

Intro: Whereas spirituality is “in,” organized religion and even “church” are often perceived as non-essential if not harmful to true spirituality. What are some of the ways people express disdain for the church? Why do you think this is so? This, of course, raises the question of whether or not the church is an essential element of the gospel or not. It is the assumption of chapters 25 and 26 that we will need to explore more carefully, even as the present “hour” requires that we reconstruct the Biblical justification for our confession’s conclusion about the church: “out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” (WCF 25.2)

Read WCF 25.1 and then WCF 26.1:

- 25.1: How is the Church related to Christ? (2 relations are explicitly stated in relation to being under Christ the Head)
- 26: Notice then how chapter 26 expands upon the above relation to of the Church to Christ as the Head—i.e. Notice especially the “by” as an instrumental clause: “by means of.” How then does Christ effect his headship in the church? Answer “by...” (3 things, the third “by” is assumed” as they are all three deeply inter-related)
- What then does fellowship in Christ include?
- Given the inherent logic of this confession, we should consider the meaning of being united in Christ “by His Spirit” and especially the sense in which “by His Spirit” is directly related to “being united to one another in love”? Consider for instance:

*John 6:54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;
John 6:56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*

- In what sense do we “eat Christ’s flesh and drink his blood? Three general options: 1) figuratively, as to simply be symbols of remembrance (memorialist—Baptist), 2) literally, as by the transformation of the substance into the corporeal body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation—Roman Catholic), or 3) spiritually, as by the Holy Spirit joining with the elements such that by faith, we partake of Christ really and truly, albeit spiritually, not corporeally, when we partake of the elements of the Lord’s supper. Is there then no real “flesh” and “blood” in our communion with Christ?
- Notice then how this “spiritual” communion is worked out in the Gospel of John and the writings of Paul.
 - John: the use of *abide* in chapter 6 is further explained in chapter 15 in the context of Christ sending the Spirit as this then unites all true believers together in love.
 - Jn 7:39—speaks of an age after Christ’s ascension when salvation will be transacted by the Spirit
 - Jn.14:26—speaks of the Spirit whom the Father will send in Christ’s name—i.e. as the presence of Christ in our midst absent his “corporal” presence. (see 16:3)
 - Jn. 13:35, 17:21-23—speaks of God’s love for the Son, and the Son’s love for the church, being related to, if not instrumentally effected by the love and “union” that is within the body of Christ!
 - Paul in 1Corinthians. This same logic is present in Paul as he speaks of the Lord’s Supper especially, wherein the “koinonia” (which assumes some real sharing in, participating in, uniting in) Christ is directly effected in some way with our “koinonia” within the body of Christ or “church.”

1 Cor. 10:15 I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (koinonia) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (koinonia) in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake (koinonia) of the one bread.
 - Paul in Ephesians as pertaining to the ascended ministry of Christ. Compare for instance the “fill all in all” in Eph. 1:22-23 as directly related to Christ in the Church, how this is more fully explained in Eph. 2:19-22 as per the church as a “dwelling place of God” and

then how this drives Paul's argument concerning the ministry of the Holy Spirit through "gifts of men" as per the ascended ministry of Christ in order that again Christ may "fill all in all" according to Paul.

Summary: Christ's body and blood is corporally present, by the mystery of the Spirit acting in, with and through the flesh and blood of the body of Christ—it could be said that we are not fully in union with Christ until we are in union with the body of Christ, wherein Christ is present by his spirit! In other words, being united to Christ by His Spirit is most fully and really accomplished (instrumentally) by means of our being united to one another in love even as this is related to the ministry of word, sacrament and fellowship in the church as the mediated presence of Christ in our midst unto salvation. The visible church is called by Paul the "household of God," the "church of the living God," which is said to be the "pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15ff). Redemptive history is not merely about the history of a saving message but of a saving presence vis-à-vis Christ's presence in word, sacrament and order/government as this is all transacted in, with, and through the "flesh and blood" of the body of Christ on earth. For ever since Adam and his posterity were excommunicated from "before the face of God" (Gen. 3:8) until the elect are reunited back into God's immediate presence (as told in Revelation 21:3-4 using the language of "tabernacle" from Leviticus 26:9ff), God has in a provisional way mediated his saving presence in, with, and through a holy temple—albeit one that had a specific geographical location in the Old Covenant, but is now, under the New Covenant, wherever the apostolic church is convened gathered. E.g. Orthodoxy in the Old Testament era was described in terms like "dwelling place", "living God", "tabernacle," even covenants were initiated and sealed through rites whereby God manifested his presence to his people. (See for example Gen.15, 26:24, Exodus 29:42, and where the tabernacle is also described as the "dwelling place" of God in Deuteronomy 12:5. See also Ex. 29:42, 40:34, Lev. 22:3, Ps.76.2, Ps. 76:2, and Num.35:34) The New Covenant, although under new apostolic forms, proves no exception as promised by Christ in Matthew 28:18-20, "I am with you until the end of the age." Thus, apart from the church, we do not have full access to Christ by means of His advent in the Holy Spirit. The gospel according to Paul is not a transition from temple to "no temple" as some would have it. In this regard, Paul's teaching for us under the New Covenant is no different than the prophetic teaching under the Old Covenant, that salvation is described with the promise "I will dwell with them" (2 Cor. 6:16). This is also Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 3, even as Richard Hayes has observed,

Paul dares to assert [that] the community is the place where God dwells. "Do you not know," he asks, "that you [plural] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you [plural]?" (3:16). To read this last sentence as though it spoke of the Spirit dwelling in the body of the individual Christian would be to miss the force of Paul's audacious metaphor: the apostolically founded community takes the place of the Jerusalem temple as the place where the glory of God resides.¹

Therefore, our confessions' conclusion is one and the same that has been expressed in so many words throughout church history—for example:

The catholic or universal Church... gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof... is... the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all. The visible Church... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

WCF 25.1-2

From her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated... Whoever is separated from the Church is separated from the promises to the Church. Nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ...

