



THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

SAM WALDRON



The Doctrine of Christ's Church

Exposition of the London Baptist Confession, Chapter 26

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The London Baptist Confession of 1689, Chapter 26

The following booklet by Sam Waldron is a commentary on Chapter 26 of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689. Chapter 26 is reproduced here in its entirety for ease of reference for the comments that follow.

1 The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole ^anumber of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all. (^a Heb 12:23; Col 1:18; Eph 1:10,22-23; 5:23,27,32)

2 All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, ^bare and may be called visible saints; ^cand of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.

(^b 1Co 1:2; Act 11:26; ^c Rom 1:7; Eph 1:20-22)

3 The purest churches under heaven are subject ^dto mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become ^eno churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan; nevertheless Christ always hath had, and ever shall have a ^fkingdom in this world, to the end thereof, of such as believe in him, and make profession of his name.

(^d 1Co 5; Rev 2-3; ^e Rev 18:2; 2Th 2:11-12; ^f Mat 16:18; Psalms 72:17; 102:28; Rev 12:17)

4 The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, in whom, by the appointment of the Father, ^gall power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner; neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is ^hthat antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.

(^g Col 1:18; Mat 28:18-20; Eph 4:11-12; ^h 2Th 2:2-9)

5 In the execution of this power wherewith he is so intrusted, the Lord Jesus calleth out of the world unto himself, through the ministry of his Word, by his Spirit, ⁱthose that are given unto him by his Father, that they may walk before him in all the ^kways of obedience, which he prescribeth to them in his Word. Those thus called, he commandeth to walk together in particular societies, or ^lchurches, for their mutual edification, and the due performance of

that public worship, which he requireth of them in the world. (ⁱ Joh 10:16; ^k Joh 12:32; Mat 28:20; ^l Mat 18:15-20)

6 The members of these churches are ^msaints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together, according to the appointment of Christ; giving up themselves to the Lord, and one to another, by the will of God, ⁿin professed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel. (^m Rom 1:7; 1Co 1:2; ⁿ Act 2:41-42; 5:13-14; 2Co 9:13)

7 To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his Word, he hath given all that ^opower and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power.

(^o Mat 18:17-18; 1Co 5:4-5; 5:13; 2Co 2:6-8)

8 A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church (so called and gathered), for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty, which he intrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are ^pbishops or elders, and deacons. (^p Act 20:17,28; Phi 1:1)

9 The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common ^qsuffrage of the church itself; and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the ^relder-ship of the church, if there be any before constituted therein; and of a deacon ^sthat he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands. (^q Act 14:23; ^r 1Ti 4:14; ^s Act 6:3,5-6)

10 The work of pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ, in his churches, in the ministry of the Word and prayer, ^twith watching for their souls, as they that must give an account to him; it is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister, not only to give them all due respect, ^ubut also to communicate to them of all their good things according to their ability, so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves ^xentangled in secular affairs; and may also be capable of exercising ^yhospitality towards others; and this is required by the ^zlaw of nature, and by the express order of our Lord Jesus, who hath ordained that they that preach the gospel should live of the gospel.

(^t Act 6:4; Heb 13:17; ^u 1Ti 5:17-18; Gal 6:6-7; ^x 2Ti 2:4; ^y 1Ti 3:2; ^z 1Co 9:6-14)

11 Although it be incumbent on the bishops or pastors of the churches, to be instant in preaching the Word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the Word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also ^agifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it. (^aAct 11:19-21; 1Pe 4:10-11)

12 As all believers are bound to join themselves to particular churches, when and where they have opportunity so to do; so all that are admitted unto the privileges of a church, are also ^bunder the censures and government thereof, according to the rule of Christ. (^b 1Th 5:14; 2Th 3:6,14-15)

13 No church members, upon any offence taken by them, having performed their duty required of them towards the person they are offended at, ought to disturb any church-order, or absent themselves from the assemblies of the church, or administration of any ordinances, upon the account of such offence at any of their fellow members, but to wait upon Christ, ^cin the further proceeding of the church. (^cMat 18:15-17; Eph 4:2-3)

14 As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to ^dpray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ, in all places, and upon all occasions to further every one within the bounds of their places and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and graces, so the churches, when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold ^ecommunion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.

(^dEph 6:18; Psa 122:6; ^e Rom 16:1-2; 3Jo 8-10)

15 In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, ^fand give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not intrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or ^gto impose their determination on the churches or officers. (^f Act 15:2,4,6,22-23,25; ^g 2Co 1:24; 1Jo 4:1)

The Doctrine of Christ's Church

Exposition of the London Baptist Confession, Chapter 26

Introduction

The Uniqueness and Importance of the Chapter

Chapter 26 of the 1689 Confession is one of the chapters in which it differs most widely from the Westminster Confession of Faith. The chapter entitled "On The Church" in the Westminster Confession of Faith has six paragraphs, whereas the 1689 Confession has fifteen. The doctrine of the church separates the Baptist Puritans from the Presbyterian Puritans. Baptists, however, were not the only ones to differ from the Westminster Confession of Faith on this issue. Many of the paragraphs in this chapter are derived from similar statements in a platform of church polity published with the Savoy Declaration of Faith by the Congregationalist Puritans in 1658. The ideas found in this chapter are, then, not exclusively those of Baptists, but ideas advocated by such Congregationalist Puritans as Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, and John Cotton. The polity of our Baptist forefathers derives from and is very similar to such Congregationalist Puritans. Only the idea of placing them in the Confession itself is unique to the Baptists. This shows the importance of the doctrine of the church for our Baptist forefathers.

