

The universal church consists of all the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, its head (Hebrews 12:23). This universal church is the bride and body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way, and the agency which forms the focus of God’s work of reconciling all things to himself (Ephesians 1:9–10, 23; 3:6–11; 5:25–32). The universal church may be called invisible with respect to the internal work of the Spirit.

All those who profess faith in Christ and obedience to the gospel, and who do not destroy their profession by unholiness of conduct, are to be regarded as visible saints. A local church ought to be constituted only of visible saints (Matthew 18:15–20; Acts 2:37–42; 1 Corinthians 5:1–9). In addition to this fundamental principle, true churches are recognised by their faithful preaching of the gospel (Galatians 1:6, 9), pure observance of the ordinances in the fear of God (Matthew 28:18–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–25), practice of church discipline (Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:1–9) and mutual love (John 13:34–35).

(Sola 5 Confession 7.1–7.2)

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, humanity has lived at enmity with God. From the beginning, however, God called a people out of their fallen state into relationship with him and with one another. This called out community is known as the church and is given visible expression in communities known as local churches. Confession 7 details what we believe about the church, and 7.1 and 7.2 speak, in particular, about what we believe about the universal church and local churches.

More often than not, when the New Testament uses the word “church” it has reference to visible, local churches. However, the New Testament also recognises the existence of the universal body of Christ—the universal church. Confession 7.1 recognises this: **The universal church consists of all the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, its head.**

Hebrews 12:23 calls the universal church “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” This gives the picture of a list of names “enrolled in heaven” who all form a part of “the assembly [or church] of the firstborn.” Can you think of other texts in the New Testament in which “church” refers to the people of God in this universal manner? _____

The Confession goes on to identify the particular ministry of the church as God’s reconciling agent: **This universal church is the bride and body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way, and the agency which forms the focus of God’s work of reconciling all things to himself.** Taking into account the supporting texts (Ephesians 1:9–10, 23; 3:6–11; 5:25–32), in what sense(s) is the church to work for reconciliation? _____

How can we know that the church is doing its job in fulfilling this ministry? _____

Explain the closing statement of Confession 7.1: **The universal church may be called invisible with respect to the internal work of the Spirit.** _____

The invisible (universal) church finds its expression in the local church. Confession. 7.2 moves onto a discussion of the local church: **All those who profess faith in Christ and obedience to the gospel, and who do not destroy their profession by unholiness of conduct, are to be regarded as visible saints.**

Qualifications for local (“visible”) church membership here are twofold: profession and practice.

First, church members are those **who profess faith in Christ and obedience to the gospel**. How do we assess someone’s profession of faith and obedience to the gospel? _____

Second, church members must **not destroy their profession by unholiness of conduct**. Why does a church member’s lifestyle matter? _____

Those who make the right profession and live in light of it **are to be regarded as visible saints**. Does this give the church declarative authority regarding a person’s salvation? _____

There are churches that welcome unbelievers as members, believing that membership will be some form of a witness to bring them to believe. The Confession, on the other hand, argues that **a local church ought to be constituted only of visible saints**. How do the supplied texts support this statement?

Matthew 18:15–20: _____

Acts 2:37–42: _____

1 Corinthians 5:1–9: _____

The Confession packs a punch into its closing sentence in 7.2: **In addition to this fundamental principle, true churches are recognised by their faithful preaching of the gospel (Galatians 1:6, 9), pure observance of the ordinances in the fear of God (Matthew 28:18–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–25), practice of church discipline (Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:1–9) and mutual love (John 13:34–35).**

These are all important marks of a healthy church, and the supplied texts provide ample support. Can you think of any other marks you might suggest to someone searching for a healthy church? _____

What does **mutual love** look like in the context of a local church? _____