Cyprian, AD 251

Beyond the pale of the Church, no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for ... the paternal favor of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal?

John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.4

¹ Richard B. Hayes, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in 1 Corinthians*, (located on the web.) N.p.

No diligent reader of the Scriptures can fail to notice, that they set forth, as an essential and fundamental fact of the scheme of redemption by "Christ crucified," the organization of a visible society of men – a community under constitution laws, and ordinances – a church of God – a "Kingdom of Heaven" in the world, although not of this world." And this visible organization is not less clearly distinguished from the mystical body of Christ, the elect of God – the invisible church, known only to God, than are the invisible movements of the Spirit, whereby souls are made members of the mystical body, distinguished from the external means of salvation, – the Sabbath, the word, sacraments and prayer – whereby the spirit communicates to the souls of men, the benefits of redemption. So prominent indeed, is this fact, that the Bible is not more a book of Theology – technically so called – than a book of ecclesiastical history.

Stuart Robinson, "What Are the Constituent Elements of the Church of God, as Organized and Visible?– with Some Inferences," *Presbyterian Critic*, December 1855

- Notice in 25.3 the more explicit “means” through which Christ acts in, with and through the church to effect his saving presence in the midst of us, even as they are related to the three “marks” of the church as per Christ as mediated prophet, priest and king
- Notice in 25.4-6, and 26.3, the ways that the confession will “qualify” its understanding of the church so as to preserve the exclusive headship and sovereignty of Christ over the church.
 - “Invisible vs. visible”? Not “primary vs. secondary” and “not organized” vs. “organized”!! Rather, it is the “church as God sees it” vs. the “Church as we see it— both seen, both organized, both gathered. So what is the point? What was the confession seeking to protect? Notice then how this is explained in the rest of paragraph 4.
 - *Does not make them partakers of the “substance” of Christ.* What is the confession guarding against here by “substance?” (vs. say “spiritual essence as mediated in the substance of the body of Christ”) Why would Christ’s presence be less immediate if we partook of Christ’s corporal substance at the table? What is between us and Christ therefore? Not Calvin against the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. (We will talk more about this under sacraments and Lord’s Supper)

“no extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ.”²
- What do sections 4-6 mean in terms of organized church unity? E.g. denominationalism—the good and the bad...
- Notice the implications of being in communion with Christ vis-à-vis our communion with each other in 26.
 - What is the nature of our relationship to each other within the church—how should it impact our sense of “self” and the way this impacts our ethics?

The primary task of the church is not to baptize whatever elements of secular culture seem most religiously promising. Its task is to make greater Christian authenticity possible by socializing its members into a new way of life. This way of life is structured by the canonical texts of the community and the ways in which they recite the stories of Israel and the church. These stories, as they are read and followed by the church, have the communal power to shape belief, experience and action.³

David Fergusson
 - Based on our spiritual communion, what other kinds of “communion” does this entail? (26.1) Where do we see an example of this in NC Church? (Acts 2:43ff) What as the result of this kind of communion? Wasn’t this exactly as Christ promised? (John 13:35, 17:21, 23)
- By implication, what is a true conversion? Is the so called “sinners prayer” enough? Compare it to Acts 2:28-29—note the personal “repent” and the corporate “be baptized.” Also, note Eph. 2:11ff as per the meaning of becoming a Christian, and Rom. 9:9 and the contextual meaning of “confess” as per the ascended ministry of Christ now mediated in the descended ministry of the Holy Spirit in Word. E.g.

² John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum*, 37: 48.

³ David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics* p. 35

Notice that to “confess” in redemptive history is more than to simply say what you believe, but to enter into covenant with God by means of a covenant initiation through vows in the midst of God’s assembly.

A vow is a ‘confession’ and ordinarily limited to initiation ceremonies regarding the formation of a covenantal relationship. As then related to a Biblical rationale for taking vows in the church one can observe how the Psalms speak of “vows” as part of the corporate worship of God (Ps.22:25, 61:5, 116:14, etc). According then to Christ, “whoever confesses me before men, him I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven.” (Mt.10:32) This is an amazing statement, more so because the idea “on earth as it is in heaven” is repeated later pertaining to Christ’s instituting the visible church. It is in this context that the “keys” are a reference to the use of government on earth to mediate Christ’s government as he is seated in heaven. (Mt.16:15-19) In comparison then to Mt. 18, the language of “binding and loosing” in that passage is clearly related to the exercise of government as pertaining to membership rites and privileges in the temple context of Christ’s day. According then to the apostle Paul, a person becomes a Christian when “you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,” (Rom.10:9) presumably in relation to Paul’s teaching in Romans 6 as related to Christian baptism as well.

- By implication, who should participate in the Lord’s Supper? (*cf.* 29.1 where this language is again reiterated, *to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body* with 27.1) Notice “pledge” as per the covenantal nature of the Lord’s Supper, and this being related to those who are “in covenant” by the taking of vows in the midst of the congregation as per the above.
- Notice the language of our confession that defines the constituents of the church as consisting *of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children* (WCF 25.2). We will be looking at the Biblical theological justification for this next week in our study of WCF 27, on sacraments, as applied to WCF 28, on baptism.