

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 64

Halifax, 11 January 2009

Q. 64 What is the invisible church?

A. The invisible church is the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head.

Introduction:

In the scriptures, the church is often spoken of.

- As we have seen, the Greek word is *ekklesia* and means “assembly of those who are called out to transact business.”
 - The term is used to refer to any kind of official assembly whether it be political or religious.
 - In English, our word “church” has a narrower meaning in that it refers exclusively to a *Christian* assembly.
 - It also refers to the building in which the Christian assembly meets.
 - In the Bible, *ekklesia* never refers to the building, but always to the assembly of persons, however,
 - the Greek word *ekklesia* also began to be used for the place of meeting almost as soon as specialised buildings were erected for that purpose.
- In Hebrew, the word *kahal* is used to refer to the assembly of God’s people in the Old Testament,
 - and this word is ordinarily translated by *ekklesia* in the Greek version of the Old Testament.
 - So it is important to understand that the idea of an assembly of God’s people was not a new concept after Jesus came.
 - It was something that was well known from scripture.

There is only one church of Jesus Christ, but there are different ways of looking at the church.

- We can look at what we call the visible church or we can look at the invisible church.
- When we speak of the visible church, we speak of the church as it appears in the world.
 - It is made up of all those who profess the true religion along with their children.
 - We saw this in Question 62.
 - Sometimes, a particular assembly is spoken of, such as in Col 4:15 where Paul says to greet the church that is in the house of Nymphas.

- Other times it is used to refer several congregations in a region, such as the Church at Jerusalem of the Church at Corinth.
- It is also used of the whole body of professing Christians throughout the world, for example, where Paul says in Galatians 1:13 that he had “persecuted the church of God.”
- The visible church is organised with Christ as the Head, speaking through scriptures, and with elders and deacons chosen according to the guidelines given by the Lord in Scripture.
 - This is the visible church.
 - It is made of up both true and false believers—
- When we speak of the invisible church, we speak of those who truly belong to Jesus Christ and so are true members of His body.
 - The invisible church includes those who have already been gathered in as well as those who are yet to be gathered in—even those who are not yet born.
 - The Scriptures speak of the church in this way when it says that Christ gave Himself for the church (as in Ephesians 5) or refers to the church as “the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven.”
 - These are the ones who were chosen of God to be in Christ from before the foundation of the world.
- As it is now, there are many members of the invisible church who are either departed from this life (and so from the visible church) or who are not yet born (and so not yet brought into the visible church).
 - There are also many in the visible church who are not members of the invisible church because of their unbelief...
 - But on the final day of judgement when all the dead are raised and those who belong to Christ are separated from those who do not,
 - the visible church and the invisible will be one and the same.
 - That is the church in its final perfection.

We have looked at the visible church for the last few weeks,

- seeing what it is, and seeing the privileges that the members of the visible church have...
 - in short, that they have the oracles of God—God’s very own word.

This week, we begin to focus in on the invisible church.

- Today we will look at what it is...
- Next week at the benefits there are to being a member of it...
 - which will lead into a whole series of questions about these benefits that we will take up for quite some time.

So today as we look at what the invisible church is,

- I want to read to you from Psalm 22 where we have our Lord's plan for the church.

- Before I read from this Psalm, I want to say a couple of things about it.
 - This Psalm was written about 1000 years before Jesus came (about 3000 years ago).
 - It is a remarkable Psalm because by prophecy, it gives us the very meditations of Jesus when He was on the cross.
 - In verse 1, the words,
 - "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," are precisely the words He spoke out loud from cross when He was cut off from the Father as the one who was bearing the curse of our sins...
 - In verse 16, He speaks of the piercing of His hands and feet...
 - This was expressed before crucifixion had even been developed as a means of execution.
 - But by prophecy, it is clearly what is referred to.
 - He also speaks of many other details that pertain to His suffering on the cross:
 - His thirst...
 - The casting of lots for His clothing...
 - The mocking and cruelty of His enemies...
 - The fact that His bones were not broken...
 - All this points to the fact that this Psalm contains the very meditations of our Lord on the cross...
 - But there is one other thing that makes it absolutely certain that this Psalm is about Jesus.
 - And that is, what it says about the outcome of His sufferings in verses 22-31!
 - All through the first 21 verses, He is crying out to God for deliverance...
 - but in verse 21 there is a great turning point!
 - Suddenly, right in the middle of the verse,
 - He declares that God has heard Him!
 - With triumph, He says, "You have answered me!"
 - And then He explains how the whole church comes alive with praise and thanksgiving because of God's deliverance of Him!
 - The Father has accepted His offering for the church's sin!
 - He declares the good news to the great assembly (the church).

