

REFORMED DOGMATICS



*Vos during his professorship at the Theological School
of the Christian Reformed Church, circa 1888–1893.*

REFORMED DOGMATICS

GEERHARDUS VOS, PH.D., D.D.



VOLUME FIVE:
ECCLESIOLOGY
THE MEANS OF GRACE
ESCHATOLOGY

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PREFACE

The appearance of this volume has been facilitated by initial translations of its different parts by Kim Batteau and Allan Janssen. As with the previous volumes, I have reviewed and revised their work and given the translation its final form. The editorial footnotes are mine.

The relative distribution of attention to the topics treated in this volume is striking and will likely be surprising to many familiar with Vos' interest in eschatology prominent in his later work in biblical theology. Here less than one-fifth of the whole is devoted to eschatology, the rest to the church and the means of grace. Approximately 60 percent more attention is given to baptism alone than to eschatology, and only slightly less attention given to the Lord's Supper than to eschatology. Still, in this treatment of eschatology we find a clear recognition of the two-age construct, including the present interadvental overlapping of this age and the age to come, and the structural importance of this construct for biblical eschatology as a whole—an insight that he subsequently develops so magisterially in works like *The Pauline Eschatology*. The in-depth discussion of the church and of the sacraments will repay careful reading in any number of places. Even those who disagree at points—say, in the case made for infant baptism—will be stimulated by the challenge to their own thinking.

As noted in the preface to Volume One,¹ the *Reformed Dogmatics* does not include a section on introduction (prolegomena) to systematic theology. In that regard, the answer to question 11 in part two, chapter

1 Page x, note 9.

three in this volume, “In how many senses can the expression ‘the word of God’ be understood?” warrants careful consideration not only in its own right but also because it provides an indication of key elements that surely would have marked Vos’ formal treatment of the doctrines of special revelation and Scripture.

This is the final volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. With the completion of the translation as a whole, several points made in the preface to Volume One bear repeating. The goal throughout has been to provide a careful translation, aiming as much as possible for formal rather than dynamic equivalence. Nothing has been deleted, no sections elided or their content summarized in a reduced form. Vos’ occasionally elliptical style in presenting material, meant primarily for the classroom rather than for published circulation to a wider audience, has been maintained. The relatively few instances of grammatical ellipsis unclear in English have been expanded, either without notation or placed within brackets.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that this is not a critical translation. Only in a very few instances has an effort been made to verify the accuracy of the secondary sources Vos cites or quotes, usually by his referring to no more than the author and title and sometimes only to the author. Also, no exact bibliographic details have been provided, and explanatory footnotes have been kept to a minimum.

The *Reformed Dogmatics* makes a welcome addition for anyone wishing to benefit from a uniformly sound and often penetrating presentation of biblical doctrine. Also, English readers will now be able to explore the relationship between the early Vos of the *Reformed Dogmatics* and his subsequent work in biblical theology. With this translation now completed, I am confident in saying that whatever differences such comparisons may bring to light, the end result will confirm a deep, pervasive and cordial continuity between his work in systematic theology and in biblical theology.

Who were teachers or other theologians, contemporary to Vos or recently past, who may have directly influenced his views and his presentation of material in the *Dogmatics*? That question, raised in the prefaces to several of the preceding volumes, so far remains unanswered, for others perhaps to examine.

From its beginning in 2012, this translation project has been a collaborative undertaking that would not have been possible without the

substantial help of others. Those mentioned above and in previous volumes have provided initial translations of its various parts and, in some instances, reviewed them. Thanks are also due those who have been involved with the copy editing, Elliot Ritzema and Abigail Stocker—their careful work has also added a measure of smoothness to the translation at a number of points—as well as those who prepared the extensive and useful indices, Dustyn Eudaly and Spencer Jones. Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to Justin Marr, the project manager at Lexham Press, for all his help and for serving as a continuing source of patient encouragement throughout this project.

May God be pleased to grant that the value of the *Reformed Dogmatics* be duly appreciated. May it be used for the well-being of His church and its mission in and to the world in our day and beyond.

R. Gaffin, Jr.

May 2016



PART ONE

Ecclesiology: The Doctrine of the Church



CHAPTER ONE

Essence

1. *What is the nature of the transition from soteriology, handled previously, to the doctrine of the Church?*

Everything discussed so far has had reference to the individual believer and to what the Spirit of God brings about in him as an individual. As such he was called; as such he was regenerated; as such he believed and was justified; as such he is an object of sanctification. But the individual believer cannot remain by himself. The work of the application of the merits of the Mediator also has a communal side. A root of unity is latent among those individuals. This unity originates not only in retrospect but existed beforehand. Believers were all reckoned in Christ, regenerated by the Spirit of Christ; they were all implanted into Christ in order to form one body. Therefore, now that what concerns the individual has been handled, what is communal ought to be discussed. This takes place in the doctrine of the Church.

