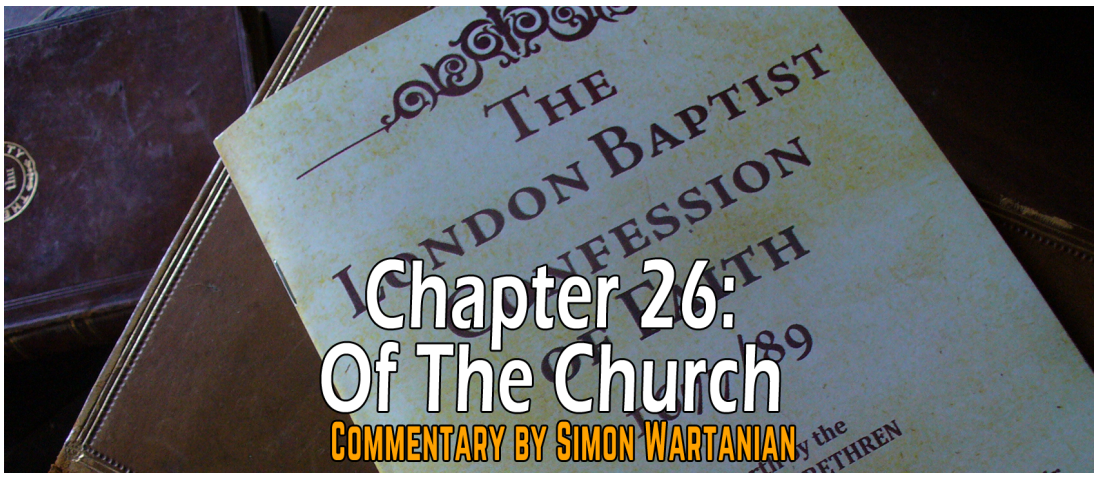
1689 Baptist Confession Chapter 26: Of the Church - Commentary

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Chapter 26: Of the Church

What is the church? What is the visible and invisible church? Who is the head of the church? What power does the church have? What is church discipline? What offices are there in the church? What about church membership? What does an elder do and who can become an elder? What does a deacon do and who can become a deacon? What is the work of the pastor? How is a church to govern itself?

This is the longest chapter in the Confession. Without question, this chapter is different than the sister confessions. The doctrine of the church was and is one of the most important distinctions between paedobaptists and Baptists. Covenant Theology, as noted in chapter 7, is an important difference between our Reformed paedobaptist brethren and us, Reformed Baptists. Practically, 1689 Federalism manifests itself in the doctrine of the church. One of the primary distinctive of Baptist ecclesiology is regenerate membership. Furthermore, the distinction that only those baptized upon a profession of faith may be members of a local church. This distinction and difference must be placed in the light of the huge agreement concerning almost all other areas of the Confession. Our forefathers basically copy-pasted from the Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Alan Dunn observes the following on the historical setting of this chapter:

> On the one hand, our Confession was written in an attempt to distinguish us from the false Roman Catholic Church. We will encounter statements in which Roman Catholic teaching is refuted. On the other hand, our Confession aligns us with churches that proclaim the gospel and worship Christ in obedient submission to Scripture.
>
> Among such Biblically orthodox churches however, there are yet differences held with honest Biblical conviction. Therefore, our Confession also expresses our Baptistic and Reformed distinctives in contrast to our Presbyterian and non-Reformed brethren.[1]

§1 The Universal Church Consists Of The Whole Number Of The Elect

1. The **catholic** or universal church, **1** which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, **consists of the whole number 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. **2**
    1. Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 1:22; 4:11-15; 5:23-25, 27, 29, 32; Col. 1:18, 24; Heb. 12:23[2]
    2. Eph. 1:22; 4:11-15; 5:23-25, 27, 29, 32; Col 1:18, 24; Rev. 21:9-14

The **catholic** (meaning **universal**) **church,** which is **called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect** (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2; Heb. 12:23). The **universal church** does not consist only of New Covenant Christians, but **of the whole number of the elect** who **have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ**. Notice that the church consists of the elect who are **gathered**, i.e., converted. In their unregenerate state, the elect are not part of the universal church until they are gathered into Christ. Christ is the **head** (Col 1:18) and the church is the **spouse** (Eph. 5:25), **the body** (Col 1:18) and the **fullness** (Eph. 1:23) of Christ.

The word "catholic" means *universal* and hereby, our forefathers are agreeing with the last part of the Apostles' Creed:

> I believe in the Holy Spirit, 9. **the holy catholic Church,** the communion of saints, 10. the forgiveness of sins, 11. the resurrection of the body, 12. and the life everlasting. Amen.

Neither the Nicene Creed nor the Confession refers to the *Roman* Catholic Church in the word "catholic", but to the *universal* Christian Church of Jesus Christ. This church is the universal *invisible* church. This designation refers to true believers, who were chosen before the foundation of the world, are members of the New Covenant and not *merely* members of a *local* church. They are true believers and part of the New Covenant in Christ's blood. This is what the New Covenant consists of and this is what makes up the invisible church, which only God infallibly knows its members. There will be professing believers in our churches, even members or on the staff, who are not true believers and thus not part of the *invisible* church, but they are part of the *visible* church. The invisible church becomes visible. The universal church becomes local. John Dagg defines these distinctions as follows:

> By the church invisible, they [theologians] mean all true Christians; and by the church visible, all those who profess the true religion. The invisible consists wholly of those who are sons of light; and the visible includes sons of light and sons of darkness in one community.[3]

The Presbyterian Louis Berkhof defines the distinction in the following way:

> the invisible Church is the Church as God sees it, a Church which contains only believers, while the visible Church is the Church as man sees it, consisting of those who profess Jesus Christ with their children and therefore adjudged to be the community of the saints.[4]

We see in this definition the distinction between paedobaptist covenant theology and 1689 Federalism carried out to the church. As the Covenant of Grace, in paedobaptist conception, includes believers and their children, so also the church. In **chapter 7**, we've questioned this constitution and argued that the Covenant of Grace was made with the elect in Christ. We will rehearse a few points below, no doubt, but for a longer discussion on the basis of these points, see chapter 7.

The New Covenant consists only of believers. This is one of the major points which 1689 Federalism stresses. The New Covenant, which is wholly salvific, is only for the elect. In other words, all the members of this covenant, unlike all previous covenants, are redeemed and elect of God from eternity. All the members of the New Covenant are truly regenerate and Spirit-dwelt believers. This is seen, for example, from Hebrews 8:6-13 where all members of the New Covenant, from the oldest to the youngest know the LORD. Not merely know *about* Him, but truly *know Him.* Furthermore, this New Covenant is unlike the Mosaic Covenant which had members who were unbelievers and members who were believers. This New Covenant is one which will not be broken like the Mosaic was and thus, apostasy is impossible in the New Covenant (see **chapter 17** and our exposition of texts used to argue for actual apostasy from faith). So basically, the universal or the invisible church consists of the members of the New Covenant, all redeemed and elect believers throughout all ages.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is one of the most important texts on the New Covenant. It tells us what kind of covenant it is, namely, unlike the Old Covenant. It tells us what its blessings are, namely: (1) God will put His law within us; (2) God will write His law on our hearts; (3) God will be our God and we will be His people; (4) we will know the Lord; (5) God will forgive our sins and remember them no more. It describes its members as those who know the LORD. To know about God is one thing and a necessary thing. But to know God is wholly another. Various attempts have been made from various groups to make exceptions to what is said in this passage about the New Covenant, its nature and its members. Dispensationalists usually say that this covenant is not yet inaugurated because it speaks of Israel and Judah. Some of them say that it will be fulfilled in the Millennium, others say that the New Covenant which we enjoy is a foretaste of Jeremiah 31. Our paedobaptist brethren usually say that only in the eschaton will everyone *know* the LORD and thus, it is not necessary for membership in

the *administration* of the covenant or a local church.[5] In this way, they justify infant church membership. Our position is that this Jeremiah 31 covenant, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit in Hebrews, is the fully inaugurated New Covenant in Christ's blood. We make a distinction between the invisible church (this paragraph) and the visible church (next paragraph). While those who make up the visible church should have *been* part of the invisible church, we know that this is not the case. They are falsely laying a claim upon a privilege which is only for those who are part of the invisible church. But if we read Jeremiah's description of the New Covenant, what we have is members who truly, and not merely by profession, know and love the Lord. In other words, they are regenerate believers. What Jeremiah speaks about are the true members of the New Covenant. Another thing which we distinguish from our brethren is that for us local church membership is not the same as New Covenant membership. There are many local church members who are not New Covenant members. But they are church members falsely. They lay a claim to a thing they don't have a right to. They set up their homes on a ground which is not theirs.

Since the New Covenant consists only of those for whom Christ's blood was shed, we believe that a local church should likewise be composed of those for whom Christ's blood was shed. But we are getting ahead of ourselves at this point.

Christ's Church (Matthew 16:18)

The Lord Jesus promised to establish His church which no power of hell could stand against. He said:

> Matt. 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock **I will build my church**, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

It is Christ Who builds His community of believers, His congregation, His church. Men do not build the church. Men may build church *buildings*, but Christ is the architect of His church. Sadly, the Roman Catholic interpretation is how this passage is remembered for. As Albert Barnes noted, if "it not been that the Church of Rome has abused it [Matt 16:18, and who the rock is], and applied it to what was never intended, no other interpretation would have been sought for."[6] The controversy that surrounds this verse between the Protestants and Catholics lies in the question as to who "this rock" is which is being referred to and the further Roman Catholic implications from this identification. The Roman Catholic church claims that here, Christ gave Peter supreme authority over the church and raised him above all the other apostles. Furthermore, they see in this the doctrine of the Papacy. They say that Peter was the first bishop of Rome and from him, there has been a direct succession of popes/bishops of Rome. Therefore, they see in the Pope the authority of Peter, which they understand as being the supreme leader on earth over the Church. The Pope, so to say, is Christ on earth.

Barnes was right, these things could not be found anywhere in the Bible, let alone in Matthew 16:18. It was not the intention of the Lord Jesus to give us here a doctrine of a single bishop of Rome who will be called the Head of the Church. There is no difficulty in identifying Peter as "this rock" which Christ was speaking of. As Keith Thompson has studied this passage and observed, "Conservative Protestant exegetical scholarship is basically unified in affirming Peter is the rock here. D. A. Carson, Craig Blomberg, Craig S. Keener as well as the late Oscar Cullmann and W. F. Albright among many dozens of others are in agreement on this point."[7] The difficulty lies in the fact that the Papists have read all kinds of things in the words of the Lord Jesus which He never intended.

The apostle Peter did function as the "starter" of the Church. On the day of Pentecost, it was he who first preached the gospel to the Jews (Acts 2:14-41). Furthermore, it was also he who brought the message of salvation to the Gentiles in Acts 10. So, in a real sense, Christ did build His church on Peter's preaching and through Peter's ministry. This may also be tied to the keys given to Peter a few verses later (Matt. 16:19). But it is wrong to say that by this declaration and by this deed, now Peter is the head of the Church on earth. The passage communicates no such thing, nor is such a thing taught elsewhere in Holy Writ. The Bible teaches there is only one Head of the Church—Jesus the Christ (see paragraph 4). Most importantly, we should not ignore the occasion that caused the Lord Jesus to say such a thing about Peter. When the Lord Jesus asked who the disciples said that He is, Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Therefore, Peter should not be considered in his person alone, but also in his *confession,* which is the confession of every true Christian. The Lord Jesus, the true and only Head of the Church, built His church on the foundation of Peter among others (Eph. 2:20) and all of His people share in Peter's confession that Christ is "the Son of the living God."

From the Scriptures, we do not see Peter as having sole authority in the church, but as an elder, he shared authority with others in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the claim that in Matthew 16:19 the Lord Jesus gives unique authority to Peter to absolve sins, judge doctrinal matters and so on, is wrong because that power is given to the church in Matthew 18:18. In Matthew 16, the Lord Jesus specifically spoke of Peter, but He did not mean *only* Peter as the next reference to this "binding and loosing" shows. Peter did receive a key and he used it to open the door to the Gentiles as he did to the Jews (cf. Acts 14:27; 15:7). Peter opened the door to the Jews (Acts 2), to the Gentiles (Acts 10) and to the Samaritans (Acts 18). He was one of the foundation stones of the church (Rev. 21:14). Just a few verses later (Matt. 16:23), Peter would be called "Satan", thus this declaration of our Lord did not mean that he was to be infallible or without fault. Barnes noted here that 'The whole

meaning of the passage is this: "I will make you the honored instrument of making known my gospel first to Jews and Gentiles, and I will make you a firm and distinguished preacher in building my church."'[6]

This Church of Christ—this assembly of Christ—is known for its confession of Christ as the Son of God and has its allegiance to Him and her faith rests on Him. This Church, strictly speaking, started on Pentecost by the coming of the Spirit. But, this idea of a church was not unique to the New Covenant as Israel itself is often called a church in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word *qahal* is the equivalent of *ekklesia* in the Greek which is used in Matthew 16:18. See Acts 7:38 where Stephen speaks of "the church in the wilderness" (KJV). Christ's Church is uniquely His and consists of His elect, beloved from eternity and drawn together in love.

For those who want to know more about the Papacy, the interpretation of Matthew 16:18 and its understanding by the early church fathers, I recommend **Dr. James White's debate vs Father Mitch Pacwa**. It is a very insightful and respectful debate.

The Whole Number Of The Elect

The Confession claims that the universal and invisible church "consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ" which undoubtedly includes believers prior to the establishment of the New Covenant in Christ's blood. But how is this the case? As we have argued and tried to show in **chapter 7** on Covenant Theology, the Covenant of Grace, in 1689 Federalist understanding, is the New Covenant in promise form. It was not a *formal* covenant as the others were. The fact that all the saints, both prior to the physical coming of Christ and after the coming, are included in the universal church is seen in Hebrews 12:22-24. Here, the church on earth joins with the church in heaven. In worship, we come to the assembly or the church "of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven". John Gill comments on this passage:

> the church of God, consisting of all his elect, both Jews and Gentiles, and the meeting of them together: they met together, in the infinite mind of God, from all eternity; and in Christ, their head and representative, both then and in time; and at the last day, when they are all gathered in, they will meet together personally; and a joyful meeting it will be; and a very general one, more so than the assembly of the Jews, at any of their solemn feasts, to which the apostle may have some respect; since this will consist of some of all nations, that have lived in all places, and in all ages of time[8]

If it was the blood of Christ which saved all saints, in all ages and under all the covenants, then they belong to Christ and His assembly. He is their Mediator and He is the Mediator of only one covenant, the New Covenant in His blood. If He stood for them before God, He stood as the Mediator of the New Covenant or the Covenant of Grace on their behalf. Therefore, they had to be members of the New Covenant or people who have been chosen to be in the New Covenant for Christ to represent them. This was, in fact, the covenant that the believers under the Old Testament were called into (Heb. 9:15-17; **see here** also). Dr. Sam Waldron observes that

> the church is the climactic earthly expression of the people of God. 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 Matt. 8:11-12; John 10:14-17; Heb. 11:39-40). Thus the 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'.[9]

That the universal church consists of the elect may be seen in a few ways. First, we may see the church as the members of the New Covenant. As noted above, Jeremiah 31 teaches us that all members of the New Covenant are regenerate believers, who live with God as their God in an unbreakable covenant. The Old Covenant was broken and in it, the people were faithless. But this New Covenant will not be like the Old. As only those who are part of the New Covenant can have Christ as their *covenant* head, so they are united with those who likewise have Christ as their covenant head into one body. They belong to each other because they belong to Christ. Furthermore, Christ is covenant head to no other than they for whom He mediates. Those who have Him as Mediator do not fail to come to God (Heb. 7:25; John 6:44). Therefore, they make up the society of His called-out ones.

Second, we may see the church as the body of believers because Christ gave His life for her. As Reformed people and as Holy Scripture teaches, we believe that Christ died sacrificially to save a specific people (**see chapter 8:8**). Ephesians 5:25 identifies the church as the object of Christ's love and redemptive purpose.

Thirdly, we may see the church as the body of believers in the way in which the Bible speaks of it. In Matthew 16:18, the church of Christ is built upon confessing Peter who acknowledged Christ as the Messiah (Matt. 16:16). This is the confession

of every true Christian. They are described as those who are “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). While undoubtedly wolves will creep among a local body, the description here given goes to the heart of the church. Every local body should be composed of only those people. But since the local body is human and has the human fallibility aspect to it, it does contain wolves. But the universal or spiritual body, as God sees it, has only believers in it. “The Lord knows those who are his”, infallibly (2 Tim. 2:19). The church is described as the body of Christ, in union with Him (e.g., Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 12:12ff). No one who is united with Christ can be lost. Furthermore, everyone who is has been saved or will be saved is/will be united to Christ (see also **here**). The church, as the bride and body of Christ, for whom He gave His life are His elect and redeemed people, and only those who viewed from the point view of God. God knows who are His. Ephesians 1:22-23 speaks of the headship of Christ being *for* the church. Obviously, the reference to the church in this passage does not speak of the Ephesian local body, but the church as a whole everywhere. Ephesians 3:10 speaks of the “manifold wisdom of God” being known unto all “through the church”. This reference likewise, does not refer merely to a local body. God has determined that the church is the people in whom and among whom His glory will be manifested. To this effect, Paul doxologizes: “to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:21). When Paul speaks of God appointing apostles, prophets, teachers and et cetera, he is not speaking of a local church, but of the church everywhere (1 Cor. 12:28). Ephesians 4:11-14 is likewise to the same effect. The body spoken of there is the universal body of Christians for whose upbuilding the offices are given. They will be equipped to achieve unity among all believers. Apostleship is not a continuous office of the church. It was given once for all for the upbuilding of the whole body of believers. This is the church (or temple) which is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20).

In these ways, we see that the church is a universal and spiritual body of born again believers. Therefore, A. H. Strong defines the church as:

> The church of Christ, in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth (Mat. 16:18; Eph. 1:22, 23; 3:10; 5:24, 25; Col. 1:18; Heb. 12:23). In this sense, the church is identical with the spiritual kingdom of God; both signify that redeemed humanity in which God in Christ exercises actual spiritual dominion (John 3:3, 5).[10]

Later he adds, “Union with Christ is the presupposition of the church.”[11] Stephen J. and Kirk Wellum explain this truth beautifully:

> Through its union with him, the new covenant church is a new assembly and new temple who are born, empowered, and indwelt by the Spirit. The church is not a mixed entity but a regenerate, believing community precisely because all whom Christ calls come (John 10:27). And all who come he keeps (v. 28). Those who are not his sheep don’t hear and don’t come (v. 26).[12]

Apostolic Attributes of the Church

In the Nicene Creed, the church of all ages has confessed:

> We believe also in only One, Universal, Apostolic, and Holy Church

The Apostles’ Creed speaks of “I believe in...the holy catholic church.” These attributes speak of the church which Christ established—the community of His elect people. These attributes describe *what* the church is. These attributes speak primarily about the universal and invisible church, while secondarily, the local church. We will briefly take a look at these attributes biblically speaking.

Unity of the Church

The unity or oneness of the church is, first of all, grounded in its unity in and union with Christ. The believers, who *make up* the church, are all united to Christ. They belong to one Head and therefore, they are united with one another through their Head. The Lord Christ prays for union and oneness among His people in John 17. He prays that we “may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us” (John 17:21). In John 10:16, the Lord’s desire is to gather all lost sheep into one fold. Therefore, believers all around the world belong to one fold, which belongs to one chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4). They are one because they believe in the same God. Paul speaks of the Corinthians as those who are “called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2). They are “together” because they are called to be saints, they call upon the name of Christ and He is their and our Lord also. The metaphor of the body as used in 1 Corinthians 12 points to the unity of the church. There is one Head, the

Lord Jesus Christ. But the body has many members.

This unity of the church extends not only after the cross, but also before Christ with the faithful in the Old Testament. In worship, we come to "Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the **assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven**, and to God, the judge of all, and to the **spirits of the righteous made perfect**" (Heb. 12:22-23). Anyone and everyone whose destiny is heaven has been enrolled and predestined to be there from all eternity. Therefore, they belong to the "assembly of the firstborn" with whom we worship God and are one.

