominationally, but, ideally at least, more broadly as well. There is a certain cadence--rhythm--to the very words that are used in the administration of the sacraments, which, along with the words themselves, help to provide continuity and uniformity.

Secondly, beyond orderliness, there is a connection between Word and sacraments. The Word is necessary to explain the sacrament. The Word as a whole sheds light on these ordinances. But, of course, the words of institution particularly shed light on the sacraments. Moreover, there is authority in both Word and sacrament. In Scripture, the phrase "Thus says the Lord" emphasizes the authoritative nature of the Word. There is also authority in the turning of the keys of the kingdom, which entails either admitting to the sacraments, or barring people from them.

Thirdly, the sacraments' administration fits with the office. In this regard, note that Christ has set apart officers to perform certain functions. In Numbers 8, the priests were set apart for holy service. In Ephesians 4:11-13, the risen and ascended Jesus has given good gifts among men, including apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. In Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:17-20, He gives to the apostles (and through them to presbyters today) the power of the keys of the kingdom, which are preaching and discipline. In John 20:21-23, Jesus, after His resurrection, breathed on the apostles, indicating their reception of the Holy Spirit and their being able to retain or remit sins. Notice also that among the relevant functions of presbyters (elders) are the following: to feed the flock (I Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28); to watch for souls (Hebrews 13:17); and to exhort (Titus 1:9; 2:15). Also, it is elders who are to exercise wise discernment, in turning the keys of the kingdom. This comes from a deep understanding of these things. Ezra 7:10 says of Ezra that he was one who "had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel." II Timothy 2 says, "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. . . . Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Ezekiel 43:11 reads, "'And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple and its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, its entire design and all its ordinances, all its forms and all its laws. Write it down in their sight, so that they may keep its whole design and all its ordinances, and perform them.'" In addition to Biblical knowledge, elders presumably are those who have wisdom in knowing how to apply that knowledge--a practical knowledge which comes from having worked with people.

Fourthly, please consider the seriousness of the situation. Believers should want someone who knows what he is doing and understands how to administer the sacraments. In other words, an expert, not a novice. When Penny and I flew across the Pacific Ocean to reach Japan, we were glad to have a couple of experienced airline pilots in the cockpit. We would not have been reassured if we had seen a couple of sixteen-year olds who had had two flying lessons between them to take control of the 747. Similarly, when you undergo surgery, you want a surgeon who

has had experience before you submit to the procedure. How much more should we be concerned when we are dealing with the totally serious matter of the administration of the sacraments? The seriousness of the matter is underscored when we remember that sacraments are signs of judgment as well as blessing. Sacraments not only unite--they also divide. This type of pronouncement of potential judgment is done properly by an official--a heavenly ambassador.

So, by way of application, let me note, first of all, that God is not pleased with unofficial administrations of the sacraments. He does not want just anyone dispensing them. Rather, He wants them performed His way--accompanied by the official proclamation of the Word; as tokens of judgment; and as avenues of blessing. Secondly, and this brings us back to why this doctrine has relevance to the importance of the visible church, there is a close connection between the sacraments and the visible church. The sacraments are administered in the church. They constitute public, not private, rituals. And without the visible church, the sacraments could not be properly administered, since without the visible church, there could be no ministers to administer them.

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As a corollary that comes from the importance of the visible church, we would also note the importance of church history. And a large part of church is Christian biography. Accordingly, I want to take some time at this point to speak about a couple of Presbyterian heroes—certainly heroes of mine—from the Southern Presbyterian tradition. They are Robert Lewis Dabney and John Lafayette Girardeau.

Southern Presbyterian apologist Robert Lewis Dabney—patriot, professor, prophet—was born in Louisa County, Virginia, March 5, 1820, the sixth child of Charles Dabney (of Huguenot descent) and his wife Elizabeth. An assistant to General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson during the War for Southern Independence, Dabney after the war became a prominent figure in the Southern “Lost Cause.”

