

## CHAPTER 1.

# THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

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In this volume of *Growing in the Gospel* we turn our attention to the last two major topics of doctrine. First we focus on Scripture's teaching about the church. This is also known as *ecclesiology* because *ekklesia* is the Greek word for *church*. Next we look at what God reveals about the final fullness of our salvation. This is also called *eschatology* because it involves Scripture's teaching about the last things or the *eschaton*. Both of these topics tend to generate many questions in our minds. Here are a few samples.

What is the proper relationship between doctrinal faithfulness and church membership? This can quickly become a pressing question in family life. Let us say that a young woman who attends a Reformed church meets a young man who belongs to a Baptist church and falls in love with him. If the relationship develops, which church should they join? Some would be quick to answer, "It really doesn't matter. So long as they both sincerely love the Lord, they are free to choose whichever church they like." However, that implies that the baptism of infants is a minor, and therefore negotiable, doctrine. Is that correct? And if it is acceptable to compromise on baptism, is it also permissible to join a church that encourages people to make their own free choice to be saved? What about celebrating the mass instead of the Lord's supper? Where do we draw the line? If you have gone through situations like this in your own family, you will understand how emotional these questions can become.

Turning to another matter, can a church still truly be a church of Christ if there is widespread moral corruption or spiritual laziness? Imagine a congregation that, over the span of three years, is devastated to learn about a number of scandalous sins committed within its membership: some involving sexual sins and others relating to financial crimes. One day a member of the congregation confides in his close friend and says, “After everything that’s happened, I’m not even sure if I still belong to a real church. Maybe I need to find a congregation that walks the walk instead of just talking the talk.” Can you empathize with that person’s spiritual struggle?

Finally, concerning the church, we may wonder how long she can survive in a consumer-oriented society. The fact of the matter is that members of the church are not as faithful to their local congregation or to their own federation as they once used to be. As a society we are rapidly acquiring the attention span of a butterfly. We flit from website to website, almost as rapidly as that beautiful insect flies from flower to flower. This also affects how we shop. If Canadian Tire does not give us satisfactory customer service, we do not think twice about taking our business down the road to Walmart. Will the church soon become a religious business in which the spiritual customer is king, just like in every other industry on earth? Or has she already caved in to our consumer society?

To be sure, if we tally up questions like these about the church, and if we add in all the intriguing queries about life after death, then there will certainly be enough to discuss in this book. We will begin answering some of these questions in this chapter, but others will be addressed later. So, without further ado, let us begin exploring what the God of all grace has to say about his church and the future imperishable inheritance that he is storing up for us (1 Pet 1:4).

#### SALVATION AND THE CHURCH: WHICH COMES FIRST?

There is a natural connection between the church and Scripture’s teaching about salvation, which we covered in chapters 8–12 of the previous volume of *Growing in the Gospel*. Soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, is about how God rescues us from sin; ecclesiology, the doctrine of the

church, is about how redeemed people are gathered together to the glory of their Saviour. However, it is not always so easy to know which comes first and which follows. As John Calvin once wrote in a slightly different context, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess . . . consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, we might ask: does the doctrine of salvation lead into the doctrine of the church, or is it the other way around?

From one angle, it seems right to speak about salvation first. After all, how can you have a church of redeemed people if there is no salvation to rescue them? But a legitimate case can be made for reversing the order. Consider the following reasons. First, salvation is by faith, and faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ (Rom 10:17). However, the preachers of the Word are sent out by the church. It is true that without believers there is no church, but it is also true that without the church there is no preaching of the Word of Christ through whom we are saved. As John Calvin said, it is not so easy to discern which one comes first.

Second, God’s overall plan includes more than saving people from sin. For example, when the LORD called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans, he did not begin with a call to repentance. Instead, he began with a promise of making a great nation out of one married couple, Abram and Sarai (Gen 12:2). That great nation, one day called Israel, was the Old Testament church. Some time after that initial promise, the LORD also credited Abram with righteousness through faith (Gen 15:6). So, you could say that the doctrine of salvation (righteousness by faith) is wrapped within the robe of the Old Testament’s teaching on the church (becoming the great nation). In this respect it is also interesting that the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed both place the doctrine of the church (“I believe a holy catholic Christian church”) before the doctrine of salvation (“the forgiveness of sins”).

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.1.

