

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 63

Halifax, 28 December 2008

Q. 63 What are the special privileges of the visible church?

A. The visible church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ, to all members of it, in the ministry of the gospel, testifying that whosoever believes in Him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto Him.

Introduction:

This morning we saw how the Lord called Abraham out of the mass of fallen nations to establish His gracious covenant of salvation with him...

- In His covenant, God promised to Abraham that He would be a God to him and that He would make Abraham and his seed to be His people.
 - This means everything—
 - For God to be his God meant that Abraham would be pardoned of all his sin and would be blessed forever and ever as God's own.
 - It also meant that God would work in him to transform him and make him holy as He is holy.
 - Very radical measures would have to be taken to bring this blessing to Abraham.
 - For him to be pardoned, it would require nothing less than atonement by the shedding of Christ's precious blood...
 - And for him to be transformed, it would require the radical working of the Holy Spirit to first turn him to God and then to continue working in him to enable him to conform to God's ways.
- Last week, we saw that the visible church is the society of people in the world who profess the true religion along with their children.
 - These members are accepted on basis of their profession since we cannot see their hearts.
 - Some of them are not genuine, but they are still in the visible church for a time.
- This week, we want to look at the privileges of belonging to the visible church.
 - There are many people in our day who have been turned off by the widespread hypocrisy in the church...
 - And indeed it is a huge problem!

- It is a huge problem because the great majority of the members of the visible church do not even make a credible profession of faith...
 - In other words, these are persons who ought not to even be allowed to remain as church members because of false doctrine or scandalous lives.
 - But the corruption is so widespread that the elders and ministers who ought to remove them are in the same error.

- Seeing this, it makes many people say,
 - So what benefit is there to being a part of the visible church?

- For our Scripture reading, I have chosen a passage in which Paul asks this very same question.
 - Romans 2:17 – 3:8.
 - READ> Romans 2:17 – 3:8
 - In this passage, Paul is speaking about the Old Testament church.
 - He is showing that the behaviour of the Jews,
 - who boast that they have the law (which of course they did)
 - is quite empty if they do not obey it.
 - If they are those who are circumcised but who do not have the true circumcision of the heart that comes from God’s salvation,
 - their physical circumcision is meaningless.
 - They have the sign of God on their bodies marking them out as those whom God has transformed when in fact they have not been transformed.
 - The sign does not create the transformation,
 - It is only the outward mark God has commanded for those who profess that they are trusting in Him for salvation.
 - And so having shown this problem of the corruption of so many in the Old Testament church,
 - Paul then asks what advantage it is to be a Jew.
 - In 3:1, he says:
 - Rom 3:1: **“What advantage then has the Jew, or what *is* the profit of circumcision?”**
 - This is the question we are concerned with this afternoon...
 - What is the advantage of being a member of the visible church when there are so many who are false?
 - What is the advantage of being baptised when baptism has virtually lost its meaning?

- He asks this question because he anticipates that some,
 - looking at the hypocrisy of those who receive God’s covenant sign and are numbered among His people,
 - might conclude that there is no value in the institutions that God has appointed!
 - And I tell you, that is a major problem in our day!
 - There are many who depreciate the value of baptism and of church membership!
 - These persons are very right to say that these institutions are of no value for those who receive them insincerely,
 - but they are very wrong to conclude that they are of no value to anyone!
 - The problem is not with God or His institutions, it is with the unfaithfulness of man.
- And so in verse 2, Paul answers his own question...
 - He answers it very simply...
 - “What advantage has the Jew or what is the profit of circumcision?”
 - Rom 3:2: **“Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.”**

TRANS> My brothers and sisters, that is the great privilege of the visible church...

I. God Almighty has given us His Word!

- **The oracles of God are the sayings of God or the Word of God.**
- A. The church is distinctively privileged as the society to whom God has spoken!
1. That is what Paul means when he says the oracles of God were committed to the Jews.
 - This is brought out at the end of Psalm 147 as that which was unique to Israel.
 - **Ps 147:18-19: He declares His word to Jacob, His statutes and His judgments to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His judgments, they have not known them. Praise the LORD!**
 - Jacob, of course, refers to Israel—as you know, Jacob’s name was changed to Israel...
 - And of course the nation of Israel is the Jews...
 - They were set apart as the people to whom God gave His word.
 - This is what made them unique among the nations.