As discussed in a previous chapter, the believers under the Old Testament were part of the same covenant which we now enjoy. Therefore, they belong to us and we to them because we have the same God, Savior, and Mediator (cf. Heb. 11:39-40). See **chapter 8:6**. Another point which points to our unity with believers under the Old Testament is the fact that all of us have the same father. Here, I'm specifically focusing on unity with Israelite believers. Paul's argument for justification by faith throughout history may also be extended to include our unity with those who are justified in the same way we are (see Rom. 4 and **chapter 11** of the Confession). Only those who have faith are truly the children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7, 28-29). In 1 Corinthians 10:1, the apostle Paul speaks of the wilderness generation as "our fathers [who] were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea". This unity extends itself in the unity of Jew and Gentile under the inaugurated New Covenant. In Ephesians 2, the apostle speaks of this unity in which God has torn down the dividing wall which stood between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14). By breaking that wall of division, God has created peace between those who stood on both sides of the wall. He has done this by making *one* new man from the two.

Scripture not only speaks of unity as a fact, but also as an imperative and something to strive for. In Ephesians 4, God equips us until "we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:13). The calls for unity in the New Testament are numerous. In Philippians 2:2, the apostle says, "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." The apostle Peter calls all of us to "have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Pet. 3:8).

Therefore, we see that the unity of the church is both a fact and something which we should strive for.

Universality of the Church

The catholicity of the church is the attribute which points to the fact that there is but one church of Christ. The unity of the church likewise touches on this point. But the attribute of catholicity shows that the church of Christ is everywhere in the world. In a sense, to speak of a *Roman* Catholic church is an oxymoron. Roman is specific, while catholic is general and universal. The church of Christ is not an ethnically or geographically limited body. It is a church which is one "with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). It is a church that has people from all nationalities. The primary divide in the Bible is between Jews and Gentiles. The Old Covenant was an exclusive covenant by design. But the New Covenant and its commission are universal. Christ's call is to go and "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). He did not send the church to Israel alone, or to Rome alone, but to the whole world. Even that divide which permeated the Jewish mind has been torn down in the New Testament. As noted above, the dividing wall has been torn down and as a result, God has made one new man from Jew and Gentile believers (Eph. 2:14). The apostle Paul speaks of the oneness of the church in gender, nationality, and social status (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). When the apostle John saw the heavenly vision in Revelation 5, he described the redeemed as they "people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9; 7:9). While there are countless local churches all around the world, yet they constitute one universal church by their faith in Christ.

Apostolicity of the Church

The apostolicity of the church points to the foundation of the church. Ephesians 2:20 speaks of the church which is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone". Roman Catholics, obviously, interpret this attribute with reference to the Papacy. But this attribute has nothing to do with the Papacy. Rather, it points to the fact that the church of Christ was built, instituted, and taught by the *representatives* of Christ. As we noted above on Matthew 16 and Peter, the Lord told him that he is the rock on which He will build His church. This was also the case as Peter preached the gospel to Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans. The apostles, even now, remain to build the church through their writings which God has preserved. The early church is described as those who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). A church that distances itself from the apostolic teaching is no church at all.

Holiness of the Church

The holiness of the church is primarily found in that it is the abode of the Spirit of holiness (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). That the church is holy means that it is separated from the world. Indeed, it is in the world but not of it. As the church finds its identity in Christ, it cannot but be holy. The church is also holy because it is the *only* body of the redeemed in the world. The

church is the society or the people in which God has determined to dwell and have a relationship with. He has set the church apart. As with the unity of the church, the holiness of the church is both a fact as well as an imperative. The holiness of the church is composed of the holiness of its individual members. As the holiness of its members is increased, so also the testimony of the holiness of the church in the world is more visibly seen. Our Lord sets Himself apart for His people to be set apart (John 17:17-19). Its members are predestined to "be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:4). Its Husband has given His life "that he may sanctify her...so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:26-27). Peter describes the church as a building, a temple, and "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). As our Lord is holy, so He calls us to be holy also: 'but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."' (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

Jonathan Leeman has beautifully summarized these points and how the church has dealt with them, focusing on the attributes of holiness and apostolicity:

> Christians have professed to believe in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic nature of the church at least since the Nicene Creed, but one might narrate the history of the church's quest for unity as a tussle between the two characters Holiness and Apostolicity. It's as if Holiness has sought the church's unity by asking the questions, "Who is holy, and what makes a person holy?" Apostolicity, meanwhile, has sought unity by asking, "Who or what possesses the apostles' authority, and what is it an authority to do?" Holiness has God's work as Redeemer in mind. Apostolicity has God's work as Ruler in mind.[13]

Metaphors for the Church

The church, as the body of believers, is spoken of under a few metaphors in the New Testament. It will be beneficial for us to take a look at these metaphors. These metaphors can be applied both to the universal as well as to the local church.

Body of Christ

The most prominent biblical metaphor for the church is that of a body (Rom. 12:5; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:12; 5:23, 29-30; 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12ff; Col. 1:18, 24; Heb. 13:3). This image stresses the union which we have with Christ. We are *organically* united with Him as a body is united with its members. Furthermore, we are united with the body, but we are not the leaders of the body. Christ is the Head "from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God" (Col. 2:19). As Head, He is both the source of nourishment as well as authority. He is the leader of the body. As we are united with our Head, so also we are united with the individual members of the body. So, the apostle Paul employs this metaphor to stress and call for unity within a local body of believers. He begins by taking an example from the natural constitution of man and members of our body (hand, ear, nose, eye) and then moves to make the point for the church as a body with many members. His conclusion is that we "are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). Therefore, we should conduct ourselves in such a way that the members within the body have their place and perform their function. Each member in the body is important. No member is disposable.

Bride of Christ

The church is also described as the bride or wife of Christ (Eph. 5:22-32; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; John 3:29). Christ's love for her was so great that He gave His life for her! Ephesians 5:25 draws a parallel between human marriage and our relationship with Christ: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her". His love for her is so great is that it costs Him His life. The apostle then goes on to say the following:

> Eph. 5:28-30 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body.

Christ's work for us is used as the example to be imitated in marriage. As He nourishes us and prepares us to be presented "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 5:26), so the husband should take care of his wife. Our beloved Husband, not only loved us even unto death, but He was raised to life and now "nourishes and cherishes" us.

This image will be consummated in the New Heavens and New Earth where we will celebrate the marriage of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9). In the New World, she is called the New Jerusalem which is "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9) who is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). Oh, how beautiful an image and what an indescribable future for you saints!

This image shows the intimate relationship which we have with Christ. There is no intimate human relationship greater than marriage. But even marriage was designed to be a picture of Christ and His church (Eph. 5:32). Even this, is a *picture* of His relationship and love for the church. How vast and unmeasured is His love for her then?!

Temple of God

Another image which the Bible employs for the church is that of a temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). The church is the temple not of idols, but of the living God. The reason that she is the temple is because the Holy Spirit lives in her. The apostle Paul assumes that believers should have known that they are God's temple since the Holy Spirit indwells them (1 Cor. 3:16). The fact that they are the temple of God calls for ethical action: to be holy (1 Cor. 3:17; 2 Cor. 6:16-18). Because believers are the temple of God, they have received the command to "go out from their midst, and be separate from them" (2 Cor. 6:17; cited from Isa. 52:11). Believers are a temple that is still being built. Ephesians 2:21 speaks of believers "being joined together" and growing "into a holy temple in the Lord." That they are the temple of God means that God has made His dwelling among us (Eph. 2:22). This is also a point made in the Corinthian letters (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). Peter speaks of believers as stones who belong to the "living stone rejected by men" (1 Pet. 2:4), and we are like Him as "living stones" (1 Pet. 2:5). As living stones, we "*are being* built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." The connection with the priesthood and the sacrifices makes clear that what is being spoken of here is a temple house. We still have priests, but now *we* are the priests. We still have sacrifices, but our sacrifices are no longer carnal but spiritual. We still have a temple, but it is a spiritual house and not a physical house. Christ said to the Jews concerning the temple, "your house is left to you desolate" (Matt. 23:38). But this spiritual house into which believers are being built up is the house of the living God. He *is* dwelling in it. That is His promise (2 Cor. 6:16). This means that we have direct fellowship with God. The New Testament invites us to "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (Heb. 4:16). We always have direct access to God (Eph. 2:18; Heb. 10:19-22).

This image shows us the intimate spiritual relationship which we enjoy with the Lord. He dwells among us. We are His dwelling place on earth.

Household of God

Another image which the Bible employs is that of a household or family (Matt. 10:25; Eph. 2:19; Gal. 6:10; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6). We are a family because we have the same Father (Eph. 3:14-15). We are all adopted into one family of God, therefore, by definition, we are an organic body united through the one Father which we have. The fact that the church is the household and family of God means that there is a way "how one ought to behave" himself in it (1 Tim. 3:15). Therefore, Paul calls us to treat "an older man…as…a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters" (1 Tim. 5:1-2). Our good works should especially be directed toward "those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). This image of the church is what God promised us: "I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:18).

This image shows the organic unity of believers with the one Father and among each other. It shows believers as an intimate body among themselves.

Other images

The church is also spoken of as the **Heavenly Jerusalem** (Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 21:2, 9-10); the **branches** on the Vine (John 15:5); **God's field** (1 Cor. 3:6-9); a **building** (1 Cor. 3:9), and a **pillar** and **buttress** holding up the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Sometimes the image of a field from Matthew 13 is used, but as Strong noted so long ago, 'Augustine indeed thought that "the field," in Mat. 13:38, is the church, whereas Jesus says very distinctly that it "is the world."'[14]

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§2 Visible Saints

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, are and **may be called visible saints; 1** and of such **ought all particular congregations to be constituted. 2**
    1. 1 Cor. 1:2; Rom. 1:7-8; Acts 11:26; Matt. 16:18; 28:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-9
    2. Matt. 18:15-20; Acts 2:37-42; 4:4; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 5:1-9

All people…professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ (Rom. 1:5-8; 1 Cor. 1:2), who are **not destroying their profession** are to be **called visible saints**. Notice the careful wording of the Confession. While paragraph 1 speaks of the universal or invisible church consisting of the whole number of the elect and thus those who are

truly regenerate, the second paragraph says nothing of election. It speaks of those who are **professing the faith** and **obedience unto God by Christ**. This is the only way in which we, as fallible human beings, can know if one is regenerate or not. Indeed, some will be able to deceive us, but we do not have the ability to look into one's heart to determine if they're elect or not. Therefore, profession of faith and conduct of life is the only way in which we can (fallibly) determine if one is a Christian or not. If this is the case for someone, they are **may be called visible saints**, i.e., saints of the visible church. Finally, all **particular congregations**, i.e., local churches, should consist of **visible saints**, i.e., those **professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ**. The Westminster Confession of Faith in chapter 25:2 (which is the parallel for this chapter) says that the invisible church "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children" (compare both **here**). In other words, their children are included as visible saints and as part of a local church. But the 1689 rejects this in saying that only they who profess the gospel and obedience unto God may be called visible saints.

Paragraph 1 spoke of the church as God views it. The universal church consists only of regenerate believers. Those believers have been predestined from all eternity to be Christ's. They are the bride and the church for whom His life was given (Eph. 5:25-27). The Spirit of God regenerates them and gives them new life according to the New Covenant promises (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27). But it would be wrong to think of the invisible or universal church as something that does not exist in the world, as something which is merely in the mind of God or the mind of the theologian. That is wrong. This paragraph teaches that the church of paragraph 1 (the universal church) becomes visible. The invisible church exists truly in time and history. It is the church both of living believers as well as glorified believers in heaven. But this invisible church becomes visible in the local church. Those who are called to the universal church of God are likewise called to the visible church and thus to be "visible saints." One enters into the body of Christ, the universal church, by regeneration and by the Holy Spirit's work (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:13). But entrance to the local or visible church is by profession of faith and baptism, which is a sign of new life. Louis Berkhof beautifully expresses this:

> The invisible Church naturally assumes a visible form. Just as the human soul is adapted to a body and expresses itself through the body, so the invisible Church, consisting, not of mere souls but of human beings having souls and bodies, necessarily assumes a visible form in an external organization through which it expresses itself. The Church becomes visible in Christian profession and conduct, in the ministry of the Word and of the sacraments, and in external organization and government.[15]

The two ways of seeing the church, invisible and visible, do not speak of two churches. Christ has one church for whom He gave His life (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 5:25). Ideally, only those who belong to the invisible church should be members of the visible church. Since the universal church consists of born-again, Spirit-indwelt, united-to-Christ believers, why should its visible manifestation be any other? But we've said over and over again that the invisible church is the church as God *infallibly* sees it. God has not granted us the gift of infallibility. Therefore, how are we to know who should belong to a visible or local church and who should not? Does it matter to God? To ask such a question is to answer it. It is a ridiculous question which assumes that God does not care about that which He has spoken about in His Word. The majority of the Epistles in the New Testament were addressed to visible, definite, and local churches. They were not written to some heavenly church. They were not written to the universal church although they certainly were written for it. They are addressed to visible churches in the Roman world. How are these people addressed?

The church at *Rome* is described as:

- "all those in Rome who are **loved by God** and **called to be saints**" (Rom. 1:7).
- Their "faith is proclaimed in all the world" (Rom. 1:8).

The church at *Corinth* is described as:

- "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those **sanctified** in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints** together with all those who in every place **call upon the name of our Lord** Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2).
- They are being supplied "so that you are not lacking in any **gift,** as you **wait for the revealing** of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will **sustain you to the end, guiltless** in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:7-8).
- They are described as **coming "together as a church"** (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:23).

The church at *Ephesus* is described as:

- "the **saints** who are in Ephesus, and are **faithful in Christ** Jesus" (Eph. 1:1).
- They are blessed "in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places", they are chosen and predestined to be holy and blameless (Eph. 1:3-6).

The church at *Philippi* is described as:

- The Epistle is addressed "To all the **saints in Christ** Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1:1).
- They were partners with Paul in the gospel since day 1 (Phil. 1:5).
- They are assured that God will bring His work in them "to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

We could go on, but we will not. While these churches were not perfect, they are still addressed as congregations of true believers. Notice the way in which they are addressed in the letters. They are said to be saints (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2). They are said to be called (1 Cor. 1:2). They are said to be faithful (Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2). They are said to be brothers and sisters (Col. 1:2). They are said to be loved by God (Rom. 1:7). As you will notice, I've limited myself to the introductory sections of various epistles. This is the way in which these members of *visible* churches in various areas are addressed.

What we notice in the names and titles which are given them is that they are considered to be true believers. Paul has not written a letter to "the church at *x* who do not believe and are still in their sins." Even when he writes to the Corinthian congregation which he rebukes, he does not call their Christianity into question. He still addresses them as saints—holy ones and set apart for God (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). Even when he speaks to the Galatian church he warns them to remain in the gospel which he preached to them. He is worried about them. He is rebuking them. He is calling them back, but he does not assume that he is writing to a congregation of unbelievers.

This is basically the point which should be clear: the visible or local church is constituted of those who are said to be saints and believers. They are not described as any other than how the universal church is described. They are described as believers as the members of the universal church are described. The next question which we will concern ourselves with is "how do we determine who belongs and who does not?" The answer is in the definition of the visible church as asserted in this paragraph: They are those who are "professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ." The church at Corinth is described as "saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2). It is the description of believers as those who call upon the name of the Lord. This is the characteristic of this Messianic age. Joel concludes his promise of the Spirit with, "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Joel 2:32). This promise is the conclusion to Peter's citation of this prophecy on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:21). It is cited in Romans 10 to substantiate the statement that "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9-13). This calling upon the name of the Lord has both private as well as public components to it. The people on Pentecost were admonished to call upon the name of the Lord personally to save them. But they were also called to the waters of baptism. Both Reformed Baptists, as well as paedobaptists, are agreed that adults are baptized upon profession of faith and admitted to membership likewise on the basis of a profession of faith. This "calling upon the name of the Lord" says something about what has happened or is happening in a person. This confession aspect is also a point which Christ pointed at in Matthew 16. When He asked the disciples who they said He is, Peter answered with, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Christ blesses professing Peter and says that this will be the rock on which He will build His church (Matt. 16:17-18). It is a congregation of Christ-professors. They are Christ professors who have received the ground of this profession from heaven (Matt. 16:17; 1 Cor. 12:3).

Profession of faith and a walk consistent with the gospel is the only way in which he can discern the spiritual condition of a person. The church is to be constituted of those who belong to Christ. Those who do not belong to Christ, should not belong to His body on earth. That is why the epistles call on us to walk in a way worthy of the gospel (Eph. 4:1; 5:2; Col. 1:10; Phil. 1:27; 3:17; 1 Thess. 4:1). We should outwardly manifest what is true in us. But since human judgment is necessary to admit one to baptism or membership, this means that this is a fallible process. While the ideal situation is that only those in the invisible church should be admitted to membership in a local church, this is impossible to achieve. The impossibility lies in the fact that we cannot see into people's hearts. We are not God. Therefore, the way in which God has given to determine this is by profession of faith and by conduct of life. God-loving elders and congregations determine this by these fallible means. This process will undoubtedly admit those who do not belong to the universal church into a local church. There are people who are deceived and think are believers. They even show some outward fruit that they are believers, but are not. While there are those who merely "walk the walk and talk the talk," but their hearts are still enslaved to sin. This means that this process allows for tares/weeds among the wheat (Matt. 13:24-30). But this is not a process which allows anyone with interest to join up. There should be a profession of faith which is in accord with the conduct of one's life and vice versa.

Those who follow what Scripture says about the church and of whom it is constituted will *not* knowingly admit unbelievers among themselves. When that takes place, the blame is not upon the leadership and the church, but upon the false professor. Those who belong to the church are described as those who remain. While false professors will have their time to leave: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19).

The Wellums even point to the warning passages as proof that the church should be constituted of those who are true believers. They write:

> The New Testament knows of false professions and spurious conversions. In fact, that’s why Paul exhorted, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith” (2 Cor 13:5 NIV; see also 2 Pet 1:10). Still the New Testament views the church on earth as a *heavenly* (tied to the “age to come” and the new creation) and *spiritual* (born of and empowered by the Spirit) community. It is “the outcropping of the heavenly assembly gathered in the Jerusalem that is above.” [D. A. Carson] Scripture simply does not treat it as a mixed community of believers and unbelievers like ancient Israel. It is constituted as a regenerate people who profess to have crossed from death to life, to have been united to Christ, to be participants in the new creation and the new covenant age.[16]

There would be no point to call for the purity of the church if its membership does not matter, or that its membership may be mixed between regenerate and unregenerate. The fact is, the membership of the visible church on earth should reflect that of the invisible church. The way we know that is by profession of faith and walk of life. We may even take the example of the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul writes to a local church of God which is located at Corinth, but his words apply to the universal church as well. Paul did not have a special insight into who is a true believer and who is not. He took people at their word and judged from their conduct if they’re true believers or not. Some were successful in deceiving him (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:10, 16). He is writing to those who are sanctified in Christ. They have been set apart in Christ for God. They are made unique, not because they were unique, but God by bestowing His grace upon them has made them unique. Therefore, if they’re sanctified, they are to be known as those who are sanctified by the title “saints.” They are called by God to be saints. They are called to be sanctified in Christ by the Spirit. Here we see a simple congregation, who certainly was not free of error, being unhesitatingly called saints by Paul. He did not apply this title to particular persons alone, but to all those who are “sanctified in Christ Jesus” and who “call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”. The same is true of the believers in Rome (Rom. 1:7). We may distinguish certain people for their work for the Church or the impact that they had, but “saint” is not the word for that, as all members of the New Covenant are saints by calling. If false professors were able to deceive the apostle Paul, then how much more us? If they belong to a church then he assumes that they are true believers unless proven otherwise.

As we noted in the previous paragraph and in the introduction of this paragraph, paedobaptists would agree with what we have thus far said. They would only add that professing believers *together with their children* constitute the visible church. We would dispute the last part, seeing that nowhere in the New Testament is a provision made for those who are only children of the flesh. Under the Old Covenant, one came to the church or congregation of Israel through natural birth. But this privilege was taken away when Christ said that we must be born of water and Spirit (John 3:3-6). We must be born from God. To whom does God give the privilege of becoming sons of God? John 1:12-13 says that it is to those “who believed in his name” and “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” Galatians 3:7, 29 also makes clear that those who claimed Abraham as their father for privileges in the Old Covenant and congregation of Israel can no longer do that under the New Covenant. Only through faith do we become children of Abraham. Romans 9:6-7 and Galatians 4:28-29 distinguish between children of the flesh and children of the Spirit/promise. If we may take an example from the first church at Jerusalem, those who were added to it by baptism (Acts 2:41) are said to have “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). No word is said about any unbelieving children or infants. We refer the interested reader to **chapter 7** for more on the New Covenant and its nature, and **chapter 29** for more on baptism (including infant baptism). We see no evidence in the New Testament that unbelieving infants were admitted to the church because of the spiritual condition of their parents. Therefore, we believe that they do not belong to the church until they believe and profess their faith in baptism.

