

# FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

*Systematic Theology Series*

## ECCLESIOLOGY

*The Doctrine of the Church*

*One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All*

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### UNIT 2: THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

*What the Church Is Before It Considers What the Church Does*

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#### Lesson 4

## THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CHURCH

*The Distinction That Keeps Ecclesiology Honest*

*God sees the church as she truly is; we see her as she appears and wisdom lies in never confusing the two views.*

*“Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal:*

*“The Lord knows those who are His.”*

*2 Timothy 2:19, NASB 1995*

*Key Texts: Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43; 1 John 2:19; 2 Timothy 2:19; Romans 9:6; Revelation 2–3*

*“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”*

**1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995**

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## Introduction

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Every pastor who has shepherded a congregation for more than a few years has encountered the same disquieting phenomenon: a man who served faithfully, gave generously, and spoke convincingly of his faith in Christ for years — and who, in the end, revealed by his departure or his conduct that something essential had always been missing. John names the phenomenon with pastoral directness in 1 John 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.” The visible church has always contained people who appear to belong to the community of the redeemed but who do not, in the final reckoning, genuinely do so. This is not a pastoral failure; it is a theological reality inscribed into the nature of the church in this present age. And it demands a distinction that has been one of the most clarifying and most contested concepts in the entire history of ecclesiology: the distinction between the visible and the invisible church.

This distinction is not a counsel of cynicism. It does not license the pastor to view his congregation with suspicion or to treat every profession of faith as probably fraudulent. It does not provide the discouraged church member with an excuse to abandon the gathered assembly in favor of a purely internal and private spirituality, reasoning that since the visible church is imperfect, the true church must be sought elsewhere. What the distinction does is this: it preserves simultaneously the church’s integrity and her humility. It preserves her integrity by insisting that the church in her true nature consists entirely of those who genuinely know and are known by God. It preserves her humility by insisting that the church in her present, visible expression is an imperfect approximation of that true nature, prone to the same human failures that mar every institution in a fallen world.

Lesson 3 established what the church is: the called-out assembly of God’s redeemed people, defined by her relationship to the triune God and illuminated by the four great images of body, bride, temple, and flock. This lesson presses into the complexity that arises when that theological definition meets the empirical reality of actual congregations. The church as God sees her, the totality of all the genuinely elect, from Abel to the last saint who will enter glory before the Lord returns, is a community of absolute spiritual purity, known infallibly to God alone. The church as she appears in the world, the congregations that gather each Lord’s Day under the ministry of Word and ordinance, is a community that always contains some whose profession is not matched by regeneration. Holding both of these realities together, without collapsing one into the other, is the task of a theologically honest and pastorally wise ecclesiology.

The lesson moves through seven interconnected arguments: the biblical foundations of both the invisible and visible church; the wheat-and-tares parable as Christ’s own teaching on the mixed nature of the visible assembly; Augustine’s foundational contribution and its proper limits; the Reformed Baptist insistence that the visibility-invisibility distinction does not relieve the church of the obligation to pursue regenerate membership; the letters to the seven churches in Revelation as a case study in how Christ Himself addresses the visible church with both commendation and correction; and the twin dangers that have always threatened to undermine this distinction from opposite directions, perfectionism on one side and nominalism on the other. The governing conviction throughout is Paul’s great seal in 2 Timothy 2:19: “The Lord knows those who are His”, a word that is simultaneously a comfort, a corrective, and a call to holiness.

## I. THE INVISIBLE CHURCH

*The Church as God Sees Her, The Totality of the Elect*

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### A. Defining the Invisible Church

The term “invisible church” requires careful definition, because it is easily misunderstood. The invisible church is not a Platonic ideal that exists only in the realm of pure thought, of which visible congregations are merely imperfect shadows. It is not a kind of spiritual fellowship that floats free of any institutional expression, accessible to anyone who considers himself spiritual regardless of his relationship to the gathered assembly. The invisible church is the totality of all the elect of God, all those whom the Father has chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), whom the Son has purchased with His blood (Acts 20:28), and whom the Spirit has regenerated, called, justified, and is presently sanctifying (Romans 8:29–30). She is “invisible” not because she is less real than the visible church, but because she is known with certainty only to God Himself.

The 1689 Confession captures this definition precisely in Chapter 26.1: “The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.” Three temporal dimensions are explicitly included: the elect who have been gathered (the saints of past ages, now with Christ in glory), who are being gathered (the saints of the present age, still on the earth in the midst of their sanctification), and who shall be gathered (the saints of future ages, not yet born or regenerated). The invisible church is the church across all ages, the complete company of the redeemed, the bride in her entirety, the body of Christ in its full eschatological extent.

The biblical grounding of the invisible church concept is most concentrated in Romans 9:6, where Paul addresses the apparent failure of God’s word to Israel: “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.” There is, within the visible covenant community of ethnic Israel, a smaller community of genuine elect: the Israel within Israel, those who have not merely the external covenant sign but the inward reality of regeneration and faith. Paul’s argument is that God’s word has not failed, because God’s elective purposes were never coextensive with the visible community of circumcision. The same principle carries directly into the new covenant age: not all who are in the visible church are genuinely in the church. There is an “ecclesia within the ecclesia”, the truly regenerate within the larger body of the professing. God knows infallibly who belongs to the former; the church in her visible expression can only approximate it.

### B. The Theological Grounding of the Invisible Church

The invisible church concept is not a theological convenience invented to explain away pastoral failure. It is the ecclesiological consequence of a rigorous doctrine of election and regeneration. If election is sovereign and unconditional, if God chose His people in Christ before the foundation of the world, not on the basis of foreseen faith but according to the good pleasure of His will (Ephesians 1:4–6), then the community of the genuinely elect is defined entirely by divine choice, not by human profession. The visible church, being constituted by human profession, will always imperfectly correspond to the community defined by divine choice. Some who profess will not be genuinely elect; some who are genuinely elect may not yet have professed (they are the “shall be gathered”

of the confession's formulation). The gap between divine choice and human profession is precisely the gap between the invisible and the visible church.