2. You know what happened at Babel...
 - a. The nations gathered together to bless themselves and to save themselves by united human effort.
 - As so many people today, they believed that they could bless themselves without the help of God.
 - If they worked together, they believed they could make themselves great and prosperous and secure.
 - They were so full of pride,
 - that they actually ignored the fact that they were part of this fallen human race that has offended God.
 - They acted as if they could make a great life for themselves without bothering to be reconciled to the true and living God.
 - Just as so many people do today.
 - And as you know, God frustrated their efforts.
 - It was by His mercy that they had been enabled to make what progress they had made...
 - Yet, they were not thankful to the Lord...
 - Yet, they did not seek reconciliation with God for their sins...
 - They did not love the Lord their God nor did they fear Him.
 - So the Lord confused their languages and brought an end to the delusion that they could bless themselves without God.
 - b. But you know what else the Lord did after He separated those families!
 - 1) He came to one of them and promised to bless it.
 - He came to Abraham...
 - He came to Abraham, and, as we saw this morning, He **spoke** to Abraham!
 - To use the language of Romans 3:2,
 - He gave Abraham His oracles!
 - 2) And He commanded Abraham to pass these oracles along to his descendents after him...
 - And the Lord promised that He would continue to be their God and to make them His people...
 - And He did that, through the ages, by continuing to speak to them...
 - By continuing to give them His word...His oracles!

B. And what did the Lord say to them when He spoke to them?

1. Well first of all, He told them what they really already knew innately, but had suppressed...
 - He told them that He was the Lord who made heaven and earth.
 - He reminded them that He is over all things.
 - He gave them His moral commandments—which they knew, but had ignored—
 - reminding them how they were meant to live as those made in His image.
 - reminding them that it was theirs to love Him with their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love their neighbour as themselves...
 - to worship Him as He commanded, to keep the Sabbath, to honour their father and mother, to refrain from murder and stealing and deceitfulness.

TRANS> And of course when they were reminded of who God is and of their duty to Him,

- they were made painfully aware of their sin—
 - that they had come short of His glory.
2. But He also reminded them that He had promised to redeem a people out of this fallen world for Himself...
 - He brought the good news upon them with freshness...
 - He had given His promise of salvation to the human race just after the fall...promising to restore a people to Himself...
 - And He had given them sacrifices to show them that He would accept the death of a substitute in their place.
 - God brought this promise of His salvation to Abraham in a fresh way, and then continued to bring it to his descendents...
 - In time, He appointed the whole sacrificial system in Israel to set forth to them daily what Christ would do for them when He came.
 - In this way, they were constantly reminded that the Lord, by His grace, would provide the sacrifice that would take away their sin.
 - He kept the promise of salvation alive to them by speaking it to them.
 - He gave them His oracles.

C. But the Lord also promised that His salvation would in time be expanded to the nations.

1. Right from the beginning, when God separated Abraham from the other nations or families of the earth,

- He promised that through His seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.
 - You can read about that in Genesis 12.
 - This promise was kept alive throughout Israel's history,
 - and it was shown through Isaiah and Daniel and many other prophets that the nations would be blessed when Christ came...
 - That God would give the nations to Him as an inheritance that He might bring salvation to them.
2. But how did God bring this salvation to them?
- a. He delivered it to them by bringing His oracles to them!
 - He came to them to tell them what Christ had done for their salvation so they could trust in Him!
 - He comes to them reminding them that He is Lord...
 - He comes to them reminding them of their duty to Him which causes them to see their guilt and shame...
 - And He comes to them with the good news, declaring to them that Christ has come with salvation for the world...
 - and that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.
 - b. He commanded the Jews to whom Christ had come and who had been given God's oracles about Him to publish the good news in all the earth.
 - 1) At the end of the gospels,
 - the command is given to go into all the earth and preach the gospel to the nations,
 - baptising them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - 2) And those who gladly receive God's word—His oracles—are baptised and added to the church.
3. And so now the church is made up of Jews and Gentiles who have received God's oracles—
- a. God has spoken to them so that they have heard and professed to believe His word.
 - Many of the Jews rejected God's final oracle—His oracle concerning Christ...
 - that He has spoken to them by His Son!
 - And for this reason, they were cut off from the church.
 - b. So now the church is made up of all those from every nation who are baptised in Jesus Christ—who profess to trust in Him for salvation.