All this means that everyone who professes the true faith of the gospel and walks the walk of faith may be called a saint and be welcomed as a brother or sister. Obviously, some professing believers will be just that—professors of the faith, but not possessors of the faith. They are welcomed into our fellowships, receive the sacraments unbeknown to us that they’re actually not true believers. We cannot look into peoples’ hearts, but we must listen to what comes out of their mouths and what their conduct is. Those who participate in church fellowship, but are not true believers, will certainly have some restraints because of the preaching of God’s Word. This is the case, for example, in 2 Peter 2:17-22 (**see here**). Some of them may remain professing believers until death. Some will fall away from the church and go into other religions or atheism. Some will come to true repentance and faith in Christ. But the fact is, such professing believers, should be treated as believers unless their mouth or their lives prove otherwise. When it is revealed that some believers are not living up to the way of the gospel, then comes the process of church discipline by which the church is purified (**see paragraph 7**).

While false professors may gain entrance to a local body, that does not make them members either of the universal church nor of the New Covenant. Samuel Renihan has an analogy which helps to illustrate this point:

> A friend of my son can come and visit my house, but while he visits he is not my son. And if one day I were to awake and find this friend sleeping in my guest room, claiming to be my son, his presence in my house and claim to my name does not make him my son. **Unless I legally adopt him, he cannot force his way into my family**. If someone shows up at my door claiming to be a long-lost relative, I may believe their story for a time, but eventually the truth will be revealed.
>
> In the kingdom of Christ on earth, **people make false professions**, invisible to the eyes of fallible humans, and **enroll in the wedding feast without a wedding garment**. They are granted access to the sacraments of the kingdom and taste the powers of the age to come, but they **remain illegal aliens in the kingdom**. Their treachery is all too real. **The apostate was not in covenant**, but **regarded as such** (Acts 8:13; 2 Peter 2:1). **The apostate was not a member of the kingdom**, but **regarded as such**. But the apostate is legally accountable and liable to the supreme King and Lord of the covenant-kingdom...**A true covenant member is chastened and returned to his place**, but a **wolf is excommunicated, dismembered, and placed under a sure curse of death and judgment apart from repentance**. We can invoke Psalm 50:16 against such a person, "But to the wicked God says: 'What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips?'"[17]

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§3 Christ Always Hath Had, And Ever Shall Have A Kingdom In This World

3. The purest churches under heaven are subject to **mixture and error**; **1** and some have **so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ,** but synagogues of Satan; **2** nevertheless **Christ always hath had, and ever shall have a kingdom in this world,** to the end thereof, of such as believe in him, and make profession of his name. **3**
    1. 1 Cor. 1:11; 5:1; 6:6; 11:17-19; 3 John 9-10; Rev. 2; 3
    2. Rev. 2:5 with 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:14-15; Rev. 18:2
    3. Matt. 16:18; 24:14; 28:20; Mark 4:30-32; Ps. 72:16-18; 102:28; Isa. 9:6-7; Rev. 12:17; 20:7-9

There are no churches with no doctrinal or practical error. Even the **purest churches...are subject to mixture and error** (1 Cor. 11:19), but this does not mean that they are no true churches of Christ. The framers would have included the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists under this category, and even themselves, as they were aware that no one can have perfect theology. But there are such churches which have **so degenerated as to become no church of Christ, but synagogues of Satan** (Rev. 2:5, 9; 3:9) as the Roman Catholic Church. No matter how degenerate churches become **Christ always hath had, and ever shall have a kingdom** (and church) **in this world** (Matt. 16:18; Isa. 9:6-7). Christ has promised that the gates of hell will not be able to prevail against His church (Matt. 16:18). This church which Christ will always have, no matter how degenerate the world or particular churches become, consists **of such as believe in Him, and make profession of His name**. This consists of those who are elect from all eternity and also profess His name. They are not merely they who profess His name but are really true believers.

Imperfect Churches and Degenerated Churches

There are no perfect churches. If you find one, don't go, because *you'll* cause it to become imperfect. All churches under heaven have some mixture of truth and error in them because of our limited knowledge and sinfulness. There are churches who want to bind their members to non-essential and unbiblical things. These churches are in error, but they may have the gospel right. Some churches may demand that everyone use a particular translation of the Bible or abstain from alcohol. Both of these are not Scriptural and thus are errors, but this does not mean that such a congregation has degenerated to the point that they're actually a synagogue of Satan. They are mistaken about some doctrines, but if they have the gospel right, they are a true church of Christ. Many churches do not adhere to the 1689 Confession, baptize children, do not believe in Covenant Theology, reject Calvinism, but if they preach the gospel rightly, they are still valid and true churches of Christ with some mixture of error and truth.

The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, is an example of a degenerated synagogue of Satan which the Reformers wrote and fought against. They finally lost any title which they had of a true church when they declared the gospel of Sola Gratia anathema in the Council of Trent in response to the Protestants:

> CANON XI.-If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favour of God; let him be anathema.

This is the gospel and Rome has rejected it, so how can it be a true church of God if it rejects the gospel of God? It is the gospel that creates the church, but Rome has rejected the gospel in this declaration. This is not to mention all things about Mariolatry, all kinds of non-biblical doctrines like Purgatory, special priesthood, the Papacy, salvation by works and faith, indulgences and so on. All these things exclude the Roman Catholic Church from being a true church of God. They may claim Christ, but Christ does not claim them since they are a synagogue of Satan. Furthermore, the understanding of the church between Protestants and Roman Catholics is vastly different. The conception of the Catholics is more "physical" and organizational than the spiritual conception of Protestants.

No matter these synagogues of Satan and the churches whose doctrine is mixed with truth and error, the Lord Christ, as Sovereign over all, will always have His Church on earth which consists of those who are true to Him and call upon His Name. No matter the difficulties, the Lord's word still stands fast: I will build my church, and **the gates of hell shall not prevail against it** (Matt. 16:18). No matter what Christ will have a people who are true to Him and call upon His Name. No matter how difficult things get or how severe persecution is, Christ is ever-victorious and His people are more than conquerors in Him (Rom. 8:37). The best and flourishing times of the church, paradoxically, are in its times of persecution and difficulty. As Tertullian so long ago said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." We see the Lord Christ praying to the Father to protect us within persecution and not take us out of it. The Lord prayed, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). Christ has promised to be with His church until the end of days and this means that He will have a church in the world until the end of days (Matt. 28:20). Some churches will apostatize, some churches will be purified, but Christ will ever have His church in this world and on earth. It is a true and a confessing church, who will confess Him before men at the cost of their lives (Matt. 10:32-33; Luke 12:8-9; Mark 8:38; Rev. 2:10).

The Church and the Kingdom of God

At this point, it may be proper to say something as to the relation of the church with the Kingdom of God. These are two important themes in the Scripture. There is certainly a relationship between these two, but what is the relation?

Roman Catholics, for example, believe that the Roman Catholic Church is the visible manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth. This is, in essence, to make God's kingdom "of this world" which it is not (John 18:36). Rather, the Kingdom of God is "the rule of God established and acknowledged in the hearts of sinners by the powerful regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit"[18]. If we take this position then we would have to say that the Kingdom of God is the reign of God over the invisible church. Seeing that our Lord said that we must be born again to see the Kingdom (John 3:3, 5). True believers live under the spiritual reign of God, which will one day be visible and be consummated.

But is there a way in which we may identify the Kingdom of God with the *visible church*? Scripture does not allow us to identify the Kingdom of God with the organized Roman Church or any church body. For the Kingdom is the sphere of God's spiritual reign over the believers. The church is the citizens of the Kingdom of God or its subjects. To say that the church is the Kingdom is to conflate the two. They are certainly closely associated in Matthew 16:18-19, but are not identical. The church holds the keys to the Kingdom. Berkhof explains the connection between the visible church and the Kingdom:

> The visible Church may certainly be said to belong to the Kingdom, to be a part of the Kingdom, and even to be the most important visible embodiment of the forces of the Kingdom. It partakes of the character of the invisible Church (the two being one) as a means for the realization of the Kingdom of God. Like the visible Church, the Kingdom also shares in the imperfections to which a sinful world exposes it. This is quite evident from the parable of the wheat and the tares, and that of the fishnet. In so far as the visible Church is instrumental in the establishment and extension of the Kingdom, it is, of course, subordinate to this as a means to an end. The Kingdom may be said to be a broader concept than the Church, because it aims at nothing less than the complete control of all the manifestations of life.[19]

We would agree with most of what was said by Berkhof, but it must be noted that the Kingdom of God is not to be associated directly with the visible church. By doing this, some have justified mixed membership based on "the parable of the wheat and the tares, and that of the fishnet." The reference is to Matthew 13, where our Lord explicitly identifies the field where the seed is sown as "the world" not "the church" or "the kingdom" (Matt. 13:38). Furthermore, the Kingdom shares in the imperfections only in so far as sinful people come under its realm. In the parable of Matthew 13, at the point that the tares are gathered, the world has become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ. Because of this they are gathered from

Christ's Kingdom and thrown into hell (Matt. 13:40-43). Therefore, if we are careful in this distinction then we will do well to listen to Berkhof.

George Ladd, a historic premillennialist, summarized the differences between the Kingdom and the church very well:

> The **Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God**, and, derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced. In biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God's rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it. The **church is the community of the Kingdom** but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus' disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The **Kingdom is the rule of God**; the **church is a society of men**.[20]

This is a very helpful distinction: one speaks about the rule and sphere of that rule; the other speaks of the people ruled. When people enter the Kingdom they also become part of the church universal (John 3:3, 5). In other words, those who are in the Kingdom of God are also among the church of God. The Kingdom of God in the New Testament is both a present as well as a coming reality.

To conflate the Kingdom and the church is, in essence, to say that when the disciples preached the good news of the Kingdom of God they were preaching "the good news of the church" (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). As we noted above, the "church is the custodian of the kingdom"[21] because she holds the keys of the Kingdom. In the words of John Frame, "The church consists of those who have been conquered by God's saving power, who are now enlisted in the warfare of God's kingdom against the kingdom of Satan…The church, then, is, to maintain the military metaphor, the headquarters of the kingdom of God, the base from which God's dominion extends and expands."[22]

In the words of Dever, 'the church is the *koinonia* or "fellowship" of people who have accepted and entered into the reign of God.'[23] Therefore, we may say that the Kingdom is visibly manifested among God's people.

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§4 The Lord Jesus Christ Is The Head Of The Church

4. The **Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church,** in whom, **by the appointment of the Father,** all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner; **1 neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof,** but **is that 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.** **2**
    1. Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:20-23; 4:11-16; 5:23-32; 1 Cor. 12:27-28; John 17:1-3; Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 5:31; John 10:14-16
    2. 2 Thess. 2:2-9

The Lord Jesus Christ alone **is the Head of the church** (Col. 1:18). It is **in** Him, **by the appointment of the Father** that **all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church** (Eph. 1:20-23). We no longer have multiple fallible and sinful human beings as mediators between us and God. In the New Covenant, there is only one Mediator and this Mediator is also the ruler of His church. God the Father has appointed Christ as the Head and King of the church. His being the Head and Ruler of it means that it is He Who has the authority and power to call, institute, order, and govern the church. It is He alone Who may govern the Church as it is His body and it is His possession.

Now the Confession moves to make clear its position on the **Pope of Rome**. He is in no **sense** the **head** of the church, but is, in fact, **that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition** (2 Thess. 2:1-12). If there is an article which should be revised in the Confession then many would choose this paragraph. The Confession here is specifically identifying the *office* of the Pope with the antichrist, which I believe cannot exegetically be supported although it was believed by virtually all Reformers. Though the Papacy may be considered *an* antichrist in that the office **exalteth** the Pope **in the church against Christ**, but it cannot be so definitely identified with these passages. *Antichrist* does not only mean *against* Christ, but it also can mean *instead of* Christ. The Pope, as head of the church, functions *instead of* Christ on the earth, which may be properly called *an* antichrist, but I do not believe that it is accurate to describe the Papacy as **that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition**.

Christ, The Only Head

The Lord Jesus, not the Pope, is the head and cornerstone of the church. Only the Lord Jesus is said to be the head of the church in Scripture; not Peter, nor any other person. This is clearly seen in the prooftexts for this paragraph (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23). In **Colossians 1:18**, we learn that Christ is the Head over the church, which means that He is the supreme authority over His body, the church. He alone exercises unrestrained sovereignty and rule over His Kingdom. Matthew Poole, after noting, first of all, the description of Christ as Creator of the World in the previous verses, then observes:

> the apostle doth here speak of him with a special reference to his church, or the new creation, whereof he shows here, (as elsewhere: See Poole on "Eph 1:22,23", with Eph 4:15, and Eph 5:23), that he is the Head and Governor, his chosen and called being the proper subjects of his special kingdom, the choice body, unto which he doth more peculiarly relate, Col 1:24, for the guiding and governing of it, he being that to it which the head is to the natural body, and more especially in the two former respects:
>
> 1. Of their union to God, which was chiefly designed and expressed in those words, **who is the beginning**, i.e. the first foundation or principle of their union to God, whereupon the first corner-stone of the church's happiness is laid, he being the beginning of the second creation, as of the first, Rev 3:14. And:
>
> 2. Of their restoration from sin and death, being brought into that first-designed happiness, which is the great intention of that union, as appears from the following expression, **the firstborn from the dead**, in a special distinction from the dead, here too of the creature, Col 1:15.[24]

Christ, the Son of God alone deserves and has ascribed to Him this position of headship over the church, not Peter, nor the Papacy, nor any other person. Therefore, all teaching which seeks to put someone aside Christ as the Head or anyone with him, is anti-Christ. In **Ephesians 1:22-23**, Christ is described as Head over all the world, not only over the church. But the interesting part is that Christ as Head and sovereign *over* all things is given *to* the church. This means that His sovereignty and headship are for the good of His body, the church. His bride whom He loved to death, even death on a cross and redeemed her from sin. It is Christ Who builds His Body by supplying His body with all the graces that are necessary for her nourishment. As a shepherd feeds his sheep, so Christ likewise feeds His sheep (cf. Eph. 5:25-32).

The Pope Of Rome, Antichrist

I don't agree that the Pope is **the** antichrist, but he and his office are certainly *an* antichrist with his church because they have so degenerated from the way of Christ in many ways. By denying the people the peace of the gospel which comes by grace through faith in Christ, and not also by performing good works, the church of Rome has constituted itself a synagogue of Satan. I don't believe that the Papacy is the ultimate manifestation of the antichrist (the beast, the man of sin). It was usual for the Reformers to think of the Roman Papacy as the antichrist and who can question that seeing how Rome persecuted the Reformers and was gone astray from the true gospel of Christ? Furthermore, the actions of the Roman Church and the Papacy fitted and still fit the description of 2 Thessalonians 2. There was a period where the Popes were clearly not virtuous and good people, but openly wicked. They condemned the righteous and sought to please themselves, therefore, the description of "man of lawlessness" fitted them very well. John Gill, writing in the 18th century, said:

> here it intends the whole hierarchy of Rome, monks, friars, priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and especially popes, who may well be called "the man of sin", because notoriously sinful; not only sinners, but sin itself, a sink of sin, monsters of iniquity, spiritual wickednesses in high places: it is not easy to reckon up their impieties, their adulteries, incest, sodomy, rapine, murder, avarice, simony, perjury, lying, necromancy, familiarity with the devil, idolatry, witchcraft, and what not? and not only have they been guilty of the most notorious crimes themselves, but have been the patrons and encouragers of others in sin; by dispensing with the laws of God and man, by making sins to be venial, by granting indulgences and pardon for the worst of crimes, by licensing brothel houses, and countenancing all manner of wickedness; and therefore it is no wonder to hear of the following epithet,[8]

The understanding of the Papacy and the Roman Catholic system as the antichrist, to my knowledge, is uniform among the Reformers. Calvin said on v. 3, "Paul, however, does not speak of one individual, but of a kingdom, that was to be taken possession of by Satan, that he might set up a seat of abomination in the midst of God's temple — which we see accomplished in Popery."[25] The word antichrist both means one *against* Christ and one *in place* of Christ. The Reformers pretty much saw the Pope as claiming to be the voice and representative of Christ on earth as such a claim. He sat as head of the Roman Catholic Church and thus in a sense, in the Temple of God, and claimed to be the representative of God on

earth. The claim that Popes were able to grant forgiveness of sins on behalf of God, indulgences, and the way in which the Pope was revered was a confirmation in the minds of the Reformers that the Papacy was, indeed, "that man of sin" which Paul spoke of. We may think whatever we like about the Reformers' point of view, but I agree that the Papacy and the Roman Catholic Church is ***an*** antichrist or manifestation of antichrist, but not ***the*** antichrist. They are a false church and a synagogue of Satan. The claims that they make about the Pope are antichrist. The claim that he is the head of the Church likewise establishes him as an antichrist. The *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church* states:

> **882** The *Pope*, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful." "For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered."[26]

This should be the description only of Jesus Christ, the true and only Head of the church, and not of mere men. The claim that the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, probably confirmed in the minds of the Reformers that the Papacy was indeed the antichrist. Concerning this term, an article on GotQuestions.org explains:

> The term "vicar" comes from the Latin word vicarius, which means "instead of." In the Catholic Church, the vicar is the representative of a higher-ranking official, with all of the same authority and power that that official has. Calling the pope the "Vicar of Christ" implies that he has the same power and authority that Christ had over the church.[27]

Such a claim for the Pope was blasphemous and antichrist and it still is so. Until Rome and the Papacy recant from these false teachings (which would include the abrogation of the Papacy) she cannot but be an antichrist. Moreover, the true Vicar of Christ is the Holy Spirit, not the Bishop of Rome (John 14:26; 16:7).

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§5 The Lord Jesus Calleth Out Of The World Unto Himself

5. In the execution of this power wherewith he is so entrusted, the **Lord Jesus calleth out of the world** unto himself, **through the ministry of his word, by his Spirit,** those that are **given unto him by his Father,** **1** that they may walk before him in all the ways of obedience, which he prescribeth to them in his word. **2** Those thus called, **he commandeth to walk together in particular societies, or churches**, for their mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which he requireth of them in the world. **3**
    1. John 10:16, 23; 12:32, 17:2; Acts 5:31-32
    2. Matt. 28:20
    3. Matt. 18:15-20; Acts 14:21-23; Titus 1:5; 1 Tim. 1:3; 3:14-16; 5:17-22

With **this power** and authority which Christ has (paragraph 4), He **calleth out of the world unto Himself, through the ministry of His word, by His Spirit those that are given unto Him by His Father** (John 10:16; 6:63; 17:2). It is He Who calls us unto Himself. How He does it? Through the gospel which comes from His Word and by His Spirit Who opens our hearts to receive the gospel. Why does He call us? **That** we **may walk before Him in all the ways of obedience** (Matt. 28:20; Rom. 1:5; Eph. 2:10) which He has given **in His word**. As they are called **unto Himself** and regenerated, they are brought into the universal or invisible church. But those who are part of the universal church on earth, **He commandeth to walk together in particular societies, or churches**. Which means that it is the duty of Christians to join local **churches** and **walk together** with other brothers and sisters. For which purposes? **For their mutual edification** which cannot come if we are on our own and are not part of a local body of Christ's church. And most importantly, **the due performance of that public worship, which He requireth of them in the world**. Worship on the Lord's Day is both private as well as public (see **chapter 22:8**). But those who are not part of a local church cannot obey the command of God concerning public worship on the Sabbath day and are neglecting to meet together (Heb. 10:25).

While the first four paragraphs focused on the invisible church and attention was given to its visible manifestation in paragraph 2, the following paragraphs concern themselves specifically with the order of the church. A word which is sometimes used in this respect is *polity*. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives two definitions for polity: (1) "something (such as a country or state) that has a government : a politically organized unit" and (2) "a form of government"[28]. Polity,

then, has to do with government, i.e., how things are managed. Since we are speaking of the church then polity has to do with church government and how the church is organized. In the words of Mark Dever, “Polity, then, is management, organization, government, and structures of authority.”[29] This is thus the introductory paragraph for the rest of the chapter which touches upon different aspects of the local church on earth.

He calls by His Word and Spirit

The Lord Jesus is the Head of the church and He is her only Head. As Head, He is its Ruler. He gathers His people to Himself. A church, as the Greek word indicates is an assembly of people. John Dagg explains, “The Greek word ἐκκλησία denotes *an assembly;* and, in this particular, differs from the English word *church,* which is often used to signify *the house* in which men assemble for religious worship.”[30] The church is the *assembly* of God’s redeemed. The word *congregation* or *assembly* is a better fit for translation than the word *church*, which most often denotes the *building* in our society. We’ve argued in paragraph 2 that local churches should be composed of those who profess the true faith and live in a way consistent with that profession. But whom does He call to congregate? He calls those whom He died for to Himself. We’ve noted the Confessional use of the “Word and Spirit” formula in **chapter 13:1**.