Dabney graduated from Hampden-Sidney College (1837), the University of Virginia (1842), and Union Theological Seminary (1846), then located at Hampden-Sidney, Virginia. After a brief stint as a missionary in Louisa County, he was ordained to the ministry upon the call of the Tinkling Spring Presbyterian Church, Fishersville, Virginia, where he pastored from 1847 to 1853. On March 28, 1848, he married Lavinia Morison.

In 1853, Dabney was called as chair of Ecclesiastical History and Polity at Union Seminary. Starting in 1859, he filled the chair of Systematic and Polemic Theology until 1883. In that year, he became a founding faculty member at the University of Texas in Austin, having been appointed as Professor of Moral and Mental Philosophy. He also later helped to found Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Dabney was caught up in the division between North and South, which affected the church as well as national politics. When the Northern-dominated Presbyterian General Assembly in 1861 required all members of the denomination to support the federal government in Washington, D.C., the Southern presbyteries withdrew to form what became known informally as the

Southern Presbyterian Church. Dabney fully supported the formation of this new branch of the church, as well as the secession of Virginia from the Union after Lincoln determined to use force against seceded states. In 1862, Dabney became a major in the Confederate Army, performing admirably as “Stonewall” Jackson’s Adjutant-General. Illness, however, forced his resignation that same year. In 1866, he published the earliest biography of General Jackson. The next year, he penned *A Defense of Virginia (and through her, of the South)*. That volume began with his lamenting that the Yankees had murdered his mother (the Commonwealth of Virginia), and then launched into a vigorous defense of the South’s institution of slavery. For several years after the war, he seriously considered immigrating to another country in order to perpetuate Southern culture.

Theologically a staunch Calvinist, Dabney held to Scottish common-sense realism, the country’s reigning philosophy in the late-eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. He continued to champion the traditional view of science, in opposition to the new scientific perspective characterized by Darwinism. Along with fellow Southern Presbyterian theologian John Lafayette Girardeau, Dabney battled the evolutionary views of James Woodrow (uncle of future U.S. president Woodrow Wilson), helping to force him from his post as a Southern Presbyterian seminary professor.

Dabney wrote and delivered numerous post-bellum political discourses. In September 1865, he challenged General O. O. Howard, Chief of the Freedmen’s Bureau, to do better for the freed slaves than the South had done for them, or have the North be condemned by both God and man.¹

In 1876, in opposing the establishment in Virginia of a system of free public education, he argued that the role of education belongs to the sphere of the family, and that the notion that a commonwealth has charge of its children is a pagan one which derives from Sparta and Plato’s writings. Furthermore, the inevitable tendency in government schools will be toward atheism and a rejection of the true source of morality, viz., Christianity.²

In 1882, he warned Southern collegians, facing a New South, not to bury that which was noble in the Old South.³

In an article entitled “Women’s Rights Women,” he wrote: “In our day, innovations march with so rapid a stride that they quite take away one’s breath. The fantastical project of yesterday, which was mentioned only to be ridiculed, is to-day the audacious reform, and will be to-morrow the accomplished fact. Such has been the history of the agitation for “women’s rights,” as they are sophistically called in this country. A few years ago this movement was the especial hobby of a few old women of both sexes, who made themselves the laughing-stock of all sane people by the annual ventilation of their crotchet.” He excoriated feminism’s drive to blur all distinctions between the sexes and to emancipate married women from subordination to their husbands. Dabney also took to task Northern conservatism, as being “a party which never

¹ C.R. Vaughan, ed., *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney*. . . . (1890; Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), Vol. 4, pp. 25ff.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 191ff.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 1ff.