- The good news is that God the Father has not despised His affliction—
 - He has accepted it for the sins of His people!
- Jesus speaks of gathering the nations of the world into this great assembly that rejoices in what has been done through His suffering!
 - And He speaks of this gathering going on into the future from generation to generation!
 - This outcome of suffering can only pertain to the sufferings of Jesus Christ!
 - Jesus is the one who gathers this great assembly together...
- Let me read the Psalm to you...
 - READ> Psalm 22
- From this Psalm, I want to bring forth three things about the invisible church.
 - First, that the invisible church is the great assembly of those who rejoice in the gospel.
 - Second, that the invisible church is made up of persons from all the nations of the world.
 - Third, that the invisible church is made up of the elect from every generation.

I. The invisible church is that great assembly of those who rejoice in the gospel.

A. Jesus declares to them what God has done and they rejoice in it

1. You see this in verse 22.
 - Right after He announces that God has answered His cry for deliverance,
 - He vows that He will declare God's name to His brethren and lead them in praising God!
 - And the reason is given in verse 24...
 - It is because God has accepted His suffering...
 - **Psalm 22:24: "For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard."**
 - Jesus was afflicted for our sins...
 - And once God accepted His offering,
 - He gathers all His elect together to tell them the good news!
 - He declares what God has done for them and this caused them to rejoice!
2. This is what is described in Hebrews 2 where this Psalm is quoted...

- Hebrews 2:9 explains that now we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour because He has tasted death for everyone...
 - verse 10 explains that He was made perfect through sufferings—a perfect, complete sacrifice for us, acceptable to God.
 - And then in verse 11, it says that He is not ashamed to call us His brothers because He has sanctified us by the blood of the cross—
 - And then in verse 12, His promise from Psalm 22:22 is quoted—
 - The promise that He will declare God’s name to us and will sing praise in the assembly (the ekklesia) to God as our head...
 - He is the one who leads new testament worship—
 - It is the acceptance of His sacrifice that is the center of our praise!
 - It is through His suffering, accepted for our sins, that we see all that God is to us, His people!
 - We are the ones who are given to Him—to be His people, sanctified by His blood!
 - He has destroyed the power of death by propitiating the Father!

TRANS> Jesus delights to declare this wonderful news to the church and to fill the church with praise to God because of it!

3. This is what Jesus describes in John’s gospel.

- In John 5:24, He explains that those who hear His word and believe in God who sent Him as Saviour will be given everlasting life. He says:
 - **John 5:24: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.”**
 - This word that we hear is the gospel...the good news that God has accepted His sacrifice for our sins.
 - And when we hear, we live.
 - **John 5:25 “Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.”**
- In John 10, He says that He will declare the good news to all those whom the Father has given Him, and that they will hear and believe.
 - In John 10:26, He told the rebellious Jews:
 - **John 10:26-29: “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.”**

TRANS> You see from this that Jesus declares the good news to every member of the invisible church—

- to every person who is appointed to salvation...
 - and every one of them hears and believes the good news—
 - the news that the Father sent Jesus and that He has been accepted for our salvation.

- Now you may say,
 - “But Christ ascended into heaven almost 2000 years ago.”
 - “How can the members of the invisible church who live in all these generations after His ascension hear His voice?”
 - Do you remember?
 - We looked at this in previous sermons...