We must understand and believe that the church is the creation of Jesus Christ. It belongs to Him. It is His wife. He takes the initiative to call her to Himself. The way in which He calls her is through His Word and Spirit. Which word is this? It is the word of the gospel which creates spiritual life. Peter speaks of this precious word when he says, “you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God…this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1 Pet. 1:23, 25). God’s word, in the beginning, created the universe, and God’s word has recreated us spiritually. The apostle Paul says, ‘For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:6). He compares the creation of the world with the “new creation” of the believer (2 Cor. 5:17). The preached Word is called “the words of this Life” (Acts 5:20). It creates spiritual life and it points to the source of all life. This “word of life” is something to be held onto (Phil. 2:6). It nourishes us as a baby is nourished by milk (1 Pet. 2:1-2).

But this word is not alone. To call His people out of the world, the Lord Jesus sends both His Word and His Spirit. The Word alone, while powerful, convincing, true and good, cannot create life by itself. For that, the Spirit and His work are necessary. But the Spirit does not come alone. He comes with the Word which He has inspired for us. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, the apostle connects their being “saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth”. Furthermore, the apostle clarifies that they were called to this salvation “through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Both the work of the Spirit and the gospel were necessary for their conversion. Earlier, he said, “And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:3-5). His words were not grounded in the wisdom of man, but in the power of the Spirit. He imparts the things revealed by the Spirit “in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:13). To the Thessalonians, he said that “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5). The believers, whether universal or local, are called to be “members of the same body…through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6).

All that this means is that Word and Spirit create and call the church from the darkness into the light. The gospel, as used by the Spirit, creates the church. Since it creates the church, it stands at the center and core of the church. The gospel simply is Jesus Christ in all His beauty, glory, mercy and grace given to us to be received and adored by faith.

Local Churches

What the Confession here calls “particular societies, or churches” are what we call *local churches*. As paragraph 2 said, “All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it…are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.” A local church is a company of believers gathered for worship and mutual edification. A. H. Strong has a good definition of the local church:

> The individual church may be defined as that smaller company of regenerate persons, who, in any given community, unite themselves voluntarily together, in accordance with Christ’s laws, for the purpose of securing the complete establishment of his kingdom in themselves and in the world.[31]

As we noted in paragraph 2, the descriptions given to the church in the New Testament make it clear that they were composed of professing believers. No author of the New Testament assumed that he is writing to an unbelieving church. Even when they had hard words to say, they did not assume that the church may remain mixed and unpure. They had hard words to say exactly because the purity of the church is important to God. The purity of a church is tied to the purity of its individual members. If there are unbelievers among its membership then this obviously defiles the purity of that particular

church.

To minimize or overlook the importance of the local church is to minimize or overlook the context of the New Testament. The majority of the New Testament books were written to particular churches. They were not written to the universal church, but they were written to local churches in various areas in the Roman world. They were composed of definite people who belong to a particular congregation in a city. So, the epistle to the Romans is written to the Christian congregation in Rome which Paul so longed to see (Rom. 15:23). So also all other letters of Paul with the exception of the pastoral and Philemon. The dual letters to Timothy were written to him as Timothy ministered as an elder in Ephesus, which had a congregation whom Paul knew (see Acts 18-20). Peter addresses his first epistle to various churches located in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet. 1:1). Revelation is explicitly written for seven particular churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 1:4, 11; 22:16). If these local churches did not exist, then the New Testament itself would not exist. The New Testament was not written to or entrusted into the hands of a heavenly and mystical body, but various local ones.

As we said, a local church is a gathering or an assembly of believers. The New Testament speaks in various ways of these assemblies. As to location, they are said to meet in the temple at Jerusalem (Acts 2:46) as well as houses. When we are used to thinking of the word *church* referring to a *building* rather than the people, it is easy for us to be shocked that the early believers met in their homes. It is not that building that makes the church, but the gathering of believers. So, we read of the church at the **house** of Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19), the church at the house of Gaius (Rom. 16:23); the church at the house of Nympha (Col. 4:15); the church at the house of Philemon (Phlm. 1:2). A church in a whole **city** is referred to as in the case of Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), Thessalonica (1 Thess. 1:1), Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 11:2), Antioch (Acts 13:1), Caesarea (Acts 18:22), and Ephesus (Acts 20:17). Multiple churches are referred to in the singular, in a **regional** sense as in "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria" (Acts 9:31). This is in the same sense when we speak of "the state of the church in the world" or in a particular place or country. Churches of a **particular region** are also referred to in the plural as the "churches of Asia" (1 Cor. 16:19), Achaia (2 Cor. 1:1), Galatia (Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 16:1), and Macedonia (2 Cor. 8:1). This most likely means that Paul is referring to multiple local assemblies in these places.

Besides being located in a certain place and thus *local* churches, these are churches that *church*, i.e., **gather** (Acts 2:42; 4:31; 5:16; 6:5; 12:12; esp. Acts 14:27; 15:6, 30; 20:7-8; 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:17, 20, 34; 14:23, 26; Heb. 10:25). Thus Acts 20:7 teaches that the disciples, "on the first day of the week…were gathered together to break bread". They were gathered in a house with an "upper room" (Acts 20:8). But they were gathered as a church to celebrate the Lord's Supper and to hear Paul "talk" to them. Not only do we see a very early example of Christians gathering together, but they that to celebrate the ordinances of Christ and to hear the preaching of the Word of God. Hebrews 10:25 even encourages us not to neglect "to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." See **chapter 22:7-8** for more on the day of worship in the New Covenant. See also **below** for a little more on the church as gathered.

In addition to what we've said and argued concerning the spiritual condition of the church's membership, we may also note how they are referred to. They are called **disciples** (Acts 6:1-2, 7; 9:1, 19, 26, 38; 11:29; 14:20-21). This is how Christ chose to refer to His people. A disciple is someone who has a teacher. Christ said, "you have one teacher," referring to Himself, "and you are all brothers" (Matt. 23:8). A disciple does not merely learn things from his teacher, but a disciple likewise imitates his teacher. Therefore, our Teacher says, "It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher" (Matt. 10:25). Furthermore, he made it very clear that the cost of discipleship is everything. He said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26-27). This is the calling of every true Christian and church member. In fact, the church is also the place where discipleship takes form.

Those church members are also designated as "**the believers**" (Acts 5:14; 10:45; 15:5). They identified with the crucified-risen Messiah. In Acts, we read of people belonging to a church. So, "Herod the king laid violent hands on some who **belonged to the church**" (Acts 12:1). The author did not refer to people belonging to the universal church, but to the church at Jerusalem. They belonged to a particular congregation or society of people. So we also read that people were **added** to the churches. The 3000 converts on Pentecost "were added", presumably, to the church. For to what else were they added? Since they were able to identify that there were 3000 converts and later 5000 more (or 2000, making the total number of the disciples 5000), it would not be strange to think that there was some list of membership (see 1 Tim. 5:9 a reference to a list of widows). There was a discernable way of telling if someone belonged to a particular church or not. We will delve a little more into the question of membership in the next paragraph. Believers were added to the existing body of believers. Thus, "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47; cf. Acts 5:14; 11:24).

In this way, the presence and prominence of the local church are shown in the New Testament, including what kind of persons made up its membership and the places of their meeting.

Purpose of the Local Church

Seeing how much the New Testament speaks of the church and of the local church in particular, then we are led to ask

concerning the purpose of the church in the world. That the church is an institution and creation of the Lord Jesus is His own testimony (Matt. 16:18), but why? The Confession gives two purposes, namely, "mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which he requireth of them in the world." These are certainly purposes for which Christ instituted His church, but we may also add evangelism to the list, too.

Mutual edification

As we noted above, the majority of the New Testament was explicitly written to particular churches in the Roman world. This means that the commands given by the apostles were directed to people who were in these congregations. People who did not belong to Christian congregations simply did not have the New Testament nor did they heard it. All this means is that belonging to a local church is presupposed in every command given. In other words, the command to love one another is given to members of a local church and concerns, prominently, those "of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

God has given the church so that we would build each other up. Thus the commands to do everything for "*mutual upbuilding*" (Rom. 14:19; cf. Rom. 15:2; 1 Cor. 14:3; 2 Cor. 12:19; Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 5:11). They are to *love* one another (Rom. 12:9-10; 13:8-10; Gal. 5:15; 6:10; Eph. 1:15; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:17; 3:8; 4:8; 1 John 3:16; 4:7-12). They are to *forgive* one another (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12). They are to *encourage* one another (Rom. 1:12; 1 Cor. 14:3, 31; Eph. 6:22; Col. 4:8; 1 Thess. 2:12; 4:18; 5:11, 14; 2 Thess. 3:12; 1 Tim. 5:1; Heb. 10:25). They are to *pray* for one another (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:31 6:4, 6; 8:15; 12:5; 13:3; 14:23; Rom. 12:12; 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 1:16; 6:18; Phil. 1:19; 1 Thess. 5:17, 25; 2 Thess. 2:11; 1 Tim. 2:1). They are to seek *unity* and live in *harmony* with one another (Rom. 12:16; 14:19; Eph. 4:3-6; Phil. 2:3; 1 Cor. 1:10). They are a family (Gal. 6:10; 1 Tim. 3:15). Every church member is "given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7) and is called to use their gift(s) for the common good.

In summary, they are to do everything for mutual upbuilding and not only for their good, but also for "the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). In many ways, these points belong to and are the responsibilities and duties of church members.

Worship

The primary reason that man exists is to worship and enjoy God forever. Therefore, how much more should the purpose of redeemed humanity be? The church exists to serve the Lord. In worship, the local church joins the heavenly or triumphant church in heaven. When God speaks about the privilege which we have under the New Covenant, He describes it in this way:

> Heb. 12:22-24 But you have come to **Mount Zion** and to the city of the living God, **the heavenly Jerusalem**, and to **innumerable angels** in festal gathering, 23 and to **the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven**, and to God, the judge of all, and to the **spirits of the righteous made perfect**, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

We belong to the assembly of the firstborn. We are firstborn sons and daughters of His, just like Christ, which means that we are co-heirs (Rom. 8:16-17; Gal. 3:29; 4:7). But the church on earth joins in the worship of the church on heaven. Such is the glory of Christian worship under the New Covenant. We do not come to the types and shadows of the Old Covenant, but we enjoy the spiritual realities of the New Covenant, even joining the worship of heaven. If we look to the devotion of the early church, it cannot be described in any other words than worship (e.g., Acts 2:42). According to Paul, it would be possible, even for an unbeliever, when in a church gathering to know that "God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:25). In worship, God is especially among His people. The Lord Jesus walks among His churches (Rev. 1:12-13, 20; 2:1). Therefore, the New Testament encourages us not to neglect "to meet together, as is the habit of some" (Heb. 10:25).

The Father is seeking true worshipers who will worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23). The congregations of those who claim His name should primarily concern themselves with rendering Him proper worship as He desires (see **chapter 22**).

Evangelism

The church exists to enlarge the church. The Head of the church has not given commanding orders to particular individuals. He has given the Great Commission to the church. It is the duty of the church to preach the gospel. It is likewise the duty of every Christian to preach and testify to the gospel. But it is their duty as they are a part of a church. Scripture knows nothing of a lone-ranger Christian. The Great Commission is a command to go into the world, preach the gospel to everyone, bring the believing into the church and disciple them. Read in the Acts of the Apostles how dedicated they were to reach the lost because it was the purpose for which the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples in the first place. The Lord Christ said, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The church is to testify both by their words (Matt. 28:19; Acts 4:2; 10:42; 18:4; 19:8; 1 Pet. 3:15-16) as well as by their deeds

(Matt. 5:13-16; 1 Pet. 3:1, 15-16).

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§6 Church Membership

6. The members of these churches are **saints by calling,** visibly **manifesting and evidencing** (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; **1** 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, in **professed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel.** **2**
    1. Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 14:22-23; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2 with verses 13-17; 1 Thess. 1:1 with vv. 2-10; Acts 2:37-42; 4:4; 5:13-14
    2. Acts 2:41-42; 5:13-14; 2 Cor. 9:13

The members of local **churches are saints by calling** or as paragraph 2 puts it, "visible saints" who are **visibly manifesting and evidencing** their faith and **obedience** (Rom. 1:5-7; Acts 2:37-42). Notice how they evidence **their obedience unto that call of Christ** unto Himself. It is not because the elders of the church could see into their hearts, but it is **in and by their profession and walking**, which is the only way in which we can judge if one is a Christian or not, albeit a fallible judgment. Those **saints by calling** do **willingly consent to walk together** in obedience to Christ's command and thereby **giving up themselves to the Lord, and one to another**. They do not only commit themselves to the Lord, but also to one another as a local body of Christ to serve and obey Him and also to serve each other. Furthermore, they profess **subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel** (Acts 2:42), which are baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The saints of God show themselves to be of God in the church, where they do what the Lord Jesus commands them through His Word. They have been called to be saints, i.e., set apart for the purpose of God, and thus to act like that toward each other (1 Cor. 1:2; Rom. 1:7). We should willingly be eager to serve each other and to do that with joy and as service to our Savior. We should as brothers and sisters encourage each other to serve the Lord and to help each other in serving the Lord (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 3:13). It is not the intention of God that believers be lone-rangers, rather, they should be in a church and thus grow in their faith and serve each other. When we show love and render loving service to each other, then the love of Christ will manifest itself amongst us. This is the mark of Christians which the Lord wants them to have (John 13:34-35). As to the spiritual condition of these members, we've said enough. Let the words of John Dagg suffice for this purpose:

> The character of the persons who composed the New Testament churches, may be readily learned from the epistles addressed to them. They are called "The elect of God;" [Col. 3:12] "Children of God by faith;" [Gal. 3:26] "Sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints;" [1 Cor. 1:2] "Saints in Christ Jesus;" [Phil. 1:1] "Followers of the Lord;" [1 Thess. 1:6 KJV] "Beloved of the Lord." [2 Thess. 2:13] No doubt can exist that these churches were, in the view of the inspired writers who addressed them, composed of persons truly converted to God.[32]

Its Scriptural Basis

I attended the current church I go to for more than 2 years before I became a member. I did not see the necessity of me becoming a member and to be honest, I was unwilling to commit myself to the congregation. I thought, if I would want to leave, then it would not be a problem. I would just stop coming. There are some people who think that church membership is something unbiblical. Where does the Bible speak of church membership? There is nothing about "church membership" in the Bible! These kinds of arguments sound persuasive, but they do not prove that the Bible does not teach church membership. The reason that church membership is mostly neglected in our Western world is because people are living commitment-free lives. Marriages are no longer meant for life. If you join a club you can leave any time you want. There are various services which we can get a 'trial' on and so on. It is the tendency of our society and believers have just taken over this destructive attitude. As will become clear, commitment is the primary point of church membership.

What we need to understand about the issue of church membership is what church membership actually entails. Basically, it entails a few things. 1) A commitment to the local body of Christ, to worship and serve there. 2) To be under the rule, care, discipline, and teaching of the elders. 3) To have a place from whence the Great Commission is to be carried out. Other points could be added, but church membership has "commitment" at its core. When a Christian becomes a member of a particular congregation, they are committing themselves to that local body. They see the need for Christians to flock together, therefore, they join themselves to a local body of Christ and seek to serve their King there. This is the place where

they are nurtured and where they may minister or be ministered by others. Church membership is just that, one's commitment to the local body of Christ. When one wants to become a member of a local church, they are committing themselves to that church. There may be requirements for church membership. Most Baptist churches require that the members must be baptized, others do not think that it matters. There may be (there should be!) a confession of faith or creed which the member would sign. By becoming a member of a local body, a Christian is, in essence, saying, "I want to serve you and I want to serve Christ with you." This is the meaning and point of church membership. Therefore, while we readily admit that we do not have commands to become church members, yet we see church membership *presupposed* in the New Testament! How? Let's see!

It is quite likely that the early church kept a record of its members. The believers were a recognizable body of 120 prior to Pentecost (Acts 1:15). How was this known? Was a list kept of who was in? What about the 3000 who were "added" on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41)? The obvious question here is, "to what they were added?" The obvious answer is: to the body of believers. They were added to the church in Jerusalem. So, the local church which began with 120 members gained 3000 more members in one day. These people came under the authority and were part of the Jerusalem church. They became committed to Christ and His body, and they showed that by their baptism and involvement in the life of the church (e.g., Acts 2:42). This point, in my opinion, clearly points to the idea of a definite church membership and there being a record kept of those who belong to the church. The church knew who belong to them and who did not. They knew who was committed and who was not. This explains also the statement about summoning "the full number of the disciples" in Acts 6:2. This clearly implies that there are those who are known and registered as disciples and as such belong to the Jerusalem church. The church in Jerusalem was not a free-to-all club.

The church is described as a body with members by Paul. Writing to the Corinthians he said, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). In this picture and analogy, there is a commitment on the part of the body members to serve each other, for the good of the body (1 Cor. 12:7). There are certain functions within the body for everybody. Some are feet, hands, eyes and so on. This shows us that there are certain functions like eldership, which are not for everyone to practice. This shows us also that everyone has been gifted differently. Not everyone is an eye or a hand. But no member of the body is disposable if we want the body to function properly. But we see here also the idea of membership and being a part of a church with a commitment to serve each other. In fact, in this picture of the body, the idea of membership is explicitly pointed out. To be a member, therefore, is to be committed to the purpose and health of the body. Paul is here not merely speaking of the universal church, but he uses this image, which also points to the universal church, to make an application for a particular congregation.

The Bible says to elders to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you" (1 Pet. 5:2). But who is the flock of God? The elders are to exercise authority over the flock of God and they are to lead and rule them, but who makes up the flock? Are elders to simply exercise their rule over anyone they want, visitors as well as members, believers as well as unbelievers? Obviously not. Rather, the flock are those who have joined themselves to the particular body of Christ and have put themselves under the authority of the shepherds in the church. In this way, they are to submit to their leaders (Heb. 13:17), and their elders should shepherd them and teach them the things of God. Through church membership, we submit to the leadership of the elders and place ourselves under their care. Those who are not part of a local body of believers are simply in disobedience to this command of Christ to submit to our leaders.

Another point that supports church membership is the matter of church discipline, which is an extension of the previous point. If I place myself under the leadership of a local church, then I must also accept their discipline if there is any fault within me. Through church membership, I accept the fact that I may be a subject of church discipline. But, do the elders have authority to discipline someone who is not a member and who is not committed to that local body? Have they any authority to discipline a visitor as they do a member who has made a commitment? No, they do not. The elders are not elders of the *state*, but of a particular local church. When Paul, for example, speaks of the one who is to be excommunicated he speaks of him being put ***outside*** of the church (1 Cor. 5:12-13). He was once inside, he was once a part of the church, but now he is to be removed. He is to be put out in Satan's realm. When we look at Matthew 18 and what our Lord said concerning discipline, then we clearly see someone who was part of the church and then is no longer. The unrepentant sinner is to be "be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17). This clearly means that he is to be treated like an outsider. He was once inside, now he is outside. As Mark Dever has observed:

> Actions of reproach and, ultimately, exclusion are to occur within the arena of a specific and identifiable group of people. In many other places in the New Testament, a church appears to be composed of a specific and identifiable group of people. [Acts 9:41; 12:1; 15:3, 22; Eph. 2:19; 3:6; 4:25; 5:30; Col. 2:19; 3:15; 3 John 9][33]

These considerations taken together and individually, convince me of the biblical mandate to join and commit ourselves to a local body where we are discipled. The epistles of the New Testament are addressed to such churches which consisted of those who had committed themselves to the body of Christ universal, but also to a local body in their city. The idea of church members, while not explicitly taught, it is assumed throughout the New Testament. There would be no New Testament

without local churches and church members.

As we observed many times already, believers are the only candidates for church membership. A. H. Strong writes, “They only can properly be members of the local church, who have previously become members of the church universal,—or, in other words, have become regenerate persons. Only those who have been previously united to Christ are, in the New Testament, permitted to unite with his church.”[34] As proof, he points to Acts 2:47; 5:14 and 1 Corinthians 1:2. We see in these texts that those who were added to the church are called believers and saints and are saved. It is true that we are often deceived by false professors, but church membership should not be extended to those whom we *know* are not believers. Therefore, in the majority of Baptist churches, only those who have professed faith and shown that in baptism are allowed to be members.

