

Session Three

The Church He Actually Built

Unless Someone Guides Me

Scripture, Tradition, and the Authority of the Church

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the Church in the New Testament is visible, identifiable, and structured: a body you can be put out of and brought back into, one you can bring a dispute to and receive a decision from.

Catholic Touchstone. Christ did not found a movement, a feeling, or a scattered set of the sincere. He founded a body with a visible shape, and he prayed that its visible unity would be the evidence to the world that the Father sent him.

Sessions 1 and 2 were about where Scripture came from and what came before it. Both pointed past themselves to a community. Tonight that community steps into the light, and the group meets the third pillar: the claim that the real Church is invisible, known to God alone, and that no institution can be identified with it.

What You Need to Know

The invisible church idea has a serious motivation and you should honor it. It arises from an obvious and painful fact: visible churches contain hypocrites, scandal, and outright wickedness. If the Church is the spotless Bride of Christ, and the visible body plainly is not spotless, something has to give. The invisible church solves that by locating the real Church among the elect, known to God alone, scattered across every denomination.

Notice that Catholics agree with the premise. The visible Church is a mixed body and always has been. One of the Twelve betrayed him. Our Lord's own parables say the field holds wheat and weeds until harvest and the net brings up fish of every kind. The Catholic answer is not to deny the mess. It is to deny that the mess requires a second, invisible Church, and to notice that the parables locate the mixture inside one field rather than sorting it into two.

The load-bearing verse

Matthew 18:17 is the sentence the whole session turns on. Jesus gives a procedure for a dispute between believers: speak privately, then take witnesses, then tell it to the church. That third step is an instruction, and it is only obeyable if there is a church to tell, with a recognizable membership and some way of rendering a decision. You cannot report a matter to an invisible body, and an invisible body cannot put anyone out.

Where the Church requires honesty from us

Do not let this session become a claim that everyone outside the visible Catholic Church is lost. That is not what the Church teaches and stating it would be both false and cruel. The Second Vatican Council

taught that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, and also that many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside her visible boundaries. Baptized Christians who are not in full communion are rightly called brothers and sisters in the Lord. Say all of that out loud tonight, before anyone asks, because it is true and because a group that hears it will trust everything else you say.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Israel was never an invisible fellowship of the sincere. It was a people with a census, a priesthood, borders, feasts, courts, and a procedure for putting someone outside the camp and bringing them back.

| *Of the man with the disease: "he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp."* **Leviticus 13:46**

There is a camp. You can be inside it or outside it, and someone with authority makes that determination. The priest does not discern an invisible condition of the heart; he examines and declares.

| *"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"* **Psalms 133:1**

The fulfillment is Matthew 18, where the same power to declare someone inside or outside is handed to the Church, and John 17, where our Lord asks that his people be one so that the world may believe that the Father sent him. The word visible is not in the text. What the text does is make the unity of his people the evidence offered to the world, and Catholics draw the conclusion that evidence the world is meant to read has to be evidence the world can see. State that step out loud rather than assuming it, because a thoughtful Protestant will hear the difference.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Letter to the Smyrnaeans, ch. 8

Writing around 107 on his way to martyrdom, Ignatius tells the Smyrnaeans that where the bishop appears, there the people should be, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.

This is the earliest surviving use of the phrase catholic Church, and note what it is doing: it locates the Church visibly, around a particular man in a particular place. Whatever else the early Christians thought the Church was, they thought you could point at it.

Famous and securely attested at the standard locus; substance given as summary.

Voice of the Church

St. Cyprian of Carthage

On the Unity of the Catholic Church, chs. 6-7

Cyprian writes that a person cannot have God for a Father who does not have the Church for a mother, and compares the Church to the seamless garment of Christ, which the soldiers would not tear.

He is writing during an actual schism, not composing theory. His concern is pastoral and urgent: a torn Church is a torn Christ, and the tearing is the thing he cannot accept.

Well attested; the Father and mother line and the seamless garment argument stand in consecutive chapters rather than in one, so the locus is given as chs. 6-7. Given as summary rather than quotation.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

City of God, Book XVIII, ch. 49 (summary)

Against the Donatists, who held that the true Church consists only of the pure, Augustine argues from the parables that the Church in this world is a mixed body, containing both wheat and weeds until the harvest, and that the servants are told not to attempt the separation themselves.

This matters for tonight in both directions. It concedes everything true in the invisible church instinct, and it denies the conclusion: the mixture is inside the one field, not evidence of a second and truer field elsewhere.

Given as a summary of his anti-Donatist argument rather than as a quotation.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 771 teaches that the Church is at once visible and spiritual, a society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ, one complex reality rather than two things.
- CCC 811-816 give the four marks and state that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church.
- CCC 819 states that many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church. Read this one aloud tonight.
- CCC 817-822 treat wounds to unity and the work of restoring it, and are worth having open if the room includes anyone with Protestant family.

Thread Watch

Leader only. Do not read aloud.