The doctrine of regeneration reinforces this. If regeneration is a sovereign act of the Spirit, the Spirit blowing where He wills (John 3:8), quickening those who were dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1–5), imparting a new heart and a new spirit that no human effort can manufacture (Ezekiel 36:26–27), then the presence or absence of genuine regeneration in a given individual is ultimately a matter that God alone knows with certainty. The church can and must examine professions of faith, observe patterns of life, administer baptism to those who give credible evidence of regeneration, and exercise discipline when that evidence is contradicted by persistent ungodliness. But the church cannot peer into the heart with divine omniscience and make the infallible judgment that God alone can make. “The Lord knows those who are His” (2 Timothy 2:19): that seal is God's, not the church's.

Second Timothy 2:19 is the key text for the invisible church concept, and it deserves careful attention. “Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.’” Paul writes in the context of the defections of Hymenaeus and Philetus, false teachers who had departed from the truth and were upsetting the faith of some. The “firm foundation of God” that stands unmoved by their departure is, in context, God's elective purpose. The false teachers may have appeared to be part of the community of the redeemed, but their departure reveals that they were not. God knew all along. The seal on the foundation, the guarantee of its stability, is precisely this: that the true company of the elect is defined and secured by God's sovereign knowledge and choice, not by any human profession or institutional affiliation. The defection of apparent believers does not threaten the church's foundation; it reveals what was always true from God's perspective.

## II. THE VISIBLE CHURCH

### *The Church as She Appears, The Professing Assembly*

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#### **A.** *Defining the Visible Church*

The visible church is the local assembly of professing believers who gather for worship, the ministry of the Word, the ordinances, and mutual edification, the church as she appears and is known in the world. Where the invisible church is defined entirely by divine election and regeneration, the visible church is defined by human profession and covenant membership. She is visible in the most literal sense: her gatherings are observable, her membership is a known community, her ordinances are publicly administered, her preaching is heard, and her discipline is exercised in the sight of the congregation. She is the church that has an address, a calendar, a membership roll, and elders who are known by name.

The 1689 Confession defines the visible church in Chapter 26.2: “All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according to it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.” Two features of this definition are worth noting. First, the basis for visible church membership is profession: the visible church consists of those who profess the faith of the gospel. Second, the standard for that profession is not mere intellectual assent but a credible profession: one that

has not been “destroyed” by foundational heresy or by a life of persistent, unrepentant ungodliness. The visible church is not simply anyone who has ever said the Sinner’s Prayer; she is the community of those whose profession of faith is credible, examined, affirmed, and not publicly contradicted by a pattern of life that denies what the lips confess.

It is important to note that the visible church is not a second-best or diminished form of the true church. She is the church in her historically concrete, covenantally accountable, ordinance-administering expression, and as such she is precisely the church that the New Testament addresses, instructs, and commands. When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he is writing to the visible church at Corinth: a community that includes some who are genuinely regenerate and some who, as subsequent events may reveal, are not; a community that is nonetheless addressed as “the church of God which is at Corinth” and as “those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling” (1 Corinthians 1:2). The visible church is the church as she lives and moves in the world, and she is the context in which the entire pastoral project of the New Testament epistles unfolds.

### ***B. The Mixed Nature of the Visible Assembly***

The defining characteristic of the visible church that distinguishes her from the invisible church is her mixed nature. The visible church always contains, alongside genuinely regenerate members, some whose profession of faith is not matched by genuine regeneration. This is not an accidental feature of the visible church; it is a structural reality of the present age that Christ Himself taught and that the apostles explicitly acknowledged. John’s statement in 1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us”, is a retrospective recognition of this reality: there were people in the community of faith who appeared to belong but who, by their departure, revealed that they never had. The visible church, in her present form, does not consist only of the genuinely elect; she consists of the genuinely elect together with those who have made a credible profession without possessing the genuine article.

This mixed nature is not a failure of the visible church’s discernment; it is an inevitable consequence of the limits of human knowledge in the face of the hiddenness of the heart. The church can examine the outward marks of a credible profession, a testimony that reflects genuine understanding of the gospel, a pattern of life that is broadly consistent with what regeneration produces, a willingness to submit to the covenant community and its accountability, but she cannot see the heart with divine omniscience. Her examination is necessarily imperfect, and her judgments are necessarily provisional. What looks like genuine faith to the most careful and discerning eldership may be revealed, over time and by the pressure of trial, to have been something less. The church receives those whose profession is credible; God receives only those whose profession is genuine.

Paul’s language in Romans 9:6 is the theological key: “they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.” The principle holds for the new covenant community as surely as it held for the old. The church’s external membership, those on the roll, those who have been baptized, those who take the Lord’s Supper, does not perfectly coincide with the invisible church’s membership. There are people in the pew who are, in Paul’s terms, “not really of us” (1 John 2:19). This should produce in the pastor neither cynicism nor paranoia, but a settled, realistic pastoral wisdom, the wisdom of the sower who scatters the seed and trusts the Lord of the harvest to determine what springs up and what does not (Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23), and of the shepherd who tends the flock faithfully, knowing that the final gathering of the true sheep belongs to the Chief Shepherd alone.

### III. THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

#### *Christ's Own Teaching on the Mixed Church*

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#### **A.** *The Parable and Its Meaning*

No passage in the Gospels addresses the mixed nature of the visible church more directly than the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24–30, with its interpretation provided by the Lord Himself in verses 36–43. “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also.” The parable is transparently an allegory: the sower is the Son of Man, the field is the world, the good seed is the sons of the kingdom, the tares are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil (Matthew 13:37–39). The harvest at the end of the age is the final judgment, at which the angels will separate the wheat from the tares, gathering the latter for destruction and the former for the glory of the Father’s kingdom.

The pastoral instruction embedded in the parable is as important as its eschatological content. When the servants see the tares growing among the wheat, they ask the householder: “Do you want us to go and gather them up?” The householder’s answer is decisive: “No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.’” The restraint the householder enjoins is not indifference to the tares’ presence; it is wisdom about the limits of human discernment in the present age. The rooting out of the tares is not the servants’ task; it is the reapers’ task, and the reapers are angels, not elders. The final separation of true from false within the visible church belongs to the eschatological judgment, not to the congregation’s disciplinary process.