The Analysis and Outline of the Chapter

This chapter is clearly divided into two distinct sections. Paragraphs 1-4 deal with the universal church, while Paragraphs 5-15 deal with the local church. This division is indicated not only by the respective emphases of the two parts of the chapter, but by their respective origins. Paragraphs 1-4 are substantially derived from the Savoy revision of the Westminster Confession's chapter on the church which deals with the universal church. Paragraphs 5-15 are, on the other hand, substantially derived from the platform of local church polity published with the Savoy Declaration. In the exposition of this chapter, the outline provided above will generally be followed.

1. The Universal Church

1. Its Identity (Paragraphs 1-2)

The Universal Church as Invisible

There are three key words in paragraph 1. The term “catholic” simply means universal. When we speak of the catholic church, we mean the universal church and not the Roman Church which calls itself universal, or catholic. The term “invisible” can be very easily misunderstood as it is used here. You will notice that it is very carefully qualified by the Confession: *which may be called invisible*.

The term “elect” is the third key word. The universal church as invisible consists of *the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one*. This paragraph, by means of these key words, teaches at least three things. Firstly, there is a universal church. Secondly, this universal church consists of all the elect. Thirdly, as such, this universal church is invisible.

Does the Bible teach that there is a universal church? The New Testament uses the word “church” one hundred and fifteen times. Most of those occurrences do not refer to the universal church, but to a local church or to local churches (2Co 8:23-24; Gal 1:2). Nevertheless, the New Testament does speak of a universal church (Mat 16:18; 1Co 12:28; Eph 1:22; 4:11-15; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32; Col 1:18, 24; Heb 12:23). Such passages refute Landmarkism¹ and its denial of a universal church.

Does the Bible teach that this universal church consists of all the elect? Here a distinction is crucial. We must distinguish between the visible church as it has existed in different periods of history from the ideal or invisible church.

The visible church was typified in the church or assembly of physical Israel created by the Old Covenant. The type began to be fulfilled in the church as a spiritual organism and institution created by the New Covenant. When the New Covenant is consummated in the age to come, all the elect will be a part of it in the glory of resurrected life. There is a distinction implied here which enables us to do justice to portions of the New Testament which are frequently misinterpreted.

There was, on the one hand, a very important sense in which the church *begun* as an institution and organism in the complex of events surrounding Christ’s first advent. There was a sense in which historically the church as the final organized expression of the people of God began in the events of Christ’s

¹ Landmarkism – a 19th century variation of Baptist ecclesiology that affirms only faithful Baptist churches are legitimate churches and that they are part of an unbroken line of faithful churches from apostolic times.

early ministry: death, resurrection, and pouring out of the Spirit. The apostles of Christ are the historical foundation upon which Christ is now building His church (Mat 16:18; Eph 2:20; Heb 12:18-24). The future tense in the statement of Christ, "I will build my church," may, therefore, be given its natural force. Though Israel was a type of the church (Rom 2:28-29; 1Co 10:18; Gal 6:16; Phi 3:3) and though the church is the new Israel of God and the fulfillment of prophecy (Act 2:16; 15:14-18; 1Co 10:11; Gal 6:16; Eph 2:12-19; Heb 8:7-13), it is true that the church as the institution and organism it is today did not exist in the Old Testament. These truths contradict the tendency of some strains of Covenant Theology to flatten the difference between the church and Israel in the interest of paedobaptism.

On the other hand, the church can be considered invisibly in Scripture. Thus, language is frequently used which equates the church with all those in union with Christ. The church is the body and bride of Christ (Eph 1:22; 4:11-16; 5:23-27, 29, 32; Col 1:18, 24). Furthermore, the bride of Christ is composed in the last day of the saved from every age (Eph 5:27; Rev 21:9-14; note also Mat 8:11-12; Joh 10:14-17; Heb 11:39, 40). Thus, the visible church will one day be composed of all the redeemed. As the people of God, the church does consist of *the whole number of the elect*. These considerations refute Dispensationalism with its church/Israel distinction and its denial that the Old Testament saints are part of the church.

Does the Bible teach that this universal church is invisible? If we use the term "invisible," we must, like the Confession, use it very carefully, because there is no invisible church absolutely distinct from the visible church. In other words, the universal church is always also a visible, organized institution. John Murray says, "There is no evidence for the notion of the 'church' as an invisible entity distinct from the church visible."² The universal church is always visible, even if it is not perfectly or completely visible. The universal church spoken of in Ephesians is visible (Eph 1:22; 3:10, 21; 4:4, 11-13; cf. 1Co 12:28). The universal church could be persecuted and so had to be visible (Act 8:1, 3; 9:1-2, 31; cf. Gal 1:13; Phi 3:6). One may not credibly profess to be a member of the invisible church while despising membership and fellowship in the visible church.

In what sense, then, is the church "invisible"? It is invisible because we cannot directly see the work of the Spirit which joins a person to Christ. It is invisible because we cannot perfectly judge the truth of another person's grace. It is invisible because the church as a whole is not yet a perfected, earthly reality.³

² John Murray, *Collected Writings* Vol. II (Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 234.

³ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 312.

The Universal Church as Visible

The universal church is not simply or completely invisible. Paragraph 2 teaches that it is visible. It asserts two things about this visible, universal church.⁴ The identity of the visible church is described as those only who profess to believe the gospel and obey Christ and who do not contradict this profession by holding foundational errors or practicing ungodliness (1Co 1:2; Rom 1:7-8; Act 11:26; Mat 16:18; 28:15-20; 1Co 5:1-9). The relation of the universal, visible church to local churches is that only visible saints should be members of local churches (Mat 18:15-20; Act 2:37-42; 4:4; 1Co 5:1-9). While the universal church is not perfectly or completely visible, it is practically visible. There is no true Christian who does not confess Christ's name and obey Him outwardly. Any profession of faith, no matter how glowing, is contradicted by impenitence in any heresy or path of ungodliness.