Evidently connected with this doctrine is that of the sacraments, for they, too, do not have an individual character. They are inseparable from the Church, proceed from it, and point to it. By baptism a relationship to the Church is represented and established. One is not baptized as a solitary individual but in connection with the Church of Christ. Likewise, no one can hold the Lord's Supper by himself and for himself; the Supper refers to the communion of the saints.

Now, one could still ask whether it is not necessary to deal with the doctrine of the Church before individual soteriology. Does not the individual Christian exist from the outset if he is born into the covenant of God, according to and under what is communal? This would, in fact, be the case if we taught, with modern theology, that the life of the children of God resides in the church and is passed on from the church to those who join it. With Rome, too, that must be the sequence. Here it is not believers who form the church, but the church forms believers, and that not only in an external sense through the ministry of the Word and sacraments in the covenant of God, but in the most real sense, to the extent that all grace must come through the material substance of the sacraments, which the church has at its disposal. Someone is regenerated through his baptism, and in the array of sacraments he receives in succession from the treasury of the church all the grace necessary for his salvation.

This is not the case according to the Reformed conception. Although we believe in the ministry of the covenant of grace and attach great value to that ministry, it is still firmly established that real re-creating grace passes not from one believer to another, not from the church to the individual, but from Christ directly to the one called. Through this unity with Christ, believers also become one with each other. In this way, too, the ministry of the covenant of grace originates. God calls efficaciously, and then establishes His covenant with them and with their seed. He has done so with Abraham. This is why we have the doctrine of the Church following soteriology.

2. Which words in Scripture are used for the concept “church”?

The proper word for “church” is *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία), from *ekkalein* (ἐκκαλεῖν), “called out.” For the Greeks this *ekklēsia* is the gathering of free citizens who make decisions about matters of the state and who are called together by a herald.

In the Old Testament, this word is now used by the Septuagint for the translation of the Hebrew *qahal* (קהל), which has the similar derivation: “gather, call together.” It means, then: (1) the Israelite nation in its entirety as a church-state, even when it was not called together (e.g., Lev 4:13, “if now the entire congregation of Israel will have gone astray”); (2) an assembled gathering of this Israelite nation (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:65, “At the

same time Solomon also held the feast and all of Israel with him, a great congregation”).

In the books of Moses, *qahal* is rendered, where it appears, as *synagōgē* (συναγωγή). However, in these books it is mostly replaced by another Hebrew word, namely, *‘edah* (עֵדָה), which likewise means “assembly.”

For the New Testament use of the word *ekklēsia*, attention must now be paid to different things, namely:

- a) The use of the word in antithesis to the name that the Jews used for their assembly.
- b) The use of the word in the mouth of the Savior in the Gospels.
- c) The connection between the concepts “church” and “kingdom of heaven.”
- d) The differing meanings in which the word itself appears in the New Testament.

3. *Is there a contrast with the assembly of the Jews in the word ekklēsia?*

Yes, a few times in the New Testament the term *ekklēsia* also appears for the Jewish church; for example, “This is he [Moses] who was in the congregation of the people in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38). But here it looks back to the old Israelite church. On the other hand, for the present Jewish assembly, *synagōgē* is generally used: “And when the *synagōgē* was dismissed” (Acts 13:43). In antithesis, on a single occasion the gathering of believing Christians is called a *synagōgē*: “If a man with a golden ring on his finger comes into your gathering” (Jas 2:2). But those are exceptions. As a rule, it is the case that the assembling of Jews and of Christians are contrasted with each other as “synagogue” and “church.”

Thus it must be of significance when the Lord and His apostles refrained from the use of the word *synagōgē* and reverted to a word that, although entirely scriptural, had nonetheless fallen more and more into disuse by the Jews. That the Jews made use of *synagōgē* had various reasons. For them the word *ekklēsia* had a pagan flavor. Moreover, the word *synagōgē* was the usual word in the law of Moses. Since Judaism after the exile now thought it had to focus on keeping the law with the exertion of all its powers and so had degenerated into a legalistic Judaism of holiness by works, it surely had to give preference to this term from the law. When we take this into consideration, then the choice of *ekklēsia*

by the Lord acquires a deeper sense. He chose a word that transcends the legalistic meaning of Israel, that points to *the call of God*, that causes one to think back to the call of Israel, that thus from the outset places the New Testament dispensation of the covenant of grace on a basis that is no longer limited to a single nation; see Acts 2:39: (a) for the promise comes to you and to your children, and (b) to all who are far off, as many of you as the Lord our God will call.

With this it is not maintained that the synagogues of the Jews fell outside the circle of the Old Testament dispensation of the covenant. This was clearly not the case. Christ himself went into synagogues; later the apostles found a point of contact for their missionary work in the synagogues. They did not break off the line of the ministry of the covenant, even after the resurrection of the Lord and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

One thing must not be lost from view here. The synagogue of the Jews was not a solely religious gathering *everywhere*. The Jews in the Diaspora naturally had no civil power, and when they gathered it was as a religious community. This was the case even in Palestine, everywhere where a mixed population was found. There were, however, many places where the civil government of the elders and the administration of the synagogue coincided. Thus, in such cases, notwithstanding the abolition of the Jewish state, the Old Testament identification of state and church continued. In this respect as well, the concept of the church will have formed an antithesis to that of the synagogue.