Finally, when John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ began preaching, they gave exactly the same command to the crowds: “Repent” (Matt 3:2; 4:17). Repentance is part of the doctrine of salvation. However, both of them also added the same motivation: “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2; 4:17). The kingdom of heaven is closely connected with the church of Christ (see LD 48). So, there is no room for the individualistic notion that repentance is all about “Jesus and me,” because Jesus himself says it has everything to do with the kingdom of heaven, which is obviously a lot bigger than small little me.

All of this leads us to conclude that soteriology and ecclesiology are extensively intertwined. The doctrine of the church is not a minor epilogue to the main story of salvation, and, for that matter, neither should the teaching of salvation be completely overshadowed by our confession of the church. Both salvation and the church find their origin in Christ. It is really no surprise, then, that they are so closely connected with each other. In the end, then, whether we work from the church to salvation or from salvation to the church, one thing must be certain: both must be firmly rooted in Christ, who is pre-eminent over all (Col 1:18).

Rooting our doctrine of the church in the person of our Saviour also helps us find the right point of departure. In later chapters we will tackle some of the interesting and pressing questions that come up when we speak about the church. However, to begin with, we need to be clear on what, or who, the church really is. In other words, it helps to start with the question of *identity* before we delve into matters of action and conduct. Remarkably, we noticed the same pattern with the doctrine of Christ: we began with the *who* and then turned to the *what*.<sup>2</sup> Unless identity is clearly understood, actions are constantly misunderstood.

#### DEFINITION BY DISTINCTIONS?

If you begin reading books about the church, you may soon stumble across various distinctions that theologians use to describe it. Some write about the invisible church versus the visible church. Others compare the

2. See *Growing in the Gospel*, Volume 2, Chapter 3.

church as organism to the church as institute. Then there is also the militant church as compared to the triumphant church. Finally, people will refer to the church *as God sees it*, that is, from the point of view of election, and church *as we see it*, that is, from the point of view of the covenant.

Now, there may be some truth in some of these distinctions. At the same time, there are also problems with some of them. Toward the end of this chapter we hope to evaluate them more closely. But for now it is important to notice that these distinctions tend to make the church sound like a rather complex thing, especially if people start applying two or three of these distinctions simultaneously. What exactly would the militant, invisible church as institute look like? Where do you find such a thing? How do you know when you have found it? It all sounds rather complicated.

Martin Luther, the well-known German reformer of the sixteenth century, had a different outlook on the church. He once wrote, “A seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and ‘the little sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd’” (Smalcald Article 12). Yes, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, but he does not distinguish between the church as organism and the church as institute, let alone between the church as visible and the church as invisible. The straightforward faith of children is often a good corrective in dealing with complexities that adults generate. So let us explore exactly how the Word of God speaks about the church of God.

“GATHER THE PEOPLE TO ME” (DEUT 4:10)

Guido de Brès once summed up the church in one sentence. He wrote, “We believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation and *assembly* of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, as washed by his blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (BC 27; emphasis added). The word *assembly* is a central part of this definition. The point is that the church is not just the sum total of all true Christian believers, but it

is that gathering, or assembly, of true believers as they come together to worship and serve their Saviour, also by edifying and assisting each other. The Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes something similar when it says, “I believe that the Son of God . . . *gathers*, defends, and preserves for himself . . . a church chosen to everlasting life” (LD 21, Q&A 54; emphasis added). Please notice that *gather* is the first verb in the list. The church starts when and where Christ begins gathering true believers together.

Already in the Old Testament it is clear that this assembly of God’s people begins with the call of God. Not only did the LORD call his people out of Egypt (Hos 11:1), but when they arrived at Mount Sinai they had to come together and stand before the LORD, who descended on the mountain with an awesome display of fire and smoke, thunder and lightning, all accompanied by the sound of a very loud trumpet blast (Exod 19:16–22). One detail in that passage should not escape our attention: “Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain” (Exod 19:17). The people of God were living in their own tents, all carefully arranged, tribe by tribe, close to Mount Sinai. However, for this special occasion of meeting with God, they did not stay in their own tents, each family praying and singing to God on their own. Instead, Moses led them “out of the camp,” out of their own tents, and they all assembled before the LORD at the foot of the mountain. This kind of public gathering together is at the very heart of what it means to be church.