Particular notice must be given to the phrase in paragraph 2, *everting the foundation*. The old English word “evert” may mean to turn something inside out. Here, however, because of its use with the word “foundation” it rather means to turn something upside down or to overthrow it. Thus, it speaks of errors which overthrow the foundations of Christian doctrine. This is why I have spoken of heresy. There is a distinction between lesser errors which are consistent with a profession of faith and greater errors which overthrow the foundation of the Christian faith and must be called heresy. It is very important practically and for the sake of Christian charity to distinguish between lesser errors from such error or heresy which overthrows the foundation.

2. Its Perpetuity (Paragraph 3)

1. Its Seeming Improbability

The perpetuity of the universal, visible church is introduced by a reference to certain realities which might seem to make such perpetuity implausible or doubtful. Those realities are that local churches can sin (1Co 1:11; 5:1; 6:6; 11:17-19; 3Jo 1:9, 10) and even apostatize (Rev 2:5 with 1:20; 1Ti 3:14-15). We must not blindly follow the examples of any church or its leaders. We must watch carefully against corporate sin and apostasy. If you love your church, you must pray for your church, watch against sin, and exhort those in sin.

⁴ The 1689 Confession does not use the phrase “visible church,” speaking instead of “visible saints.” It does suggest the phrase “visible church,” by speaking of “particular congregations” later in the paragraph. The writers may have avoided the term “visible church” in order to avoid the impression that a visible, universal church exists with earthly officers which have authority over more than one congregation. Note the assertion of the independence of the local church in paragraph 7.

2. Its Actual Certainty

In spite of such realities which may befall individual local churches, the universal church will always visibly continue (Mat 16:18; 24:14; 28:20; Mar 4:30-32; Psa 72:16-18; Isa 9:6-7). Both the Scriptures and the Confession are speaking of the indestructibility of the visible, universal church. Christ will always “have a kingdom...of such as...make profession of his name.” We need not fear that the name and church of Christ will ever vanish. Atheists predict it. Novelists write about it. Voltaire prophesied it, but his home was turned into a place where Bibles were printed.⁵ We may claim these promises in our prayers for our own local church. While we have no absolute promise that our own local church will continue, we do know that Christ’s universal church will always visibly continue. The way in which He has appointed for that to happen is in local churches like ours. Thus, we may pray that He would build His church and defeat the forces of Satan through us!

3. Its Authority (Paragraph 4)

The main point of paragraph 4 is that the Lord Jesus is the head or authority of the universal church. Secondly, it is deduced from this that the pope of Rome is not in any sense the head of the church. Many who hold staunchly to the 1689 Confession doubt the value of its dogmatism regarding the pope being the antichrist. This writer is among these. Such doubts are commonly viewed as consistent with full subscription of the Confession. This is one of those statements which might be qualified in the Confession. Such a qualification must be made, however, not because of any weakening of our convictions about the apostate condition of the Church of Rome or the wicked and heretical character of the claims of the pope, but out of the exegetical conviction that the statement of the Confession is without adequate biblical basis.⁶

Christ is repeatedly asserted to be the head of the church (Col 1:18; Eph 4:11-16; 1:20-23; 5:23-32; 1Co 12:27-28; Joh 17:1-3; Mat 28:18-20; Act 5:31; Joh 10:14-16). Someone might say, however, “All this sounds great, but how does this work out practically? Christ is in heaven, not on earth. No living person on earth has literally spoken to Him face to face in almost twenty centuries. What really can such a headship mean? How is it exercised?” The answer to this latter question is actually very simple. Christ exercises His headship by the Holy Spirit working through His appointed representatives on earth.

⁵ <https://crossexamined.org/voltaires-prediction-home-and-the-bible-society-truth-or-myth-further-evidence-of-verification/>

⁶ The writer’s own conviction is that 2 Thessalonians 2 is speaking of an individual destroyed at the second coming of Christ, not a line of popes. Of course, it is possible that a future pope could be that individual.

The Holy Spirit is the Vicar of Christ. He is sent to carry on and carry out Christ's work (Joh 14:16-18, 26; 15:26-27; 16:7-13; Act 16:6-10; 2Co 3:17-18). The apostles of Christ are "universal overseers" of the church and through their witness are its foundation (Mat 16:16-18; Eph 2:19-22; Act 1:20-26; Rev 21:14). Thus, the work of the ascended Christ is carried on through their "witness" (Act 5:31-32). These "witnesses" still rule Christ's church through their inscripturated testimony (the New Testament). The Spirit is present to apply that Word to the end of the age. The apostles of Christ, the universal overseers of the church, were not content to have local groups of believers without definition or leadership. Here, they again had the mind of Christ Who was giving gifts to the church. Hence, they appointed local overseers in the individual churches (Eph 4:11; Act 14:23; 13:1; 20:28; 1Pe 5:1; Ti 1:5-9). These leaders, who are variously called elders, overseers, pastors, or teachers, exercise a real, but only a local and fallible authority, in the particular church where they are appointed. Yet, in those churches they do exercise Christ's authority and rule over His church.

If what we have said about the headship of Christ and its earthly representatives is true, then the claims of the pope are false and so also are the claims of any person or persons who would claim authority over all or even many local churches. The true Vicar of Christ is the Holy Spirit, not the pope. The pope does not possess the qualifications to be an apostle. The only genuine apostolic succession is that present in the writings of the New Testament. The only earthly representatives of Christ's authority are local overseers. Their authority is strictly local, while the pope wrongly claims universal authority.

2. The Local Church

Having examined the universal church in paragraphs 1-4, and having concluded that examination by an assertion that the Lord Jesus Christ is its living head, the Confession comes now, in paragraph 5, to apply the truth of this headship to the particular, individual expression of the universal church, which is the local church. Having just spoken to how Christ as the head of the church *is invested with all power for the calling, institution, and order or government of the church*, the Confession now shows how Christ exercises that power in the origin of local churches.