conserves anything. Its history has been that it demurs to each aggression of the progressive party, and aims to save its credit by a respectable amount of growling, but always acquiesces at last in the innovation. What was the resisted novelty of yesterday is to-day one of the accepted principles of conservatism; it is now conservative only in affecting to resist the next innovation, which will to-morrow be forced upon its timidity, and will be succeeded by some third revolution, to be denounced and then adopted in its turn. American conservatism is merely the shadow that follows Radicalism as it moved forward toward perdition. It remains behind it, but never retards it, and always advances near its leader. . . . It is worthless because it the conservatism of expediency only, and not of sturdy principle. It intends to risk nothing serious for the sake of the truth, and has no idea of being guilty of the folly of martyrdom.” Referring to the observations of the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic book *Democracy in America*, Dabney wrote: “Indeed, as De Tocqueville predicted, innovations in the direction of extensions of suffrage will always be successful in America, because of the selfish timidity of her public men. It is the nature of ultra democracy to make all its politicians time-servers; its natural spawn is the brood of narrow, truckling, cowardly worshippers of the *vox populi*, and of present expediency. Their polar star is always found in the answer to the question, ‘Which will be the more popular?’” Dabney contrasted the feminist movement to the teachings of Scripture: “Women are here [in the Bible] consigned to a social subordination, and expressly excluded from ruling offices, on grounds of their sex, and a divine ordination based by God upon a transaction which happened nearly six thousand years ago! The woman’s sphere is expressly assigned her within her home, and she is taught that the assumption of publicity is an outrage against that nature with which she is endowed. Now the politics which denounce all this as a natural injustice and self-evident folly cannot be expected to reverence these Scriptures; they must and will flout their whole authority. We must then make up our minds in accepting Women’s Rights to surrender our Bibles, and have an atheistic government.” Dabney noted that a leading feminist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, had drawn the logical conclusion that “‘Women’s Rights’ mean the abolition of all permanent marriage ties. . . . She holds that woman’s bondage is not truly dissolved until the marriage bond is annulled. She is thoroughly consistent. Some hoodwinked advocates of her revolution may be blind to the sequence; but it is inevitable. It must follow by this cause, if for no other, that the unsexed politicating woman can never inspire in man that true affection on which marriage should be founded. Men will doubtless be still sensual; but it is simply impossible that they can desire them for the pure and sacred sphere of the wife. Let every woman ask herself: will she choose for the lord of her affections an unsexed effeminate man? No more can man be drawn to the masculine woman. The mutual attraction of the two complementary halves is gone forever.” Dabney ended this article by predicting that God would be avenged on America, a nation that had betrayed God’s blessing: “His vengeance will be to give them the fruit of their own devices. He will set apart this fair land by a sort of dread consecration to the purpose of giving a lesson concerning this godless philosophy, so impressive as to instruct and warn all future generations. As the dull and pestilential waves of the Dead Sea have been to every subsequent age the memento of the sin of Sodom, so the dreary tides of anarchy and barbarism which will overwhelm the boastful devices of infidel democracy will be the caution of all future legislators. And thus ‘women’s rights’ will assist America ‘to fulfill her great mission,’ that of being the ‘scarecrow’ of the nations.”⁴

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 489ff.

In *The Sensualistic Philosophy . . .* (1875), he related the sensualism then in vogue to both scientific theory (such as evolution) and political philosophy.

In *The Practical Philosophy . . .* (1897), Dabney predicted “that the time will come in this once free America when the battle for religious liberty will have to be fought over again, and will probably be lost, because the people are already ignorant of its true basis and conditions” (Dabney 1897, p. 394).

Having suffered from painful illnesses for many years, and totally blind since 1889, Dabney’s body finally gave out on January 3, 1898. The massive granite monument over his grave in Hampden-Sidney includes the Biblical inscription, “Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.”

The other theologian was John Lafayette Girardeau, also of Huguenot descent, born in South Carolina in 1825. He attended Charleston College where he was hailed as a great Greek scholar, and graduated as valedictorian at the age of 17. One year later, he began seminary at what became known as Columbia Theological Seminary, where he trained under the brilliant James Henley Thornwell.