The unforgettable assembly at the foot of Mount Sinai was not the only such gathering. There were similar assemblies on other occasions, although the thunder, lightning, and very loud trumpet blasts did not always occur. At the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests, the LORD instructed Moses to “assemble all the congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting,” and they did so (Lev 8:3–4). Then there were the annual Old Testament feasts, such as Passover and Pentecost, which were called “holy convocations,” or sacred assemblies (Lev 23:4, 21). In addition, the weekly gathering together on the Sabbath day was also designated as a sacred assembly (Lev 23:3). Furthermore, assembling was

not just something that God's people did on a regular basis, but it was simply part of who they were, that is to say, their identity. In the Old Testament one of the Hebrew words for an assembly is *qahal*. This word is often used almost as another name for the people of Israel (e.g., Exod 12:6; 16:3; Lev 16:17, 33; Deut 5:22; Ezra 10:12; Ps 149:1).

In sum, then, the Old Testament teaches us that God's people do not just stay to themselves. When they come before the LORD in worship, they do so together in a public assembly. They also do this repeatedly and regularly, especially on the weekly Sabbath day.

Once this is clear in our minds, the transition to the New Testament is easy to make. To begin with, Jesus Christ himself regularly participated in the weekly synagogue gatherings; in fact, it was "his custom" to do so (Luke 4:16). Right after Pentecost the believers in Christ met together with even greater frequency, that is, on a daily basis (Acts 2:46). After some time, though, the frequency of gathering appears to have returned to the more regular pattern of once a week, especially on the first day of the week, the day of Christ's resurrection (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:1). Moreover, just as in the Old Testament, God's people in the New Testament are known by a name that has to do with assembling. The common Greek word for the church in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which literally means: those who are called out (of the world) and summoned to serve their Saviour together. In fact, in Acts 7:38 Stephen also refers to God's people in the Old Testament as the church (*ekklesia*) or assembly in the desert.

Church as assembly also permeates some metaphors that the Holy Spirit uses to describe the church in the New Testament. Sheep scattered over the hills and in the valleys—one sheep here and another over there—do not make a flock. A shepherd only has a flock when his sheep are gathered together, listening to his voice as he calls them. This is the way Jesus Christ describes his church in John 10:14–16. And, as Luther said, even a seven-year-old child can understand that concept!

Then there are the passages which describe the church as a building, or especially as a temple (1 Cor 3:17; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:4–6). Again, building materials may be scattered all over the place—a few skids of bricks here, some planks of lumber over there, and a bunch of pipes lying next to them. But building materials that are dispersed, helter-skelter around the jobsite, do not constitute a building. A building is constructed when those materials are methodically gathered and joined together, each brick, plank, and pipe in its appropriate place. So it is with the church. The mere existence of genuine Christians does not constitute a church; rather, the assembly of those true believers is what the church of Christ is really all about. Many people today forget this vital truth. As a result, their understanding of the church is weak or perhaps even unscriptural.

In this regard, perhaps the most powerful imagery in the Bible is the apostle Paul’s comparison between the church and a body. To be more specific, he says, the church is Christ’s body (Eph 1:20; 5:23, 29; Col 1:24). At the same time, this “body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body” (1 Cor 12:12). A certain body part, such as a foot, cannot say that it does not belong to the body because it is not a hand, while the eye cannot reject the hand, saying, “I have no need of you” (1 Cor 12:14–26). The apostle’s point is simply this: a single part does not a body make. To have a living, healthy body, the parts of the body must be joined together, each one doing its own special work (Eph 4:16). In other words, it is not merely the existence of various human organs and limbs that makes a body; rather, it is the proper *assembly*, or intricate knitting together, of them that makes a body (Ps 139:13–15). No wonder then that the Belgic Confession remarks that “no one ought to withdraw from [the church], content to be by himself, no matter what his status or standing may be” (Art. 28).

“A BRIDE ADORNED FOR HER HUSBAND” (REV 21:2)

Closely connected with the metaphor of the church as Christ’s body is the image of the church as Christ’s bride. These two descriptions are



even combined in Ephesians 5, where the church is compared to Christ's own body (vv. 29–30) right within a passage that speaks about the marriage covenant of a husband with his wife (vv. 21–33). Indeed, toward the end of this famous passage on Christian marriage, the apostle Paul exclaims, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (v. 32). It is worthwhile spending a little extra time learning the true identity of the church by looking at some parts of the Bible that describe the church as Christ's bride. After all, that is where the whole Bible ends: with the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:9) and the new Jerusalem, which symbolizes the church (Heb 12:22–23), descending out of heaven in radiance, ready to meet her gracious and glorious Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ (Rev 21:2–3).