- THREAD A, the Unnoticed Premise. Tonight the premise takes its first positive hit. Sessions 1 and 2 showed what the text does not establish; tonight the group finds that the text positively describes a visible body with a decision procedure. Still do not name the thread.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. Envelopes stay sealed. Two sessions to go.
- THREAD C, the Ethiopian's Question. Ask it at Matthew 18:17: if two sincere readers disagree about what this passage requires, what does the passage itself tell them to do?

Session Goals

1. Every participant can explain why Matthew 18:17 requires a visible Church.
2. Every participant can state the invisible church position fairly enough that someone holding it would recognize it.
3. The group discovers that the parables of the mixed body concede the problem and locate the mixture in one field.
4. Every participant can say what the Church actually teaches about Christians outside her visible boundaries, accurately, without either triumphalism or vagueness.
5. Nobody leaves believing that the Catholic claim is that non-Catholics are damned, because that is not the claim.

Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win: 12 minutes.
- Build, questions 3 through 5 (Matthew 18 and Ephesians 4): 25 minutes.
- The steelman and question 6: 30 minutes.
- Question 7 and the honest teaching on those outside: 13 minutes. Do not cut this.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 12 minutes.

If you are running short: cut question 4 and the Dig Deeper on Acts 2. Never cut question 7; a session that presses the visible Church without stating what the Church teaches about those outside it will do harm.

THE OBJECTION BENCH

Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.

"The Church is the body of Christ, and a body is spiritual, not institutional."

Ask which body. St. Paul's body language in 1 Corinthians 12 is relentlessly physical and organizational: some are apostles, some prophets, some teachers, and he ranks them (12:28). A purely spiritual body does not have an ordered list of offices.

"Denominations are just branches. Unity is in Christ, not in structure."

Hold Ephesians 4:5 up to it: one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Ask, gently and without scoring: if two communities teach contradictory things about baptism, is that one faith? The branch metaphor is warm but the text says one, not several.

Then concede the real force: the divisions are a scandal, Catholics bear a share of the blame historically, and the Council said so. Do not defend the divisions; defend the claim that they are wounds rather than the design.

"So you are saying my Baptist grandmother is going to hell."

No, and answer it immediately and warmly rather than with qualifications first. The Church does not teach that. Baptism truly incorporates a person into Christ, and someone raised outside full communion through no fault of their own is not held culpable for that.

CCC 818 and 819 are the paragraphs. If it is your own group member's grandmother, put the theology down for a moment and say something kind first.

"The visible Church was corrupt for centuries. That proves it is not the true one."

Concede the history without flinching. There were corrupt popes, simony, and periods of genuine scandal, and pretending otherwise destroys your credibility.

Then ask what the objection proves. Judas was chosen personally by Christ and the promise did not fail. The Catholic claim has never been that the Church's members are good; it is that Christ keeps his promise to preserve her teaching, which is a narrower and more defensible claim than the one being attacked.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, on the night before you died you prayed that we would be one, so that the world would believe. We have not kept that unity well. Have mercy on us, and let us look at your Church tonight the way you see her. Amen.

Win

1. Have you ever belonged to something where the membership was genuinely unclear? How did that go?
2. When someone asks what church you go to, what do you actually say?

Build

THE GROUND Questions 3 through 5 are the discovery.

Read aloud: Matthew 18:15-18.

3. Walk through the three steps Jesus gives. What is the third one, and what would you have to do to actually obey it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Tell it to the church. To obey, you would need to know which church, be able to reach it, and be able to receive an answer from it.

Press gently: could you tell it to an invisible church? Could an invisible church answer? Could it treat someone as an outsider, which is what verse 17 goes on to say?

The command presupposes a body with a membership and a decision procedure. That is not a Catholic gloss; it is what obeying the sentence would require.

Be precise about how far this gets us, because a well read Protestant will be. It establishes that Christ expected an identifiable church with a membership and a way of rendering a decision. It does not by itself tell us which body that is, and someone who holds the universal Church to be invisible can answer that the local congregation is what you tell it to. That is a fair answer and we will meet it head on in the steelman. Tonight's claim is the one the text will bear: the Church of the New Testament is visible, identifiable and structured.

4. Verse 18 gives binding and loosing. Who is holding that authority here?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Look at who is being spoken to. The you in verse 18 is plural, and it lands immediately after "tell it to the church," so the binding and loosing is given to the disciples together, in the setting of the church acting on a case, not to an individual settling a private grievance. Catholics understand that authority as exercised in and through the Church. Note this carefully for Session 4: at Matthew 16 the same words are given to Peter alone along with the keys; here they are given in the plural. Both are true and we will sort out the relationship next week.

Do not run ahead into the papacy tonight. If someone raises it, say we are doing exactly that next session.

Live discovery. Give the group Ephesians 4:1-6 and ask them to count the ones. Then ask which of those seven things could be true of a set of communities that teach contradictory doctrines.

5. What did you count, and what did you conclude?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. Seven.

The pressure point is one faith and one baptism. Communities that contradict each other about what baptism does are not holding one faith about baptism, whatever else unites them.