The interpretation of this parable has been a site of genuine controversy in the history of ecclesiology, and the controversy bears directly on the visible-invisible distinction. Some interpreters, particularly in the Anabaptist and Separatist traditions, have read the parable as addressed primarily to the world rather than to the church, arguing that the field is the world (as Jesus explicitly says in verse 38), not the local congregation. On this reading, the parable teaches that wheat and tares will coexist in the world, but says nothing about the inevitable mixture of genuine and false believers within the visible church itself. The Baptist tradition, which holds the parable to teach something about the visible church’s mixed character in this age, must acknowledge this exegetical complexity honestly. What the parable unambiguously teaches, regardless of the precise referent of “the field,” is that the final and infallible separation of the genuine from the counterfeit belongs to God at the judgment, and that human attempts to achieve that separation prematurely, with the certainty and thoroughness that only God possesses, will do more damage than the original problem.

#### **B.** *What the Parable Does and Does Not Teach*

The wheat-and-tares parable is frequently invoked as a reason why the church should not practice church discipline or pursue the ideal of regenerate membership, the argument being that since Jesus commanded the servants not to pull up the tares, any attempt to remove false professors from the visible church is illegitimate. This reading is exegetically untenable. The parable’s injunction against premature separation is addressed to the

attempt to achieve the final, comprehensive, infallible separation that belongs to the eschatological judgment. It is not addressed to the church's ordinary pastoral responsibility to maintain the integrity of its membership through discipline. Matthew 18:15–20, Jesus' own instruction on church discipline, given in the same Gospel as the tares parable, makes clear that the church does have the authority and the obligation to remove from membership those who have made a public profession of faith and then publicly and persistently denied it by their conduct. The tares parable and the church discipline passage are not in tension; they address different aspects of the same reality.

What the tares parable does teach is a set of crucial pastoral dispositions. First, humility: the church should not act as though her discernment of who is genuinely regenerate is infallible. Her membership processes and discipline procedures are approximate, not perfect. Second, patience: the church should not be in panic when false professors are discovered within her ranks. This is the normal condition of the visible church in the present age; it is what Jesus explicitly taught His disciples to expect. Third, restraint: the church should not attempt the kind of root-and-branch purification of her membership that only the eschatological judgment can accomplish. The attempt to produce a perfectly pure visible church by removing everyone whose sincerity is in question will, as the parable warns, uproot wheat along with the tares. Fourth, confidence: the outcome of the harvest belongs to the Lord. The visible church's mixed nature is not the last word. At the consummation, the sorting will be done perfectly, by the Lord who cannot be deceived, and the wheat will be gathered into the Father's barn. The pastor who holds these four dispositions will shepherd his congregation through the inevitable pastoral complexities of the mixed assembly with both realism and hope.

The tares parable also has an important word for the individual believer who is troubled by the apparent hypocrisy or superficiality of others in the congregation. The temptation, when one sees what appears to be tares growing alongside the wheat, is either to assume the worst about the whole field or to withdraw from it in disgust. Both responses misread the parable. The parable does not encourage cynicism about the entire visible church; it teaches realistic patience with her inevitable imperfection. And it does not encourage separation from the visible community; it explicitly teaches that the servants are to "allow both to grow together." The believer who withdraws from the visible church because it contains hypocrites has drawn exactly the opposite conclusion from the parable that Jesus intended. The response to tares in the field is not to leave the field; it is to continue growing as wheat, trusting the Lord of the harvest to accomplish in His own time what no human process can fully achieve.

## **IV. AUGUSTINE AND THE CORPUS PERMIXTUM**

### *The Mixed Body and the Limits of Visible Purity*

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#### **A. Augustine's Contribution**

The theological vocabulary for the visible-invisible distinction was largely fixed by Augustine of Hippo in the context of the Donatist controversy, which we examined in Lesson 2. Augustine's term *corpus permixtum*, "mixed body", became the standard designation for the visible church as a community containing both genuine believers and false professors, wheat and tares, intermingled until the final judgment. Against the Donatists' insistence that the true church must be constituted only by the morally pure, Augustine argued that the visible church in this age

is necessarily a mixed body, and that the attempt to constitute a perfectly pure visible church by excluding all the impure is both theologically mistaken and practically disastrous.

Augustine's argument rested on a careful reading of several key texts. The wheat-and-tares parable was central, as was the parable of the dragnet (Matthew 13:47–50), in which fish of every kind are gathered into the net and the separation of good from bad is reserved for “the end of the age.” He also drew on the example of the apostolic communities themselves: did not Judas walk with the disciples for three years? Did not the Corinthian church contain those who were abusing the Lord's Supper in ways that brought judgment upon themselves (1 Corinthians 11:29–30)? Was not the apostolic letter to the seven churches in Revelation addressed to communities that contained both genuine and counterfeit believers? The pattern of the apostolic church itself confirms that the visible church has always been a mixed body, and that the Donatists' dream of a perfectly pure visible community was a dream that the New Testament itself does not authorize.

Beyond the exegetical arguments, Augustine saw clearly that the Donatist program of visible church purity carried within it the seeds of an endless and ultimately destructive fragmentation. Who decides who is pure enough to belong to the true church? By what standard is the necessary moral purity measured? If the validity of the sacraments depends on the moral purity of the minister, how can any minister, knowing his own sins, administer them with confidence? The Donatist logic, consistently applied, produces not a pure church but a church progressively reduced to smaller and smaller circles of those who are confident of their own purity, a church constituted not by grace but by the self-assessment of the morally accomplished. Augustine's rebuttal was pastoral as well as exegetical: the church is held together not by the purity of her members but by the grace of God, who can work through imperfect instruments and who has not conditioned the validity of His means of grace on the unblemished character of those who administer them.