4. *What is the distinctive meaning of the word “church” in the mouth of the Savior?*

In the Gospels, *ekklēsia* is used by the Lord only twice:

- a) Matthew 16:18: “And I also say to you, that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my *church*, and the gates of hell will not overcome it” (ἐπὶ ταῦτα τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν).
- b) Matthew 18:17: “And if he does not listen to them, then tell it to the church (εἰπὲ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ), and if he also does not listen to the church, then let him be to you as a pagan and tax collector.”

Here, both times, the congregation in view—that is, “the *church*”—is spoken of as something future: “I will build my church.” In Matthew

16, almost immediately following the Word of the Lord cited, is the prediction of His suffering, His death, His resurrection. The building of the church is thus indisputably related to that. Earlier, it was always “kingdom of heaven”; now, where the prophecy of the suffering and the resurrection occurs, it suddenly becomes “church.” It is likewise so in Matthew 18:20—“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them”—something that evidently refers to the absence of the exalted Mediator in His human nature. Thus, on the one hand, the church is something future. On the other hand, there is present in the word itself, pointing back clearly enough to the church of Israel, that it is not something absolutely new. It has existed earlier but will now come in a new form; it will now be *His* church par excellence—that is, the church in the form that He Himself, having appeared in the flesh and as duly authorized by the Father, has given it. In essence, the church under the old and new covenant is the same; in form and manifestation there is a difference. And this difference resides in more than one thing.

- a) The church under the old dispensation was more than church; it was equally state. The Old Testament covenantal dispensation had two faces, something that at the same time had the dependence of the church as a consequence. Just because the church was more than church, it could not be completely church. The church did not receive its own form, was not something separate and distinguished from all other things.
- b) The church of the old covenant was not only a state church; it was also essentially a national church—that is, limited to one nation. A pagan who wanted to belong to it could only join by becoming a Jew. It is certainly true that this particularism is used in the design of God for a purpose encompassing the entire world, but in itself, it was still a limitation.
- c) The outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as it is specific to Pentecost and could only follow the accomplished work of the Mediator, likewise distinguishes the Old and New Testament church. It is not as if earlier there had been no activity of the Spirit. Prior to that outpouring, the Spirit also regenerated and led to the Mediator and effected being united to Him by faith. But in the particular

form in which this now happens, it forms a distinction between the Old and the New.

5. *What does it mean when the Savior says, "I will build my church"?*

In the first place, this image is without doubt suggested by that of the rock, which is applied to Peter's confession. At the same time, there appears to be yet another thought present, namely that of the house-family connection. For the person in the Middle East, house means his family as well as his dwelling. That the church is a house connects it with the administration of the covenant. It is continued by God in the line of families. In Scripture, then, the church appears in this sense as the "house of God" (cf. 1 Tim 3:15; Heb 3:6, 10:21); the members of the church are "family" (Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; Matt 10:25).

6. *What is the connection between the two concepts "kingdom of heaven" and "church"?*

This connection is twofold:

- a) On the one hand, "kingdom of God" is the narrower, and "church" the wider concept. While the Church has both a visible and invisible side, and so can often be perceived of an entire nation, the kingdom of God in its various meanings is the invisible spiritual principle. It is the lordship Christ exercises over our souls if we truly belong to Him, our submission to his sovereign authority, our being conformed and joined by living faith to His body with its many members. It is the gathering of these true members and subjects of Christ. It is called the "kingdom of heaven" because it has its center and its future in heaven. All the spiritual benefits of the covenant are linked to it: righteousness, freedom, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit [cf. Rom 14:17]. As such a spiritual entity, it is within man and does not appear with an outward face. Understood in this sense, the kingdom of heaven equals the invisible church, but then in its New Testament particularity, for Christ preached that the kingdom of heaven had come near, namely, through His coming. He is the king, and through His clear self-revelation and through His completed work, the invisible church also receives a new glory that it did not have previously, so that even the least in this kingdom is still greater than John the Baptist [Matt 11:11].

b) On the other hand, the “kingdom of God” or “of heaven” is a broader concept than that of the church. In fact, it is presented to us as leaven that must permeate everything, as a mustard seed that must grow into a tree that with its branches covers all of life. Plainly, such a thing may not be said of the concept “church.” There are other spheres of life beside that of the church, but from none of those may the kingdom of God be excluded. It has its claim in science, in art, on every terrain. But the church may not lay claim to all that. The external side of the kingdom (the visible church) must not undertake these things; the internal essence of the kingdom, the new existence, must of itself permeate and purify. It is precisely the Roman Catholic error that the church takes everything into itself and must govern everything. Then there appears an ecclesiastical science, an ecclesiastical art, an ecclesiastical politics. There the kingdom of God is identical with the church and has been established on earth in an absolute form.