Keep the tone even. Many in the room have Protestant family and the point is not that those people are frauds. The point is that Paul's unity is doctrinal and visible, not merely sentimental.

DIG DEEPER: What the first Christians looked like

Acts 2:42-47 describes a body with teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers, shared goods, daily meeting, and a countable membership that grows by a recorded number.

Whatever else this is, it is not anonymous. Somebody was counting.

The Steelman

THE DEPTH Read in full and do not soften it.

The strongest form of the objection.

Scripture says the Lord knows those who are his. That is the Church: the elect, known to God, hidden from us. And it must be so, because every visible church on earth is full of people who are not his. Some are hypocrites, some are frauds, and some sit in high office. Our Lord himself said the field would hold weeds among the wheat and the net would bring up fish of every kind, so we already know that any visible body will be mixed.

Which means identifying the true Church with a visible institution is a category error. It confuses the roster with the reality. The real Church is the company of the redeemed in every age and every denomination, and its unity is a unity in Christ that no organization chart can produce and no schism can destroy.

And do not hear this as a claim that congregations do not matter. The position holds both things at once. The universal Church is invisible because no one but God can read a heart and no roster can be trusted to match the book of life; meanwhile visible congregations genuinely preach, baptize, admit members and put members out. Matthew 18 is obeyed at that level, in the local body, by men who may be wrong. What is denied is only this: that any visible institution may identify itself with the whole Church of Christ, or claim that its verdict is anything more than the fallible judgment of Christians doing their best.

And the alternative is worse. If the true Church is a visible institution, then that institution can point at itself and say: we are the Church, and to question us is to question Christ. That is precisely the move that produced the abuses the Reformation answered.

6. That argument contains something true. What is it? And where does it go wrong?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

What is true: the visible Church is a mixed body. Catholics do not merely concede this, we teach it. Judas was among the Twelve. The parables of the weeds and the dragnet are our texts too, and the Church has always rejected the view that only the visibly pure belong to her.

Where it goes wrong is in what the parables actually say. The weeds grow in the field, and the servants are forbidden to pull them, and the sorting happens at the harvest. That is one field with a mixture in it, not a hidden true field somewhere else. The parable answers the problem of impurity without producing a second Church.

Second, Matthew 18:17 presses hard on the position, but notice exactly where. If the objection lets a visible congregation hear the case, it has already granted that Christ founded something you can point at, be a member of, and be put out of. What it still denies is that any such body is the Church rather than a fallible piece of it. That is the real question between us: whether Christ left his Church an authority that can actually settle a matter, or only congregations that can each settle it differently and none of which can be wrong in a way that matters.

Third, take the last part of the objection seriously rather than brushing it off. The worry about an institution claiming immunity from question is a real worry, and history gives it teeth. The Catholic answer is not that the Church is above criticism. It is that the promise of preservation attaches to her teaching, not to the holiness of her officeholders, which is why the Church can and does confess her members' sins without the promise failing.

7. So what does the Church actually teach about Christians who are not Catholic?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Read CCC 818 and 819 aloud. The Church teaches that those born into communities separated from full communion cannot be charged with the sin of separation, that they are accepted as brothers and sisters in the Lord, and that many elements of sanctification and truth exist outside her visible boundaries.

Say plainly: the Catholic claim is about where the fullness of the means of salvation is found, not a verdict on any individual soul. God is not bound by his sacraments even though we are.

If someone in the room has a Protestant spouse, parent, or grandparent, this is the most important five minutes of the session. Do not rush it and do not hedge it into mush.

Send

8. Where have you seen the Church's visible unity actually work? Where have you seen it fail?
9. Is there someone you love on the other side of this divide? What would you want them to hear from you this week?

Live It This Week

- Read Acts 2:42-47 and notice how ordinary and how organized it is.
- Pray once this week for Christian unity, specifically, by name, for someone not in full communion with the Church.
- Find out who your bishop is, if you do not know, and pray for him.
- If you have said something dismissive about another Christian community, go repair it.

Closing Prayer

Father, your Son asked that we be one so the world would believe. Forgive us for the ways we have made that harder. Keep us in the unity you gave, and make us the kind of people others would want to be one with. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Memory Verse

▮ *“One Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Ephesians 4:5*

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

- Leviticus 13:46, outside the camp
- Psalm 133:1, brothers dwelling in unity
- Matthew 18:15-18, tell it to the church (core text)
- Matthew 13:24-30 and 47-50, the weeds and the dragnet
- Ephesians 4:1-6, the seven ones (live discovery, memory verse at v. 5)
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-28, the body and its ordered offices
- Acts 2:42-47, the shape of the first community
- John 17:20-23, that they may be one so the world may believe
- 2 Timothy 2:19, the Lord knows those who are his (steelman)
- 1 Timothy 3:15, pillar and bulwark (carried from Session 1)

Catechism: CCC 771, 811-816, 817-822, with 818 and 819 read aloud.

Patristic: St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans ch. 8. St. Cyprian, On the Unity of the Catholic Church chs. 6-7. St. Augustine, anti-Donatist argument on the mixed body.