

The Church, Visible and Invisible

by Milton Haney

Milton Haney's sermon explores the distinction between the Invisible and Visible Church, emphasizing the importance of true membership and the challenges faced by organized bodies of believers throughout history.

Scripture: John 1:12, John 17:20, Ephesians 4:11, 2 Timothy 2:19, 3 John 1:9

Topics: "Church Membership", "Spiritual Discernment"

Description

Milton Haney preaches about the distinction between the invisible church, known only to Christ, and the visible church, organized by human hands. He emphasizes the importance of being truly born of God to be part of the invisible church, which is recorded in the Lamb's book of life. Haney discusses the historical pitfalls of the church, cautioning against the dangers of allowing unsaved individuals into the visible church and the need for spiritual discernment in membership. He highlights the significance of upholding the true gospel, avoiding worldly influences, and maintaining a strong connection with God for the church's spiritual health and effectiveness in saving souls.

Transcript

The church of the New Testament called the "Body of Christ," is made up of those and those only, who have been truly born of God. This is called the invisible church, or "Body of Christ," because He alone knows its membership. While of the millions of the ransomed, each one may know himself or herself, to have been thus born, Christ alone knows all who are, and who are not, of His body. There never was a Christian church which could decide that question, nor a body of ministers, without direct revelation from God, who was capable of settling it. "Having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are His." 2 Tim. 2:19. No man, nor angel, ever received a member into the invisible church. These are inducted into this spiritual body, by the Holy Ghost, and this church record, is the Lamb's book of life! Human hands cannot meddle with that record, to either write, or erase a single name! These are they who have received Him, and are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man; but of God! John 1:12-13. In their care is left the sacred oracles, and to them is intrusted the human side of the world's salvation. As God's children, they are to co-operate with Christ, their "Elder Brother," in saving the race. This work, the greatest ever committed to finite beings, necessitates the organization of the children thus born, into visible bodies, distinct from the world; in order to this co-operation with Christ. Hence, the visible church, in contradistinction from the invisible church: the one being the outflow of the other. The visible church is therefore, throughout all time, the invisible church in organized form. For this, Christ made provision by calling and ordaining His apostles, and giving them authority to ordain presbyters, or bishops, to oversee

His people, and to establish the relation between pastor and people; with all the needed help, to make His church the mightiest aggressive agency of the race. These ministers, of whatever grade, were given, first, to perfect His saints, and through the sanctification of His church, to reach and save the world. John 17:20-23; Eph. 4:11-16. The visible Christ declared that after His ascension, He would send the Holy Spirit in person to convince the world of sin, to lead His people into all truth, and to abide as the indwelling Comforter in those who were sanctified.

This great, Divine, Almighty Spirit is the everywhere present, invisible Agent, who is to lead and accompany the visible church to the conquest of the world. The church is Christ's visible representative and the Holy Spirit His invisible representative. The world is to see Christ in the church, and to know Him by the Holy Ghost, when born of God. The deficiencies in this saving process, are all on the human side, and relate to failures in the visible church! There never has been a time or place, where the visible church of Christ (by whatever name she may have been called) was not liable to contain both unsaved men and ministers. No unsaved soul can creep into the invisible church because God alone receives its members; but the members of this visible church have to be received by human agency. Our "come out" brethren with great sincerity, and many of them precious souls, have aimed to avoid this evil by avoiding organization: but in no case have they succeeded. To illustrate the case we will suppose a host of souls have been converted in the city of Mansoul. These will need the care of pastors from the beginning, who will have to give their time to the care of the church: and God holds the church responsible for their support. But who is the visible church at Mansoul? Why, that church is to be made up of those who were born of God in that place. Somebody will have to find who they are and gather them together, if they are to be a working body. But here is Mr. A. and Mr. B. and Mrs. C. who report themselves as converted people, who really have never been born of God; and they are recognized as a part of the body. The body is now recognized and organized, whether a record is made or not, and there are [let us say, in the visible Church in Mansoul] three hundred and thirty-seven, whether any one has numbered them or not.

Now there is in Mansoul a visible church of three hundred and thirty-seven, but the invisible church has only three hundred and thirty-four! [after subtracting Mr. A. Mr. B. and Mrs. C. who are not genuinely born again] They have a pastor, deacons, or elders, or both, and these have to be recognized by the church, even if they were absolutely appointed of God.

Now of all this, there may not be the scratch of a pen, but before God and man they are an organized church, and that church is made up of three hundred and thirty-four sheep and three goats! These brethren with their pastor may all make war on the organization of churches and against having any unconverted members, but they are organized, and have three goats among the sheep!

They may put in years of outcry against sects and sectarianism; but they, themselves, are a sect, and may easily be the most sectarian sect to be found in the whole country! Any three persons who unite in the belief and advocacy of a set of tenets, or doctrines, is a sect. A holy heart is very beautiful, but does not do away with the need of an instructed mind. God alone can erase names from the book of life, but human authority can blot names from the church record. This is true now and was true in the days of the apostles. See 3 John 1:9-10.

Diotrephes surely could not erase names from the Lamb's book of life; but he could and did expel members from the New Testament visible church. The churches of Corinth, Asia Minor, and in John's day, were therefore visible, organized bodies, as are the American churches today; and there were unsaved people among them, as there are now.