### ***B. The Proper Limits of Augustine's Corrective***

Augustine's corpus permixtum doctrine was a necessary and largely faithful corrective to Donatist perfectionism, and it has served the church well as a check against every subsequent form of the same error. But as we noted in Lesson 2, it must be held within proper limits, and the Baptist tradition insists on those limits with particular clarity. The recognition that the visible church is inevitably a mixed body is a description of what the church in this age always is; it is not a prescription for what the church should aim to produce. The corpus permixtum is not the church's goal; it is the church's realistic expectation. The church that uses the wheat-and-tares reality as a reason to abandon the pursuit of regenerate membership has turned a descriptive doctrine into a prescriptive policy, and in doing so has evacuated the church's discipline, her membership practices, and her covenantal integrity of any serious meaning.

The proper limits of Augustine's corrective can be stated precisely. He was right that the visible church will always contain some false professors, and that the church should not be in a state of constant panic or schism over this reality. He was right that the final, infallible separation of genuine from counterfeit belongs to the eschatological judgment, not to any human process. He was right that the validity of the sacraments and the ministry of the Word does not depend on the personal moral perfection of those who administer them. But he was wrong, or at least incomplete, if his doctrine is taken to mean that the visible church need not pursue a regenerate membership as vigorously as possible, or that the presence of tares in the field relieves the elders of their responsibility to exercise church discipline when a member's conduct publicly and persistently contradicts his profession. Augustine's corrective protects the church from perfectionism; it does not protect the church from its opposite

error, which is nominalism, and it is the latter error, not the former, that poses the greatest threat to the contemporary evangelical church.

The Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1689 Confession both acknowledge the corpus permixtum reality while insisting on the church's obligation to maintain the integrity of her visible membership. The 1689 Confession's insistence on regenerate church membership, believers' baptism, and church discipline is not a return to Donatism; it is the positive Baptist program for making the visible church approximate the invisible church as closely as the limits of human discernment will allow. The goal is not a perfectly pure visible church, that would be Donatism. The goal is a visibly credible visible church: a congregation whose membership, examined with reasonable care and maintained with faithful discipline, consists as nearly as possible of those who are genuinely the Lord's. The gap between visible and invisible will never close entirely in this age; but it should be as narrow as faithful ecclesiology can make it.

## V. THE REFORMED BAPTIST EMPHASIS

### *Approximating the Invisible Through Regenerate Membership and Discipline*

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#### **A.** *The Baptist Program for Visible Church Integrity*

The Reformed Baptist tradition's response to the visible-invisible distinction is neither Donatist perfectionism nor Augustinian quietism. It is a deliberate, theologically grounded program for making the visible church as faithful an approximation of the invisible church as the limits of human discernment allow. Three institutional instruments constitute this program: regenerate church membership, believers' baptism by immersion as the sign of new covenant entry, and church discipline as the mechanism for maintaining the membership's credibility over time. Each of these instruments is derived from the same theological conviction: that the new covenant, unlike the old, is a covenant in which all the members truly know the Lord from the least to the greatest (Jeremiah 31:34), and that the visible church should be constituted and maintained in a manner that reflects that new covenant reality as faithfully as possible.

Regenerate church membership is the conviction that the formal, covenantal membership of the local church should consist only of those who give credible evidence of genuine regeneration and saving faith. This does not mean that the church claims to know with certainty who is and who is not genuinely regenerate; it means that the church exercises responsible discernment in receiving members and responsible oversight in maintaining the integrity of her membership roll. The practice of receiving members through an examination of their testimony, their understanding of the gospel, and their willingness to submit to the covenant accountability of the body is an expression of the church's covenantal responsibility, the recognition that church membership is not a social formality but a covenant commitment that carries real theological weight.

The connection between regenerate membership and believers' baptism is direct and indissoluble. Baptism, in the Baptist understanding, is not the sign that initiates a person into the covenant community in order that they might eventually come to faith; it is the sign that publicly declares a personal faith already received, the ordinance that marks the transition from the old life to the new (Romans 6:3–4), and the outward seal of the new covenant relationship into which the Spirit has already introduced the believer. To administer baptism to an infant, who cannot yet make any profession of faith, is, in the Baptist reading, to administer the sign of the new covenant to

someone who does not yet bear the reality to which the sign points. It is to build a visible church on a basis that cannot approximate the invisible church, because it includes by design people who may or may not ever be regenerate. Believers' baptism is thus not merely a matter of the mode or the timing of baptism; it is a direct expression of the Baptist ecclesiology of regenerate membership.

### ***B. Church Discipline as the Maintenance of Visible Integrity***

Church discipline is the third instrument through which the Baptist tradition pursues visible church integrity, and it is perhaps the most neglected in contemporary practice. The theology of church discipline rests on the recognition that the visible church's integrity is not merely established at the point of membership reception but maintained over time through the covenant accountability of the body. A member whose conduct publicly and persistently contradicts his profession of faith has not merely committed a private sin; he has publicly undermined the credibility of the church's testimony and the integrity of the covenant community's witness. The church's responsibility in this situation is not to look the other way in the name of grace but to pursue the erring member through the process that Jesus Himself prescribed in Matthew 18:15–20: private address, then address with witnesses, then address before the congregation, and finally, if the member remains unrepentant, exclusion from the covenant community.

The pastoral purposes of church discipline are multiple and must be clearly distinguished. First, the primary goal is always the restoration of the erring member: "If he listens to you, you have won your brother" (Matthew 18:15). Discipline is an act of love directed at the wandering sheep, not a punitive act directed at an enemy of the community. Second, discipline is an act of corporate integrity: the community that tolerates persistent, public, unrepentant sin in its membership is implicitly declaring that the distinction between the church's life and the world's life does not matter, and that the covenant commitment of membership carries no real accountability. Third, discipline is an act of pastoral realism about the mixed nature of the visible church: when a person's conduct persistently and publicly denies what his profession affirms, the honest and loving response is to acknowledge that the profession may not be genuine, that what appeared to be wheat may be tares. The exclusion from membership is not a judgment of damnation; it is a pastoral recognition that the person's present condition does not correspond to the covenant identity he has claimed.

The consistent practice of biblical church discipline is, in the Reformed Baptist tradition, one of the most significant ways in which the visible church pursues the integrity that the invisible church already possesses by definition. It will never close the gap entirely; the church's discernment will sometimes receive false professors whom discipline later reveals, and it will sometimes discipline genuine believers whose sin has become publicly scandalous. But the faithful practice of discipline over time produces a community whose visible character is a more credible representation of the new covenant community, a community in which the distinction between membership and the world is real and not merely nominal. The visible church that practices discipline is a visible church that takes seriously the promise of 2 Timothy 2:19: that the firm foundation of God stands, and that everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.