- As we saw this morning and last week,
 - **Gal 3:26-29: For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**
 - Like Abraham, these are the ones who have received the word...
 - They profess to believe the promise of God and to trust in Him for His salvation.
- c. And because this is so, the same thing that made Israel unique is the thing that makes the church of Jew and Gentile unique in every nation where she is found...
- She has been entrusted with the oracles of God!
 - Paul describes the church in these terms in 1 Timothy 3.
 - After giving Timothy much instruction, he says:
 - **1 Tim 3:14-16: These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.**
 - Notice how Paul describes the church here as *the pillar and ground of the truth!*
 - It is the visible church that carries the truth—
 - A pillar and ground is something that upholds the truth.
 - God has entrusted His word to us and we are to hold it forth to the world and to each other!
 - He has given us the Scriptures and He has told us how to minister them.
 - We are the only people in all the world to whom God has spoken.
 - We have the unique privilege of knowing His word that gives salvation when it is believed...
 - Of course, as with the Jews, if we are merely baptised and boast that we are teachers of others, but do not obey God's word—if we do not obey the gospel...
 - then the word does not profit us...
 - In fact, the very word that we have been given condemns us because we have not believed!
 - It tells us that unless we repent, we will surely perish.

II. Now I want you to see how the Lord has structured His church in order that He might bring His oracles to us.

A. The head of the church is Jesus Christ.

1. In John 1, Jesus is presented as the Word of God...
 - He is the one who came to save us from our sins and this He does by giving Himself as a sacrifice of atonement...
 - But in doing this, He is also the One who reveals God to us...
 - By His action and by speaking the truth of God to us He brings the oracles of God to us.
 - For this reason, He is called the truth...
 - So Christ, the Head of the church, is God's revelation to us.
2. In Hebrews 1, we are told that God spoke to His church in all different manners, but has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.
 - Christ is the one who, by His actions and speaking, reveals God to us and His salvation for all who believe.
 - He shows us that we were entirely estranged from God and brought under His judgement by our sin,
 - but that through His sacrifice and gracious working, we are reconciled.
 - We come to know God in all the fullness of holiness, grace, beauty, wisdom, justice, wrath, and glory through Christ, the Word.
3. And in Ephesians 2, when Paul is telling the how the word came to them, he says that Christ
 - **“came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near...”**
 - Now it is very interesting language he uses because Jesus never went to Ephesus in the flesh...
 - But as He is the head of the church, He is the one who sends forth His word by His servants...
 - And so it was that when Paul and his companions spoke the word of God to the Ephesians,
 - Christ is said to have preached to them...
 - It was the preaching that He had commanded...
 - It was His message, spoken by His Spirit...
 - It was not the word of man, but the Word of God that effectually works in those who believe.

TRANS> And so you see that you have Christ, the Son of God, as the Head of the church who brings the oracles of God to the church...

- He is the chief administrator who decides the message and then sends the messengers and empowers them to speak His word.

B. So this brings us to the apostles and prophets who are His sent ones.

1. They are the ones who speak the word of God to us so that we may hear the oracles of God...

- They spoke them by the Spirit of God and their word has been recorded for us in the Holy Scriptures which are given to the church.
- And so it is that they are said to be the foundation on which the church is built, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone...

2. And we have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, as it says in 1 John, because they have written to us the things they have seen and heard of Christ...

- What makes the church the church is the fact that we have the oracles of God, now contained in the scriptures...
 - And so by scripture, the apostles still speak to the church when the church goes to the Scriptures for her faith and practice.
 - From Scripture, she learns of Christ.
 - God gives His oracles to the church by giving us scripture.

C. Next there are the ministers of the word...

1. They too are sent forth to preach the word, only they do not give us the scripture as the apostles do, but preach the word of the apostles.

