

# Westminster Larger Catechism

## *Question 61*

Halifax, 14 December 2008

**Q. 61 Are all they saved who hear the gospel, and live in the church?**

**A. All that hear the gospel and live in the visible church, are not saved; but only they who are true members of the church invisible.**

### **Introduction:**

You can see what this question is asking...

- Is everyone in the church saved?
- Is every church member going to go to heaven?

This is a very important issue in the church today—

- It has always been an important issue...
- **There are two serious errors around this matter that have led millions astray...**
  - **First, there is that grave and perpetual error of covenant presumption...**
    - There are those who assume that because they are connected with the church and been baptised, their way to heaven is certain.
    - This has been fostered by the Roman Catholic Church where it is taught that the church saves us by her sacraments...
      - You have priests that offer sacrifices for you and these sacrifices take away your sins—so all you have to do is join up and do a few rituals and all will be well.
      - People are taught to rest in their connection to the church rather than in Christ.
        - It keeps them from ever finding God's true salvation...
          - We call it the religion of anti-Christ because the church or the Pope comes in as a substitute Christ.
    - Sadly, the Roman Catholics are not the only ones who believe this!
      - There are many Protestants that share the same sort of presumption—almost...
        - They assume that if they are church members and do the best they can, God will most certainly receive them.
        - Their hope is not in Christ, but in their connection with the church.

TRANS> This is the error of covenant presumption because those who have entered into God's covenant community presume that they are saved.

- The second problem is a reaction against covenant presumption...
  - Perhaps we could call it covenant contempt...
  - These are the ones who are so disgusted with the church and all the covenant presumption in it that they come to despise the church...
    - They act as if the Lord Jesus never even established a visible church on earth to administer His covenant...
      - As if He never established a society on earth of His professing people with officers and censures that should administer His covenant...
        - officers appointed to proclaim His word and administer His sacraments...
          - appointed to receive members upon profession and to dismiss those who do not maintain a credible Christian profession.

This week, I want to focus in particular on the first error and show you from scripture that we must never think that every member in the visible church is saved...

- Next week and the week after, we will look at the fact that there is a visible church that Christ has established in the world—we cannot just do away with it.

For our Scripture reading today, I have selected Hebrews 3...

- In this chapter we are shown that both in the Old Covenant and in the New Covenant there have been false sons in the church with whom God is not pleased—
  - false sons who will be rejected at last.
  - false sons who are not saved.
- READ> Hebrews 3:1 – 4:2.

**I. The first thing I want you see from this passage is that Jesus Christ is the One who builds God's house (which we call the church)**

A. Hebrews 3 opens with a call for us to consider “the apostle and high priest of our confession, Jesus Christ...”

1. An apostle is one who is sent by another to carry out his business...
  - Paul was an apostle of Christ...
    - Peter, James, and John were also apostles of Christ...
  - But Jesus Christ is called **the** apostle because He is the one who was sent by God from heaven to establish God's kingdom in the earth—
    - He came to set up God's house—the church.

- Those He sends are apostles, but He is *the* apostle.

TRANS> But that is not all He is called here...besides being the apostle,

2. He is also called **the** high priest of our confession...
  - He is **the** high priest because He is the One who was sent from heaven to offer **the** one sacrifice that would truly take away our sins...
    - You can see that in the previous chapter—
    - Heb 2:17-18 says:
      - Heb 2:17-18: **“Therefore, in all things He had to be made like *His* brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”**
    - To be our high priest, He became one of us—He came in our flesh...
      - And then He offered Himself as a propitiation...
        - As a propitiation, He is the one who, by His sacrifice, turns away the wrath of God from the church—

B. You are told, in Hebrews 2, to consider that He was faithful in His work...

1. You are told in verse 2 that He was faithful just as Moses was faithful...
  - Moses, by God’s grace, did what God appointed for him to do...
    - He led the people in God’s way,
    - He gave them God’s commandments,
    - And he set up the whole sacrificial system until Christ came.
  - He called together and established the covenant community, the church or the assembly that God appointed in the Old Testament.

TRANS> Moses was faithful to do what God had appointed...

2. But you see that Christ is described as far superior to Moses!
  - a. And the reason is that Moses was a part of the house, but Christ is the one who actually builds the house!
    - As verse 3 says,
      - “He who built the house has more honour than the house!”
      - In verse 5 & 6, Moses is said to be a servant in the house, but Christ is the Son over the house!
        - It is the house that Jesus built!