## VI. THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

### *Christ's Address to the Visible Church in Revelation 2–3*

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#### **A.** *Christ Addressing the Visible Church with Precision*

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 constitute one of the most instructive New Testament case studies in the doctrine of the visible church, and they are particularly illuminating for the visible-invisible distinction. These letters are addressed to seven real, historical, visible congregations in Asia Minor, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Each letter is addressed by the risen Christ Himself, speaking in His role as the one who walks among the lampstands (Revelation 1:12–13, 20) and who therefore knows each congregation with an intimacy and precision that no human observer can match. Together, the letters demonstrate that Christ addresses the visible church, as she actually is, in her mixed and imperfect condition, with commands, warnings, commendations, and promises.

What is striking about the letters is the specificity of Christ's knowledge of each congregation. He commends Ephesus for her doctrinal vigilance and her rejection of false apostles, but charges her with having abandoned her first love (Revelation 2:2–4). He commends Smyrna for her faithfulness in the face of poverty and persecution, and warns her of coming tribulation while promising the crown of life (Revelation 2:9–10). He charges Pergamum with tolerating those who hold the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:14–15). He praises what is genuine in Thyatira and Sardis while confronting what is corrupt: Thyatira tolerates “the woman Jezebel” (Revelation 2:20), and Sardis has “a name that it is alive, but is dead”, with only “a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments” (Revelation 3:1, 4). He commends Philadelphia without qualification. He threatens Laodicea with the terrifying warning that He will spit them out of His mouth (Revelation 3:16).

The theological significance of these letters for the visible-invisible distinction is considerable. They demonstrate that Christ takes the visible church with absolute seriousness as the community He addresses, evaluates, commends, and threatens. He does not say to Sardis: “Your membership roll is not really important; what matters is the invisible church which I alone know.” He says: “I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.” The visible church's condition is a matter of direct concern to the risen Lord. He sees the gap between her visible profession and her invisible reality, and He is not indifferent to it. He is jealous for the visible church's integrity precisely because He is the Lord who knows those who are His (2 Timothy 2:19), and He will not be content with a visible community whose outward profession is a poor reflection of the invisible reality.

#### **B.** *What the Letters Teach About Visible Church Accountability*

The letters to the seven churches press upon the contemporary church several lessons of permanent pastoral importance. The first is that the risen Christ is present and active in the midst of His visible churches, walking among the lampstands, observing with perfect knowledge what no human elder or congregant can fully see. The church exists under divine scrutiny at all times, not a punitive scrutiny that looks for fault but a jealous, pastoral scrutiny that calls her to be what she is called to be. The elder who leads a congregation under this awareness will shepherd with both freedom and sobriety: freedom, because the Head of the church is ultimately responsible for her growth and preservation; sobriety, because the same Head will hold the undershepherd accountable for the quality of his stewardship.

The second lesson is that the visible church's condition admits of meaningful moral and spiritual differentiation, some congregations are more faithful than others, some are doctrinally sound but loveless, some are loving but doctrinally careless, some have a name to be alive but are spiritually dead. This differentiation is not merely sociological; it is a matter of genuine spiritual health or sickness that Christ Himself diagnoses and addresses. The visible church is not merely a neutral container within which the invisible church is randomly distributed; she is a community whose visible condition reflects, more or less accurately, the spiritual vitality of her members and the faithfulness of her leadership.

The third lesson, and perhaps the most sobering for the contemporary church, is the letter to Laodicea. Laodicea is not a persecuted church or a doctrinally corrupt church; she is a self-satisfied church, a congregation that describes herself as rich and in need of nothing, but which Christ diagnoses as "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). The Laodicean pathology is not heresy or immorality; it is a comfortable, self-congratulatory religious mediocrity that has lost its sense of absolute dependence on Christ. The lukewarmness that prompts Christ's threat to spit the congregation from His mouth is the tepid religiosity of a community that has mistaken material prosperity and institutional stability for genuine spiritual vitality. The letter to Laodicea is a perpetual warning to every comfortable, well-resourced, culturally respectable evangelical congregation in the Western world: the visible church's outward success is no guarantee of her inward health, and Christ is not impressed by what impresses men.

## VII. THE TWIN DANGERS

### *Perfectionism and Nominalism, The Errors on Either Side*

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#### **A.** *The Danger of Perfectionism*

The visible-invisible distinction is threatened from two opposite directions, and a theologically honest ecclesiology must guard against both with equal vigilance. The first danger is perfectionism: the attempt to treat the visible church as though she were or could be made identical to the invisible church in the present age. This is the error of the Donatists, of the more radical Anabaptists, and of every separatist movement that has sought to constitute a fellowship of the genuinely pure by separating from all who fail to meet the community's standard of visible holiness. The perfectionist impulse is not without a genuine motivation: it is driven by a proper desire for the church's holiness and a proper revulsion at the gap between the church's visible profession and the new covenant's demands. But it errs in several critical ways.

First, perfectionism misreads the tares parable, taking the presence of tares as an emergency requiring immediate action rather than a reality requiring patient wisdom. Second, it overestimates the church's capacity for discernment: the invisible church is known infallibly to God alone, and any human attempt to reproduce that infallible knowledge in the visible church will produce either self-deception (the community convincing itself that it has achieved a purity it has not) or an ever-narrowing circle of mutual suspicion (as each member becomes subject to the community's scrutiny). Third, perfectionism tends to locate the church's holiness in the moral achievement of its members rather than in the grace of God that both imputes righteousness to the ungodly and progressively sanctifies them. The church's holiness is first a positional reality, she is holy because she is in Christ,

and only secondarily a progressive reality, worked out through the ongoing ministry of the Spirit. Perfectionism confuses these and demands a progressive holiness that exceeds what the present age can deliver.