According to us, it is otherwise. The true Christian belongs in the first place to the church, and in it acknowledges Christ as king. But besides that he also acknowledges the lordship of Christ in every other area of life, without thereby committing the error of mixing these things with each other. The Old Testament church-state, which comprehended the entire life of the nation, was a type of this all-encompassing kingdom of God.

If now one compares the visible church and the kingdom of God viewed from the first side, then one can say that the former is a manifestation and embodiment of the latter.

If one compares the visible church and the kingdom of God viewed from the second side, then one can say that the former is an instrument of the latter.

If one looks to the final outcome, then one must say that the church and kingdom of God will coincide. In heaven there will no longer be a division of life. There the visible and the invisible will coincide perfectly. Meanwhile, for now the kingdom of God must advance through the particular form of the church.

7. *With what meanings does the word “church” occur in the New Testament?*

- a) In the sense of the totality of those internally, effectually called, thus all who by faith are united to Christ the Head—the sum of true believers. The New Testament concept of the Church emerges from that. What is internal and invisible is what is first, and then not as it is limited to one place but as it extends to all places where the body of Christ has its members. In the first place, it is those called by Christ and to Christ, not those called together to a particular assembly. That already follows from the fact that, in the mouth of the Savior, “church” was also connected with the Old Testament *qahal*. And this *qahal* always comprised the entire nation. Thus, “Church” comprises all the people of God, where they are in heaven and on earth; for this meaning see Acts 2:47, “And the Lord added to the *church* daily those being saved.” “And God has placed in the church first apostles,” etc. (1 Cor 12:28); “because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:9; cf. Gal 1:13); “to shepherd the church of God which He has obtained through His own blood” (Acts 20:28). In all these passages, the reference is to the church of the elect called on earth. In Hebrews 12:23, it also refers to those who have already entered heaven, “to the general assembly and the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.”
- b) The second meaning of the word “church” is that of the local, visible church—thus, the gathering of believers who meet in a particular place or city. In this sense it occurs numerous times: for example, the church in the house of someone, “Greet also the church (congregation) in their house” (Rom 16:5; cf. 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2); the church of Antioch (Acts 13:1), of Jerusalem, (Acts 8:1), of Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:1); “no church” (Phil 4:15); “everywhere in all the churches” (1 Cor 4:17); “the churches of the Gentiles” (Rom 16:4). So throughout, the local church.
- c) The question arises whether besides these two meanings the word *ekklēsia* has yet a third, namely a collective, meaning, so that it would stand for the union of a number of local churches in a certain region or country. The resolution of this question depends on a single text—namely, Acts 9:31, where one reads, “Then the churches throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria

had peace,” etc. Here the *Statenvertaling*¹ follows the reading *αἱ ἐκκλησῖαι*, plural. If this is correct, then it must be said that there is no text in the New Testament where “church” appears for a number of churches taken together. There are, however, manuscripts that have the singular, and these, it would seem, are the oldest and best. Westcott and Hort also read ἡ ἐκκλησία, “the church.” But that reading is not entirely certain. For this generally current use, one could appeal to the Old Testament, where the visible gathering of all Israel in its unity is called a *qahal*, *ekklēsia*. Still, this appeal is not sufficient to legitimize the more recent use. Indeed, the Jewish church was in fact centralized in a sense in which the Christian church under the new covenant is not and may never be. Thus it will not do to draw a conclusion from that. And the usage of our fathers, who preferred to speak of “churches,” has in fact a scriptural foundation. On the other hand, however, one must also not forget that the churches as they appear in the New Testament history had their unity in the apostolate. To begin with, they did not yet need to form a unity of themselves and among each other through representation. Thus there existed no occasion to speak of “church” in the singular. Later, it was otherwise.

It seems to us that for these reasons no well-founded objection can be offered against the application of the term “church” to the totality of local churches. To say something does not appear in the New Testament is not equivalent to saying it is in conflict with the principles of church government laid down in the New Testament.

One will have noted that in the two places where the term “church” is used by the Savior, both meanings are found. In Matthew 16:18, it is the universal church of those called of which the Lord speaks, the church that He will build everywhere. In Matthew 18:17, on the other hand, it is the local church to which the brother to be censured and his accuser belong. This is seen in “tell it to the church,” something that can only refer to the local church.

1 The “States-translation” of the Bible authorized by the Dutch government, first published in 1637.

Finally, there is still the question whether in the New Testament “church” is used of the place, the building where the church gathers. “Synagogue,” as is well known, is used in this way. In our usage, “church” in this sense has almost completely superseded the use of the term for the local church. Roman Catholics maintain that there are examples of this in the New Testament—wrongly. The first Christians had no church buildings but gathered in houses or where they were best able to. Appeal is made to 1 Corinthians 11:18 and 22, but here “when you come together in the church” is equivalent to “when you come together as the gathering of believers.”