- b. As I sometimes say to you as members of God's house...
  - What did you do to establish this house?
    - Did you die on the cross to take away the sin of the church?
    - Did you change the hearts of the members of this house?
    - Did you take those who were dead in sin and make them alive?
  - No, all the honour goes to Jesus Christ!
    - That means that all of our trust and all of our confidence must be centered upon Him!
- c. The epistle to the Hebrews was especially interested in showing these Hebrews (because they were Hebrews) the superiority of Christ to Moses!
  - Moses was a great man and he did what God commanded—He was faithful!
    - But Christ is the One in whom we trust for our salvation!
    - He is the One who is **the** apostle and high priest of our confession!
      - The One we trust in and affirm to be the builder and redeemer of the household of faith...
      - The faith of the household of faith is centred upon Him...
        - No one else died on the cross for us...
        - No one else poured out God's Spirit on us to transform us.

TRANS> So you see that Christ is the one who builds God's house—the church...

- And because this is so, you see that you are to consider Him as the one that we confess...
- And I want you to see secondly that

## **II. You are part of His house if you hold firmly to the Christ of your confession.**

A. Look at verse 6...

1. It says that Christ is a son over His own house...
  - and that we are members of that house...
    - **Heb 3:6: "if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end."**
  - He is the One that the members of the visible church confess as the apostle God send to save them...
    - and as the high priest who offered Himself as a sacrifice to take away their sins...
  - Those who make this confession of Him and hold to it are part of the household of faith...

- the household of faith in Christ...
- the church and house of God.

2. And you see that He is called our confidence and rejoicing...

a. We put full confidence in the one we confess.

- we see how sufficient His work is for us...
- that Son of God should leave heaven to come and die for us!
  - There can be no doubt that such measures can save us who come to God by Him!
  - If this cannot do the job, nothing ever could!
    - What confidence can you put in the flesh or in works or ceremonies when you have the Lord Jesus Christ?

TRANS> And of course it follows that if we have such confidence in Him,

b. We also are filled with rejoicing in Him...

- If our sins are forgiven so that instead of eternal condemnation we have eternal life!
  - If He has made us to be the very dwelling place of God...
    - What joy there is in our hope!
  - God will be our God forever and ever!
    - He will bless us richly!
    - We have a future and a hope because we are trusting in One that God sent to establish us as His very own dwelling place!

B. And you see here that you are this house if you **continue** in the confidence and rejoicing of this hope to the end...

1. This is a very loaded statement—I mean that it carries a lot in it!

a. First, it indicates that if we *do not* hold our confidence in Christ to the end...

- that if we should turn away at some point—
  - If we should turn our confidence to some other object—something other than Christ...
  - If we should look for our hope in ourselves or in this world...
    - then we are not really part of His house.
- We are only part of God's house **if** we are one who has faith in Him that continues to the end...
  - If our confidence and rejoicing in Him only lasts for a time,
    - it shows that we did not ever really have genuine confidence and rejoicing in Him.

- This really makes a lot of sense—it is self-evident...
    - I mean, once you realise who Jesus is and what He has done for our salvation—when you really come to understand that, and what God has in store for those who trust in Him...
      - you really don't have anything else to put your confidence in!
      - It's all quite worthless by comparison to this—once you see His salvation for what it is.
        - So if you should have the kind of confidence and rejoicing in Him that could turn away from Him to something else,
          - it must mean that you never really believed.
          - It must be that you never really understood.
- b. But you see, this is a loaded statement because it also suggests that you were a part of His house in an outward way—a visible way...even though you were not really a part of it...
- It suggests that that you made a profession of faith and were part of the visible church...
    - that there was a profession of faith that you did not continue in.
  - I mean, just look at who it is that is being addressed here...
    - Look at verse 1 again...
      - **Heb 3:1: “Holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling.”**
      - You see, it is those who are among the called ones...
        - Those who are set apart in the world as called!
        - Those who are called out of the world to follow Christ and who confess Him as their apostle and high priest.
  - Verse 6 is about them *holding fast* to their confidence and rejoicing in Him...
    - In other words, at least outwardly, they are trusting and rejoicing in Christ and so are partakers of the heavenly calling...
      - they are part of the covenant community—the visible house of God—the society of faith that confesses Christ...
      - They are part of the house by their confession now,
        - but they are truly part of the house only if their confession is such as would continue to the end.
2. You see that this idea of having confidence and rejoicing in your hope to the end becomes a theme of this whole chapter...