The contemporary expressions of perfectionism are rarely as theologically sophisticated as the Donatists' sacramental argument, but they are no less damaging. The elder who refuses to receive any candidate for membership whose testimony is not sufficiently detailed or emotionally intense is operating in the perfectionist register. The congregation that divides over secondary matters of doctrine or practice, each faction convinced that it alone represents the genuinely faithful remnant, is exhibiting the perfectionist pathology. The believer who leaves congregation after congregation because none of them is pure enough to merit his commitment is applying the perfectionist logic to his own ecclesial life. In each case, the pursuit of an impossible visible purity produces not holiness but fragmentation, pride, and the loneliness of those who have concluded that no visible church in the world is worthy of their covenantal loyalty.

### **B. The Danger of Nominalism**

The opposite and far more common danger in the contemporary Western church is nominalism: the use of the visible-invisible distinction as a reason for indifference to the visible church's integrity. The nominalist reasoning runs something like this: since the visible church always contains tares alongside the wheat, and since only God knows infallibly who is genuinely His, there is no point in maintaining rigorous membership standards, practicing church discipline, or expecting the visible church's life to look meaningfully different from the surrounding culture. The visible church is inevitably impure; we should simply accept that reality and get on with the ministry. This reasoning has the appearance of humility, it acknowledges human limitations and refuses to play God, but it is actually a form of ecclesiological laziness that abandons the church's covenantal responsibility in the name of a misread theological realism.

Nominalism's damage to the visible church is profound and well-documented in the history of Protestant Christianity. Churches that abandoned regenerate membership standards in the name of inclusivity have, over time, produced congregations in which the line between the church and the world has become undetectable. Churches that ceased to practice discipline in the name of grace have produced communities in which persistent, public, unrepentant sin is tolerated indefinitely, and in which the church's moral witness to the surrounding culture has been evacuated of any credible content. Churches that treated the Lord's Supper as an open table for anyone who happened to be present, regardless of their profession or their conduct, have over time produced a sacramental practice that has lost its covenant meaning entirely. In each case, the nominalist reading of the visible-invisible distinction, "since we can't know who is truly saved, we should not attempt to maintain any meaningful standard of visible church membership", has produced exactly the result that a more faithful ecclesiology would have predicted.

The antidote to both perfectionism and nominalism is precisely the balance that the visible-invisible distinction, properly understood, preserves. The invisible church reminds us that God alone knows infallibly who is genuinely His, which means the church should be humble about her discernment, patient with the inevitable imperfections of the visible assembly, and neither shocked by nor obsessed with the presence of false professors in her midst. The visible church reminds us that the church in her historically concrete form is a community with real responsibilities, to examine professions, to receive members carefully, to administer the ordinances to those who are credibly in the covenant, to exercise discipline when the covenant is publicly violated, and to maintain a visible community whose character reflects, as credibly as possible, the new covenant reality that the invisible church

already embodies perfectly. The firm foundation of God stands. The Lord knows those who are His. And everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness. Both parts of Paul's seal in 2 Timothy 2:19 belong together, and the church that holds them both in tension will navigate between the twin dangers with the wisdom that only a well-taught and Spirit-formed community can exercise.

*"Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.""*

**2 Timothy 2:19, NASB 1995**

## Theological Terms and Definitions

|                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Invisible Church</b>             | The totality of all the elect of God across all times and places, those who have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the Head. Defined entirely by divine election and regeneration; known with certainty only to God Himself. Not an abstract ideal but the church in her true, eschatological completeness.                                                                                           |
| <b>Visible Church</b>               | The local assembly of professing believers gathered for worship, the ministry of the Word, the ordinances, and mutual edification, the church as she appears and is known in the world. Defined by credible human profession and covenant membership. Necessarily contains a mixture of genuinely regenerate believers and false professors in the present age.                                                           |
| <b>Corpus Permixture</b>            | Latin for “mixed body.” Augustine’s term for the visible church as an inevitable mixture of wheat and tares, genuine believers and false professors intermingled until the final eschatological judgment separates them. A description of the visible church’s present condition, not a prescription for ecclesial policy.                                                                                                |
| <b>Perfectionism</b>                | As an ecclesiological error: the attempt to make the visible church coextensive with the invisible by maintaining a perfectly pure membership in the present age. Associated with the Donatists and radical Anabaptists. Errs by overestimating human discernment, misreading the tares parable, and locating the church’s holiness in moral achievement rather than divine grace.                                        |
| <b>Nominalism</b>                   | As an ecclesiological error: the use of the visible-invisible distinction as license for indifference to the visible church’s membership integrity, discipline, and covenantal character. The error of treating the inevitable mixture of wheat and tares as a reason not to pursue regenerate membership or practice church discipline. The besetting error of contemporary evangelical ecclesiology.                    |
| <b>Regenerate Church Membership</b> | The Baptist conviction that formal membership in the local church should consist only of those who give credible evidence of genuine regeneration and saving faith. Grounded in the new covenant promise that all members shall know the Lord (Jeremiah 31:34). The primary institutional instrument for making the visible church approximate the invisible.                                                             |
| <b>Church Discipline</b>            | The process by which the church addresses public, persistent, unrepentant sin in a member’s life, as prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18:15–20. Aims primarily at restoration, secondarily at congregational integrity, and thirdly at honest pastoral recognition that unrepentant conduct contradicts a credible profession of faith. An instrument for maintaining the visible church’s covenantal integrity over time. |
| <b>The Seven Churches</b>           | The seven literal, historical local congregations in Asia Minor addressed by the risen Christ in Revelation 2–3: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Together they constitute a case study in the visible church’s mixed and differentiated condition, each congregation addressed with precision, commendation, and warning by the one who walks among the lampstands.              |
| <b>Laodicean Pathology</b>          | The condition described by Christ in His letter to Laodicea (Revelation 3:14–22): self-satisfied, spiritually lukewarm religiosity that mistakes material prosperity and institutional stability for genuine vitality. Christ’s threat to “spit out” the lukewarm congregation is the New Testament’s sharpest warning against comfortable, self-congratulatory ecclesiastical mediocrity.                                |
| <b>Credible Profession</b>          | A public declaration of faith in Christ that is accompanied by a consistent pattern of life, a credible understanding of the gospel, and a willingness to submit to the covenant community’s accountability. The standard on which the visible church bases membership decisions. Not infallible, but the church’s responsible approximation of the invisible church’s membership.                                        |

## Practical Application

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### **A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?**

We must believe that the visible-invisible distinction is not a counsel of cynicism but a gift of theological honesty. The recognition that the visible church always contains some whose profession is not matched by genuine regeneration is not a reason for despair about the church or for withdrawal from her. It is a reason for realistic, patient, humble pastoral wisdom, the wisdom of those who know that the Lord knows His own, and who labor faithfully within the limits of human discernment, trusting the eschatological harvest to sort out what no human process can perfectly achieve in this age.