The church as the bride of Christ is cast in sharper relief when we consider the Old Testament background of Ezekiel 16. There Jerusalem, a symbol of the Old Testament church, begins as a baby girl, born to pagan parents (“your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite,” v. 3). She was subsequently abandoned by them in a field, left to die—both naked and unwashed (vv. 4–5). Certainly, this is no newborn princess lying in a royal bassinet in some luxurious palace! Still, the LORD finds this helpless orphan, cleanses her, clothes her, nourishes, and nurtures her, until one day when she is fully grown. Then, of all surprising things, he marries her (v. 8)! For the wedding she is given fine linen to wear, along with dazzling jewelry and even a beautiful crown (vv. 11–12). The abandoned pagan baby is now the very beautiful queen of the LORD (v. 13), who is King of all the earth. What a grace-filled transformation! Yet his mercy does not end there. For this queen, trusting in her beauty, turns to adultery and idolatry (vv. 15–63). Surely, if any husband had a legitimate right to divorce his wife, the LORD did. But though he does punish her (vv. 38–41), it is all with a view to forgiving her (vv. 42, 60–62).

Although not quite as dramatic, Psalm 45 presents a similar picture in poetic form. As the superscription of the psalm indicates, it is the wedding song of a royal couple—yet not just any royal couple. The king in this psalm is clearly unique. On the one hand he is a man, even “the most handsome of the sons of men” (v. 2), but on the other hand the psalmist

addresses him as God: “Your throne, O God, . . .” (v. 6). How can this king be a man and yet at the same time be addressed as God? Clearly, this psalm is pointing forward prophetically to the Lord Jesus Christ, our mediator and deliverer, “who is a true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures; that is, one who is at the same time true God” (LD 5, Q&A 15). Who is his bride? She is certainly a beautiful bride, wearing the gold of Ophir (v. 10) and embroidered garments. However, she, too, was not naturally born as a princess. Instead, she has to leave her people and her father’s house behind, and make a new beginning as the bride of this king who is God (vv. 14–15).

Passages like these in the Old Testament are eagerly straining forward to Ephesians 5, where Christ cleanses his bride “by the washing of water with the word” (v. 25) and presents her in radiant clothing “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (v. 27). This virgin bride, the church, has been promised to just one husband, the Christ (2 Cor 11:2), and she eagerly awaits her Groom, who will come for us arrayed in heavenly splendour (Rev 22:17).

The time of engagement, before the actual wedding day, will not always be easy. She will be attacked by the serpent, who wants nothing more than to drown her in a torrent of temptation (Rev 12:15). Yet, protected and guided by the Spirit of her heavenly Husband, the bride of Christ remains loyal to her Groom. In so doing, the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” (Rev 22:17). In other words, the bride can hardly wait for her wedding day (Rev 19:7). She wants to be with her glorious Bridegroom forever, living together with him in a place where all former and miserable things will pass away, being replaced by a new creation that is even more splendid than the Garden of Eden itself (Rev 21). Such is the description of the church that the Word of God gives us, provided we follow the theme of the bride of the LORD through both the old and new covenants. This description teaches us some important truths.

To begin with, it reveals to us that ultimately the church is not an *it* but a *she*. This beloved *she* is betrothed to the King of kings, the Most High God, who is rightly jealous for his bride’s devotion. This should also

reminds us to be ever so careful about how we speak of the church. If the church is nothing more than an *it*, an institution, then somehow it seems easier to speak disparagingly of it. At times people become cynical about the church, constantly criticizing her leaders and regularly castigating her members. Ironic, isn't it? Normally speaking, people would not dare to speak so harshly about any woman in the presence of her husband. Yet, when the bride in question does not belong to a certain man, but rather to the Son of God himself, then people—including many Christians—feel free to speak derisively about her, without care or caution. Since the church is a most precious *she* in the eyes of Christ, should we not be much more careful to speak about her with respect?

Identifying the church as Christ's bride also gives a dynamic purpose to the history of the church. The church of Christ is not wandering around aimlessly in the wilderness of this present misery-filled world. On the contrary, she is a bride with focus; she is a bride working toward a deadline, even if she does not know exactly when that deadline will be. Nonetheless, the bride of Christ is always getting ready for her wedding day, adorning herself with the virtue of the Spirit's fruit, which in beauty transcends even the most dazzling jewel-studded wedding gown that any bride has ever worn. As the bride of Christ, how do we fill our days? Do we work with an eye to our wedding day? Or do we stumble about, without direction, wondering what life is really all about? Understanding the doctrine of the church properly helps us maintain a focused, purposeful life.