Like many of the South Carolina upper-class into which he was born, Girardeau had a sense of what we might call *noblesse oblige*—the sense of obligation toward the poor and the downtrodden. This was particularly manifest with respect to his ministry among black slaves. In 1854, he became pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in Charleston which ministered to slaves. Over the next six years, that congregation grew from 36 members to over a thousand. From 1859 to 1861, the weekly attendance was 1500. Girardeau’s preaching at Zion Presbyterian Church became legendary. The congregation also became known for its catechizing hundreds of blacks, its diaconal ministry (including sewing clubs for women), and missionary outreach.

However, the storm clouds of war were brewing. The War for Southern Independence disrupted Girardeau’s ministry in Charleston. After the war, the blacks begged for Girardeau’s return, preferring his ministry to that of a black preacher being imposed on them by Northern churchmen. Girardeau worked tirelessly for the inclusion of blacks in the Southern Presbyterian Church, and in 1869 he oversaw the election and ordination of seven black elders in the congregation. Unfortunately, Reconstruction and the Freedmen’s Bureau exerted pressure for separate black churches; and Southern Presbyterian stalwarts B.M. Palmer (pastor of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans) and Robert Lewis Dabney argued for separate organizations as well. At the 1874 Southern Presbyterian General Assembly in Columbus, Mississippi, of which Girardeau was the moderator, he was the only one to dissent from the resolution calling for separation along color lines.

Starting in 1876 and continuing for nineteen years, Girardeau was Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. He became one of the chief antagonists of James Woodrow, his seminary colleague, with regard to the matter of biological evolution.

Girardeau, like Dabney, strongly opposed union with the Northern Presbyterian Church. He was an active participant in the courts of the church. He authored several treatises and numerous

articles on various topics. Among his books are *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism: Compared as to Election, Reprobation, Justification, and Related Doctrines*; and *Discussions of Theological Questions*. In the latter volume, he proposed a division of theology into the Theology of Natural Religion and the Theology of Evangelical Religion or Redemption. Girardeau argued for this bifurcation on the following grounds. One, it makes “the kinds of theology correspond with the kinds of religion about which they are concerned”; indeed, “the religion of nature and the religion of redemption are the two generic types of religion which God has been pleased to communicate.” This approach comports with theology being the Science of Religion. Two, it is the simplest approach, and simplicity is always to be desired. Three, it is exhaustive; “it embraces the essential principles of God’s government, viewed as a whole,” and therefore “there is no order of creatures which falls outside its scope. The salvation of angels, as well as that of man, is covered by it. The physical government of God, in relation to the material system of the universe, is not, even by implication, excluded. His relation as Creator and Providential Ruler to the material heavens and the material earth is involved. The scientific reduction of the naturally revealed facts connected with the covenant of works and of those belonging to the covenant of grace are all explicitly comprehended.” Four, “This division is recommended by the fact that the principle upon which theology is distributed is a principle upon which it may be collected into unity. That principle is religion.”⁵ He contributed significantly to the doctrine of adoption, and to the church’s understanding of diaconal ministry. One of his chief contributions is his 1888 book, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, which maintained the historic position of *a capella* singing. In that volume, he wrote: “The church, although lapsing more and more into deflection from the truth and into a corrupting of apostolic practice, had not instrumental music for 1200 years (that is, it was not in general use before this time); The Calvinistic Reform Church ejected it from its service as an element of popery, even the church of England having come very nigh its extrusion from her worship. It is heresy in the sphere of worship.”

Girardeau is also noteworthy for his offspring. Three of his daughters married Presbyterian ministers. One of his sons-in-law was Robert A. Webb, who penned a 1907 book, *The Theology of Infant Salvation*. Another son-in-law was George A. Blackburn, who succeeded Girardeau as pastor of Second Presbyterian Church (today Arsenal Hill Presbyterian Church) in Columbia, South Carolina, and who was the last of the Southern Presbyterian ministers to insist on excluding musical instrumentation from the church’s worship.

Girardeau died in 1898. His grave is in a Columbia cemetery, just a few steps away from the resting place of his mentor, James Henley Thornwell.

⁵ John L. Girardeau, *Discussions of Theological Questions*, ed. by George A. Blackburn (1905; Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1986), pp. 58ff.