- d) To the three meanings discussed, one could still add that of Matthew 18:17, since “say it to the church,” according to many, will have to refer the representatives and rulers of the church, thus the so-called *ecclesia representativa*. Roman Catholics even derive from this passage that “church” can be equivalent to the Pope. If, then, the Pope would obey what is said here to Peter, he would have to understand “say it to the church” in the sense of “say it to yourself.” Bellarmine too, then, does not hesitate to explain the matter in this way.

Presently we are accustomed to making a distinction between “congregation” and “church”—and then, in this sense, that the former is local and the latter general, inclusive of a number of “congregations.” The old usage of our language was the reverse. Preference was given to calling the local gathering of believers “church” [*kerk*] and to calling the universal gathering of believers in all places “congregation” [*gemeente*]. Still, this too was not followed strictly. When one consults the *Statenvertaling*, one will see that it uses both *gemeente* and *kerk* of the one as well as the other, apparently without a fixed rule. Only for this usage, one should take note that throughout, the Greek word is the same [*ἐκκλησία*] and that there are not two Greek words that correspond to these two Dutch words. Naturally, one need not therefore reject the distinction.

8. *What is the derivation of our word “church” [kerk]?*

This comes from the Greek *κυριακόν*, the neuter of *κυριακός*, “what is of the Lord,” “what belongs to the Lord.” Some have doubted this derivation, but it still appears to be correct.

9. *Is it easy to give a definition of “the church”?*

No, for as the matter is considered from differing viewpoints, the definition will also come out differently. The concept of the church is many-sided, and what matters is that one does justice as much as possible to all sides and aspects.

10. *From what three viewpoints has one attempted to define “the church”?*

For this some have begun from election for one viewpoint; from baptism for another; then again, from confession.

- a) From *election*. Some say that the essence of the Church is not latent in any external institution but in internal unity with Christ. As has already been observed repeatedly, Rome works from the outside to the inside. For it, what is outward imparts a share in what is inward. We cannot reason this way. And so to show that the true essence of the Church lies in what is inward, one would have it delimited through election. The elect, be they already in heaven or still on earth or yet unborn, would then as such fall within the Church. One easily sees that the concept can be exchanged with that of the invisible church. At the same time, it already has within itself as a subdivision the distinction between the church militant and triumphant. Many of the theologians also begin with election in defining the church.

Against that, however, is one objection: election comprises all who belong to the body of Christ, regardless of whether they are already engrafted into the body of the Lord or are still completely estranged from Him. Now, one can scarcely say of the latter that they belong to the Church. The concept of Church does not refer to being destined for the body of Christ but actually being in this body. Election as delimiting the Church must thus be replaced by effectual calling. When we substitute the latter, there is no longer anything against saying that the invisible church is the gathering of those effectually called by God’s Word and Spirit, who are

bound by true faith and by mystical union with Christ and in Him with one another. This concurs completely with the term Church itself. The *ekklēsia* still is the gathering of those called (from *ἐκκαλεῖν*, called out).

- b) From *baptism*. Engrafting into the body of Christ and belonging to it are outwardly signified and sealed in baptism. Thus here we no longer have to do with the invisible church, but with a visible form that it assumes. Naturally, in consideration here must be a Christian baptism that can be recognized by us as legitimate. However, one of the most difficult questions is where the line must be drawn here. Roman Catholic baptism is recognized by us as baptism, and yet it would be difficult to call members of the Roman Catholic church believing brothers and to have Christian communion with them as such. In any case, there is a visible church where faith manifests itself, the genuineness of which we have no ground for doubting. God has put at our disposal certain external signs that we have to evaluate and to treat someone as Christian without legitimating further expression of judgment over his condition. Wherever, then, the obligation is incumbent upon us to presuppose the presence of faith by these external signs, we also have to recognize the existence of the visible church.
- c) Finally, some have begun from *confession*. Insofar as confession is the principal external means to manifest the invisible essence of the church and to cause it to materialize outwardly, it already belongs under the preceding approach. Confession, however, is also a bond that binds the members of the church together in the external form of the church. To this extent, it is what is characteristic for the visible church in its institutional form. One can define the visible church as “the gathering of those who, through the external Word, the use of the sacraments, and ecclesiastical discipline, unite into an external body and association.” To such a visible church belong the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the office of rule, and discipline. Only through this union in a fixed form does the visible church actually appear. What is discussed above under (b) can certainly be called a sporadic manifesting of the one invisible church. The visible church as such, it is not. To be able to retain the designation

“visible” over the long run, the church must be organized, assume a fixed form; it may not exist in a completely disjointed manner. That is the duty incumbent on it for this earthly dispensation, and where that duty is continually omitted and willfully neglected, one has well-founded reasons to doubt the presence of the invisible church as well. Thus the major distinction that remains for us is that between the visible and the invisible church.