B. They hear through the word of His servants

1. First, they hear through the apostles who gave us the word of Christ which is now preserved for us in Scripture.
 - In John 17, after Jesus prayed for His disciples, He adds:
 - **John 17:20: I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;**

2. It is because of this that Paul can tell the Ephesians who never met Christ that they have heard Christ...
 - They heard the declaration that He makes to every member of the invisible church.
 - **Eph 4:20-21: But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him.**

3. And now He is heard through those who preach the gospel, declaring to the great assembly the good news.
 - Before He ascended into heaven,
 - He commanded His disciples to preach the gospel in all the world...
 - And promised that those who hear will be saved...
 - And as we saw in John 10,
 - All those that the Father has given Him *will* hear and believe.

C. When they hear, they rejoice—the see the good news as good news and it causes them to praise the Lord...

- By His Word proclaimed,
 - Jesus gathers all these poor sinners (who were destitute and ruined by the fall) into His church to praise God with Him for accepting His offering...

- So the whole visible church—every member—is filled with rejoicing.
- This is what Jesus says in Psalm 22:25-26:
 - **Psalm 22:25-26:** “My praise *shall be* of You in the great assembly; I will pay My vows before those who fear Him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek Him will praise the LORD. Let your heart live forever!”
 - These enriched hearts, filled with praise to God for Christ crucified and accepted by Him, will live forever...
 - They will ever be praising Him.
 - Every member of the invisible church will hear and believe.
 - They will all join in the praise forever.

And now secondly, I want you to see where all these persons come from.

- I want you to see that...

II. The invisible church is made up of many persons from all the nations of the earth

A. Jesus speaks of this in Psalm 22:27-28

1. He says:

- **Ps 22:27-28:** “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom *is* the LORD’s, and He rules over the nations.”
- You see what Jesus is talking about here!
 - The nations are going to remember what He has done—just as we do in the New Covenant ceremony of the Lord’s Supper...
 - We remember and we give thanks and we turn to the Lord in worship and submit to Him as our Lord.
 - This is done all over the world, just as Jesus anticipated.
 - This is really one of the most remarkable prophecies in the entire scripture, and it was given in a time and circumstance when it seemed impossible...
 - Here Jesus has been rejected by the leaders of Israel,
 - Here He is being crucified by the Romans.
 - It is a time when it looks like the end has come for Him.
 - But He is anticipating the whole world coming alive with praise to God because of His suffering and death...
 - because of the very circumstances He had just borne on the cross!

2. This corresponds exactly with what Jesus emphasised in Matthew’s gospel.

- a. When a Gentile showed faith in Him, He saw this as only a foreshadowing of the great influx of the nations to His kingdom...
 - He saw this even in a time when many in Israel were rejecting Him...
 - In Matthew 8:11-12, He says:
 - **Matt 8:11-12: “And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”**
 - Jesus knew that the Father had promised to give Him the nations as His inheritance.
 - He knew that the church was made up of people from all over the world.
- b. In Matthew 24, He speaks of His messengers going out and gathering in His elect from the all over the world...
 - In Matthew 24:29-31, He says,
 - **Matt 24:29-31: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”**
 - There is debate about whether this passage refers to what happens at the end of the world or if it is about what happens after the destruction of Jerusalem when the nations are gathered in by the gospel.
 - The word *angel* means *messenger*,
 - and the trumpet can be either the last trumpet or the trumpet of the gospel that is calling sinners to repent and believe.
 - I am inclined to understand this as the call of the gospel gathering the nations,
 - but whichever the case, this passage clearly teaches that Jesus had elect persons from all over the world who will be gathered.
 - And when He said these words,
 - it was pure prophecy—
 - This had not begun to happen, but He knew it would happen because God had chosen these Gentiles to come.

