

It is surely manifest at once that if the Church of the New Testament be an invisible fellowship, then every visible thing on earth calling itself a Church is unscriptural and wrong; is in fact nothing less than a wicked attempt on the part of a mere human and unauthorized society, by appropriating a name which does not belong to it, to delude people into the notion that by joining it they will secure to themselves the promises and privileges which belong to another society altogether. It would hardly be honest for a new firm to take the name of an old and well-established house in order to gain for itself one credit and custom that belonged to the ancient and secure establishment; or, to take another illustration still fresh in men's minds, it was surely not right, it was most wicked and wrong, for the butcher, Arthur Orton, to take the name of Roger Tichborne that he might be able to appropriate as his own the rich estates of the Tichborne family. And yet this theory about the Church being invisible obliges us to believe that any visible thing on earth calling itself a Church is guilty of just such a crime as that.

But what then, you ask; do you deny that there is an invisible Church? And I answer yes, in the sense described by Dr. MacLaren, I do. The company of those who have passed out of the body into the presence of their Lord is invisible to us now, but it is not another Church, it is part of the same. It is also true that those who belong to Christ, not in name and by profession only, but in spirit and in truth, are invisible to us, and known only to God; but neither of these are ever called the invisible Church in the New Testament. That Church is a visible organized body, made up of good and bad members, tares and wheat, wheat and chaff, good fishes and bad, foolish virgins and wise, branches of the true vine, some living, some withering, some dead.

To all the members of this visible Church—this one body of Christ—as far as God's intention and gift and act can make them so, all the promises of the Gospel, all the privileges of the Church—membership in Christ, adoption and sonship, and inheritance among the saints—are pledged and do belong. Only, as in other matters, a gift has not only to be given but to be taken. A privilege must not only be conferred but accepted. An estate bequeathed must also be claimed and taken possession of before it benefits him to whom it has been given. But many, alas, to whom these high privileges belong, like Esau, despite their birthright, do not claim or seek to appropriate as their own these unspeakable gifts of God, and so forfeit and lose them. And yet they are gifts which God conveys in and through the visible Church to all who will receive them. And so I end this letter, as the last, by asserting, without any fear of contradiction, that there is not a shred of positive evidence in the Bible for the theory of an invisible Church which Dr. MacLaren tells has been learned from the Bible. And further, that that theory is positively excluded by many positive statements, and by the unvarying use of the term Church.