11. *What then is the connection between these two?*

As is well known, Rome starts from the absolute identification of these two. Through the visible church—that is, through the Roman Catholic church as institution—one also gains access to all the invisible benefits of salvation. Everything is tied to the church. Only joining the external institution makes someone a full member of the Church. For consistent Roman Catholics, catechumens who are not yet baptized, excommunicated persons, and schismatics do not belong to the Church, although some, like Bellarmine, would consider them as potential members, like a child who is conceived but not yet formed and born. Rome will not acknowledge an invisible church, and its spokesmen constantly charge Protestants with deliberately fashioning this concept to evade the difficult question of where their church was prior to the Reformation. Naturally, that is not so. That Protestants start from the concept of the invisible church has a much deeper basis—namely, that they desire to have no mediator between God and the believer. For the deepest thought of Rome comes down to that: that the church places itself between us and Christ, as Christ stands between the Church and God. Since now Christ, although visible in His humanity, is still absent from us according to the flesh and is only to be seen by faith, since also union with Him is something spiritual, not in the sphere of the sensible-visible, so this standpoint, once taken, directly includes that the Church is invisible. Therefore, this doctrine of the invisibility of the Church is not an aid in the polemic against Rome, but the deepest expression of the antithesis to Rome. The invisibility of the Church must be further defined:

- a) It is not ascribed to the Church in an absolute sense, as if the Church raised to its perfection and having reached its goal would still be an invisible entity—that is, something that by its nature cannot be seen. Such a dualism would be completely intolerable.

The invisible is oriented toward the visible and vice versa, as the soul to the body and the body to the soul. When the Church is perfect, it will also be entirely visible as well as invisible, and the former will be an adequate manifestation of the latter. The Church does not consist of angels but of men, and men are visible beings. But the re-creation, which is invisible, is during the present dispensation still resident within the visible creation, which is unrenewed. Believers do not have a different body than unbelievers. If they did, we could easily distinguish between the two, and the invisible church would coincide with the visible. In this respect, Rome, accordingly, anticipates the heavenly and the perfect as it in other respects repristinates—that is, draws out the old again from the days of the old covenant.

- b) To begin with, there is invisibility in the *form* of the Church (*invisibilitas formae seu essentiae*). By that is meant that the essence of the Church, faith, does not come within the scope of the senses, that therefore we can never specify determinatively and infallibly this or that person belongs to the Church in the deepest sense of this judgment. Only for God, who sees and knows all things, is the Church manifest according to this form, according to this its essence. He sees and searches out the entire organism of the body of Christ in all its parts. We see only here and there a trace of a few points on the surface from which we can form an idea of its shape in general, but we do not see the body as such.
- c) Next there is an invisibility of *parts* (*invisibilitas partium*). By that is really meant “the incalculability” of the Church. The church is spread over the entire earth. Apart from the fact that its inner essence is invisible, if we keep ourselves to what is external it also remains the case that the greatest part of the catholic (universal) church falls outside our purview; we cannot survey it all. In this sense, even Rome would have to grant that the Church is invisible, if, in the Pope and the clergy with an ascending order of ranks, it had not fashioned a means to concentrate the entirety of the body of the Church within a small compass. In the Pope, the entirety of the Roman Catholic church is visible to itself. But we do not believe in such invisibility. Perhaps it will be possible in heaven. For the present, it is excluded.

- d) The Church is also invisible, or can be invisible, when error or persecution hinders its outward manifestation. One calls this the invisibility of marks (*invisibilitas characterum*). It has its basis in accidental and temporal conditions. With the previously mentioned meanings of the word “invisible,” the basis in part of invisibility lay in something else. That the Church therefore does not adequately possess its outward-sensible form of manifestation lies in the development of the plan for the world. That it cannot be seen by us in all its inward ramifications, in its deepest essence, lies in the limitation of our knowledge. That it cannot be surveyed in its entirety is bound up with our finitude.

It is the invisibility intended under (b), that of the form or the essence, that is at issue between Rome and us. And here, too, one must take note that it has not become a question of terms. It finally comes down to the following issue: Scripture speaks of a Church. Certain goods are granted to this Church. Now the question is, to what are these properties and goods given? Rome says, to the visible church. Thus it follows that salvation and all that belongs to it attaches to external things. We say, to the invisible church; thus, the opposite follows. The entire way of salvation belongs to it. That the Church viewed in its essence or its form is invisible appears from the following:

- a) The terms by which the Church is designated in Scripture are such that they do not coincide with outward, visible things. It is called the body of Christ. But this is a body that is formed through mystical union. The question is not whether in the organized, visible church there are members who do not belong to the body of Christ, but the question is only whether it can be said of the mystical body of Christ that there are dead members in it. Further, the Church is called the bride of Christ, to whom He is betrothed in righteousness, in truth, forever, whom He cares for and loves as His own flesh, with whom He will one day celebrate the eternal wedding (Eph 5:23; Hos 2:19; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:9). That too may not be said of the external, visible hope, but only of the invisible, spiritual Church hidden within it. The Church is a spiritual temple built from spiritual stones, from *living* stones, which are not visible in their quality as living stones [1 Pet 2:4-5]. The Church is called *holy*, and we therefore describe it in the

Apostles' Creed as "the communion of saints." It can now only be holy through the possession of the Spirit and through its union with Christ—again, both invisible things.