B. The assembly, then, is one of great diversity:

1. In Psalm 22, Jesus says it is made up of “all the families of the nations...”

- This points back to the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12—
 - that in his seed, all the families of the earth would be blessed.
 - Those families that had been separated at Babel would, in God’s time, be brought to share in the blessing of Abraham...
 - There would be neither Jew nor Greek, but all would be one in Christ.
2. He speaks of the church being also made up of both rich and poor, the prosperous and the destitute.
- In verse 26 the poor are mentioned, and in verse 29 the prosperous are mentioned.
 - The poor come to realise that they have everything in Christ...
 - The rich come to realise that they have nothing without Christ...that all is vanity apart from the life that He gives—apart from having Christ crucified as their redeemer.
 - And so both the rich and the poor come to rejoice with Christ in the acceptance of His offering,
 - and as members of the invisible church, they partake of Him..
 - They feast upon His sacrifice.
 - In his epistle, James speaks about this diversity of the rich and poor in the church,
 - and how in Christ, they are brought together, having the same riches that make the passing riches of this world irrelevant.
 - In James 2:5, he says:
 - **James 2:5 Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?**
 - On this principle, he insists that the lowly brother should glory and the rich should not gloat because what he has is passing away...
 - **James 1:9-10: Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away.**

TRANS> So you see that there is a great diversity in the make up of the church.

- C. And we are told throughout scripture that total number of members in the invisible church is very great...
- In Revelation 7, John sees a vision of this great diverse multitude doing the very thing that Psalm 22 says they will do...
 - praising God because of the good news that the offering of Jesus Christ has been accepted for their sin!

- **Rev 7:9-10: After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”**
- This is the invisible church, made up of a great diversity of persons all brought together by Christ into the great assembly to praise Him for His saving work!
 - Our Lord is very generous with His grace!
 - It is remarkable that even one should be saved—
 - but here we see that the invisible church is made up of a multitude that no one can number!
- And now thirdly, I want you to see that...

III. The invisible church is made up of all the elect from every generation and from all ages

- A. In Psalm 22:30-31, Jesus speaks of a people “yet to be born” who will come to join in the rejoicing of His accepted sacrifice.
1. Psalm 22:30-31 says:
 - **Ps 22:30-31: “A posterity shall serve Him. It will be recounted of the Lord to the *next* generation, they will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has done *this*.”**
 - a. In calling this a posterity, it indicates His mercy to families—to children’s children of those that keep His covenant.
 - The invisible church is not a purely random selection of persons,
 - but when they Lord chooses a man, He often also chooses his offspring.
 - The nations, receiving salvation, declare that salvation to their children after them,
 - and these children also come to serve Him by the grace of God.
 - They come to rejoice in what their parents rejoice in by the mercy of the Lord.
 - They come to rejoice in what God has done in sending Christ.
 - b. And because this is so, the praise of God continues from generation to generation without ceasing...
 - The invisible church is made up of those from every generation who have ever lived on the earth.

2. These ones who are yet to be born are ones who have already been chosen for salvation—already chosen as members of the invisible church before they are even born...
 - a. Ephesians 1:4 says that God chose us in Christ
 - **“before the foundation of the world...that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.”**
 - So you see,
 - the members of the invisible church were known to God before He even created the world!
 - A people yet to be born were predestined to rejoice in Christ.
 - b. Jesus mentions these ones that are already chosen as those whom the Father has given Him...
 - For example, in John 6, He says:
 - **John 6:39: “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.**
 - And we already saw in John 10:27 that Jesus said that His sheep would hear His voice and come to Him...
 - And in verse 29, He refers to the Father as the one “who has given them to me.”
 - c. It is on this same principle that Paul, when he went to Corinth, was told to remain through difficult times because the Lord had many people in that city...
 - Acts 18:9-11 says:
 - **Acts 18:9-11: Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.” And he continued *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.**
 - You see that there were people who had not yet trusted in Christ who were already said to belong to Christ.
 - They were not yet members of the visible church,
 - but they were members of the invisible church as those for whom Christ had died and who were chosen to believe.

TRANS> So you see here how the invisible church is made up of *future* believers that were chosen by God before the foundation of the world.

B. Now I want you to see that God has elected people from every generation so that there has always been and always will be a visible church to rejoice in Christ’s salvation.