Duties of Church Members

Church membership is not a free-for-all membership. It is given to believers and, in the context of a local church life where the commands and ordinances of Christ are to be carried out. All the “one another” commands were written to members of local churches who were commanded to carry these commands to each other. As we briefly noted **above**, the New Testament calls us to do everything for mutual upbuilding, to love one another, to forgive one another, to encourage one another, to pray for one another, to live in peace and unity with one another. These are the duties of church members to each other. As they are committed to one another, they are to do that which Christ commands to be done for one another. Benjamin Keach considers bearing one another’s burdens one of the glories of a true Christian church:

> The beauty and glory of a true church is exhibited when they bear “one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). And that you may do this, consider where is that church in which there are no burdens to be born (Gal 6:1). Consider what a burden Jesus Christ has born for you. Consider what a burden you have to bear of your own (Gal 6:5). May you not in some things be a burden to your brethren? Would you not have others bear your burden? May not God cause you to bear a more heavy burden because you cannot bear your brother’s? It is a fulfilling the law of love, nay, the law of Christ (Gal 6:2; Rom 13:10).[35]

Church members are to serve Christ together. They do this by fulfilling the “one another” commands in the New Testament. They do this by weekly **gathering** together for worship and “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Heb. 10:25). They are to **protect pure doctrine**. When Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians about the controversy of those Jewish Christians who were perverting the gospel, he did not write it to the leadership of those churches, but “To the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2). He speaks about the authority that the church has to reject the teaching even of apostolic or angelic messengers (Gal. 1:7-8). These words were not merely directed to the leadership, but to the whole church. This means that it is the duty of members to guard and encourage sound doctrine. John commands us to “not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). Guarding the purity of doctrine is also the work of simple church members. Church members are to celebrate the ordinances of the gospel with one another. The gospel creates the church and now the church is to display the gospel in two ordinances given to her by her Lord. **Baptism** is an initiatory sign into the visible church, and the **Lord’s Supper** is a continuing sign of unity in a local body. Paul used the image of the body and the Supper as motivation for unity and oneness among the Corinthians. As we noted above, **evangelism** is a command that was given to the church, therefore, it is the duty of church members to evangelize the lost.

These are (some of) the duties of church members to one another. But church members also have duties toward the leadership in their church. Members are to **pray** for their leaders (e.g., 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1; Col. 4:3; Acts 12:5; Heb. 13:18). As the leaders are also members, the “one another” commands also apply to them. But prayer is also to be made for them specifically for their role and office in the church. Benjamin Keach, after citing the proof-texts provided, explains the motives that are given:

> 1) Ministers’ work is great: “who is sufficient for these things?” (2Co 2:16).
>
> 2) The opposition made against them is not small (1Co 16:9).
>
> 3) God’s loud call (as well as the call of ministers themselves) is for the saints’ continual prayers and supplication for them (Col 4:2-4).
>
> 4) Their weakness and temptations are many.
>
> 5) The increase and edification of the church depends upon the success of their ministry.
>
> 6) If they fall or miscarry God is greatly dishonored and His ways and people reproached.[36]

Members are to **obey** and **submit** to their leaders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:5; 1 Cor. 4:1). They are to be **honored** (1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17; Phil. 2:29). Members are to **financially support** those who labor in the Word (1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Tim.

5:17-18).

Church membership is more than a modern formality. It is an identity that comes with several responsibilities to the body which one is joined to. Seeing the prominence of the church in the New Testament and the everywhere-presupposed membership, then it is true that Christ commands believers to join a local church (paragraph 5).

Baptism and Membership

We may briefly note the connection between baptism and church membership. Baptists have traditionally only admitted into church membership those who have been biblically baptized. That baptism is an initiatory sign, all denominations of Christianity admit, from Protestant to Catholic. Baptism is "a sign of his [the believer] fellowship with [Christ], in his death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into him; of remission of sins; and of giving up into God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life" (**chapter 28:1**). In other words, baptism is a sign of regeneration. Baptism is an outward sign which points to an inward change. As we have argued over and over again, since a church should be composed of believers, wouldn't it logically follow that a church should be composed of *baptized* believers? If baptism is a sign of fellowship and union with Christ, and churches should be composed of those who are united to Christ, then shouldn't only those be admitted to membership? A church is a place and a context where the commands of Christ are to be obeyed. His marching orders included the command to be baptized (Matt. 28:19). That's Christianity 101. Therefore, why should a (Baptist) church admit someone to membership who hasn't yet taken the first step?

There are a few indications in Scripture concerning the relation of baptism and church membership. For instance, we noted above the fact that believers were added to the church at Jerusalem. Acts 2:41 says, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." Notice that the receiving, the being baptized and the being added concerns the same group of people. Not only faith and baptism are connected here, but baptism and membership are also closely connected. It is a logical step. Dagg summarizes the basic case:

> As profession is necessary to church-membership, so is baptism, which is the appointed ceremony of profession. Profession is the substance, and baptism is the form; but Christ's command requires the form as well as the substance. In reading the Scriptures, it never enters the mind that any of the church-members in the times of the apostles were unbaptized. So uniformly was this rite administered at the beginning of the Christian profession, that no room is left to doubt its universal observance.[37]

Mark Dever notes concerning the importance of baptism for church membership:

> Paul's assumption in his letters seems to be that those who are baptized have experienced new life (Romans 6), those who have had their hearts circumcised (Colossians 2). Baptism, then, is essential for membership in a church because if one were to be admitted by a church, only to refuse such a clear command of Christ, then such an unbaptized person claiming to follow Christ would simply be immediately disciplined until they either decided to follow Christ's commands, or stopped having the church's endorsement of their claim to follow Him. There will never be anything that Jesus calls you to do that will be easier than baptism.[38]

While baptism is required for church membership, based on Acts 2:41 there also seems to be a natural connection between being baptized and then becoming a member. This seems to be the rule in the New Testament. There were no random baptism services visited by persons from various places or congregations. The believers who were baptized on Pentecost were added to the Jerusalem church. The people who were baptized in Samaria became part of the church there or started the church there and so on. There are exceptions to this rule. For example, the case of the Ethiopian eunuch. He was baptized on his way home and there was no local church to which he would be added. But these exceptions only confirm the rule that baptism and church membership belong together.

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§7 Church Polity

7. To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his word, he hath **given all that power 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. **1**
    1. Matt. 18:17-20; 1 Cor. 5:4-5, 13; 2 Cor. 2:6-8

Christ **hath given all that power and authority** to these local **churches…for carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which He hath instituted for them to observe** (Matt. 18:17-20). Christ has given them power and authority to obey and follow Him and His ways. He has not given them the power and authority to invent ways of worshipping Him or ways how they are to govern the church contrary to His Word. He has given **commands and rules** in Scripture of how that **power** is to be executed. Notice also to whom this power and authority is given. It is not given to the leadership in the church. It is given to "**each of these churches thus gathered**".

At this point, we have arrived to the question of *polity*. How is a church to govern itself? Who is to govern a local church? As we noted above, polity has to do with government, rule, and order. Therefore, to speak of the polity of the church is to speak about its order and who bears responsibility. This is a subject which many Christians are divided on. This is one of the major differences between Presbyterians and Reformed Baptists. This was even a difference between paedobaptist groups like the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians.

Presbyterian Polity

While wholesale copying was going on between the three confessions (Westminster, Savoy, and London Baptist), at this chapter each of the confessions has a different take on things, while the most agreement is between the Baptists and the Congregationalists (compare them **here**). The name *Congregationalist* refers to a specific kind of church government, so does also the name *Presbyterian.* These groups identified not merely by the doctrines they believed, but also in the way that they organized their churches. The Presbyterian system of church government, while it acknowledges the same church offices as Baptists, elders and deacons, it also makes the local church a part of a larger whole—a synod. This is confessed in the Westminster Confession chapter 30, titled "Of Church Censures":

> 1. The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his Church, hath therein **appointed a government in the hand of Church officers**, distinct from the civil magistrate.
>
> 2. **To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed**, by virtue whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel, and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.

Christ has given government in the church distinct from the civil government. The keys of the kingdom and power are given to these "Church officers." This is the first difference between what is called Congregationalism and the Presbyterian form of church polity. When we read this paragraph of our Confession, we see that all "power and authority" are given to the local church, not to "Church officers." The second difference comes in chapter 31 called "Of Synods and Councils":

> 1. For the better government and further edification of the Church, there **ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils**.
>
> 3. It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially, to **determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience**; to set down rules and directions for the better **ordering of the public worship of God**, and **government of his Church**; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and **authoritatively to determine** the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his Word.
>
> 4. All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore **they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both**.

In a sense, the authority given to the local church in this paragraph of our confession is transferred to the synod or council of the Presbyterian system. This is not a small difference. The Presbyterian system requires that there be an external authority above the local church which directs its government and order of worship. Our Confession speaks about keeping relations with other bodies and other churches (paragraph 15), but they merely have an advising role, never "authoritatively to determine" things. John Frame, himself a Presbyterian, gives a short description of that form of church government:

> In the presbyterian system, common in churches called Reformed as well as Presbyterian, there is a plurality of elders in every church. (Presbyterian comes from the Greek word for elder.) These are elected by the people. The elders meet

as the ruling body of each particular church, and the elders of a region meet together as a broader court, dealing with the ministry of the whole area. Usually once a year, all the elders of the denomination, or a representative group of them, meet as a General Assembly, or Synod, to resolve questions of importance to the whole church, as did the apostles and other leaders in Acts 15.[39]

More may be said about Presbyterian polity, but I am not qualified to speak and criticize it. Pick a decent work on ecclesiology or a systematic theology and you will encounter the arguments for and against each church polity.

Congregational Polity

Our Baptist forefathers shared a common polity with the Congregationalists. The Congregationalists baptized infants but did not admit them into church membership. Many of the statements in this chapter of our Confession are identical to that of the Savoy appendix titled, "**The Institution of Churches, and the Order Appointed in Them by Jesus Christ**". So what is **Congregationalism** actually? The name has in it the word *congregation* and in essence, it is simply what is said in this paragraph: final authority in ordering the church and governing the church belongs to the local congregation. It is variously defined based on whether one is a proponent or an opponent. Mark Dever has observed:

> One writer has defined it as "the claim of individual congregations to act as if they were alone in the world, independently of all other Christians," (Roland Allen, Missionary Methods, p. 85n1). On the other hand, some of its champions have presented it as straight and simple democracy, tying it up with the inalienable rights of man. Charles Finney presented congregationalism this way:
>
> > Episcopacy is well-suited to a state of general ignorance among the people. Presbyterianism, or Church Republicanism is better suited to a more advanced state of intelligence and the prevalence of Christian principle. While Congregationalism, or spiritual Democracy, is best suited and only suited to a state of general intelligence, and the prevalence of Christian principle. (Charles Finney in his Lectures on Theology)[40]

While acknowledging that the church is given elders to rule it, we likewise believe that every church is autonomous. It is not autonomous from God. It is autonomous from a higher earthly structure which governs it. Notice what the Confession here says about polity and what Congregationalists also say, the church is given autonomy and power to carry "on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe". They are given power and authority to obey what King Jesus has commanded. They are not given power and authority to order the church as they like, but to order it as the Head of the church likes. So, we acknowledge, first of all, that Congregational polity does not lead to democracy and autonomy concerning the ordering and the public worship of the church. Secondly, it does not mean that there are no elders who rule the congregation. But it is simply, the belief that

> Whether in settling disputes between Christians (Matt 18:15-17; Acts 6:1-5), establishing correct doctrine (Gal 1:8; 2 Tim 4:3), or admitting and excluding members (2 Cor 2:6-8; 1 Cor 5:1-13), the local congregation has the duty and obligation to promote the continuance of a faithful gospel witness. No body outside of the whole congregation has this same degree of responsibility.[41]

The Church and Discipline

To biblically argue for Congregational polity, we will have to delve into a few texts, which mostly have to do with church discipline. It is interesting to note how church polity is demonstrated in these cases. To discipline or excommunicate someone may, in a sense, be the most powerful thing a church does. They are, in essence, saying that the excommunicated person is not living according to the gospel and thus, we do not acknowledge him as a brother or sister.

In Matthew 16:19, the Lord said to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." But contrary to the Roman Catholic claim, this authority does not rest merely with the apostles or the apostle Peter in particular for this same authority is given to the whole church. In Matthew 18, we read:

> Matt. 18:15-20 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, **tell it to the church**. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, **whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven**, and **whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven**. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them

by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Our focus is upon v. 18. The same authority to bind and loose given to Peter in Matthew 16 is given to the whole church in **Matthew 18**. The keys of the kingdom belong not to a particular person or a particular class of persons, but to the church. What do these keys represent? They represent the opening and shutting the doors of the kingdom to someone. While we cannot shut them from the eternal kingdom of God, that is God's work alone. We can recognize or refuse to recognize people as belonging to the kingdom. Notice that how this process of discipline is to occur. At first, it is one-on-one. If that doesn't help, then it a few more people with you. If that doesn't help, "tell it to the church." A few things are presupposed here. The person to be disciplined is a member of that church, for the section begins with, "If your brother sins against you". This is also presupposed when it is necessary to "tell it to the church." Why should the church care to discipline someone not among their fold? Notice that in the statement "tell it to the church" the whole church is being spoken about and not only the leadership of the church. The church is the body of believers in a specific place. But notice that this is a church which decides things. The church will tell the unrepentant person a thing and "if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." This telling of something is a decision made by the church. Again, this authority, judgment, or declaration concerning the unrepentant person is not given by the elders of the church. It is not given by the Pope. It is not given by the synod. It is not given by any other exception the local congregation itself. All that this sums up to is that the local body as a whole is to judge and govern such church matters. John Dagg observed on this place:

> The distinctness of the assembly, and to some extent its organization, are here implied. Tell it to the assembly; **an assembly actually convened, and capable of being addressed**; and not a society scattered through a province or kingdom. "If he will not hear the church." **The ecclesia not only hears, but decides; not only decides, but announces its decision**. Here organization is clearly implied, and also right of jurisdiction: "Let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican." This proves **the decision to be final, and without appeal to a higher judicatory**; otherwise the offended brother would be bound to await the issue of such an appeal. Thus we discover, that this admirable passage contains, in its brief dimensions, an epitome of the doctrine concerning church order and discipline, which was more fully developed afterwards in the instruction and example of the apostles. If the divine authority of their instructions were doubtful, these words of Jesus give them his sanction.[42]

In **1 Corinthians 5**, we come to a similar case. One may even say that 1 Corinthians 5 is based upon Matthew 18.

> 1 Cor. 5:1-5 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for **a man has his father's wife**. 2 And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? **Let him who has done this be removed from among you**. 3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. 4 When you are **assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus** and my spirit is present, **with the power of our Lord Jesus,** 5 **you are to deliver this man to Satan** for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

The apostle lays out what he has heard about this congregation and then proceeds to the judgment that they should pronounce. To whom is the apostle speaking? Is he speaking to the pastor? Is he speaking to the elders? Is he speaking to the deacons? No, he is speaking to the church as a whole. Furthermore, he is holding the whole church responsible for tolerating this man. Likewise, he calls the whole church to take action. He does not tell the elders to expel this man, but he commands the church to do this. Notice also the interesting fact that this is to occur "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus". This is paralleled with the *church* as an assembly in Matthew 18:17, but also to 18:19-20 where the presence of Christ is promised to believers especially when they decide such matters. The removal of the unrepentant person is assumed to place him in the realm of Satan, but does not necessarily mean consigning him to damnation. At the end of the chapter, the apostle even says that it is the duty of the church to judge those in it.

> 1 Cor. 5:12-13 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not **those inside the church whom you are to judge**? 13 God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."

In 2 Corinthians 2:6, the apostle points to "punishment by the majority". This is not referring to being punished by the majority, but the punishment which was *decided* by the majority. John Gill observes, 'not by the pastor only, or by the elders or more eminent persons in the church, but by the multitude, by the whole congregation, at least υπο των πλειονων, "by the more"; the greater, or major part; and not by one, or a few only'[8].

The Church and Doctrine

If we consider the Galatian controversy, who did the apostle Paul address and call to action? He wrote:

> Gal. 1:1-2, 8-9 Paul, an apostle— not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— 2 and all the brothers who are with me, **To the churches of Galatia**: 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed... 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: **If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed**.

The letter is written to the "churches" as a whole not merely to the elders or leadership within the church. Therefore, the church is called to judge the soundness of the doctrine. The apostle gave authority to this congregation to stand in judgment over apostolic or even angelic messenger who teaches anything other than what they received. He did not call the elders to decide the matter. Neither did he say that a synod or a council should settle the matter. Neither did he tell them to ask another congregation. He called on the congregation itself to act. Therefore, Dever observes:

> He doesn't write merely to the pastors, to the presbytery, to the bishop or the conference, to the convention, or to the seminary. He writes to the Christians who compose the churches, and he makes it quite clear that not only are they competent to sit in judgement on what claims to be the gospel, but that they must! They have an inescapable duty to judge those who claim to be messengers of the Good News of Jesus Christ according to the consistency of their new claims with what these Galatian Christians already knew to be the gospel.[43]

The Church and the Officers

Even when we consider those who have a special task within the church as elders and deacons, we see the authority of the whole congregation. Who puts or calls these people into this office? What does Scripture say? In the book of Acts, we see a pattern of Paul as in Acts 14:21-23. Work of evangelism is done, work of upbuilding is done and then comes time to leave. Before Paul and Barnabas leave, they "appointed elders for them in every church" (v. 23). Was this done without the congregation? Albert Barnes comments on this passage and explains the Greek word for 'appointed':

> The word occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, 2Co 8:19, where it is applied to Luke, and translated, "who was also chosen of the church (that is, appointed or elected by suffrage by the churches) to travel with us, etc." The verb properly denotes "to stretch out the hand"; and as it was customary to elect to office, or to vote, by stretching out or elevating the hand, so the word simply means "to elect, appoint, or designate to any office." The word here refers simply to an "election" or "appointment" of the elders. It is said, indeed, that Paul and Barnabas did this. But probably all that is meant by it is that they presided in the assembly when the choice was made. It does not mean that they appointed them without consulting the church; but it evidently means that they appointed them in the usual way of appointing officers, by the suffrages of the people.[6]

This, indeed, was the usual pattern of the New Testament church. So, the problem of neglecting the Hellenists arose, Luke says:

> Acts 6:2-3 And the twelve **summoned the full number of the disciples** and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, **brothers, pick out from among you** seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

First, the whole church was called to consider this problem. Second, the whole church was called to select from among themselves whom the apostles "will appoint to this duty." This is the first instance of the diaconate office. Even when a replacement for Judas was to be chosen, we read that the 120 disciples were gathered (Acts 1:15), qualifications were given (Acts 1:21-22), the congregation chose two people (Acts 1:23), and then God made the final choice (Acts 1:26). Like Acts 6, the apostles place the qualifications, but they do not make the choice. The whole congregation makes the choice. Furthermore, the qualifications for elders and deacons are not merely given to other elders. Not only the elders should observe and recognize people who meet the qualifications for these offices.

The fact that the church has a hand and is responsible to elect leaders, points both to the authority as well as the responsibility of the local church.

The Local Church—a Whole Church

A point that is very important for Congregational polity is independence. This is the logical implication of what we've argued thus far. The church as a whole is responsible for inclusion and exclusion into its number (through discipline). The church is responsible for sound doctrine. The church is responsible to appoint leadership. Since a local church does all these things, then it does not need any outside body to govern it or direct its affairs. Therefore, the local church is sovereign and independent. Or in other words, "Each local congregation is fully *ekklēsia* in itself."[44] A local church is not the whole church. But a local church is a whole church. It does not depend for its authority or its mission or purpose on other body to govern and lead it. To her are the keys of the kingdom committed. She has authority over itself. She is to test the teaching. She is to exercise discipline and excommunication when needed. All these tasks are for the whole church. In light of this, we can say with Jonathan Leeman, "The independence of the local church, in short, rests squarely on the fact that it is the local church who holds the keys of the kingdom."[45] Since we cannot find a body of authority above the local church this must mean that it is sovereign and accountable to Christ, her Head. What we observed on Matthew 18, we may here summarize with the words of Strong: "Christ, in Mat 18:17, delegates authority to the whole congregation of believers, and at the same time limits authority to the local church."[46]

The Lord Christ, when speaking to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3, never referred to an outside body which governed them, or a body to which they were accountable, or a body which would solve their problems. Rather, "Jesus addressed independent churches and not just their leaders or outside church hierarchies."[47] Greg Allison, as cited in the Wellums' chapter in *Baptist Foundations*, explains the situation in Revelation 2-3:

> In his letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3), Jesus Christ addressed each one as an individual entity. When he rebuked the church, the reprimand was directed at the church for trouble that it had brought upon itself. . . . In turn, when the Lord corrected a church, his expectation was that the church itself would repent (2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19) and set straight its own matters. . . . No call for help from any other church was needed to rectify the sinful situation and bring about restoration. The churches had gotten themselves into trouble, and they were expected to depart from their former trouble and embrace the right path. There is no indication of any necessary assistance from the outside in terms of other churches or structures; each church had resources of its own for making the change.[48]

This point of the independence of the local church is an important disagreement between those who hold to Congregational polity and Presbyterian polity. Their system is largely based upon **Acts 15** and they often bring the case of Acts 15 against the Congregational system. Before we can provide an answer we must first remind ourselves of what the passage says. When Paul and Barnabas went to Antioch and ministered there (Acts 14:26-28), there came people from Judea there who were teaching that "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). This presented a serious issue as to the unity of the church and the unity of the message preached. Paul and Barnabas debated them, and they decided "to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders" to settle "this question" (Acts 15:2). Paul and Barnabas recounted God's work among the Gentiles, while the Judaizers (?) insisted on their initial position (Acts 15:3-5). Therefore, the "apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter" (Acts 15:6). They started debating again and then Peter gave his word and concluding that "we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:11). Finally, James likewise agrees and says that "we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God" (Acts 15:19). Since the body of apostles and elders has decided on this matter, the apostle James says that they "should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:20). They then send this letter with Paul and Barnabas, Judas and Silas back to Antioch (Acts 15:22). The judgment which they declared "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). When they arrived at Antioch, they "gathered the congregation together and "delivered the letter" (Acts 15:30). In Acts 16:4; the apostle Paul when he was in Lystra and Iconium, "delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem."