- b) That the Church is invisible in its essence the Apostle Paul has clearly taught in his dispute with Roman Catholics before Rome, with the Judaizers. They also taught that the essence lay in external things, in circumcision, etc. In opposition, Paul says in Romans 2:28, "For one is not a Jew who is that openly, nor is circumcision that which is open, in the flesh; but one is a Jew who is that in secret and the circumcision of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not from men but from God" (cf. Rom 9:6; Gal 6:15; Phil 3:3; 1 Pet 3:4; Rev 2:17; 2 Tim 2:19).
- c) All that constitutes the essence of the Church belongs to the realm of invisible things: regeneration, righteousness, union with Christ.
- d) What is said in the Apostles' Creed accords with this: I *believe* a holy, universal Christian Church. Faith has as its object something invisible, not something visible. The Roman Catholic church must therefore say, if it will be consistent: I *see* a holy, universal Church.

If then it is established that one may not identify the invisible church with the visible, the question still remains unanswered: What is the connection between the two? One may not place them beside each other dualistically as if there were two churches. The Reformed have always taught that the distinction between the visible and invisible church is not a bifurcation of a generic concept into two species, but simply the description of one and the same subject from two different sides. On this point one must be careful, because here many are caught in a great misconception. There are not two churches, (a) an invisible and (b) a visible, but there is one Church that must be defined from the one side as invisible and from the other as visible. If one grants the dualism just noted, then one would have to allow that a visible church of Christ is also there where no believers are present. God has not placed on earth alongside His invisible church a salvation association, an external institution, so that it would be permissible for us to establish a visible church everywhere men are inclined to unite with a part of such an institution.

It is completely the other way around: God, through His Word and Spirit, begets believers in a place, or sends them there from elsewhere, and on the basis of the confession of these believers that they desire to belong to Christ they can now form a visible church. The visible thus everywhere presupposes the invisible, rests on it, derives from it its right of existence. It is called “church” because it is thought to stand in connection with what the essence of the Church is, to be a manifestation of the body of Christ. By that it is not at all denied that in such a visible church members can appear who do not belong to the invisible church. But this coheres inseparably, as we will see, with the unique calling and goal that the visible church has on earth. Someone has quite rightly observed that although sand is mixed with gold, still the gold is not therefore called gold because of the sand mixed in it but because of its own quality.

This, however, is not the only relationship in which the invisible and the visible church stand to each other. If the former is what is primary, the antecedent of the latter, there is also a reverse relationship. In a certain sense, one can say that again and again the visible church is used by God to form and continue the invisible church, insofar as the former precedes the latter. Theologians express this by saying that the visible church is twofold: (1) the company of believers (*coetus fidelium*)—that is, the manifestation of the body of Christ in visible form through the assembling of the individual members; (2) the mother of believers (*mater fidelium*)—that is, the matrix of the seed from which the church of the future grows.

Now, both of these characteristics of the visible church must be retained and are in need of each other to present the concept of the visible church fully. Rome separates them by ascribing one to the clergy and the other to the laity; they both belong to the church as a whole. Neither of these two can be overlooked where a true, pure church is. Where God’s Word is purely proclaimed by a true church, this church is also propagated.

From what is said it now follows that the visible and the invisible church do not perfectly coincide. For (a) the triumphant Church as a whole belongs to what we call invisible and not to what we call visible; (b) it always remains possible that someone here on earth is regenerated and united with Christ who has not had the occasion to join with a visible church; (c) a true believer can fall into sin and be excluded from the

visible church through discipline; (d) there will always be hypocrites in the church, false members, who as members are not right before God but who nonetheless cannot be excluded by the church. So, in each of these four respects the visible and invisible church diverge.

12. *Is the visible church in its essence a visible entity, or is its form of organization something accidental that may also be set aside?*

There are many at present who view the organization of the church with its offices and its ministry, etc., as accidental, as a purely human creation, as a form that the Church gives to itself to reach its goals. Of course, some then grant that in the life of believers the impulse to unite must necessarily be at work, and that in the long run union without organization is impossible, but still will acknowledge no higher authority for the institutional character of the Church than this necessity. The refutation of this notion of the Church is really already given in what is said above. Precisely because the church must be both the gathering of believers and the mother of believers, it must appear from the outset not only as a visible body but also as an organization. Its continuation is guaranteed by the fixed form it receives. Thus we also see already at the beginning of the founding of the church that the Lord instituted the office of the apostolate. That was an extraordinary office. But it comprised in itself everything that was later distributed among the other ordinary offices. Other office-bearers were appointed by the apostles, or they allowed their election by believers, and so new offices originated. This clearly shows that the church was intended to be an institution, and that a loose gathering of believers without a tighter connection has no right to arrogate to itself the name of church. Certainly, the government of the church is not prescribed in all its details in the New Testament, but that there must be a government is established, and its outlines also drawn clearly enough.