- It is their task to take the revelation of God in scripture and apply it to the congregation through preaching...
 - They are to expound it and give the sense of it in every generation.

2. And so you see once again that God has arranged His church so that His oracles are brought to the lives of His people in this way.

- All through the ages, God has spoken to His people in this way, and now that Christ has come,
 - His oracles are brought to them in this way more than ever...
 - Before, it was through ceremonies at the temple which were explained by the word,
 - but now the ceremonies are much fewer and the word is the primary means of conveying his oracles.

3. It is through preaching that God continues to speak His oracles to His people.

- D. But the ministers are also elders who rule in the church, and they are joined with other elders who rule with them.
1. These elders are required to bring the word of God to the people by their example...
 - They are to live out the word of God that is preached in their families, their work, and their worship,
 2. And they are to give oversight of the church to see that the word of God is followed in the congregation...
 - It is theirs to examine those who are brought into the church to see that they profess the oracles of God...
 - And it is theirs to see that the church follows the oracles of God in her worship and teaching...
 - And it is theirs to help the members to apply the Word in their lives so that they live out the truth—as living oracles—an epistle of Christ...
 - And it is theirs to remove those who reject the word of God in faith or in practice if they refuse to repent.
 3. When the elders fail to do this, the church loses its character as the pillar and ground of the truth and begins to promote falsehood...
 - She ceases to be an epistle of Christ and becomes an epistle of Satan—
 - The elder’s role is vital for the preservation of the oracles of God within the church.
 - If her ministers and members are not disciplined, the lampstand of God’s Word is taken away.
- E. And of course, flowing from this, we have the members of the church who bring the oracles of God to each other...
1. In Ephesians 4, we are told that the members are to “speak the truth in love that we may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.”
 - And as I have told you before—those words “speaking the truth” are in the original simply “truthing in love.”
 - It is not good English, but the idea is that we are to live out the truth—to do the truth (which includes speaking, but also living).
 - The whole church is to be that epistle of Christ, known and read by all.
 - Together we bear witness of the truth to each other and to the world around us.
 2. One of the great benefits of being in the church is the fact that you have fellowship with those who have the oracles of God...
 - And God’s Spirit works so that those oracles are put into action...
 - We see in one another the truth lived out as the Spirit works among us to speak and practice God’s oracles in our families.

- In this way we constantly encourage one another and build each other up in the church...
- and we constantly bear witness to those around us.

TRANS> So you see how God administers His church to bring His oracles to us.

III. Oh brothers and sisters, what a huge privilege it is to have the oracles of God!

- **If you are in the visible church, you are set apart with those who have the precious oracles of God!**

A. I want you to think about how beneficial it is to have the word of God.

1. Moses spoke of this marvellous benefit in Deuteronomy 30.
 - He says:
 - **Deut 30:14: “But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.”**
 - He tells them that they don't have to go searching for salvation in some far away place...
 - The word is near them.
 - God has brought His oracles to *them* so that they can receive them!
2. As you know, Paul quotes this same verse in Romans 10 and explains that as God's people, we have access to His Word of promise in Christ.
 - We are told how to live!
 - We are told how to be reconciled to God and to live for Him!
 - We are told, just as Abraham was long ago, that we are not to try to save ourselves, but we are to look to God to save us...
 - And now that Christ has come, God's salvation is named...
 - We are to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved.
 - The precious word of God has been brought near to us and it is not complicated...
 - If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.
 - That is the message that God has entrusted to His church.
 - That is the message that is so near to all who are in the visible church.
 - But so many, because of pride, will not have it!
 - It is there, but they will not accept that they need a Saviour who has been crucified and raised again for them...
 - They want to have life in themselves when God tells us that we only have life in Christ...

- and so they will not receive the word even though it is so near to them.

B. Oh my brothers and sisters, it is your duty to cherish the visible church where God's word is found.

1. Just because the church has often been unfaithful is no excuse for you to abandon the church and consider her useless...