- a. There is this warning given in verses 7-13 about hardening your heart to God's voice...
- 1) It is a quote from Psalm 95, warning Israel not to do what they had done when they were in the wilderness and would not trust God.
    - Their rebellious unbelief came to a head when the time came for them to enter the land of Canaan and they refused because of their unbelief.
    - What happened to the confidence they had had just a short time before when God brought them out of Egypt?
    - What happened to the rejoicing they had had when they sang of God's deliverance and how the Egyptian, horse and rider, had been cast into the sea?
    - Their confidence and rejoicing in God's salvation was gone...
  - 2) And you see how this is applied to those Hebrew Christians to whom this letter is written—
    - He calls them brethren because they are part of the covenant community...
    - He is not talking to outsiders, but those who are members of the visible church when he says:
      - **Heb 3:12-13: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."**
      - Take this to heart! It is God's warning to you as a member of the church!
    - The Lord is warning you here about having the kind of heart that Israel had...
      - a heart of unbelief in departing from God...
      - a heart of unbelief that has confidence and rejoicing that is only superficial and that cannot carry you through the time of testing in the wilderness...
        - the time when the reality of your confidence and rejoicing is put to the test...
          - put to the test to see if it is the kind that is genuine and lasting.
- b. You see in verse 14 that the statement about holding fast to your confidence to the end is virtually repeated...
- It is almost identical to verse 6...
    - Verse 6 said that we are Christ's,

- “if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of hope firm to the end...”
  - And verse 14 says,
    - **Heb 3:14: “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end,”**
    - Those who can just throw away their confidence in Christ show that they are not really partakers of Him...
      - This is not to say that our faith will never be shaken or that we will never waver...
        - but if we have once seen what Christ has done for us and the deliverance that we have that has reconciled us to God...
          - we won’t be able to find confidence in anything else.
          - We will not, at last, refuse to go on for the Lord because we will realise that we have no other place to go.
3. This same theme is really the theme that runs through the entire book of Hebrews.
- a. You can see that he goes on warning about it in chapter 4 verse 1...
    - There you are told to be careful lest you come short of the rest that God has promised...
      - Israel came short of the rest that He promised them because of their unbelief...
      - so you must be careful as a professing Christian to see that you do not come short of the rest God has promised you by your unbelief.
    - The writer of Hebrews points out that Psalm 95 was written after Israel had already entered the land so that the rest in view was not just the inheritance of Canaan...
      - They were already in Canaan when Psalm 95 was written...
        - It was the rest that comes to those who put their confidence in Christ and rejoice in His work that takes away sin...
          - It was the rest that they had in Him as promised to them, and that we now have in Him as given to us.
      - In 4:2 it says that they had the gospel preached to them even as we have had it preached to us...
        - The implication is that if it did not profit them because of unbelief, it will not profit us either.
        - We must hold our confidence and rejoicing in Christ to the end.
        - We must have true saving faith—faith that endures to the end.
  - b. And so the theme of continuing continues in verse 11 where we are told to be diligent lest we fall according to the same example of unbelief...



- And in 4:14 where we are encouraged to hold fast to our confession...
  - **Heb 4:14:** “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession.”
- And in 6:11 where it says:
  - **Heb 6:11:** “And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end,”
- And after telling much of the excellence of Christ and how worthy he is of all our trust because of the offering He has made of His own blood,
  - we are told in 10:19 to come with boldness by the blood of Christ,
  - and in 10:23 it says:
    - **“Heb 10:23:** “Let us hold fast the confession of *our* hope without wavering, for He who promised *is* faithful.”
    - Again, the message is to hold on to Christ and not let go!
  - And in Heb 10:26-29 we are warned again about the dreadful consequences of having a shallow faith that does not endure...
    - of even despising the precious blood of covenant by which we are sanctified if we confess Christ!
    - And in 10:35, it says:
      - **Heb 10:35:** “Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:”
  - You see how this call to continue in your confession to the end runs through the entire epistle.
    - There is among God’s people this danger that some of them will not have a genuine faith.

### **III. All this goes to show you very clearly that there is no place for covenant presumption...**

- for the notion that just because you are part of the church, you are saved...
  - or that others are saved on this basis.
- A. I want you to realise something about those who are spoken of in Hebrews 3 who ended up not entering God’s rest.
  1. They were part of the visible church—the covenant community of God’s people.
    - In verse 16, they are identified as the ones who heard the promise of God...
      - **Heb 3:16:** “For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, *was it* not all who came out of Egypt, *led* by Moses?”

- When God passed over the first born sons, he passed over their sons...
  - When God opened the Red Sea, he opened it for them—they crossed over with His people!
  - When God caused bread to fall from heaven, they ate it;
    - and when He made water come out of the rock, they drank it.

TRANS> These ones had the blessing of being numbered with God’s people—of being part of the covenant community—part of the church!

2. But it was these same covenant people that God excluded because of their unbelief...
  - Verse 17 drives it home that it was these ones who were part of the covenant community who were rejected by God and never entered His rest:
    - **Heb 3:17-19:** “Now with whom was He angry forty years? *Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.*”
  - The Lord had done so much for them, but they did not look for His promised rest—for the salvation that He promised.
    - They were excluded because of their unbelief.