13. *What is meant by the attributes of the Church?*

The features that are peculiar to the invisible church. To that end, one usually recognizes the following:

- a) *Unity.* The Apostles' Creed already speaks of *one* church. By that Rome naturally means unity of organization, subjection to one external authority, presently to the Pope. According to Protestants, it is a spiritual unity, not one of place or time or ritual,

in all aspects of which the greatest diversity can reign without abrogating the unity of the Church. Further, it is a unity:

1. of the body; that is, the Church in all places and throughout all times forms one and the same mystical body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12; Gal 3:27-28);
2. with its head, namely, Christ (Eph 1:22-23);
3. of the Spirit (1 Cor 6:17);
4. of faith, and that both in an objective and in a subjective sense: what is believed and the form of believing. Concerning the former, there can certainly be difference in matters of secondary importance and all sorts of error, but all true members of this one Church of Christ must still be one in the fundamental parts;
5. of love (Eph 4:2, 16);
6. of hope (Eph 4:4; Rom 8:17);
7. of baptism [Eph 4:5]. This, however, can be a point where unity is not absolute, for one can belong to the one church without being baptized. Baptism, as said above, is valid rather as an attribute of the visible church.

But in general it must be observed that these attributes, although belonging primarily to the invisible church, nonetheless find their manifestation in the visible church. The visible churches should not act as if they had nothing to do with each other, as if, in spite of the differences that preclude living together, no deeper unity existed. One can recognize a church as a less-pure manifestation of the body of Christ without thereby understanding himself as able to join it under the particular circumstances. So, for example, Reformed churches have never denied to Lutheran churches the character of true churches and never denied fundamental unity with these churches. The antithesis can never be “*my church or no church,*” for this notion is Roman Catholic through and through.

- b) The Church is *holy*. The righteousness of Christ is reckoned to it, and in principle it has received holiness subjectively. This

holiness is manifested on the visible side as well. It is seen in believers that they are distinguished from the world; they are a city on a hill, the salt of the earth [Matt 5:13-14], children of light [Eph 5:8]. But this holiness is not absolute and may not be made the foundation of belonging to the Church. Imperfection always remains in this life. A part of the old nature asserts itself in the believer, and consequently this old nature is carried along into the Church.

Rome extends this perfection of the Church strictly on the intellectual level, and then naturally ascribes it to the external institution when it teaches of itself that it is infallible. This is discussed in the introduction to dogmatics. Here we can suffice with the observation that only in a fundamental part, and of which the knowledge for salvation is absolutely necessary, the invisible church cannot err, but that otherwise during this life its knowledge of divine truth always remains imperfect and relative. We do not ascribe infallibility to an institution and to ecclesiastical assemblies. Their judgments have great weight and no one will lightly set his individual authority over against them, but they do not bind the conscience. For Rome they certainly do. The Pope stands above all except God.

- c) The Church is *universal* or *catholic*, “one holy universal (catholic) Church.” The question is what is meant by that. The word first appears in Ignatius. In the second half of the second century, it appears to have become common as a designation and then subsequently found entry in the Apostles’ Creed. One understood by it:
1. That all local churches, even those that are not connected by a bond of external church government, nonetheless belong together and confess this solidarity. In this sense, catholicity means about the same thing as the unity of the Church.
 2. That under the new dispensation the Church is not limited by local or national boundaries but encompasses all times and places—as many as the Lord God will call both out of Israel and the nations; thus in antithesis to the national church in the Old Testament.

3. One can also take the catholicity of the Church intensively; that is to say, from the religious life of a Christian, insofar as it is manifested in the church, an influence must proceed in every area of life, so that everything is Christianized in the noblest sense of the word. Where religion is reduced to a matter of secondary importance, as something for Sunday, then that is the opposite of catholicity. We have already seen above that Scripture designates this side of Christianity with a particular name—namely, with that of the kingdom of God. For Rome, catholic = Roman Catholic.

d) The Church is imperishable (*perennis*). It can never completely disappear from the earth. The number of members of the true Church who fall within the church militant may continually change—are now more, then less; it is always there. The Socinians deny the imperishability of the church militant. This is related to their denial of the perseverance of the saints (Matt 16:18; 28:20).

14. What are meant by the marks of the Church?

The marks (*notae, γνωρίσματα*) refer to the visible church and not, like the attributes, the invisible church. A mark by its nature is something that must fall within the sphere of what is visible. Although the Church, viewed in its entirety, can never disappear from the earth, there is still no guarantee that its individual parts will continue to exist. They can completely degenerate and deteriorate; believers who are still therein can die off so that only apparent members remain. But the presence of true members does not let itself be recognized. We cannot see into the heart of men. There is accordingly a need for external visible data, from which we can make out that we indeed have to do with a manifestation of the body of Christ in which for us there will be a communion of saints, in which office is ministered in the name of Christ, and in which we can discharge our Christian calling. If the Church on earth were also one externally, then marks would naturally be superfluous. However, it is divided. This results from different causes:

a) Division of insight into what is recognized as divine truth. The one has this view of truth, the other yet another view, and there is no one who entirely avoids being one-sided. That is the case for both churches and individual persons. One could now