Finally, since being church means belonging to a marriage covenant with the only-begotten Son of God, church life must not be taken carelessly or nonchalantly. Marriage is not a light or fleeting bond. It is a life-long commitment of love and loyalty. Therefore everyone in the church must take his church membership not only seriously but also joyfully. Being the bride of Christ, his very own queen, is nothing less than a royal responsibility. It is also a delight, especially when we recognize that we, like the pagan orphan girl of Ezekiel 16, were not naturally born into this privilege. Do we still see church membership as part of a heavenly marriage covenant with God's own Son? Or do we compare it to member-

ship in one of the many clubs and associations on earth—easily joining them but just as readily leaving them? God never meant marriage to be a revolving door.

In short, what is the church? You could answer that question in a number of different ways. However, one way, which captures a lot of scriptural revelation together in one compact phrase, is this: the church is the beloved, undeserving, yet richly adorned royal bride of Jesus Christ.

#### DISTINCTIONS REVISITED

In the light of what we have learned from Scripture, let us review again some of the distinctions that are commonly used in defining the church. In the first place, if the church is regarded as nothing more than an institution, something significant of her God-given dignity is lost. As we have discovered, the church is the bride of Christ. Surely a bride is not the same as an institution! She is a beloved companion (Mal 2:14), the apple of her Bridegroom's eye.

But while the bride herself is not an institution, she is involved in a God-ordained institution called marriage. This is precisely where the organism–institute distinction starts to cause problems. Sometimes, when people use this distinction, they want to say that the more institutional and organizational aspects of the church (e.g., office-bearers, church order, and ecclesiastical assemblies) are not as critical for the church as the more organic and relational aspects (e.g., helping each other as fellow believers, worshipping together, and spreading the gospel). Yet, surely, this is a false dilemma. By way of comparison, marriage is more than just the legal paperwork of a marriage certificate. It is about love and a lifelong relationship. At the same time, without the legal paperwork the marriage is not official. Young couples may be deeply in love, but they also need their marriage certificate in order to be wed. It is both-and, not either-or. Likewise, we should not force a false dilemma between organic and institutional aspects of the church. Both contribute to her beauty and well-being.

Something similar can be said about the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. Not only is the church the bride of Christ, but she is also the assembly of God's people. It is rather hard, if not futile, to speak of an invisible assembly. Isn't an assembly, by its very nature, a visible gathering of people? The church of Christ does not exist merely as an idea, or an ideal, in our minds; she gathers before the Lord regularly to worship him. In short, she is most certainly a visible church.

At the same time, it is true that there are certain aspects of the church that we cannot see with our natural eyes. The church is the assembly of true believers, as the Belgic Confession confirms in Article 27. True faith is worked in our hearts (LD 7, QA& 21), yet unlike God we cannot see inside someone else's heart (1 Kgs 8:39). We can see the fruit of true faith in someone's words and actions (Jas 2:26), but we cannot see faith itself in someone's heart. Still, we should be careful not to make dilemmas, let alone put in place divisions where the Lord does not do so. There are not two churches: one that is visible and the other that is invisible. There is *one* bride, that is, one church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Even though she may have certain inner qualities that are hidden to the natural eye, she is most certainly visible on this earth as she lives, for all to see, in delight-filled devotion to her ascended Groom, Jesus Christ.

Others speak of the militant, or suffering, church and the triumphant church. Of course, the militant church is not a violent, aggressive church. It simply refers to believers who are still here in this life, struggling valiantly against Satan and all his evil forces in the spiritual realm (Eph 6:11–12). Meanwhile, God's people who have died and been taken up into glory now rest in the triumph of life everlasting. There is truth to this distinction; however, we should also be careful not to push it too far. Scripturally speaking, the members of the church here on earth are already "more than conquerors" through Jesus Christ (Rom 8:37). Moreover, the saints in heaven are still yearning for the day of final glory. They, so to speak, soldier on in prayer beneath the heavenly altar (Rev 6:10).

Overall, these popular distinctions, though helpful in some situations, can be a hindrance at times, too. More specifically, using them often leaves people struggling on the horns of false dilemmas. Therefore, rather than multiplying distinctions, we should opt to speak of the church using biblical metaphors and images such as the bride of Christ, the assembly of God's people, the flock of rescued sheep, or the members of Christ's body. Not only do these images dissolve many unnecessary dilemmas, they also have the added advantage that most children, including Luther's seven-year-old child, can begin to understand them quite readily, and we do want our children to grow up understanding what the church is.

#### COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Before we leave this topic of the identity of the church, we should sharpen the definition of the church just a bit more by dealing with a few misconceptions. The first misconception occurs when people speak about the church as if it were a purely human association. For example, a group of lawyers may form a barristers' association, or a group of musicians might start up a musical group. Similarly, it is said, Christians start up an association that they call church. However, there is a fundamental difference. Unlike the barristers' association or the musical group, the church is started, continued, and finally completed by God, not by us. Notice that Lord's Day 21, Q&A 54, says, "*The Son of God . . . gathers, defends and preserves for himself . . . a church chosen to everlasting life.*"

The second misunderstanding involves people who try to advance the church as if it were some kind of business, or religious industry. They use marketing techniques, clever salesmanship, and efficient managerial administration to increase the profitability of the church—either by bringing in more people, or more money, or both. Simply put, marriage is not a business proposition, and the bride of Christ is not a religious industry that needs to increase her profit margins. The church is a sacred assembly where people are gathered in the knowledge of salvation in Christ and with a desire to serve each other to his glory. Yes, we should

long for, and work towards, the growth of the church. However, it is God's grace, not our marketing acumen, which gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6).

The third and final misconception considers the church to be some form of spiritual entertainment. Those who see the church in this way are eager to make people feel comfortable, happy, and at ease. Movies, songs, books, and drama productions all aim to entertain. As such, there is nothing wrong with that, provided the entertainment is wholesome. However, church is something different. To be sure, visitors should feel welcome in our churches. At the same time, let us remember that the church does not exist to put sinners at ease; she exists to call sinners to repentance. What is more, Christ did not gather his church merely to give people a hearty laugh on a Sunday. Christ entrusted his church with the ministry of reconciliation that brings spiritual rebels into the hope of everlasting life. So, when you go to church do not expect to be entertained. Rather, expect something far more miraculous than that: be prepared to be transformed into an entirely new creation (2 Cor 5:17).

*Suggested Readings: Leviticus 23:1–3; Ephesians 5:22–33*

#### QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Elaborate on the significance of the following statement: "It is not merely the existence of Christians that makes a church, but it is the assembly of Christians that constitutes the church of Christ." The following passages can guide your discussion: 1 Corinthians 12:12–26, Ephesians 2:19–22, and 1 Peter 2:4–6.
2. This chapter lists various Old Testament and New Testament passages that speak about the church as the bride of Christ. List three such passages mentioned in the lesson and elaborate on how each one changes, or sharpens, your own thinking about the church. In sum, what difference does it make to think about the church as a "she" rather than an "it"?
3. People often use the term "invisible church" to remind others that the church of Christ is bigger than our own congregation or

federation of churches. What are the pros and cons of using this term for that purpose? Is there a better way, as well as a more helpful term, to accomplish the same goal?

4. The last section of this chapter highlights how people can misconceive the church as a purely human association, a religious business, or a provider of spiritual entertainment. Explain how each one does an injustice to who the church really is, but also who Christ is, and what he has done, and is doing, for his bride.

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. When people are members of a certain church for a long time, they may well become aware of many weaknesses and shortcomings within her. At a certain point it seems as if they cannot help but speak negatively, or even derisively and cynically, about the church. If there is truth to what they are saying, how should the communion of saints handle their critical commentary? Try to think, concretely, of something that needs to be improved within your own congregation. Then discuss ways to address it, mindful of the church's identity as the bride of Christ.
2. Since the church of Christ is the assembly of true believers, what should the church do when there are believers who are prevented from assembling with other believers? For example, what should be done when work, study, or military service take members away from their church? What should happen when a serious chronic sickness keeps a believer from gathering with the church for months or even years? Should the Lord's supper be brought to someone with chronic illness? Make sure that your answers are based on biblical principles, not just on personal opinions.
3. The bride of Christ, the church, is getting ready for her wedding day. What does this mean for members of the church in their daily lives? What kind of practical "wedding arrangements" need to be made? Try to identify at least three different activities. Some Bible passages that may help are 2 Corinthians 11:1–6, Ephesians 5:25–27, and Revelation 22:17. Meditating on the lyrics of the



well-known hymn “The Church’s One Foundation” may also be beneficial.

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