B. And you see that the whole purpose of saying this is to warn us not to think that we are secure just because we are members of the covenant community...

1. As members of the new covenant community of God’s people you have many privileges...
  - You have the privilege of seeing what Christ has done for His people now that He has come!
  - You have the privilege of knowing that God gave His Son to die for sinners!
    - You are under the government of the church that He established...
    - You hear the same gospel as the other members and you have the same baptism and the same communion table.
    - You have all these things as a member of the visible church...
    - You have entered into the same covenant—
      - You profess with the rest of the covenant community to be trusting in Christ and rejoicing in His work.
2. But it is not enough to have all these things if you do not have the sort of confidence in Christ and rejoicing in Him that will carry you through to the end.
  - If you are not resting in Christ to bring you God’s blessing...
    - If you are looking for blessing from something else...

- If you are not entering into the rest that the Lord has for you as one who is delivered by Christ,
    - then it doesn't matter that you are part of the covenant community.
    - God is not pleased with you and you will die...
      - You will not ever enter into His rest until you repent.
      - You cannot rest in your church membership if you are not resting in Jesus Christ.
3. The point here is not that some members of the church lose their salvation...
- It is rather that there are some who never have the kind of faith that endures to the end.
  - The warning is that you do not harden your heart when you, as a member of God's covenant people, continually hear His voice—His call!
    - Don't be hardened against it just because you want to hold on to your sin!
    - Respond to His voice and come to Him for the rest He promises.
      - Then you will most assuredly enter that rest that God has for His people.

C. This same doctrine is taught all through the Bible...

1. In John 15, Jesus speaks of branches that are now in Him that will be cut off on the day of judgement and cast into the fire because of their unbelief...
  - They are in Him by outward profession, but they are not abiding in Him so that they are actually receiving life from Him.
2. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns about those who come in to His kingdom by the wide gate.
  - There is a narrow gate and there is wide gate into the visible church...
    - The narrow gate leads to life and the narrow gate leads to destruction.
    - And Jesus says that many enter by the wide gate.
      - He says that on the Day of Judgment, He will tell these ones to “depart from me because I never knew you.”
      - Though they lived in the church and did many things in His name,
        - they did not ever really know Him.
3. Likewise, in the parables Jesus tells in Matthew 13...
  - There are those who hear the word and even rejoice in it for a time,
    - but who are either enticed away from Him by temptation—they find something better to pursue...
    - or they abandon His way because of difficulties that cause them to conclude that it is not worth it to follow Him any more...

- In either case, they never really believed—not with a saving faith...
    - for if they had, they would have known that there was nothing better to pursue, and no difficulty that was too great.
      - They might have often come to times of testing and struggle,
        - but in every case, their faith would obtain the victory...
        - or at least, the seed of faith would remain in them and be restored.
      - They would see by faith that what they have in Christ is so sweet and so excellent that they would endure.
  - In Matthew 13, Jesus also speaks of the tares that look just like the wheat until they are exposed in the Day of Judgment...
    - And He also speaks of the dragnet that gathers into His kingdom all kinds of fish, both good and bad, until the Day of Judgement when the good and the bad are separated.
4. And then there is the epistle to the Romans...
- In this letter, the Apostle Paul speaks about the Jews who have the blessing of outward circumcision and of having God’s word,
    - but who do not have true faith...and so are lost...
    - Now that Christ has come, they are cut off from God’s people who are not those who have confidence and rejoicing in Him as their salvation...
  - And in Romans 11, he warns the Gentiles who have come into the church to take their place...
    - the Gentiles who do have confidence and rejoicing in Christ and have been added to the church...
    - He warns them that unless they continue in faith, they too will be cut off.
      - In Romans 11:19-22 he says to the Gentiles:
        - **Rom 11:19-22: You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.” Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.**
5. And in Peter’s epistles, we have the same kind of warnings given again...
- to those who profess Christ but who do not continue in Him...
    - to those who even escape the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of Christ,
      - **2 Peter 2:20 For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are**

**again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.**

**Conclusion:**

So you see that there is no place for covenant presumption.

- Not all those who are part of the church are really part of the church...
  - Not all those who are in Christ are really in Christ...
  - Not all those who are sons of the kingdom are true sons...
  
- Just because you know the gospel, profess Christ, and live in the church does not mean that you are saved...
  - You must not only confess Christ with your words and your deeds,
    - you must also have the kind of confidence and rejoicing in Him that nothing will be able to destroy.
    - You must have true saving faith.
  
  - And my brothers and sisters, I appeal to you by the glory and beauty of Christ!
    - Here is this One whose love for His church is so great that He bore the curse for us!
    - Can you harden your heart against His call to enter in to the eternal rest that He provides through His suffering and death?
      - Can you find something else when you have this precious call?