1. Its Originating Mandate (Paragraph 5)

This paragraph teaches that the local church originates from Jesus Christ, its living and powerful head. Jesus Christ originates the church by His saving power and His authoritative mandate. His saving power is the foundation of that mandate.

1. The Foundation of the Mandate

The first step in the origin of any local church is that Christ powerfully and effectually brings men to Himself by calling them through His Word and Spirit. This effectual calling takes place by means of the Word, through the power of the Spirit and according to the pattern of God's electing purpose (Joh 10:16, 27-28; 12:32; 17:2; Act 5:31-32; see Chapter 10 of the Confession). The call to salvation comes to us in the context and framework of the Great Commission (Mat 28:18-20). Its goal, stated in verse 20 of that passage, is that those called should be taught to observe all that Christ commanded the apostles.

2. The Substance of the Mandate

Christ's command to His people to walk together in particular churches is not merely another one of His precepts. This precept creates the structure or context in which the Great Commission (especially the third part alluded to in the Confession) is carried out. Jesus desires that His disciples be taught to observe all that He commanded. How shall this be accomplished? By the creation of local churches, with local teacher-elders. Jesus commands such churches in Matthew 18:15-20. If Jesus commands that offenses be brought to the church and commands the church to rebuke such offenses and ultimately to exclude the impenitent, then necessarily He commands the existence of these local churches. In this passage, the stated purpose of the church is to teach one of Christ's commands to an erring member by calling him to repentance and, if necessary, by disciplinary action.

Jesus also gives a mandate to such local churches through the example of His apostles. The apostle Paul, Christ's personal representative, fulfilled the Great Commission everywhere he went by forming local churches and appointing local teacher-elders in those churches. Three instructive examples of this may be mentioned. In Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia, Paul personally founded such churches and appointed such local teachers (Act 14:21-23). In the cities of Crete, Paul again established such churches, but part of their organization was left to his representative, Titus (Ti 1:5). In Ephesus there was again a combination of Paul's initial personal activity and, later, solidification through his apostolic representatives (1Ti 1:3; 3:14-16; 5:17-22).

What were these elders? They were official teachers appointed to carry on the work, especially of the third part of the Great Commission, while Paul moved on to new fields (1Ti 3:2; 5:17; Ti 1:9-11; Eph 4:11-13).

The central manward ministry of the local church is the building up of believers in their obedience to all the commands of Christ. Ordinarily and normatively, teaching the disciples of Christ to observe all His commands demands the existence of officially recognized teacher/elders in the local church. The church may exist, but it cannot be well, without such pastor-

teachers. It is often said that while one church may be strong in the teaching of God's Word to God's people, other churches may be strong in music, fellowship, social concerns, or evangelism. Such assertions are false. Teaching the Word is an essential and central manward function of every church (1Ti 3:15).

The necessity of church-planting as an essential, integral part of fulfilling the Great Commission is also underscored by the above. It is often argued for one reason or another that the church cannot fulfill the Great Commission. In fact, only the church can fulfill the Great Commission because that commission assumes and demands the creation of local churches.

2. Its Defined Membership (Paragraph 6)

Discipleship, baptism, and church membership are intimately connected in the Great Commission. Discipleship, therefore, demands baptism, church membership, and submission to the elders/teachers of the church. Church membership presupposes and demands discipleship manifesting itself in obedience to the Lord—obedience manifested specifically in the acts of baptism and submission to the Word in the teaching ministry of the church. Baptism is not to be divorced from discipleship and church membership. A further implication of all this is that baptized disciples who leave one local church ought not to be and ought not to expect to be gullibly or automatically received by another local church. They ought willingly to provide that church and its elders with proof of their discipleship by verbally relating their experience of Christ, letters of recommendation from their former church, and their manifest good conduct and submission to the Lord and His church (Act 9:26-30; Jude 1:4; Rev 2:2, 14-15).

3. Its Authoritative Power (Paragraph 7)

Its defined recipients

Its complete sufficiency

Its reiterated origin

Its specified purpose

Its regulated execution

Clearly, the subject of paragraph 7 is the power and authority possessed by the local church. In dealing with this paragraph, we must first examine the description of this power in the Confession. The five points of this description are set out in the outline above. The scriptural evidence for this description may be found in two passages which explicitly mention or support every one of the points made by the Confession about this power given to the local church (Mat 18:15-20; 1Co 5:1-13, especially vv. 4-5). In these passages, *the defined recipient* of this power is the local church. Even the local church at Corinth, with all its problems, possesses this power. *Its complete sufficiency*

is suggested by the mention of the keys of the kingdom in Matthew 18:18-19. In 1 Corinthians 5, this sufficiency is suggested by the assertion that in their assembly the power of the Lord Jesus was present (v. 4) and by the command to remove the wicked man in verses 7 and 13. *The reiterated origin* of this power is clearly Christ Himself (Mat 18:20; 1Co 5:3-5). *The specified purpose* of this power includes even the excommunication of a member of the church (Mat 18:17; 1Co 5:7, 13), but worship is also suggested by Matthew 18:20. *Its regulated execution* is clearly indicated by the detailed rules given in Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5:4, 11, with 2 Corinthians 2:6-8.

In the letters to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3, the subject of church discipline is repeatedly emphasized by Christ, but each church is held solely responsible for its own members and their discipline. Christ never asserts, assumes, or implies that the other churches may exercise church discipline by intervening in another church's affairs. The entire group is not held responsible or told to act for the discipline of Laodicea.⁷

Presbyterians object to such independence for each local congregation under Christ on many different grounds. The key and classic passage, however, upon which their arguments depend is Acts 15.⁸ Essentially, the Presbyterian argument rests on two points. First, the gathering in Jerusalem exercised authority over many different local churches. This point is certainly correct (Act 15:28; 16:4). Second, the gathering in Jerusalem was a church council or synod constituted by elders representing many different local churches. It is this point which must be disputed.