To avoid this, Mr. Wesley planned a six months' probation for seekers, before they could be received as members in full fellowship. This, for the first half century of Methodism, was safe and successful; but of recent years his safeguards are abandoned. The candidate then came into the most intensified spiritual body on the earth; now it is otherwise. Then the fewest possible number were allowed in the body, who did not have the direct witness of the Holy Spirit to their adoption; now they may be numbered by the ten thousands! Then no immoralities were allowed in the membership, now there is almost a total absence of discipline!

The requirements of candidates were in fearful contrast then, with the present. Such were at once put into a class of about twelve members, under the care of a godly class leader, who was to see each one of his class every week, and inquire into their spiritual state. In case of absence from the class meeting twice or thrice, without sufficient cause, they were dropped. Now but few of our candidates ever see a class meeting, or are interrogated as to their spiritual condition. They were then in constant contact with people who with great frequency were triumphantly relating their Christian experience and inquiring about theirs; now such occurrences are very rare. They were required to constantly attend the church prayer meeting; now many of them are not found in the prayer meeting three times in a year!

Then the conversion of such candidates was incessantly looked after, till it was reached. Now they are generally treated as converted people as soon as their church membership is secured. Then they were treated as penitents seeking pardon. Now they are treated as Christians. Then they were compelled constantly to hear preaching on repentance, faith and the new birth.

Now they but rarely hear these subjects discussed. Then were found the fewest possible number of unsaved people in the church, as associates. Now they can be found by the thousands. It was comparatively safe then, thus to receive them. Now it is alarming.

It was never the intention of Mr. Wesley, after his eyes were fully opened, to allow one person to enter the church, who was not truly born of God; but our clamor for numbers has opened the floodgates, and worldlings are rushing in! It may be, we never had so many godly people as now, but the proportion of those not godly, is appalling.

Having ministered with tremendous interest at the altars of Methodism for sixty-three years, I have had wide opportunities for observations as to changes which may have taken place. It can truthfully be stated that in all these years, not one hour's thought has been given to the question of leaving her communion: but before I leave her, for the church triumphant, and while rejoicing in the strength of her bulwarks; to be true to her, to Christ and the race, I must raise some danger signals.

If the church of Pentecost with her heart of flame and tongue of fire, could so wander from God, so lower the standard of His law and gospel, and become so demoralized by taking millions of worldlings into her fellowship, as to be compelled to hide God's Holy Book for ages from the common people, lest her ungodliness should be reprov'd, and her false teaching and heathen worship should be exposed by its fiery light, -- why not see in the light of history, and the present worldward trend, impending doom, and avoid it!

What apparent triumph, what shoutings, when the church of Pentecost threw her arms widely open, and took in millions from the Roman Empire in a single revival meeting! Who would have dared to suggest that any victory for truth and Christ's gospel, had equaled it in the annals of man? He must have been a "croaking pessimist" who could have whispered a doubt as to the coming glory of the church; when she

had doubled her numbers in a single day!

But fifteen hundred years of history has since been written, and what is its verdict?

1. The revival which rushed an empire of unsaved worldlings into the church of God, brought on her, the darkness of a thousand years. Ages of spiritual darkness! Who that is interested in his race, can think of it, without weeping?
2. It superseded the simple rites and worship of the Pentecostal church by intermixture of pagan rites and worship, including practically the worship of saints and images; which she has not shaken off till this day.
3. It supplanted Pentecostal ministers by worldlings, who persecuted those who were holy and secured the slaughter of millions of God's elect, who dared to believe and teach the simple gospel of Christ. Today, it is enough to stagnate the blood of a decent man to study the instruments of torture invented by those worldling ministers of the gospel to mutilate and murder the holiest people God ever had! And even now, were it not for the thundering voice of Protestant civilization, these instruments would be in use! It is difficult to find in fallen humanity men more fierce and terrible than apostates of the pure religion.
4. These world mixtures of ceremony and increased ritualism, were so adjusted as practically to supersede Christ, and the true conditions of salvation. Who can doubt, if intelligent in the Roman religion, that images, and saints, and Mary, are in the thought of such worshipers, and mentioned, five times, to where Christ is mentioned once? There were nearly a thousand years after this ingathering of worldlings, when the Official Church kept buried the doctrine of justification by faith, when people could be made holy only through their own works and a round of ceremonies and self torture! Are we going that way?
5. A close analysis of all cases of spiritual decline will reveal all the features (in greater or less degree) described under the above four headings. What spiritual darkness has struck the pulpit and pew of my own [Methodist Episcopal] denomination in proportion as she has drifted away from God! Darkness concerning her own doctrines! The Central Doctrines of Methodism! Depravity, sin, the atonement, repentance, justification by faith, entire sanctification! What absence of the Comforter! What meager fellowship with God! What blind seeking after substitutes for our glorious gospel! What bewilderments about the resurrection! How fearfully rare, really victorious experiences, both in pulpit and pew! What going to the world for something to satisfy us! How few, compared with the multitude, who do not die like other people, [how many] who have not one word of triumph, when soul and body are parting! Is not Wesley's boast that "Our people die well," largely left in the shadows? Is there not ground for humiliation, confession, and prayer, with a speedy return to her own glorious centers?

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