A few things are to be observed concerning this passage lest we make it to be more than what it is. There was a problem coming to Antioch which originated from Judea, or the proponents thereof came from Judea. They did not belong to the church at Antioch, but to the Jerusalem church. Therefore, Paul and Barnabas, along with the others decide to settle this matter in Jerusalem with the apostles. They want to reach unanimity so that no other doctrine may be propagated. When they arrived at Jerusalem, they "were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders" (Acts 15:4). Notice how the church of Jerusalem is comprehensively described. All must admit that the Jerusalem church as the first and primitive has a special authority and a special place in the outworking of God's plan. Not everything that they did is normative for us. Not everything that happened is normative for us. Not many faithful Baptists or Presbyterians would require that there should be laying on of hands for receiving the Holy Spirit, or that people should speak in tongues after conversion spoke in tongues. These things are not normative for the church of all ages. In the same way, the presence of the apostles in this church should not be overlooked. But even at this instance, the apostles were joined with the elders of the Jerusalem church and they together considered this matter (Acts 15:6). Since they didn't want people to "trouble" believers concerning this which the Jerusalem church did not support, they send their decision in writing to them. Notice how the setting up and the

choosing of representatives is done: “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 15:22). The apostles will always be an essential authority in the life of the church. The church is built on their foundation (Eph. 2:20), and they still build the church up through their writings. But the apostles were not alone at the Jerusalem Council, they were joined by the elders of the Jerusalem church. Even the elders were not alone, but “the whole church” was there and was in agreement. This is what they say concerning how they reached the decision: “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden” (Acts 15:28). Is there still a body of apostles and which is also guided in a special way by the Holy Spirit? Is there a council or a synod whose decision could be said to be the Holy Spirit’s? Therefore, seeing the place of the Jerusalem church in God’s purpose and the presence of the apostles there, it seems that this is an exception to the rule which we have observed. Therefore, we agree with Dagg when says, “No ecclesiastical council can justly claim this synod at Jerusalem as a precedent for its action, unless it can also claim to act by inspiration, and send forth its decrees with the authority of the Holy Ghost.”[49]

But what about elders from different churches meeting together to decide a matter? There doesn’t seem to be evidence of this in the New Testament. Even in Acts 15, the elders who were with the apostles (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23) were the elders of the Jerusalem church. They were not a combination of elders from various churches. As Dagg observes, “There is not the slightest intimation that delegates went from the other churches, which were now numerous, and scattered through different countries.”[49] An elder does not belong to the universal church of Christ. An elder is a shepherd of a particular flock which is entrusted to him (e.g., Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). There are no elders that exercise authority over a congregation that is not under their care. As Wayne Grudem also observes:

> Although the apostles in Jerusalem certainly had authority over all the churches, there is no indication that elders by themselves, even in the Jerusalem church, had any such authority. And certainly there is no New Testament pattern for elders exercising authority over any other than their own local churches.[50]

Seeing, therefore, the place of the Jerusalem church, the presence of the apostles, the presence perhaps of the 70 disciples sent out by Christ (Luke 10:1, 17), “There is every reason to think, therefore, that the church of Jerusalem exercised a unique authority in the church of Christ.”[51]

John Dagg summarizes the case for the independence of the local church well:

> Each church, as a distinct organization, was independent of every other church. No intimation is anywhere given that the acts of one church were supervised by another church, or by any ecclesiastical judicatory established by a combination of churches. In the direction given by Christ, for settling a difficulty between two members, the aggrieved brother is commanded to report the case to the church, and the action of the church is represented as final. The church at Corinth excommunicated the incestuous person, by its own act and without reference to a higher judicatory. As if to settle the question of church independence, Paul, though possessing apostolic authority, and though he commanded the act to be done, yet required it to be done by the assembled church, as the proper agent for performing the work. Again, when the same individual was to be restored, the action of the church became necessary, and this action completed the deed. In the book of Revelation, distinct messages were sent to the seven churches of Asia. The character and works of each church are distinctly and separately referred to; and the duties prescribed are assigned to each church separately, and that church alone is required to perform them.[52]

Our gracious Lord has indeed given every local church of His authority and autonomy to govern itself according to His laws.

Discipline

An important power which the Lord has given to the church is the power of discipline. This power is given to the whole church not merely to the leadership. This is largely spoken of in Matthew 18:15-20. The purpose of discipline is not for the sake of merely pointing false doctrine or sin, but for the purpose that the sinning brother or sister may be *corrected* in their error and *come back* to repentance. Discipline is for the good of the church as a whole, so that those, for example, teaching false doctrine, may be stopped to do so. Furthermore, its purpose is for the good of the erring person. It is not discipline for the sake of condemnation, but *restoration*.

The Lord Jesus taught us that this discipline first should be one-on-one (Matt. 18:15). We go to the erring or sinning brother and tell them their fault, hoping that they may come back to repentance and see their sin. But, if they refuse to listen to our correction and discipline, then we are to “take one or two others along with” us (Matt. 18:16). In this way, they would see that this is not a personal issue, but more people are actually concerned about this person. But, if the erring or sinning brother still refuses discipline, then the last step is to “tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let

him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17). If he still refuses to listen to discipline from the leadership and the church as a whole, then he is to be *excommunicated* and to be treated as an unbeliever. He is to be removed from the list of membership in the church and not admitted to the privileges and ordinances of the church. The Lord promises His presence as a Judge when the church takes such a decision. When they judge a particular matter, He is there in their midst judging the rightness or wrongness of their decision. See Matthew 18:19-20 and 1 Corinthians 5, see also **above**.

Notice that throughout this discussion, implicitly, church membership is necessitated. This person at one time belonged to the church and is walking in ways contrary to healthy doctrine, therefore, the church takes it up with him. A church cannot exercise such power and authority with those who have not committed themselves to that church. A church has no power or authority over a visiting person to bring that person under discipline. But those who dedicate themselves to a particular local church at the same time accept to voluntarily submit to the correction and elders of the church.

Things which the New Testament says call for discipline and excommunication include:

- all kinds of sexual sins (1 Cor. 5:1-5);
- false teaching (1 Tim. 1:10-11, 19-20);
- those who seek divisions (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11);
- idolatry (Rev. 2:14-16),
- disobeying what Paul wrote (2 Thess. 3:14-15),
- laziness and refusing to work (2 Thess. 3:6-10).

Also, the list which is given in 1 Corinthians 5:11:

> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of [1] sexual immorality or [2] greed, or is an [3] idolater, [4] reviler, [5] drunkard, or [6] swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

We also get a general principle from 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 that sins to which the death penalty applied under the Mosaic Civil Law, have excommunication applied to them in the New Covenant. Such sins include:

- false prophets (Deut. 13:5);
- idolaters (Deut. 17:2-7);
- the one disobedient to the priest or the judge (Deut. 17:12);
- a false witness (Deut. 19:19);
- a stubborn and rebellious son (Deut. 21:18-21);
- a girl who is not a virgin (Deut. 22:20-21);
- a man and a woman committing adultery (Deut. 22:22);
- a betrothed virgin and a man who had sexual intercourse (Deut. 22:23-24);
- a man who steals and sells one of his people (Deut. 24:7).

See for more on this **here**.

This discipline when it comes *to* the church should also be decided *by* the church as a whole. This is in accordance with 2 Corinthians 2:6 where Paul writes of "punishment by the majority" which refers to discipline and excommunication. This is likewise in accordance with our Lord's words in Matthew 18:17, the third step of pursuing church discipline. The church should, not independently of the church members or officers, decide on the discipline and excommunication of the erring or sinning person and pronounce their judgment as a church. John Gill notes on 2 Corinthians 2:6, writing:

> **was inflicted by many**; not by the pastor only, or by the elders or more eminent persons in the church, but by the multitude, by the whole congregation, at least υπο των πλειονων, "by the more"; the greater, or major part; and not by one, or a few only: in inflicting this punishment, or laying on this censure in the public manner they did, they were certainly right, and to be commended; but inasmuch as there appeared signs of true repentance, it was sufficient, it had answered the purpose for which it was inflicted, and therefore it was high time to remove it: from whence we learn, that in case of gross enormities, there ought to be a public excommunication; and that this is to be done by the vote, and with the consent of the whole church, or the major part of it; and that in process of time, when the person thus dealt with has given the church satisfaction as to the truth and genuineness of his repentance, the censure ought to be taken off and he be cordially received into the communion of the church again.[8]

Organized Body

As we have observed the order of the church and move to consider elders and deacons we seen the organizational part of the church. There is an order in the church and a way in which things must be done. Concerning this, it is very beneficial to note the following quote and the biblical references from A. H. Strong:

> That there was such organization is abundantly shown from (a) its stated meetings [Acts 20:7; 10:25], (b) elections [Acts 1:23-26; 6:5-6], and (c) officers [Phil. 1:1]; (d) from the designations of its ministers [Acts 20:17, 28], together with (e) the recognized authority of the minister and of the church [Matt. 18:17; 1 Pet. 5:2]; (f) from its discipline [1 Cor. 5:4-5, 13], (g) contributions [Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-2], (h) letters of commendation [Acts 18:27; 2 Cor. 3:1], (i) registers of widows [1 Tim. 5:9; Acts 6:1], (j) uniform customs [1 Cor. 11:16], and (k) ordinances [Acts 2:41; 1 Cor. 11:23-26]; (l) from the order enjoined and observed [1 Cor. 14:40; Col. 2:5], (m) the qualifications for membership [Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:47], and (n) the common work of the whole body [Phil. 2:30].[53]

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§8 A Particular Church Consists Of Officers And Members

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 bishops or elders, and deacons. **1**
    1. Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim 3:1-13; Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:2

A local or **particular church…organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members** (Phil. 1:1). There is no church if it only consists of members or if it only consists of officers. It is always the combination of these two because Christ has spoken His mind on this issue. The **officers** of the church are **chosen and set apart by the church** (1 Tim. 3:1-13). No authority outside the local church determines who its officers will be. The people themselves choose, through prayer and fasting, who is to be over them in the Lord. The **officers** are chosen for the **peculiar administrations of the ordinances**, which are baptism and the Lord's Supper. They are also called to the **execution of power and duty** which Christ has entrusted to them. These officers are the **bishops or elders, and deacons**. The church knows of two offices alone: elders and deacons. All other offices aside from elders and deacons are unbiblical and do not come from Jesus Christ, the Head of the church.

Any church has got to have officers and members. There is no church of members alone or officers alone—at least not according to the Word of God. The officers are ordained by God to maintain order in the congregation and to see to it that the proper worship of God is followed as prescribed in His Word and the ordinances administered. The officers of the church are chosen *by* the church. There is no outside body which determines what happens in a particular church. In Baptist (and I believe, biblical) understanding, the local church is autonomous—it is on its own and his no accountability to any earthly body/organization (**see above**). There is no higher authority above it other than her Lord. A local assembly does not have to answer to a synod, for example. The officers are said to be those who are the proper persons who may administer the ordinance of the Lord's Supper and Baptism. They are those who are recognized in the church and by the church, as officers. Often, the elders will take these tasks upon themselves, but I do not believe that members may not participate in the administration. Though it is wiser to let the elders who are thus called to administer the sacraments and they may occasionally choose some members to help them in the administration.

Now we should make a brief case for the two church offices—elders and deacons. There are several works that are dedicated to the subject, qualifications, and duties of elders which should be sought. What will be provided here is basic and minimum.

Elders

Elders are the leaders within the church. New Testament churches are to be led by elders. The words elder, pastor, overseer, presbyter, and bishop are all **interchangeable** and refer to the same church office. Dr. Waldron writes, "the office of elder or presbyter, overseer or bishop and pastor or shepherd are one and the same (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:2; 1 Tim. 3:2; Eph. 4:11)."[54] At this point, it is helpful to quote A. H. Strong on the interchangeability of those words:

That the appellations “bishop,” “presbyter,” and “pastor” designate the same office and order of persons, may be shown from Acts 20:28—ἐπισκόπους ποιμαίνειν [*episkopous poimainein; overseers to shepherd*] (cf. 17—πρεσβυτέρους [*presbuterous; presbyter/elder*]); Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1, 8; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1, 2—πρεσβυτέρους [*presbuterous; presbyter/elder*] ... παρακαλῶ ὁ συμπρεσβύτερος [*parakalō ho sympresbyteros; I exhort as a fellow elder/presbyter*] ... ποιμάνατε ποίμνιον [*poimanate poimnion, shepherd the flock*] ... ἐπισκοποῦντες [episkopountes; exercising oversight]...

Acts 20:28—“Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops [marg. ‘*overseers*’], *to feed* [lit. ‘*to shepherd*,’ ‘*be pastors of*’] *the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood”; cf. 17—“the elders of the church”* are those whom Paul addresses as bishops or overseers, and whom he exhorts to be good pastors. *Phil. 1:1—“bishops and deacons”; 1 Tim. 3:1, 8—“If a man seeketh the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.... Deacons in like manner must be grave”; Tit. 1:5, 7—“appoint elders in every city.... For the bishop must be blameless”; 1 Pet. 5:1, 2—“The elders therefore among you I exhort, who am a fellow-elder.... Tend* [lit. ‘*shepherd*,’ ‘*be pastors of*’] *the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight* [acting as bishops], *not of constraint, but willingly, according to the will of God.”*[55]

Therefore, we understand that these titles all designate the same function and office and are therefore interchangeable.

An overseer ought to be one who is “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). An elder is one who may preach and teach (1 Tim. 5:17). This authority of **teaching** and **preaching** is not delegated to anyone but the elders, but it does not exclude others from preaching, even from the members in the local body (see paragraph 11). Furthermore, not every elder ought to preach, but rather, they are to be ones who *can* instruct others in the Word of truth and as shepherds, lead their flock in the right path. Some elders may not be gifted to preach on the Lord’s Day or do not feel called to do so, but they may better teach or minister to others individually. 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of elders who “especially...labor in preaching and teaching.” This means, therefore, that there are elders who do not labor in preaching and teaching (regularly).

That elders have a function of **leadership** in the church is seen in the way they are described and in the way the church is called to treat them. First, an elder/overseer ought to manage his house well, so that he may manage the house of God well (1 Tim. 3:4-5). They have the duty to take care of God’s flock (1 Pet. 5:2-3; Acts 20:17, 28). But we, as members, are called to consider preaching and teaching elders “worthy of double honor” (1 Tim. 5:17); to obey and submit to them (Heb. 13:17); and to subject ourselves to the elders (1 Pet. 5:5). These two points show that elders have a leading authority within and over the local church. The fact that no other office is described thus shows that only elders have a leading authority in the church.

Another point about eldership is that the New Testament teaches a **plurality of elders** (e.g., Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Tim. 4:14; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1-2; Heb. 13:17). This means that a church must have a minimum of two elders. A church should never be ruled by one pastor/elder. The New Testament pattern of churches is that of a plurality of elders and deacons. This is seen in how the apostle Paul planted churches. In Acts 14, we read:

Acts 14:21-23 When they had preached the gospel to that city [Derbe] and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when **they had appointed elders** for them **in every church**, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Here we see two things. (1) The ones who plant a church, appoint the elders there with the church, in this case, it was the apostle Paul and Barnabas. They planted the church, but they had to move on, therefore, they placed qualified people in the leadership to lead the flock of God into God’s way. (2) There is also the appointing of a *plurality* of *elders*. Paul and Barnabas appointed multiple elders, not just one pastor in *every* church. Any and every church which the apostle Paul planted, he appointed multiple elders there and not a single elder/pastor. This is confirmed again in the Ephesian church, for example, in Acts 20:17. They had a plurality of elders. In Titus 1:5, Titus is directed to “appoint elders in every town” similar to what Paul himself did in Acts 14:23. A plurality of elders is to be appointed in every town and in every church. The New Testament never presents a local church led by one elder/pastor. The New Testament speaks of “the elders” in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 21:18). Paul calls “the elders of the church” at Ephesus to him (Acts 20:17). Paul appointed and directed people to appoint “elders” (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Paul refers to “the council of elders” who laid hands on Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14). He speaks to Timothy of “elders who rule well” (1 Tim. 5:17). A Christian who is sick is “to call for the elders of the church” (Jas. 5:14). Peter exhorts “the elders among you, as a fellow elder” (1 Pet. 5:1). Therefore, the normative pattern for the New Testament church is to have multiple elders in each congregation.

As to the duty of pastors/elders, we may summarize them now with the words of Benjamin Keach:

> 1. The work of a pastor is to preach the Word of Christ, or to feed the flock, to administer all the ordinances of the gospel that belong to his sacred office, and to be faithful and laborious therein, studying to show himself "approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2Ti 2:15). He is a steward "of the mysteries of God" (1Co 4:1), and therefore ought to be a man of good understanding and experience—being sound in the faith and acquainted with the mysteries of the gospel—because he is to feed the people with knowledge and understanding...he must make known the whole counsel of God to the people (1Co 9:16-17; Act 20:31, 35; 2Ti 2:15; 2Co 4:1-2; 1Ti 3; Jer 3:15; 2Ti 4:2; 2Co 5:15; Act 20:20, 27).
>
> 2. A pastor is to visit his flock, to know their state, to watch over them, to support the weak, and to strengthen the feeble-minded and assist the tempted, and to reprove them that are unruly (Pro 27:23; Act 20:35; 1Th 5:14).
>
> 3. He is to pray for them at all times; and be with them also when sent for and desired, and as opportunity serves; and to sympathize with them in every state and condition with all love and compassion (Col 4:12; 1Th 3:10).
>
> 4. And he is to show them in all respects, as near as he can, a good example in conversation, charity, faith, and purity; so that his ministry may be the more acceptable to all, the name of God be glorified, and religion be delivered from reproach (1Ti 4:12).
>
> 5. He must see that he carries it to all with all impartiality, not preferring the rich above the poor, nor lording it over God's heritage, nor affirming any greater power than God has given him; but to show a humble and meek spirit, even to be clothed with humility (Jam 2:4; 1Ti 5:21; 1Pe 5:3, 6).[56]

Elders lead and govern the local body of Christ. They are the ones who have a charge to shepherd the flock of God, while on the other hand, the flock of God is called to submit to them.

Deacons

Deacons are first instituted in Acts 6. There is less in the New Testament about deacons in comparison to what it teaches about elders. The noun διάκονος (*diakonos*) simply means "a servant" or "servant, minister, a person who renders service and help to others".[57] The verb form of the word is used in Acts 6:2 for the word "serve." The Jewish disciples lived closely and the church helped each other. But as the church grew larger, there was a problem in the "daily distribution" of food (Acts 6:1). So, one group began to complain concerning the other. Therefore, the apostles, who were apparently in charge of this distribution or were leaders of it, did not want this issue to become a distraction to the main point of gospel preaching. Therefore, they declared "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2, there is a word here somewhere for those who compromise the gospel and promote a "social gospel"). Serving tables is good, but the preaching of the word of God is even better and more important. Therefore, the apostles with the church appointed seven men to carry out this duty among whom is the first martyr of Christ, Stephen. These seven people who are to "serve tables" were to do so, while on the other hand, the apostles "devote[d] [themselves] to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). We see right away a distinction made between the elders, which is the function of the apostles (apostleship is really a unique office), and the deacons. One is to labor in the ministry of the word, while the other to serve the needs of the people of God. This does not exclude deacons from evangelizing or having an opportunity to teach as Stephen does, but it does indicate that their primary function is one of serving the needs of the people. This is further confirmed when we take a look at the qualifications of deacons. In contrast to elders, there is nothing said about deacons being "able to teach" which is a confirmation of our observation from Acts 6. They are said to manage their house well as the elders were called to (1 Tim. 3:12, 4), but in contrast to elders, nothing is said about them caring for God's church (1 Tim. 3:5). Therefore, the office of deacons is not that of leadership as the eldership is.