While it is true that "elders" were subordinately involved in the authoritative decision (Act 15:23; 16:4), it is not true, nor can it be proved, that this gathering was composed of the elders of many churches or even two churches. There is no evidence that even Paul and Barnabas were among "the apostles and elders" who made the decision (Act 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4). Acts 15:2, 4, and 16:4 especially exclude Paul and Barnabas from the elders in view. There is absolutely no proof that any of the elders of the many other churches to whom the decrees were delivered were present.

The authority of the council of the church at Jerusalem is rather based on factors unique to that church. For many reasons, the church of Jerusalem had a unique authority in redemptive history unparalleled by any other church. Hence, it cannot be made an example for other later and lesser churches:

- It was the church where the twelve apostles dwelt. Their influence and presence would give her official statements great authority.

⁷ Note Wardlaw's remarks cited in James Bannerman's *Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), vol. II, 300.

⁸ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), vol. II, 325, 326.

This was probably the definitive reason for the authority of this council.

- It was also the first church of Christianity.
- Its leaders (even without counting the Twelve) were the original disciples and followers of Christ. Elders like James, the half-brother of our Lord, though not among the original twelve apostles, yet exercised an authority that can only be called apostolic (Gal 2:9; 1Co 15:7).

It exercised an authority for all the reasons stated above akin to the Jewish Sanhedrin's (the council of the seventy elders of Israel) authority over Jewish synagogues everywhere.

Several practical lessons are underscored by paragraph 7. We learn the high authority of the true local church. We see the solemn privilege of being a member of it and under its authority. We note the solemn responsibility of the local church not to abuse its power. We understand the glorious liberty of the true local church. There is no higher religious authority instituted among men. Finally, we observe the vital origin of the power of the local church—the special presence of Christ.

4. Its Appointed Government (Paragraphs 8-13)

1. The Identity of Its Government (Paragraph 8)

The point of paragraph 8 is that Christ has appointed only two continuing offices in the local church—elders and deacons. According to the Confession, elders, bishops, and pastors occupy exactly the same office. It may be helpful to collate the evidence for this assertion. Paragraph 8 speaks of “bishops or elders and deacons.” Paragraph 9 speaks of “the office of bishop or elder in a church.” Paragraph 11 speaks of “the bishops or pastors of the churches.” The statements of this chapter put beyond all reasonable doubt that it views the office of elder, bishop, or pastor as one and the same. It was common for those Puritans to argue that all elders were bishops and reject the distinction between bishops and elders assumed by those who held an episcopal form of church government.⁹ More might be said, but the main, biblical assertions important to this (two-office) view of church government are these:

⁹ While the evidence for the two-office view of church government in the Confession is clear, there are remaining questions that are raised by but remain unanswered in the Confession. Paragraph 10 speaks of the financial support of “pastors.” Furthermore, it seems to imply that all such pastors should be supported as the church has ability. This seems, however, both unlikely in itself and contrary to Scripture (1Ti 5:17-18; Act 20:33-35). Perhaps the interpretation which does the most justice to the language of the Confession emphasizes the qualifying phrase in paragraph 10, “according to their ability.” In the original Scripture proofs of the Confession, 1 Timothy 5:17-18 is cited at this point. Perhaps, the Confession is asserting that “ideally” all elders should be supported, but this phrase adds the

- First, only these two offices are mentioned in the classic New Testament passages on the continuing offices of the local church (Phi 1:1; 1Ti 3:1-13). The implication is that there were no other offices.
- Second, the office of elder or presbyter, overseer or bishop, and pastor or shepherd are one and the same (Act 20:17, 28; Ti 1:5-7; 1Pe 5:2; and 1Ti 3:2, with Eph 4:11). It is common today to draw a distinction between pastors and elders. In Acts 20:17 and 28 and 1 Peter 5:2 the elders are commanded to shepherd or pastor the church. In 1 Timothy 3:2, it is required that all elders be able to teach. The pastor-teachers of Ephesians 4:11 are simply elders. There are not three offices in the church—pastor, elder, and deacon. There are only two offices—overseer-elder-pastor and deacon. Pastors and elders are the same. The biblical teaching should not be subtly undermined by unbiblical terminology.
- Third, the norm is a plurality of elders in each local church. This is the clear implication of both the Bible and the Confession. No instance of a New Testament church with only one elder exists. Universally, a plurality of elders is mentioned (Act 14:23; 20:17; Phi 1:1, 1Th 5:12; Ti 1:5; Heb 13:17; Jam 5:14).
- Fourth, though these elders hold the same office and thus have the same authority, this does not mean that they are and must be equal in every respect. There is, first, legitimate diversity as to spiritual gifts (1Co 12:11; 1Pe 4:10-11). There are different gifts in the eldership (Rom 12:7-8) and different degrees of these gifts (Mat 25:14-15). There is, second, legitimate diversity as to financial support (1Ti 5:17-18). There is, third, different degrees of actual influence. This was true of the highest office in Christ's church—the office of apostle. Paul labored more than all the apostles and had a greater influence (1Co 15:10). Peter exercised a greater influence than many of the other apostles (Mat 16:18; Act 1:15; 2:14, 38; 3:1). What is true of the extraordinary office of apostle certainly must be true of the ordinary office of the pastor or elder.

2. The Appointment of Its Government (Paragraph 9)

The spiritual prerequisite for appointment to office in the church is stated in the words “fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit” (Eph 4:11; 1Ti 3:1-13). The church has no right to appoint any man to an office for which God has not fitted him.

thought that this support must be according to the priorities for pastoral support stated in the Bible.