We must believe that the Baptist program of regenerate membership, believers' baptism, and church discipline is not a form of Donatist perfectionism but a responsible and biblically grounded effort to make the visible church as faithful an approximation of the invisible church as the present age allows. These are not instruments for producing a perfectly pure visible church; they are instruments for maintaining a visibly credible church, a congregation whose membership, examined with care and maintained with discipline, represents as honestly as possible the community of those who genuinely know the Lord.

We must believe that both sides of Paul's seal in 2 Timothy 2:19 belong together and must be held in tension. "The Lord knows those who are His" is a comfort and a corrective: a comfort to the believer who is troubled by the presence of false professors in the congregation, and a corrective to every human claim to possess God's infallible knowledge of who is genuinely regenerate. "Every one who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness" is a demand and a standard: the demand placed on every member of the visible church to live in a manner consistent with the covenant identity they have publicly claimed.

### **B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?**

We should feel a settled peace about the visible church's imperfection that is grounded not in indifference but in theological understanding. The discovery that the congregation contains people whose profession is imperfect, inconsistent, or perhaps even fraudulent is not a crisis; it is the normal condition of the visible church in every age. Christ taught His disciples to expect tares in the field. The pastor who has internalized this expects it, grieves over it appropriately, addresses it pastorally, and does not allow it to produce either despair about the church's mission or cynicism about her members.

We should feel a deep desire for the visible church's integrity, not the driven perfectionism that will never be satisfied with anything short of a congregation consisting only of those whose regeneration is beyond doubt, but the covenantal seriousness that takes membership, baptism, discipline, and the Lord's Supper as genuine means of grace that must be administered with care and received with reverence. The congregation that desires this integrity will be a congregation that supports its elders in the difficult work of discipline, that takes membership reception seriously, and that understands covenantal accountability as an expression of love rather than a mechanism of control.

We should feel the weight of Christ's own assessment of visible churches as expressed in Revelation 2–3, and allow that weight to produce honest self-examination. Which of the seven letters speaks most directly to this congregation? Are we Ephesian in our doctrinal vigilance but Ephesian also in our abandoned first love? Are we Sardian in our reputation but hollow in our spiritual vitality? Are we Laodicean in our comfort and self-satisfaction?

The risen Christ who walked among the lampstands of Asia Minor walks among ours as well. His word to us is the same: “I know your deeds.” That word should produce not terror but honest, prayerful, courageous self-examination followed by repentance and renewed devotion.

### **C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?**

- Read Matthew 13:24–30 and 36–43 carefully this week and identify the four pastoral dispositions the parable teaches: humility about discernment, patience with the mixed assembly, restraint about premature separation, and confidence in the Lord of the harvest. In what specific situation in your congregational life do you most need to exercise each of these dispositions right now?
- Read the seven letters in Revelation 2–3 as a devotional exercise, pausing after each letter to ask: which of these descriptions most closely fits this congregation? Which fits me personally? Write down your honest assessment and bring it to God in prayer, asking for the grace to respond to Christ’s diagnosis with the same urgency He commends: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent” (Revelation 3:19).
- Reflect on your congregation’s current practice of membership reception. Is the process substantive enough to provide a credible examination of profession? Is it so rigorous that it becomes a barrier to genuine seekers? Discuss with an elder or pastor what a faithful, balanced process of membership reception looks like for this congregation, and how it might be strengthened without tipping into either perfectionism or nominalism.
- If you are aware of a situation in this congregation in which a member’s conduct publicly and persistently contradicts his or her profession, bring it to the appropriate elder or pastor rather than speaking about it informally to others. The process Jesus prescribed in Matthew 18:15–20 begins with private address, and every subsequent step requires appropriate authority and accountability. Be part of the solution to the visible church’s integrity problem, not part of the informal gossip that makes the problem worse.
- Pray specifically this week for those in your congregation whom you are uncertain about, those whose profession you cannot fully evaluate, whose spiritual condition seems unclear or inconsistent. Pray the prayer of the householder: that the Lord of the harvest would accomplish in them what no human process can achieve; that He who knows those who are His would draw them into genuine, living faith; and that the visible community they belong to would be the means of grace through which that drawing occurs.

**Key Texts:** Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43; 1 John 2:19; 2 Timothy 2:19; Romans 9:6; Revelation 2–3

## Study and Discussion Questions

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### **Opening Question**

- Have you ever experienced the departure from a congregation of someone you were confident was a genuine believer, only to discover that their departure revealed something you had not seen? How did that experience affect your understanding of the visible church and her mixed nature? How did you process it theologically and pastorally?

### **Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)**

- Read Matthew 13:24–30 and then the interpretation in verses 36–43. Identify each element of the parable and its interpretation according to Jesus’ own key. What does Jesus say is “the field” (verse 38)? How does this affect the interpretation of the parable as a passage about the visible church specifically? What is the timing and the agent of the final separation?
- Read 1 John 2:18–19. What does John mean by “antichrists” in this context? What does their departure reveal about their true relationship to the community? What does John’s conclusion (“so that it would be shown that they all are not of us”) suggest about the function of departure from the visible community as a revelatory act?
- Read 2 Timothy 2:14–21. What is the context in which Paul introduces the saying about God’s firm foundation (verse 19)? Who are Hymenaeus and Philetus, and what have they done? How does the double inscription on the foundation, “The Lord knows those who are His” and “Every one who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness”, address both the security of the genuinely elect and the responsibility of the visible community?
- Read Romans 9:1–8. What is Paul’s argument about Israel in these verses? What does he mean by “they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (verse 6)? How does this principle, that the covenant community has always been larger in its visible form than in its spiritual reality, apply to the new covenant church?
- Read Revelation 3:14–22, the letter to Laodicea. What is Christ’s specific diagnosis of the Laodicean congregation? What does He mean by “lukewarm”? What is the self-assessment of the Laodiceans, and how does Christ evaluate it? What does Christ promise to do if the congregation does not repent? What does He promise to those who do?