There is not much said about deacons other than a small portion in Acts 6:1-7 and the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, though it may be gleaned from these places that the deacons are concerned with the physical needs of the church and of its members. They may have something to do with the finances of the church because of the qualification of a deacon not to be "greedy for dishonest gain" (1 Tim. 3:8). Keach summarizes the work of deacons in one paragraph:

> The work of deacons is to serve tables, that is, to oversee provisions for the Lord's Table, the minister's table, and the tables of the poor. They should a) provide bread and wine for the Lord's Table; b) see that every member contributes to the maintenance of the ministry according to their ability and their own voluntary subscription or obligation; c) see that each member do give weekly to the poor as God has blessed him; and d) visit the poor and know their condition as much as in them lies—that none, especially the aged widows, be neglected (Act 6:1-10; 5:7-10; 1Co 16:2; Act 6:1).[58]

A deacon is to serve the church and its members.

Members, Elders, and Deacons

> Phil. 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To **all the saints in Christ Jesus** who are at Philippi, with the **overseers** and **deacons**:

Here we see that Paul has three categories of people in his mind. First up are the "all saints" in Philippi, second the overseers and then the deacons. This is not a list of showing who is important and who is not. But what is interesting here is that Paul describes the saints in Philippi to be ***with*** overseers (plural) and deacons (plural). He is writing to a congregation in Philippi (the only one at the time probably) and he describes the church as consisting of members, elders, and deacons. These are the things which we argued for above and now see in a single passage.

A Gathered Church

While I've left any lexical analysis of the word *ekklesia* aside because it is provided in all the resources and systematic theologies from which I cite, at this point, it is inevitable. When this paragraph starts with "A particular church, gathered and completely organized" we cannot ignore the *churching* aspect of the church. When is a church considered a church? Or in other words, does a gathering with some brothers and sisters (for Bible study) at home constitute a church? According to this paragraph, a church is a gathering of members and officers. Clichés abound in the evangelical world concerning "all Christians are the church" and "we don't need a building" and the like. In themselves, they are true, but they are not the whole truth. A church that does not gather is not a church. As Dever observes, "a church is more than an assembly, but to use *church* for anything *less* than an assembly would mean substituting the part...for the whole"[59]. Therefore, to determine the issue of gathering and the church, we turn our attention to the lexical meaning of the word.

The Greek word ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*, G1577) basically means *congregation* or *assembly*. It points to the *gathering* of people rather than the *place* where the gathering takes place. In the New Testament, it is used for the local churches, the church universal, but also for secular matters. For example, in Acts 19, we read of "the assembly" which was in confusion because of Paul and Alexander (Acts 19:32). In "the assembly" matters could be settled and this assembly could be "dismissed" (Acts 19:39, 41). It was not a group of people who never met. Therefore, one definition which George Abbott-Smit provides is "an assembly of citizens regularly convened"[60]. Therefore, to speak of an assembly of citizens that doesn't assemble is absurd.

In the LXX, *ekklesia* is used to speak about the "congregation of Israel." For instance, in Acts 7:38, Stephan referred to "the congregation [τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, *te ekklesia*] in the wilderness" which was with Moses. Hebrews 2:12, citing Psalm 22:22, speakers of the Messiah being "in the midst of the congregation [ἐκκλησίας, *ekklesias*]" and singing. Obviously, these two instances which refer to the Old Testament people does not refer to an *assembly* that was not *assembled.* If we look at the LXX data itself, we also see this clearly. The following citations are taken from Sir Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton's English translation of the LXX. So we read of "the day in which ye stood before the Lord our God in Choreb in the day of the assembly [τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς ἐκκλησίας, *te hemera tes ekklesias*]; for the Lord said to me, Gather [ἐκκλησίασον, *ekklesiason*] the people to me" (Deut. 4:10). As if it were not enough to speak of the assembly, the author uses a verb form of the word *ekklesia* to denote their gathering together as if to say "*church* the church for me." There are more references to "the day of assembly" in the LXX (Deut. 9:10; 18:16). As if to speak of the assembly is not enough, Deuteronomy 31:30 speaks of "the whole assembly." Judges 20:2 speaks of "all the tribes of Israel stood before the Lord in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand footmen that drew sword." Thus far it should be clear that when the Old Testament speaks of the congregation or assembly of the LORD, it is speaking not merely about the people of Israel, but of a *gathered* people of Israel (e.g., Num 14:5; 16:3; Deut. 23:1-3; 1 Chron. 28:8).

Now we move to consider the evidence from the New Testament concerning the church. The church is the body of believers as we've explored in this chapter. This body of believers is said to be gathered with each other. So, Acts 4:31 speaks of the place where the believers were "gathered" being shaken. In Acts 6, when the "full number of the disciples" is summoned, it is later called "the whole gathering" (Acts 6:2, 5). In Acts 15, the apostles, the elders, and the whole church were "gathered together" to consider a controversy (Acts 15:6, 4, 22). When the men who were sent from Jerusalem went back to Antioch, they "gathered the congregation together" (Acts 15:30) to deliver them the letter. In Acts 20:7-8, the believers at Troas "gathered the congregation together" on the Lord's Day. In 1 Corinthians, there are several references to the church coming together as a church (1 Cor. 11:17-18; 14:23). 1 Corinthians 5:4 even speaks of being "assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus". The descriptions given in these instances support the basic meaning of the word *ekklesia* as a gathered assembly. Even when we take into consideration the Church Triumphant (the believers in heaven), they are described as a church and an assembly. The Holy Spirit says, "you have come to Mount Zion...and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb. 12:22-23). In worship, the assembled church of the earth joins the *assembled* church in heaven.

Therefore, the church, property speaking is the gathered assembly of members and officers.

§9 The Way Appointed By Christ For The Calling Of Any Person

9. The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, **1** unto the **office of bishop or elder** in a church, is, that he be **chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church** itself; **2** and solemnly set apart by **fasting and prayer,** with **imposition of hands** of the eldership of the church, if there be any before constituted therein; **3** and of a **deacon** that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands.**4**
    1. Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim 3:1-13
    2. Acts 6:1-7; 14:23; with Matt. 18:17-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13
    3. 1 Tim 4:14, 5:22
    4. Acts 6:1-7

As paragraph 8 has named the two offices in the church, so this paragraph goes on to tell us how these men are to be chosen by the church. The church is to seek to call those who are **fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit**, who evidence these fruits in their profession and walk. **Bishop**s or **elder**s should be **chosen…by the common suffrage of the church itself** (cf. Acts 14:23), which means that they should be chosen by "collective vote" of the church itself as the **modern translation** puts it. The church is to vote for those who are to be chosen and ordained as elders. Furthermore, they are to be **solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer**. Finally, if there are elders in the church, they should have the **imposition** or laying on **of hands** from the **eldership of the church**. A **deacon** is to be chosen in the like manner. Interestingly, the fasting part is left out because Scripture does not mention fasting in connection with the choice of the deacons in Acts 6, although **prayer** and the laying on **of hands** is mentioned (Acts 6:6)

Elders and deacons are to be chosen *for* the church and *by* the church. Every member participates in the ordination of new elders and deacons with prayer and fasting to discern God's will about whom He has chosen for particular tasks in the church. The church then lays hands on them as a blessing and prays for God's help for these people in their tasks. There are some qualifications for elders and deacons laid out in the New Testament. However, it is important that we not think that these are super-spiritual and special people. Rather, these qualifications should be the qualifications of any good Christian! There may be an aspect like teaching or preaching, which not everyone can do, but the rest of the qualifications should be present and growing in any mature Christian.

Qualifications for Elders

1 Timothy		Titus	
3:2	above reproach	1:6, 7	above reproach
3:2	husband of one wife	1:6	husband of one wife
3:2	sober-minded	1:8	disciplined
3:2	self-controlled	1:8	self-controlled
3:2	respectable		—
3:2	hospitable	1:8	hospitable
3:2	able to teach	1:9	able to give instruction
3:3	not a drunkard	1:7	not … a drunkard
3:3	not violent but gentle	1:7	not … violent
3:3	not quarrelsome	1:7	not be arrogant or quick-tempered
3:3	not a lover of money	1:7	not … greedy for gain
3:4–5	manage his own household well, care for God's church	1:7	God's steward
3:4	keeping his children submissive	1:6	children are believers (or "faithful"), not insubordinate
3:6	not a recent convert		—
3:7	well thought of by outsiders		—
	—	1:8	a lover of good; upright, holy[61]

Paul gives us two lists of qualifications for elders that are nearly identical. Some people understand the qualification of

“husband of one wife” to mean that only married men may become elders. Others insist that an elder may only be married once or not be divorce. In the case of being a widow, they should not remarry. Others understand that an elder, in the context where polygamy was practiced, is to be a husband only to one woman. This is an important question because the Bible speaks about it and we should graciously talk to each other about this matter. Wayne Grudem, for example, believes that this qualification means “Paul was prohibiting a polygamist…from being an elder”[62]. He points to the fact that these qualifications speak to something a potential elder *now* is. Paul does not speak of an elder who once was sober-minded and self-controlled. But he speaks of one who *currently* meets these qualifications. He also points to the fact that Paul could have said that an elder should be or have been married only once, but he does not. He also points to the presence of polygamy amongst the Jews. Therefore, “The verses say nothing about divorce and remarriage with respect to qualifications for church office.”[62]

Benjamin L. Merkle surveys 4 interpretations of this qualification in *Baptist Foundations*: (1) elder must be married; (2) elder must not be a polygamist; (3) elder must have only one wife his entire life; and (4) elder must be faithful to his wife. He takes the interpretation that an elder must be a faithful man to his wife. This means it is not necessary for an elder to be married for that would have disqualified Paul and Timothy (who is thought to be a young man). Rather, it speaks of the fact that if an elder is married, he should be faithful to his wife. If this qualification is to be taken in the sense of a man must be married then it must also be concluded that he must have more than one child because 1 Timothy 3:4 says that he must keep “his **children** submissive”. At this point, it should be clear that these qualifications are being pushed too far. *If* a potential elder has a wife, he must have one wife and be faithful to his wife. *If* he has children, then he is to keep them submissive.

That polygamy was outlawed for Christians is clear from our Lord in Matthew 19 and that was clear for the early Christians. This qualification does not speak of an elder not being allowed to remarry when Paul allows widows to remarry (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:8-9, 39; 1 Tim. 5:11, 14). To conclude that a potential elder may not be remarried is to read too much into the qualification. Paul is not making of elders super-Christians who are denied privileges, freedoms, and blessings that God has given to all believers. Merkle explains that ‘The best interpretation of this difficult phrase is to understand it as referring to the faithfulness of a husband toward his wife. He must be a “one-woman man.”’[63] He concludes, “If a man is currently faithful to his wife, being above reproach, and has proven himself in that relationship, then it is possible for him to become an elder.”

Nehemiah Coxe, one of the primary framers of our Confession, commented on this qualification, saying:

> it is not required that he be a married man, but supposing him to be so, it is necessary that he have been the husband but of one wife, namely, at one time. For though he had repented of his polygamy, yet the note of his former incontinency would stick upon him—for polygamy had no good hearing even amongst the civilized heathens.[64]

Albert Barnes explains that this qualification means “that a minister should not have more than one wife at the same time”. Commenting on 1 Timothy 3:2, he explains:

> **The husband of one wife** - This need not be understood as requiring that a bishop “should be” a married man, as Vigilantius, a presbyter in the church at Barcelona in the fourth century, supposed, however desirable in general it may be that a minister of the gospel should be married. But, while this interpretation is manifestly to be excluded as false, there has been much difference of opinion on the question whether the passage means that a minister should not have more than one wife at the same time, or whether it prohibits the marriage of a second wife after the death of the first…That the former is the correct opinion, seems to me to be evident from the following considerations:
>
> (1) It is the most obvious meaning of the language, and it would doubtless be thus understood by those to whom it was addressed. At a time when polygamy was not uncommon, to say that a man should “have but one wife” would be naturally understood as prohibiting polygamy.
>
> (2) the marriage of a second wife, after the death of the first, is nowhere spoken of in the Scriptures as wrong. The marriage of a widow to a second husband is expressely declared to be proper 1Co 7:39; and it is not unfair to infer from that permission that it is equally lawful and proper for man to marry the second time. But if it is lawful for any man it is right for a minister of the gospel. No reason can he assigned against such marriages in his case, which would not be equally valid in any other. Marriage is as honorable for a minister of the gospel as for any other man (compare notes on Heb 13:4); and, as Doddridge has well remarked, “Circumstances may be so adjusted that there may be as much reason for a second marriage as for the first, and as little inconvenience of any kind may attend it.”
>
> (3) there was a special propriety in the prohibition, if understood as prohibiting polygamy. It is known that it was extensively practiced, and was not regarded as unlawful. Yet one design of the gospel was to restore the marriage relation to its primitive condition; and though it might not have seemed absolutely necessary to require of every man who came into the church to divorce his wives, if he had more than one, yet, in order to fix a brand on this irregular

practice, it might have been deemed desirable to require of the ministers of the gospel that they should have but one wife. Thus the practice of polygamy would gradually come to be regarded as dishonorable and improper, and the example and influence of the ministry would tend to introduce correct views in regard to the nature of this relation. One thing is clear from this passage, that the views of the Papists in regard to the celibacy of the clergy are directly at variance with the Bible. The declaration of Paul in Heb 13:4, is, that "marriage is honorable in all;" and here it is implied that it was proper that a minister should be married. If it were not, why did not Paul prohibit it altogether? Instead of saying that it was improper that a bishop should have more than one wife, why did he not say that it was improper that he should be married at all? Would not a Romanist say so now?[6]

The crucial difference between the elder and the deacon is the fact that an elder is to rule the church and *may* preach and teach the Word, on the other hand, there is nothing said of such functions for the deacons. Paul, in 1 Timothy 2:12-15, makes clear that women are not to preach or teach the church, neither are they to exercise authority over men. This clear word, just before the qualifications of elders in chapter 3, makes clear that Paul understood the office of eldership to be exclusive to qualified men. Therefore, biblically speaking, there are no "women" pastors and those who claim themselves as "women" pastors do so contrary to biblical teaching. It is important to note what Paul actually says, "I do not permit a woman to teach". Paul did not think that women were stupid or were not intelligent, otherwise, he would have said, "A woman *can't* preach." His wording does not consist or concern itself with the abilities of women, rather, with the God-ordained order in the family, which is to be copied in the family of God, the church. Women may preach and teach other women and children (Titus 2:3-5), but they may not teach and preach on the gathering of God's people where men are also present. The world can say whatever they want, but this is the God-ordained structure. Paul does not appeal to culture for this, neither does he say anything negative about a woman's abilities, rather, he goes back to Creation for his grounding of this command. To top it all, there is not a single mention of any woman elder in the New Testament, or any woman having a leadership role in the church. But women are commanded to "*learn* quietly with all submissiveness" (1 Tim. 2:11) which was the controversial part of this passage at that time.

The other qualifications are self-explanatory.

Qualifications For Deacons

1 Timothy 3	
3:8	dignified
3:8	not double-tonged
3:8	not addicted to much wine
3:8	not greedy for dishonest gain
3:9	clear conscience
3:10	tested
3:10	blameless
3:12	husband of one wife
3:12	managing children and household well[65]

As we noted in paragraph 8 on deacons (**see here**), there is not much said about them in the New Testament other than that they are generally, by the translation of the name, servants of the church. They do not have any leadership or teaching role within the church. An interesting qualification is that they should "not [be] greedy for dishonest gain", which would indicate that they perhaps had to do things with finances. Paul wants trustworthy people to deal with these things. This comes also with the qualification that they are not to be "double-tonged", which means that they should say the same things to all people. Charles J. Ellicott noted:

> The deacon would have in his duties connected with the administration of the Church's alms, and also in his more directly spiritual work, much opportunity of meeting with and talking to the various families of the flock of his Master. He must be watchful, in these visits, of his words, not suiting them to the occasion, and then unsaying in one house what he had affirmed in another. Such a grave fault—not an uncommon one—would, in the long run, deeply injure his influence abroad, and would inflict a deadly wound on his own spiritual life.[66]

They must be an honest person who loves their neighbor and their God and is ready to serve them both in honesty, truth, and with a clear conscience.

Women Deacons?

> 1 Tim. 3:11 ESV Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

> 1 Tim. 3:11 YLT Women--in like manner grave, not false accusers, vigilant, faithful in all things.

Then we come to our final question concerning deacons, namely, can women be deacons? I believe they can. Some translations say “their wives,” but that is not really accurate, the genitive form is not used, but rather the accusative. Therefore, the translation of “their wives” is not literally accurate, in my opinion. The word “women” is better suited here. There are three reasons why I think that women may serve as deacons, but not as elders.

1) In the qualification of elders, who have a leadership role within the church, there is nothing said about their wives. Clearly, the elders are much important in authority and as the face of the church to the outside world, but there is not a syllable said about their wives. Therefore, it seems strange to me that Paul would place an important qualification that the wives of deacons should be good Christian women while omitting that to the elders. It is obviously important for both the elders’ and deacons’ wives to be good Christian women, but it is noteworthy that this is not said in the elders’ list of qualifications.

2) When Paul uses the word “likewise” in the Pastoral Epistles, he always introduces a new group. In 1 Timothy 2:8-9, he distinguishes men from women. In 1 Timothy 3:8, he distinguishes elders from deacons. In Titus 2:2-3, he distinguishes older men from older women. In Titus 2:6, he distinguishes younger women from older women. We see in these four places that Paul distinguishes different groups with this word, even men from women, what reason do we have to think that in 1 Timothy 3:11 Paul is not speaking of a different group, i.e., women who could serve as deacons?

3) The third and final reason is that of Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2. She is described as “our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church”. The word for servant, as the ESV alternate reading notes, is deaconess. She is a woman and she is described as a servant of the church, a deaconess of the church. She is also described as one who has been “a patron of many and of myself as well.” The Greek word for “patron” is defined by Thayer as “a female guardian, protectress, patroness, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources”.[67] She is not in a leadership role, nor is she a preacher, but she is an amazing helper and servant of the people of God. Barnes notes on Romans 16:1 that ‘It is clear from the New Testament that there was an order of women in the church known as “deaconesses.”’[6] John Gill’s notes on v. 1 are likewise worthy to note:

> Of this church Phebe was a servant, or, as the word signifies, a minister or deacon; not that she was a teacher of the word, or preacher of the Gospel, for that was not allowed of by the apostle in the church at Corinth, that a woman should teach; see 1Co 14:34; and therefore would never be admitted at Cenchrea. Rather, as some think, she was a deaconess appointed by the church, to take care of the poor sisters of the church; though as they were usually poor, and ancient women; that were put into that service, and this woman, according to the account of her, being neither poor, nor very ancient; it seems rather, that being a rich and generous woman, she served or ministered to the church by relieving the poor; not out of the church’s stock, as deaconesses did, but out of her own substance; and received the ministers of the Gospel, and all strangers, into her house, which was open to all Christians; and so was exceeding serviceable to that church, and to all the saints that came thither: though it is certain that among the ancient Christians there were women servants who were called ministers.[8]

On the basis of these considerations, I believe that women can serve as deacons in the church, but not as elders. They are forbidden to have the role, office and function of elders in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 just before listing the qualifications for elders.

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§10 The Work Of Pastors

10. The work of **pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ, in his churches,** in the ministry of the **word and prayer,** with **watching for their souls,** as they that must **give an account to Him; 1** it is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister, not only to **give them all due respect,** but also to communicate to them of all their good things according to their ability, **2** so as **they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves entangled in secular affairs; 3** and may also be **capable of exercising hospitality towards others; 4** and this is required by the law 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. **5**
    1. Acts 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Heb. 13:17
    2. 1 Tim. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6-7

3. 2 Tim. 2:4
4. 1 Tim. 3:2
5. 1 Cor. 9:6-14; 1 Tim. 5:18

Pastors who are elders are to be taken upon with **the service of Christ, in His churches** (Acts 6:4). Their work consists in the **ministry of the word and prayer** (1 Tim. 5:17), being careful **for their souls, as they that must give an account to Him** (Heb. 13:17) for how they governed His church and served Him. Therefore, **it is incumbent on the church to whom they minister, not only to give them all due respect** for the work that they must do, but also to provide and **communicate to them of all their good things** (Gal. 6:6; 1 Cor. 9:14). As the work upon them is hard and requires a lot of time, so their provision should come from the church so that they would not be **entangled in secular affairs**, but **may have a comfortable supply** by which they may live and exercise **hospitality towards others**. This is **required by the law of nature** namely that they should be paid for their labour. But it is also based upon **the express order of our Lord Jesus** Who said that "The laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:18).