- It is rather for you to encourage and support the reformation of the church according to the word of God!
- You are to receive the Word in the way that God has appointed...
 - And that is the way that Jesus Christ has appointed...
 - And that is the way that His apostles have revealed to us in Scripture...
 - And that way is through the ministers and elders in the visible church.
 - Christ is the one who established the church with this structure of ministers who speak the word of God, and of ruling elders who give oversight to the congregation to see that the word is followed.
 - If He has appointed the church, structured in this way, to be the place where He administers His word to us,
 - then we are to submit to what He has ordained.
 - Heb 13:7 says:
 - **“Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct.”**
 - 1Th 5:12-13 says:
 - **“And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.”**
- From the very beginning, it was God's will that those who received the word should be baptised and added to the church...
 - The apostles had no such practice as baptising persons and not adding them to the church.
 - As soon as they professed faith, they were baptised and
 - **Acts 2:42: continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.**

- And those that did not continue in the fellowship of the church were to be removed from the church and were no longer to be considered Christians.
 - There are many today who want to live outside the church...
 - They claim that the church is corrupt and full of hypocrisy—as if this is something new!
 - It has been so from the beginning...
 - But God’s word is there and God’s word confronts the church and calls her to return to Him...
 - He chastens the church and deals with the church and restores the church.
 - It is true that there are churches that so degenerate that they have their lampstand removed,
 - In Revelation, Jesus spoke of those churches that had become a synagogue of Satan,
 - and it is true that you are not called to submit to the synagogue of Satan—
 - But Jesus also tells us that He will preserve His church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it...
 - It is your duty to submit yourself to His church where the word of God is preached, where discipline is administered, and where the sacraments are administered according to His commandments.
2. And not only are you to submit to His church and to receive the word of God from her,
- But you are also to **be** the church...
 - You are to **be** the epistle of Christ—
 - to **be** the church that is the pillar and ground of the truth...
 - You only do that by receiving the oracles of God that are set forth in the church and practicing them.
 - **Eph 4:13-16: till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.**

- The goal is that we all receive and practice the word so that we are constantly helping each other, speaking the word and living the word...
 - And when we do, we have the promise that God will be with us to bless us...
 - Psalm 133 says:
 - **“Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* for brethren to dwell together in unity! *It is* like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. *It is* like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forevermore.”**
 - God has commanded His blessing in the church where His Word is.
 - Where we are living together in the unity of His truth.
 - Do not be so foolish as to isolate yourselves from that place where God has commanded His blessing!
3. Just consider how faithful God has been to His church through the ages...
- a. How many times she went astray—
 - Yet God raised up prophets and judges to call her back...
 - He brought His word to her...again and again...
 - Over and over, He would send judgements so that they were nearly destroyed,
 - and then He would raise up a judge to call them back to His salvation again.
 - When things looked completely desperate during the time of the judges,
 - He raised up David to come and shepherd His people and restore them—to see that His word was followed again.
 - And over and over during the time of the kings,
 - They went astray and He sent chastisements upon them...
 - And He sent prophets to bring His oracles to them—to call them back...
 - And He raised up godly kings to restore them...
 - But again and again they rebelled until at last He brought them into captivity as He had threatened all along.
 - But He did not utterly forsake them.
 - He brought them out again,
 - restoring to them His word,
 - preserving them and keeping them until Jesus Christ came.

- b. And then when Christ came, there was a great purging of the Jewish church and the Gospel went out to the Gentiles...
 - But even in the first centuries while the apostles were still around,
 - there were departures from God's way...
 - In fact, most of the epistles of the New Testament are written to correct God's people and to restore them to the truth...
 - And so it has been in the subsequent history of the church...
 - There have been very dark periods,
 - but the Lord God continues to send His Word to His people and to call them back...
 - All along the way, the word is near them—
 - if they will but confess Jesus as Lord and believe in their heart that God has raised Him from the dead, they will be saved.
 - Oh my brothers and sisters,
 - Do not despise the church because of her corruptions...
 - Rather, rejoice that through the centuries God has continued to bring His word to her...
 - and that he even moves the nations of the world and the power of the heavens to facilitate the ministry of His Word among His people.
 - Praise God that He should go to such lengths to speak to us!
 - It is a privilege without equal for sinners to have His word of salvation!
 - It is the chief privilege of the visible church.
 - Let us cherish it with our whole heart.