The essential features of this appointment are two: election and ordination. I use both words to describe paragraph 9 with some hesitation. *Election* is used with some reservation. To modern ears, an election connotes several things which clearly deviate from what the Word of God teaches. There is no scriptural instance in which two or more men compete for votes in order to be elected to office in the church. There is no basis for the idea that election is an act of sovereign and autonomous authority or that it is the ultimate source of power in the church. Again, such an idea contradicts the scriptural teaching. We have no biblical right before Christ to vote for whomever we please. We have a duty to vote for the one Christ is giving as a gift to His church. The term “election” is used only to epitomize what is meant by the Confession when it asserts that calling to an office in the church must be “by the common suffrage of the church itself.” No one may be appointed to any office in the church without the consent of the church itself. The elders of the church may not appoint a man to be a fellow elder without the consent of the church.

No supposed higher authority may do this, whether that authority is a bishop, a denomination, or a pope.

This “common suffrage of the church” is deduced from the teaching of paragraph 7. Since God has given all needful power to the local church to carry on that order He has ordained, and if this authority extends even to the excommunication of its members, and if excommunication may only be enacted by the consent of the assembled church (Mat 18:15-17; 1Co 5:1-13), then this suggests that no officer may be appointed without the consent of the congregation. Further confirmation of this comes from the account of the selection of deacons in Acts 6. That account shows that the authority of the church extends to the election of officers. The requirement of Acts 14:23 may also suggest this act of election. The Greek word used here originally meant to vote by stretching out the hand. Luke may have used this word to suggest “the common suffrage of the church.” More relevant to this matter may be the description of the church as a royal priesthood (1Pe 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10). An indication of the church being a royal priesthood is that it is permitted to recognize and consent to the leadership given by its head.

Ordination is also used only with reservation. It means many things in contemporary religious circles which I do not intend by its use here. Baptist polity does not permit the notions of permanent or universal ordination. Ordination, if it is used to describe anything biblical, must be used to succinctly describe the formal installation of a man into a biblical church office by means of “the imposition of hands of the eldership of the church.” Both this paragraph and the Bible mandate such *ordination* for elders and deacons. The Seven in Acts 6:6 were so ordained as deacons of the church at Jerusalem. Though no explicit text in the New Testament records elders laying hands on

men who are being set apart to the eldership, there is every reason to think that this is right. There are instances of elders ordaining and elders being ordained. There is, therefore, biblical warrant for elders being set apart through the laying on of hands by the already constituted eldership of a church. This *ordination* is a necessary part of the process. An important implication of this is that no man on whom the elders of the church cannot in good conscience lay hands may be ordained to the eldership (1Ti 5:22). The church and its elders must therefore agree in the setting apart of any new officer.¹⁰

Notice the table below which collates the biblical instances of “ordination.”

Scripture	Who Ordained?	Who was Ordained?
1 Timothy 4:14	Eldership	Timothy
1 Timothy 5:22	Timothy	Elders
Acts 6:6	The Twelve	The Seven
Acts 13:3	Prophets and Teachers	Paul and Barnabas
2 Timothy 1:6	Paul	Timothy

3. *The Cornerstone of Its Government: the Ministry of the Word (Paragraphs 10-11)*

The Confession moves now to the ministry of the Word in its treatment of the government of the church. This is significant because Christ rules the church by the Word of God. The church’s highest continuing office has as its unique requirement the ability to teach (1Ti 3:2; 5:17). The first deacons were appointed to be servants of the servants of the Word so that this central function would not be neglected even for so noble a purpose as feeding widows (Act 6:2, 4). The church’s central function is the proclamation of the Word (1Ti 3:15). Hence, the ministry of the Word is the cornerstone of its government.

The official ministry of the Word by pastors is the subject of paragraph 10. The thrust of paragraph 10 is the material support of elders in the local church. Thus, I want to isolate and concentrate attention on that subject. Such concentrated attention is, perhaps, especially warranted because only this paragraph of this chapter appears to have no precedent in any of the previous Confessions from which the authors drew.

There are, of course, not a few who have denied that an elder in the local church ought to be supported regularly. Since such a view can have

¹⁰ John Cotton in *The Keys of the Kingdom* (San Diego: Thaddeus Publications, 2018) is seminal and vastly important for Congregational Puritan polity and the Particular Baptist polity which descends from it. He argues that both the authority of the eldership and the liberty of the membership are necessary for the bringing to the completion of any church act.

devastating results for the church, it is important to focus our attention on this point. The biblical evidence is mainly to be found in three classic passages.

- 1 Timothy 5:17-18 describes material support as “honor.” *What is double honor?* Honor here means financial support. The Greek word translated as “honor” in the New Testament frequently designates something of material value (Mat 27:6-9; Act 4:34; 5:2-3; 7:16). Honor is used of material support in the immediate context of 1 Timothy 5:17-18 (cf. v. 3 and vv. 4-8, 16). 1 Timothy 5:18 supports the statement of verse 17 (note the conjunction, “for”) with verses used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe material support (1Co 9:9; Mat 10:10; Luk 10:7). What, then, is double honor? Two clues unlock the meaning of this unusual phrase. The first is the use of honor in verse 3. Note the connection with verse 17. Widows are to be honored (financially). Elders are to be doubly-honored (financially). The second clue is the use of “double” in the New Testament (Rev 18:6; Mat 23:15). “Double” is used figuratively to indicate amplitude or great extent. Double honor, then, is ample material or financial support. *Who are to be doubly-honored?* The answer is clearly elders who rule well, but especially those who labor in the Word and teaching—the public ministry of the Word. Paul’s thought may be illustrated by means of two concentric circles. The outer circle encompasses all elders who rule well. The inner circle encompasses those elders who (are gifted to) “work hard at preaching and teaching.” Financial support must be focused on the inner circle and then radiate outward as the necessity and ability of the church makes this appropriate.
- Galatians 6:6 describes material support as “sharing.” Three questions again must be put to this text. *What is to be shared?* The answer is: “all good things.” The “good things” of verse 10 are clearly material blessings. The emphasis on “all good things” indicates an open-hearted generosity. *With whom are they to be shared?* They are to be shared with the one who teaches the Word. The word translated as “teach” in this verse is the one from which the English word “catechize” is derived. It designates formal, regular, or systematic instruction (Rom 2:18). *What are the consequences of such sharing of all good things?* The consequences of the duty stated in Galatians 6:6 must be emphasized. There are great spiritual consequences, for better or for worse, depending on the performance of this duty (Gal 6:7-9). The wicked and oppressive failure of most evangelical churches to support their pastors amply is at the root of much of the dearth and curse which is upon