The work of the pastor/elder/presbyter/overseer/bishop/shepherd is one and the same: to serve and rule the local church of God with the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:2). They are to care for the flock of God, which God Himself has entrusted into their hands (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). They are to be diligent in helping those who are entrusted to their care by serving them and faithfully preaching the unadulterated Word of God to them. They are to watch for the souls of their members (Heb. 13:17). The elders serve fellow Christians and point them to the right and narrow path. They have a great responsibility before God for this task (Jas. 3:1). The Holy Spirit says the elders/leaders will give an account of their work to God. Everyone will give an account to God, but the elders especially concerning how they cared for God's flock. We should realize the responsibility laid on them by God for this noble task and therefore, not be a cause of trouble to them, but let them do their work with all joy and peace. We are called to honor them and submit to them (1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:5). We are even called to imitate the example of our leaders and hold them in high esteem (Heb. 13:7).

They should also be paid for their work as a common law of nature and as something likewise sanctioned by the Law of God, as Paul shows (1 Tim. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6-7), for how would they otherwise live? Furthermore, they are to be doers of good, known to be good to others, even non-Christians. They are to be known to be those who are consumed with the gospel and evangelism. A qualification of elders includes that "he must be well thought of by outsiders" (1 Tim. 3:7). This does not mean that all unbelievers should like him, but rather, generally, he should be thought of, even by unbelievers, as a good civilian. His first duty is to the flock of God entrusted to him, but he is also to go to the outside and bring others in (evangelism).

See also Keach's description of the pastors' work **above**.

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§11 The Work of Preaching The Word Is Not So Peculiarly Confined To Pastors

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 gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it,** and **approved and called by the church,** may and ought to perform it. **1**
    1. Acts 8:5; 11:19-21; 1 Peter 4:10-11

The **bishops or pastors of the church** are **to be instant in preaching the word** (2 Tim. 4:2), but other brothers, **also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit**, and **approved and called by the church** may preach to the congregation (Acts. 8:5; 11:19-21; Stephen). The **work of preaching** is not only **confined** and limited to them that are pastors or elders.

The pastor is not the only one who may preach and teach in the church, but men who are gifted by the Holy Spirit are also permitted to preach. These are also men who are approved and 'seen' by the church. When the church notices that some members have been gifted by God in preaching and teaching, they may, without being pastors, bless the church by their ministry either on the Lord's Day or outside that. Furthermore, pastors have the job to train young men to fill their places later, to train the next generation. Writing to Timothy, Paul says, "what you have heard from me in the presence of many

witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). This will mean letting these men preach on Sundays. Teaching them how they are to preach and prepare a sermon, investing in them so that they would be a blessing to the church. Benjamin Merkle observes the following about the elder as an equipper:

> It is not enough for elders to be teachers; they must also purposefully equip the next generation of elders to minister alongside of them or to plant new churches in the community. Too often pastors preach and teach year after year, but, when all is said and done, they have not effectively trained and equipped anybody to take their place. It is a sign of an unhealthy church when the pastor is gone and no one in the congregation can step in and fill the pulpit. Biblical eldership includes training others to do the task of preaching and teaching.[68]

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§12 All Believers Are Bound To Join Themselves To Particular Churches

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 under the censures and government thereof**, according to the rule of Christ. **1**
    1. 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; Heb. 13:17

All believers…when and where they have opportunity are called and **bound to join themselves to particular churches**. And being **admitted unto the privileges of a church**, they are also **under the censures** (i.e., discipline) and the **government** of that particular church **according to the rule of Christ** (Heb. 13:17). By joining a church, we are not only agreeing to worship and fellowship with each other, but also to fall under church discipline if we deserve it and submitting to the eldership and **government** of the church.

By becoming members, we put ourselves under the authority that Jesus has given the church. There, we are supposed to be fed with the Word of God, to have fellowship with believers, we are to be cared for and serve others and the church. By becoming members, we agree to be those who want to be under the God-ordained authority of the local body. We've discussed this briefly in **paragraph 6 above**.

> Heb. 13:17 **Obey your leaders and submit to them**, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

A Christian who has not joined a local church cannot obey this command of God. Therefore, such commands which call us to obey and submit to leadership are indicators of local church membership whereby we place ourselves under the authority of the elders in that church. There is no biblical passage that says, "A Christian should become a church member." But that does not mean that it is not presupposed. A Christian who was not a church member was no Christian, in essence. From the very beginning of Christianity, it was a religion of community. It was a community of people committed to each other and to their common Lord. Therefore, if church membership did not exist (in whatever form), we would not have the New Testament for the church would have no outward organization, in fact, the church would not be (seeing that it is the people). Membership and commitment are everywhere presupposed and it is the natural step after conversion. As we by faith become part of the universal body of Christ, so we should through baptism and profession of faith become a member in a local body of Christ. Among his people, we are to carry the "one another" commands, hold each other responsible, pray for each other, gather to worship the Lord, fulfill our duties as members toward each other. To neglect church membership is to be "of this world" and share the disdain of this wicked world for commitment and accountability. But Christians should not be like this. They should welcome and love Christ's institution of the church because it is for our good and for His glory.

John Hammett beautifully summarizes why we should be members of a local church:

> So, why church membership? It is inescapable for anyone claiming to be a Christian. Salvation itself plunges a believer into God's community, under God's Fatherhood of his family, the church. Believers are called to relate in numerous ways to "one another," including gathering. Some of the others they are to recognize as leaders; others they are called upon to hold accountable, and, if necessary, discipline and restore. They cannot fulfill these commands apart from membership in a local church. The propriety of referring to one's relationship with the church as membership is sustained by recognizing the church as body, kingdom outpost, and family. The New Testament leaves no room for anyone to claim to be a follower of Jesus and avoid church membership.[69]

As Christians, we need each other. We need each other's support. We know that we can't "do life" on our own and we recognize that God ministers to us through people how much more then through *His* own people? The local body of believers is also the context where "Christians gain a proper assurance of their own salvation. As Christians observe, teach, encourage, and rebuke one another, the local church begins to act as a cooperative that corroborates assurance of salvation. Church membership is good for weak Christians because it bring[s] them into a place of feeding and accountability. Church membership is good for strong Christians because it enables them to provide an example for what a true Christian life is like."[70]

§13 No Church Members, Upon Any Offence...Out To Disturb Any Church-Order

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, in the further proceeding of the church. **1**
    1. Matt. 18:15-17; Eph. 4:2-3; Col. 3:12-15; 1 John 2:7-11, 18-19; 28:15-17; Eph. 4:2-3; Matt. 28:20

Church members who have an issue with another church member while **having performed their duty required of them towards the person they are offended at** (Matt. 18:15-17), should not **disturb any church-order**. They should not seek to distort the way in which the church runs because of their issues and problems. In fact, they should not even **absent themselves from the assemblies of the church, or administration of any ordinances** (Heb. 10:24-25). As long as they have this issue between them, they are to attend church as they **wait upon Christ, in the further proceedings of the church**, Who is our Judge.

Now we go back to the issue of discipline discussed in paragraph 7 (**see here**). Even in a time of problems between members or cases of disobedience, the church order must not be disturbed, because that is not fitting for the name of Christ. Furthermore, they are to normally attend church and the ordinances thereof. Paul, throughout 1 Corinthians 12-14, stresses that the church-gathering should be orderly and not out of control. The eldership ought to regulate and institute the order from the Word of God in the church and maintain it. This is the power and authority that the Lord has given the church and which the elders, as leaders, are to implement (**paragraph 7**). As Paul said, "all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). The church-gathering is a *holy* gathering and thus, it is not to be like other gatherings. On the Lord's Day, we meet with our God as a corporate body and we should have everything in order and maintain the **Regulative Principle of Worship**. Even if a person is offended, there must be no disturbance of the church service because of that. Neither, as members, they are to neglect to gather on the Lord's Day with God's people (Heb. 10:25) or miss the Lord's Table. Rather than disturbing the church order, they are to seek reconciliation and commit their cause to Christ, the all-knowing and righteous Judge of all.

§14 Pray Continually For The Good And Prosperity Of All The Churches Of Christ

14. As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to **pray 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, **1** so the churches, when **planted by the providence of God,** so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, **2** ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification. **3**
    1. John 13:34-35; 17:11, 21-23; Eph. 4:11-16; 6:18; Ps. 122:6; Rom. 16:1-3; 3 John 8-10 with 2 John 5-11; Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:1-4, 16-24; 9:12-15; Col. 2:1 with 1:3, 4, 7 and 4:7, 12

2. Gal. 1:2, 22; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:4; Rom. 16:1-2; 3 John 8-10
3. 1 John 4:1-3 with 2 and 3 John; Rom. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 9:12-15; Josh. 22

Each church should **pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ** (e.g., John 13:34-35; Eph. 6:18; 2 Cor. 8:1-4) because we are one in Christ even if we have some doctrinal differences. We should seek the prosperity, the growth and the spread of the church of Christ on the earth. And as they are **planted by the providence of God**, they **may enjoy** the **opportunity and advantage** to **hold communion among themselves**. Even if we have disagreements among other-minded brothers and sisters, we should still pray for them and their church because of the fundamental unity between us on the gospel.

We should not be like the Hyper-Calvinists who believe that they alone are true Christians. We should acknowledge other churches of Christ with whom we disagree on secondary and tertiary issues who hold fast to the doctrine of the true gospel. We may differ on church order, but if we do not differ on the gospel, then we are brothers and sisters and we ought to pray for each other. We are not to be extreme separatists, neither are we to think of our own church alone. But rather, we should care and pray for all the true churches of Christ that they may prosper with the blessing of God and may abide in the pure doctrine of the Word and be a light in a dark world. Many are the instances in Paul's letters concerning sending greetings from one church to another (Rom. 16:5, 16; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 13:13; Eph. 1:15; Col. 1:4) or praying for each other (Eph. 6:18; cf. Rom. 1:9; Eph. 1:16; Col. 1:9; 2 Tim. 1:3) or financially supporting other churches (Rom. 12:13; 15:25-26; 2 Cor. 8:1-2; 9:12).[71] This should be done with 2 John 10-11 in mind, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting" (see also 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 7-8). This is all the more needed in our day when we see the world pressing Christians on things like homosexuality, abortion or the authority of the Bible, some churches have already given in to the world. But we should pray for the churches of Christ that they stand uncompromised on His Word and His authority, not fearing man but fearing God.

We should even partner and fellowship with Arminians. Yes, their views of election are wrong, but most of them are sincere Christians, truly loving the Lord and wanting to serve Him. Yet they have a blind-spot concerning God's absolute sovereignty. The closest theological friends for Reformed Baptists are Presbyterians and other Reformed groups with whom we share a lot of common teachings but differ on secondary issues like baptism, church government (the content of this chapter is totally unique and not taken over from the Westminster), and the covenants (Westminster Federalism and 1689 Federalism). But we are united in the core teachings of the Bible and the gospel of Christ, therefore, we have unity of faith. We may not worship in the same local congregation, but we are brothers and sisters in the Lord and belong to the universal church of Christ. We have secondary and tertiary differences which means that our conscience may not allow us to worship together each Lord's Day, yet that does not mean we don't acknowledge each other as brothers and sisters from the same family of God.

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§15 Many Churches Holding Communion Together, Do, By Their Messengers, Meet To...

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,** and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be **reported to all the churches concerned; 1** 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 to impose their determination on the churches or officers. **2**
    1. Gal. 2:2; Prov. 3:5-7; 12:15; 13:10
    2. 1 Cor. 7:25. 36, 40; 2 Cor. 1:24; 1 John 4:1

When there are **cases of difficulties or difference** which a church cannot resolve on its own or between multiple churches, **either in point of doctrine or administration**, they may call the help of other churches. This is to be done among **churches holding communion together**, which probably means other Reformed Baptists churches for Reformed

Baptists. They are to have **messengers** or representatives present to **consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference**. Notice that these **messengers** do not give a command of what ought to be done, they **give their advice**. This advice is to be **reported to all the churches concerned** in this matter. These **messengers** of the churches give their advice on the matter because they **are not entrusted with any church-power** because they are not officers in the church(s) involved. Therefore, they do not have **any jurisdiction over the churches** involved in this matter.

When there are troubles, problems, and errors, whether theological or practical concerning the church, the church may seek counsel from other churches. There are sometimes problems between two congregations, but these problems should be solved in a manner worthy of the name of Christ. A church may have difficulty with a particular doctrine or thing, and they may send representatives, whether the elders or others, to other churches to seek counsel from them. Notice the wording of the Confession, it speaks of "advice" and not a command, and also the last portion of the paragraph. The local church is autonomous—on its own (see **paragraph 7**). They are not to be dictated by other churches, synods, councils, or whatnot. Rather, the church is to be led by the elders within that same church. The local church itself is the final earthly authority for herself. She is free, but she must carefully follow her heavenly Lord's dictates for she *is* accountable to Him. A local church may seek the advice of other churches, but other churches cannot dictate what they should do. As A. H. Strong note, "Since each local church is directly subject to Christ, there is no jurisdiction of one church over another, but all are on an equal footing, and all are independent of interference or control by the civil power."[72] We also noted above that in the New Testament, elders belong to a particular church with whom they are entrusted and are to lead. There are no region or city elders, neither are they elders of multiple churches. This means that an elder has jurisdiction only in his church and nowhere else. This also means that elders from other churches cannot dictate anything for a church in which they are not an elder.

We close this chapter with the words of Dr. Waldron:

> The strict limitation of such an assembly is that it is merely advisory. Counsel in the Bible is often not authoritative, even if it comes from an apostle (1 Cor. 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.[73]

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

(Matthew 16:18)

Footnotes

1. ^ *Alan Dunn. The London Baptist Confession of Faith | Exposition of Chapter 26. Herald Of Grace.*
2. ^ *Many Scriptural references have been supplied by Samuel Waldron's Modern Exposition of 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith which was apparently supplied by the Westminster Confession of Faith 1646.*
3. ^ *John L. Dagg. A Manual of Church Order. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Pub. 2012, originally 1858). p. 123.*
4. ^ *Louis Berkhof. Systematic Theology. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Banner of Truth Trust. 1963). p. 564.*
5. ^ *See for example, Richard L. Pratt Jr., "Infant Baptism in the New Covenant" in The Case For Covenantal Infant Baptism. Ed. Gregg Strawbridge. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003). pp. 156-174. See also James R. White's response, "The Newness of the New Covenant: Better*

Covenant, Better Mediator, Better Sacrifice, Better Ministry, Better Hope, Better Promises (Part 2)" in Recovering A Covenantal Heritage: Essays In Baptist Covenant Theology. Edited by Richard C. Barcellos. (Palmdale, CA: RBAP, 2014). pp. 374-381.

6. a, b, c, d, e *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*
7. ^ *Keith Thompson. Does Matthew 16 Teach Peter was the Pope? Exegetical Apologetics, 2018.*
8. a, b, c, d, e *John Gill. Exposition of the Entire Bible. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*
9. ^ *Sam E. Waldron. A Modern Exposition Of The 1689 Baptist Confession Of Faith. (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2013). pp. 388-389.*
10. ^ *A. H. Strong. Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed For The Use Of Theological Students. (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1970. Originally, 1907). p. 887.*
11. ^ *Ibid., p. 888.*
12. ^ *Stephen J. Wellum, Kirk Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism" in Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age. Ed. Mark Dever, Jonathan Leeman. (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group. 2015. Ebook). Chapter 3, under the heading "5. The Church as the New Covenant Community Is God's New Humanity."*
13. ^ *Jonathan Leeman, "A Congregational Approach to Unity, Holiness, and Apostolicity: Faith and Order" in Baptist Foundations. Chapter 18.*
14. ^ *Strong, Systematic Theology. p. 887.*
15. ^ *Berkhof, Systematic Theology. p. 566.*
16. ^ *Wellums in Baptist Foundations. Chapter 3.*
17. ^ *Samuel D. Renihan. The Mystery of Christ: His Covenant and His Kingdom. (FL: Founders Press, 2019). pp. 201-203.*
18. ^ *Berkhof, Systematic Theology. p. 568.*
19. ^ *ibid., p. 570.*
20. ^ *Cited in Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994). p. 863. Also in Mark Dever, The Church: The Gospel Made Visible. (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic. 2012). p. 13.*
21. ^ *Grudem, Systematic Theology. p. 564.*
22. ^ *John M. Frame, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), p. 1033.*
23. ^ *Dever, The Church. p. 13.*
24. ^ *Matthew Poole. English Annotations on the Holy Bible. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*
25. ^ *John Calvin. Commentaries. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*
26. ^ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications From The Editio Typica. (Double Day; 2nd edition, 2003). p. 254.*
27. ^ *Is the pope the Vicar of Christ? (GotQuestions.org).*
28. ^ *Polity. (Webster Dictionary 1828).*
29. ^ *Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman in Baptist Foundations. The preface, under the heading "Heeding Scripture."*
30. ^ *Dagg, Church Order. p. 75.*
31. ^ *Strong, Systematic Theology. p. 890.*
32. ^ *Dagg, Church Order. p. 79.*
33. ^ *Dever, The Church. p. 40. Footnote references were moved to the square brackets.*
34. ^ *Strong, Systematic Theology. p. 897.*
35. ^ *Benjamin Keach. Glory of a True Church. (Pensacola, Florida: Chapel Library, 2018, originally 1679). pp. 6-7. Available at Chapel Library.*
36. ^ *Ibid., p. 23.*
37. ^ *Dagg, Church Order. p. 95.*
38. ^ *Mark Dever. A Display of God's Glory. (9Marks). p. 75.*

39. ^ *Frame, Systematic Theology. p. 1027.*
40. ^ *Dever, God's Glory.*
41. ^ *Dever, The Chruch. p. 47.*
42. ^ *Dagg, Church Order. p. 88.*
43. ^ *Dever, God's Glory. pp. 53-54.*
44. ^ *John Hammett as cited in Wellums, "The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism" in Baptist Foundations. Chapter 2.*
45. ^ *Jonathan Leeman. A Church and Churches: Independence. (9Marks, 2013).*
46. ^ *Strong, Systematic Theology. p. 892.*
47. ^ *Wellums in Baptist Foundations. Chapter 2.*
48. ^ *Cited in ibid.*
49. a, b *Dagg, Church Order. p. 131.*
50. ^ *Grudem, Systematic Theology. p. 927.*
51. ^ *Waldron, Exposition of 1689. p. 398.*
52. ^ *Dagg, Church Order. p. 83.*
53. ^ *Strong, Systematic Theology. pp. 894-895. Scriptural references were placed between brackets instead of taking the space to cite them.*
54. ^ *Waldron, Exposition of 1689. p. 399.*
55. ^ *Strong, Systematic Theology. pp. 914-915. Words within the square brackets are mine.*
56. ^ *Keach, True Church. pp. 5-6.*
57. ^ *William D. Mounce. διάκονος*
58. ^ *Keach, True Church. p. 7.*
59. ^ *Dever, The Church. p. 135. Italics are his.*
60. ^ *Abbott-Smith's Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament. Retrieved from TheWord Bible Software. See reference for the Strong's number.*
61. ^ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version: The ESV Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles (2008). p. 2329.*
62. a, b *Grudem, Systematic Theology. p. 917.*
63. ^ *Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Biblical Qualifications for Elders" in Baptist Foundations. Chapter 13.*
64. ^ *Nehemiah Coxe. Biblical Elders and Deacons. (Chapel Library, 2015, originally 1681). p. 12.*
65. ^ *ESV Study Bible, p. 2330.*
66. ^ *Charles J. Ellicott. Commentary For English Readers. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. In loc.*
67. ^ *Joseph Henry Thayer's Greek Definitions. Taken from the TheWord Bible Software. G4368.*
68. ^ *Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Biblical Role of Elders" in Baptist Foundations. Chapter 14.*
69. ^ *John Hammett, "The Way and Who of Church Membership" in Baptist Foundations. Chapter 8.*
70. ^ *Dever, The Church. p. 152.*
71. ^ *Scriptural references were supplied by Jonathan Leeman. A Church and Churches: Integration. (9Marks, 2013). Can also be found in Baptist Foundations, chapter 19.*
72. ^ *Strong, Systematic Theology. p. 898.*
73. ^ *Waldron, Exposition of 1689. pp. 410-411.*