1. Now of course, those who lived in time of the Old Testament rejoiced in His salvation by anticipation,
 - as Abraham of whom Christ said,
 - **John 8:56** “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad.”
 - When He said that, some of the Jewish leaders objected and said:
 - **John 8:57: Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?”**
 - And Jesus answered then in a very interesting way. He says:
 - **John 8:58: Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”**
 - You might have expected Him to say simply that Abraham believed the promise about Him,
 - but instead Jesus make a great claim—He claims that He is the eternally existing one—the I Am—Yahweh—
 - As such, Abraham knew Him.
 - He was the LORD in whom Abraham believed and now these Jewish leaders do not even know Him.
 - Yes, Abraham rejoiced in what the LORD promised to do in the future...
 - but he received the promise from the Son of God Himself and trusted in Him as the One who would save him.
 - He rejoiced in Christ.

TRANS> And so you see that Abraham is an example of a member of the invisible church who rejoiced in Christ and His salvation *before* it was accomplished...

- And my point is that God has always had members of the invisible church in every generation from the beginning who truly believed and so truly rejoiced in His salvation.
 - Abraham was chosen out of all the families of the earth that were separated at Babel...
 - He was chosen as one to whom the Lord would declare His salvation and as one who would hear His voice and believe with rejoicing.
2. But I need to show you with more than an example that it always has been and always will be the case that the Lord will have members of the invisible church who believe...in every generation.

- a. This principle is stated by Paul in Romans 9-11 where he speaks about Israel and how there is a remnant according to election.
 - This remnant is made up of those chosen by God to truly rejoice in God's salvation.
 - In Romans 11, Paul speaks of how the Lord showed Elijah that He had reserved 7000 in Israel that had not bowed their knee to Baal...
 - That was sorry conditions—that there were only 7000 out of the millions in Israel—but still there were a people chosen to believe who did believe...
 - There were members of the invisible church...
 - And in Romans 11:5, he shows that this is still true in his day...
 - That even though most of Israel has rejected Christ, there is still a remnant of which Paul is a part who rejoice in His salvation:
 - Romans 11:5: **“Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.”**
- b. This is just what God promised in Isaiah 58 when he said,
 - **Isa 59:21: “As for Me,” says the LORD, “this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants’ descendants,” says the LORD, “from this time and forevermore.”**
 - This is the promise of the Lord that there will always be a remnant among His people,
 - even in the darkest times, there will be a people in the visible church who are also members of the invisible church.
 - In every age, there will be a people who truly believe and so who worship God for His saving mercies in Christ.
- c. There are examples of this faithful remnant according to election throughout the ages...
 - In the time of the great flood, there was Noah who found grace in the eyes of the Lord.
 - In the time of Babel, there was Abram who received God's promised blessing by faith.
 - In the time of the Judges, there were Boaz and Samuel who served the Lord when the church was filled with corruption.
 - And in the time when all of Israel followed Ahab and worshipped the Baals, there were Elijah and the 7000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal...
 - And in Isaiah's day,
 - though the nation as a whole was apostate and to be judged,

- God promised to Isaiah that there would be stump that would remain, even a tenth that He would reserve for Himself.
- And then in the time when Christ was born,
 - we saw recently that there was a Simeon and an Anna who spoke to all those who were waiting for redemption in Israel.

TRANS> The members of the invisible church are those who truly rejoice in God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice for their sin...

- They are the people who hear the voice of Christ declaring what He has done, and who are gathered by Him to give thanks to God.
- They are from every nation and from every class, and they are a great multitude...
- And they are to be found in every generation from the beginning of the world until the end.

Conclusion: So my counsel to you is this...

- You need to be sure that you are among this remnant—
 - You need to make your calling and election sure.
- And how do you do that?
 - You do that by receiving the gospel—the good news that Christ died to atone for the sins of His people.
 - If you are not interested in being reconciled to God, I have nothing more to say to you...
 - But if you are one who wants to be reconciled,
 - then I would ask you what you are going to trust in if not in this Saviour who has suffered for our sins?
 - Are you going to trust in something that you have done when God has sent Him to do this?
 - Surely not!
 - It is for you to come to Jesus Christ and trust in what He has accomplished by His suffering and death.
 - And if you do, His promise is certain...
 - **John 6:37: All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.**
 - Of that, you can be sure.