the professing church of Jesus Christ. Those who highly value the labor of the servant of God will find themselves blessed with highly valuable labor.

- 1 Corinthians 9:14 describes material support as “a living.” Two questions again enable us to understand its significance. *Who should have a living?* The one who preaches (solemnly proclaims) the gospel. *What is to be earned?* “A living” or “livelihood.” This designates such a sufficient supply of this world’s goods as to have a decent life, as opposed to such an insufficiency as makes life a slow death.

Other data may be found in Matthew 10:10; Luke 10:7; Philippians 4:10-20; and 2 Timothy 2:4-6. Gospel ministers should be so supported as not to be necessarily entangled or distracted by worldly needs. 1 Peter 5:2 shows that the early church was marked by the custom of so comfortably supporting their teachers as to open the possibility that some would rule for the sake of sordid gain (cf. 1Ti 6:5).

Several important conclusions may be drawn from this biblical data. The first is that elders in the local church are to be supported materially. No hair-splitting distinctions are to be found in these passages. The Bible does not fastidiously restrict support only to some rare class of teachers or itinerant missionaries. Its wording is broad. 1 Corinthians 9:14 speaks of “they which preach the gospel.” Galatians 6:6 speaks of “him that teacheth.” 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of “the elders that rule well... especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.”

The second conclusion is that the focus of material support should be upon those elders who engage in the public ministry of the Word. This again underscores the preeminence of the Word in the church.

The third conclusion is that the extent of material support given to such elders by the church ought to be generous and ample. It ought to be “a living,” “all good things,” and “double honor” (1Co 9:14; Gal 6:6; 1Ti 5:17). The Confession’s language is admirable. Churches are “to communicate to them of all their good things, according to their ability, so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves entangled in secular affairs; and may also be capable of exercising hospitality toward others.”

The auxiliary ministry of the Word by others is the theme of paragraph 11. The prohibition of preaching by non-ministers is usually associated with an exaggerated distinction between ministers and elders. There is, however, no precept forbidding any Christian to preach the gospel as he may have opportunity. There are examples of Christians preaching the Word who were not ordained elders (Act 8:5; 11:19-21; 1Pe 4:10). There are precepts and

principles which require him to avoid pride and to submit to the church and its overseers in the estimate and exercise of his gifts (Rom 12:3; Heb 13:17).

The teaching of the 1689 here, regarding the administration of the ordinances (28:2), is in contrast to that of the Westminster Confession, which frequently speaks of ministers of the Word as alone competent to preach and administer the sacraments (Chapters: 15:1; 27:4; 28:2; 29:3). Particularly revelatory of the restrictive, Presbyterian view of this matter is the statement of 27:4 (WCF): “There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.”

4. The Extent of Its Government (Paragraphs 12-13)

These paragraphs deal with that aspect of church government which concerns the discipline of the local church. My use of the term “discipline” may require explanation since it is not used in these paragraphs. The Bible teaches that the local church is neither a loose-knit social club, nor merely a preaching center. The Bible teaches that the local church is a society dedicated to teaching men to observe all that Christ commanded. It is, therefore, a religious order characterized by mutual accountability. God has commanded the church to exercise a certain authority or discipline over its members in order to bring them to the observance of all Christ’s commands. He has even given the church power to publicly censure, admonish, and ultimately expel those who impenitently or grossly violate Christ’s commands. It is this authority and these actions which are commonly called the discipline of the local church.

Paragraphs 12 and 13 concentrate on one main point: the duty of subjection to the discipline of the local church. As the outline makes clear, according to the Confession this discipline extends to all the members of the church and all church problems.

Paragraph 12 asserts that all believers are bound to join a local church (“when and where they have opportunity so to do”) and, when they join, to submit themselves to its discipline. This is assumed because it has already been stated in paragraph 5. The implication of this duty is that Christians ought to submit to the government of their churches. Biblical support for the duty to join and submit to the discipline of the local church is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; and Hebrews 13:17.

Paragraph 13 pointedly addresses a sin against the government of the church, which is very common today.

The situation envisioned is that certain church members have been offended by another person in the church. They have performed the duty

required in Matthew 18:15-17. The person has not satisfied them by his repentance. At this point, the Confession is not clear. Perhaps the people have not yet taken the matter to the church. Perhaps they have, but the church has not yet acted; at least, not to their satisfaction. The Confession assumes that these people belong to a church that has a manifested commitment to church discipline. The Confession also is assuming that the church is led by faithful, though, of course, fallible pastors. The great question facing these people is what do they do now? *The prohibition issued* informs such church members as to what they should not do! The substance of the Confession's prohibition is that there must be no anarchy, no revolution against the discipline of the church. There must be no disturbance of the church-order by public demonstrations, whispering or letter-writing campaigns, or gossip.

There must be no absenting of themselves from the church's meetings or abstinence from the church's ordinances.