### **Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)**

- The lesson argues that the wheat-and-tares parable’s injunction not to pull up the tares is addressed to the attempt to achieve a final, comprehensive, infallible separation in the present age, not to the church’s ordinary practice of church discipline. Is this exegetically convincing? How do you read the relationship between Matthew 13:24–30 and Matthew 18:15–20 in the same Gospel? Can they be harmonized? If so, how?
- Augustine’s corpus permixtum doctrine was a corrective to Donatist perfectionism. The lesson argues that it has proper limits and must not be used as a license for ecclesial nominalism. Where precisely do those limits lie? How do you articulate the distinction between “the visible church will always contain some false professors” (descriptive) and “the visible church need not pursue regenerate membership” (prescriptive)?

- The lesson presents regenerate church membership, believers' baptism, and church discipline as the three instruments through which the Baptist tradition pursues visible church integrity. How are these three instruments interconnected? Can you practice one effectively without the others? What happens to the visible church's integrity when one or more of these instruments is neglected?
- The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 demonstrate that Christ addresses the visible church in her specific, differentiated condition, commending what is faithful, warning what is compromised, threatening what is corrupt. What does this reveal about the relationship between the visible church and the invisible church in Christ's own pastoral practice? Does Christ treat the visible church as though the visible-invisible distinction makes her condition irrelevant to Him?
- The lesson identifies the "Laodicean pathology" as one of the most dangerous conditions the contemporary Western church faces. Do you agree that comfortable self-satisfaction is a greater threat to the visible church's integrity than outright heresy or immorality? What makes lukewarmness so dangerous? Why does Christ describe it as more troubling than cold rejection?

### ***Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)***

- This congregation's membership practices are one of the primary instruments through which it pursues visible church integrity. How well do those practices currently approximate the standard described in this lesson? What one change to the membership reception process would most improve the congregation's ability to receive members whose profession is genuinely credible?
- This lesson argues that church discipline is an act of love, toward the erring member, toward the congregation, and toward the church's witness. In your experience, what are the most significant practical and cultural obstacles to the faithful practice of discipline in a contemporary evangelical congregation? How would you address those obstacles from Scripture?
- Read 2 Timothy 2:19 again as a personal word addressed to you: "The Lord knows those who are His", is that a comfort or a challenge for you today? "Every one who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness", is there an area of your life in which your visible conduct is not a credible representation of the covenant identity you have publicly claimed? Bring that area honestly before God in prayer and before a trusted fellow member in accountable conversation.
- Which of the seven letters in Revelation 2–3 do you believe Christ would address to this congregation if He were writing today? Write a brief paragraph describing what you think that letter would say, what it would commend, what it would charge, and what it would call the congregation to do. Bring that paragraph to the next session as a contribution to the group's corporate self-examination.

## Prayer Focus

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Begin with 2 Timothy 2:19 read aloud in full: “Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.’” Let the word “nevertheless” land first. Paul has just described the defection of Hymenaeus and Philetus and the damage their false teaching has done to the faith of some in the community. Nevertheless: despite the defections, despite the false professors, despite the mixed condition of the visible church in every age, the firm foundation of God stands. Begin your prayer from that ground. Not from anxiety about the state of the church, not from discouragement about her failures, but from the unshakable confidence that the Lord’s elective purpose is secure and that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the community He is building.

Pray with honesty about this congregation’s own condition as a visible church. Ask the risen Christ who walks among the lampstands to give the elders and pastor the spiritual perception to see this congregation as He sees her, to identify what He would commend, what He would charge, and what He would call her to repent of. Pray specifically that the gap between this congregation’s visible profession and her invisible reality would be as small as the Spirit’s sanctifying work can make it in this generation. Pray that the means of grace, preaching, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, discipline, and prayer, would accomplish in this community what they are designed by God to accomplish: the formation of a visibly credible approximation of the new covenant community.

Pray for those in the congregation whose spiritual condition is uncertain, those whose profession seems inconsistent with their life, those who have drifted from faithful attendance and covenantal participation, those who are outwardly present but inwardly far from the Lord. Pray the prayer of the householder: not a prayer of judgment, but a prayer of earnest pastoral longing that the Lord of the harvest would accomplish in them what no human process can achieve. Pray that the ministry of this congregation, its preaching, its fellowship, its discipline, its love, would be the means through which the Spirit draws wandering hearts back to genuine, living, confessing faith.

Pray for those who have departed from this congregation or from the visible church more broadly, those whose departure, like the departures John describes in 1 John 2:19, may reveal that something essential was always missing; and those whose departure was a genuine spiritual crisis rather than a final defection, and who need the community’s earnest prayer and pastoral pursuit. Pray with the sobriety that the tares parable calls for: the final judgment about who is genuinely the Lord’s belongs to Him, not to us. Let that humility shape the prayer.

Close with the double petition that Paul’s seal in 2 Timothy 2:19 implies. First, give thanks that the Lord knows those who are His, that the invisible church’s security is grounded not in the visible church’s imperfect discernment but in God’s omniscient, sovereign, unalterable knowledge. Second, ask for the grace to abstain from wickedness, to live in a manner that makes this congregation’s visible profession a credible representation of the new covenant identity it has claimed. May this congregation be known, in this community and before the watching heaven, as a people who name the name of the Lord and who depart from iniquity. To God alone be the glory.

*“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”*

**Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995**

**Key Texts:** Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43; 1 John 2:19; 2 Timothy 2:19; Romans 9:6; Revelation 2–3

***Soli Deo Gloria***  
*To God Alone Be the Glory*

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## **FAITHFUL TO THE WORD**

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