The direction required informs such members of what they should do! If they have not told the church, they should. If they have told the church and the church has not yet acted, they should wait upon Christ in the further proceeding of the church. They should do the one thing that people in such a situation are least likely to do. They should pray. They should continue to believe that there is someone higher than the elders in every true church—the Lord Jesus Christ—and wait on the orderly proceeding of the church.

In our day, when the situation envisioned in this paragraph would be viewed as a clear warrant for a church split, the teaching of this paragraph is radical. "What!" someone says, "Just wait? What about how offended I am? You mean I do not have the right to just leave for another church?" Such attitudes require that the scriptural warrant for the statements of the Confession be examined.

The regulative importance of Christ's directions in Matthew 18:15-17 for our conduct in the church must be remembered. The principles taught there are underscored in Ephesians 4:2-3; Colossians 3:12-15; and 1 John 2:7-11, 18-19. If you love your brother, you will not leave his fellowship without the greatest grief, reluctance, and hesitation. If you are endeavoring diligently to maintain the unity of the Spirit, you will not in selfish petulance disturb the unity of the church. If you are humble, you will not be arrogantly positive that your perspective on your brother and the Scripture is without defect. You will carefully and slowly reexamine yourself if the church refrains from exercising discipline. You will remember that, even if you are right this time, you have been slow to see the right before. Therefore, you will exercise forbearance and longsuffering.

The regulative importance of Christ's presence for our conduct in the church must also be remembered (Mat 28:20). The precise words of the Confession are that we should "wait upon Christ in the further proceeding of the

church.” Is Christ present? Are you in a true church with qualified pastors? Then, even if the church has temporarily delayed or even miscarried in its obedience to Christ, should not your posture be one of prayerful waiting on Christ to vindicate you? Hastily disturbing the peace of the church and precipitously leaving it are a manifestation that you are held in the grip of unbelief. You are saying that Christ is not present in His Church!

5. Its Fraternal Relations: the Communion of Local Churches (Paragraphs 14-15)

The duty which the Confession seeks to expound in its treatment of the relations of the local church is the duty of holding communion with other churches. This is emphasized by the occurrence in both paragraphs of the phrase “hold (or holding) communion.” The notion of “formal associations” or “informal associations” in connection to the phrase “holding communion” has been much debated among Reformed Baptists in recent years. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me now that the most natural interpretation of the Confession is that it assumes formal associations in Chapter 26, paragraphs 14-15.¹¹

1. Its Divine Authorization (Paragraph 14)

a. Its Significant Backdrop (Para. 14a)

The divine authorization for this duty of local churches to hold communion must begin with the presupposition that the churches of Jesus Christ are already (legally) one in their mediatorial head and apostolic foundation. They simply recognize and regulate a pre-existing unity. Also important here is the love and oneness in Himself, which Christ desires for His people (Joh 13:34-35; 17:11, 21-23; Eph 4:11-16). The first requirement of such unity and communion is prayer for each other (Eph 6:18; Psa 122:6). Its scriptural precedents are occasional support of gospel workers from other churches (Rom 16:1-3; 3Jo 1:8-10 with 2Jo 1:5-11), frequent communication with other churches (Col 2:1 with 1:3, 4, 7 and 4:7, 12), and combined benevolence for needy saints in other churches (Rom 15:26; 2Co 8:1-4, 16-24; and 9:12-15).

b. Its Specific Obligation (Para. 14b)

There appear to be scriptural illustrations of regional communions of local churches. Such communions illustrate both the scriptural duty of local churches holding communion and its necessary providential limitations. For examples of regional associations in the Bible, compare the churches of Galatia (Gal 1:2), churches of Judea (Gal 1:22), and the communication between

¹¹ For further discussion on this topic, I point the reader to *Edification and Beauty* (Wipf and Stock, 2009), and *Denominations or Associations?* (Calvary Press Publishing, 2001) by James M. Renihan.

Colosse and Laodicea (Col 4:16). Possibly the clearest illustration of such communion is that of the seven churches of Asia (Rev 1:4). The angels of these churches are probably their messengers. Notice the co-action, cooperation and communication involved in their acting together with John.

c. Its Spiritual Benefits (Para. 14c)

The Confession speaks of benefits of such associations for churches as “their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.” Why is communion necessary for these things? Because knowledge and communication are prerequisites to love and edification, while lack of knowledge breeds suspicion and division (1Jo 4:1-3; 2Jo 1:1; 3Jo 1:1). These passages show that communication and knowledge are prerequisites for love and edification. Testing must precede receiving (Rom 16:1-3; 2Co 9:12-15). The events of Joshua 22 teach that lack of knowledge can breed suspicion, division, and strife. Communion, which has for its by-products communication and mutual understanding, is necessary in order to avoid such contradictions of Christian love. It is, therefore, a solemn duty.

2. Its Special Advantage: Advisory Meetings (Para. 15)

The possible reasons for such assemblies are difficulties, differences, and injuries between churches or in one church. The *biblical basis* for such assemblies is the biblical doctrine of seeking counsel and not being wise in our own conceits (Gal 2:2; Pro 3:5-7; 12:15; 13:10). Such assemblies are also required by the biblical necessity of endeavoring to preserve unity (Eph 4:1-3). The *strict limit* of such an assembly is that it is merely advisory. In the Bible, counsel is often not authoritative, even if it comes from an apostle (1Co 7:25, 40). Hebrews 13:17 equates the leaders of the church with governors, given charge by a King over a province of His kingdom. Such governors may seek advice from one another, but they are legally responsible only to the King.

Conclusion

There are few greater blessings in this life than the privilege of being part of a well-ordered church where both the faith and the love which are in Christ Jesus are manifestly present. There are few writings more helpful and weightier than this chapter of the Confession in constructing, with the help of God, such a church. Its balanced teaching about the nature of the universal church, its clear teaching about the character of the local church and its government, and its useful guidance about how local churches should relate to one another is still proving its immense worth today.

