

Lesson 29: 2LCF Chapter 26: Of The Church (Part 1)

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 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. 19 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."

Matthew 16:13-19

As we enter into our study of the doctrine of the church, we arrive at the longest chapter in the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith. Unlike the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is comprised of six paragraphs, the 2LCF has a total of fifteen paragraphs. Unsurprisingly, it is the chapter that differs most from the WCF. On this chapter, Waldron writes:

The doctrine of the church separates the Baptist Puritans from the Presbyterian Puritans. Baptists, however, were not the only ones to differ from the Westminster Confession of Faith on this issue. Many of the paragraphs in this chapter are derived from similar statements in a platform of church polity published with the Savoy Declaration of Faith by the Congregationalist Puritans in 1658. The ideas found in this chapter are, then, not exclusively those of Baptists, but ideas advocated by such Congregationalist Puritans as Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, John Cotton and Jonathan Edwards. Only the idea of placing them in the Confession is unique to the Baptists.³²⁵

In this chapter, we find the baptist Puritans seeking common ground with their presbyterian and congregationalist brethren wherever possible, while at the same time maintaining their credobaptist and congregationalist convictions.

The following outline demonstrates that careful distinctions made in the Confession. There is an obvious division between paragraphs 1-4, which address the universal church, and paragraphs 5-15, which carefully put forward the doctrine of the local church.

Outline

Paragraphs 1-4

I. The universal church

A. Its identity (Paragraphs 1-2)

1. As invisible (Paragraph 1)

2. As visible (Paragraph 2)

B. Its perpetuity (Paragraph 3)

1. Its seeming improbability

2. Its actual certainty

C. Its authority (Paragraph 4)

1. The true head of the church, the Christ

2. The false head of the church, the Antichrist

³²⁵ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 365.

Paragraphs 5-15

II. The local church

- A. Its originating mandate (Paragraph 5)
 - 1. The foundation of the mandate
 - 2. The substance of the mandate
- B. Its defined membership (Paragraph 6)
 - 1. Evangelical
 - 2. Volitional
 - 3. Covenantal
- C. Its authoritative power (Paragraph 7)
 - 1. Its defined recipients
 - 2. Its complete sufficiency
 - 3. Its reiterated origin
 - 4. Its specified purpose
 - 5. Its regulated execution
- D. Its appointed government (Paragraphs 8-13)
 - 1. The identity of its government (Paragraph 8)
 - 2. The appointment of its government (Paragraph 9)
 - 3. The cornerstone of its government: the ministry of the Word, (Paragraphs 10- II)
 - The official ministry of the Word by pastors (Paragraph 10)
 - Its heavy responsibilities
 - Its proper honouring
 - The auxiliary ministry of the Word by others, (Paragraph II)
 - 4. The extent of its government (Paragraphs 12-13)
 - It extends to all its members (Paragraph 12)
 - It extends to all its problems (Paragraph 13)
 - The situation envisaged
 - The prohibition issued
 - The direction required
- E. Its fraternal relations: the communion of local churches (Paragraphs 14-15)
 - 1. Its divine warrant (Paragraph 14a)
 - 2. Its providential limitations (Paragraph 14b)
 - 3. Its spiritual benefits (Paragraph 14C)
 - 4. Its special advantage: advisory meetings (Paragraph 15)
 - Their possible reasons
 - Their biblical basis
 - Their strict limitations³²⁶

In this lesson, we will seek to survey the first seven paragraphs of chapter 26. This enable us to explore the doctrine of the universal church in paragraphs 1-4, including its identity, perpetuity, and authority. We will also consider three aspects of the local church in paragraphs 5-7, including its mandate, membership, and authority.

³²⁶ Ibid., 364-65.

Paragraph 1.

The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole 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 fills all in all.

Heb. 12:23; Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:10, 22, 23, 5:23, 27, 32

Paragraph 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; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.

1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 11:26; Rom. 1:7; Eph. 1:20-22

Paragraph 3.

The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan; nevertheless Christ always has 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.

1 Cor. 5; Rev. 2,3; Rev. 18:2; 2 Thess. 2:11,12; Matt. 16:18; Ps. 72:17, 102:28; Rev. 12:17

Paragraph 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; 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 exalts himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.

Col. 1:18; Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 4:11,12; 2 Thess. 2:2-9

Exposition

Paragraphs 1-4 are largely derived from the Savoy declaration and address the identity, perpetuity and authority of the universal church.

Paragraphs 1-2: The Church's Identity

Paragraphs 1-2 identify the universal church as being made up of all the elect and being both invisible (paragraph 1) and visible (paragraph 2). When the Confession uses the term catholic, this is not in reference to Roman Catholicism. Rather, the term “catholic” is derived from the Latin term “catholicus” and the Greek word καθολικός (“katholikos”), which means “universal”.

While the concept of the universal church seem like a given to most, some groups, such as Landmark Baptists, have argued against the existence of a local church. Fred Moritz has pointed out that the Landmark movement has asserted that “baptist churches are the only true churches in world” and that “the true church is a local, visible institution.”³²⁷ He adds,

Those who hold the Landmark position argue that only Baptist churches exhibit all the marks of a true church as taught in the New Testament; therefore, they are the only true

³²⁷ Fred Moritz, “*The Landmark Controversy: A Study in Baptist History and Polity*,” Maranatha Baptist Seminary, Maranatha Baptist University, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.mbu.edu/seminary/the-landmark-controversy/>.

churches... Landmark Baptists vehemently deny the existence of a church of which all regenerated people in this age are a part.³²⁸

This gives us good reason to ask: Is there scriptural proof for a universal church?

Waldron has pointed out that there are 115 references to “church” in the New Testament, with the majority of those referencing the local church.³²⁹ Nevertheless, there are many passages that teach us about the existence of the universal church. One act of these texts, we find reference to a singular church with whom Christ relates.

Matthew 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.

1 Corinthians 12:28

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Ephesians 1:22-23

22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 5:25

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

Colossians 1:18

And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Hebrews 12:22-23

22 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 (ἐκκλησίᾳ) of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...

Waldron also makes several important points when he speaks of the universal church being composed of the whole number of the elect, in both the Old and New Covenants. He writes:

- There was a sense in which the church began in the events surrounding Christ's first advent.
- The Apostles of Christ are the historical foundation upon which Christ is now building His church (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20; Heb. 12:18-24).
- Israel was a type of the church (Rom. 2:28, 29; 1 Cor. 10:18; Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3).
- The church is the New Israel of God (Acts 2:16; 15:14-18; 1 Cor. 10:11; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:12-19; Heb. 8:7-13).
- The NT church as an institution in its present visible form and organism as a spiritual body did not exist in the OT.
- The tendency to flatten the difference between the church and Israel in the interest of paedobaptism is wrong.
- But the church is the climactic expression of the people of God—all those in union with Christ.
- The church is the body and bride of Christ (Eph. 1:22; 4:11-15; 5:23-32; Col. 1:18, 24).

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 366.

- The bride of Christ is composed of the saved from every age (Eph. 5:27; Rev. 21:9-14; Matt. 8:11, 12; John 10:14-17; Heb. 11:39, 40).
- As the people of God, the church does consist "of the whole number of the elect."³³⁰

The next relevant question pertaining to the church's identity is this: Is there biblical warrant for the doctrine of the invisible church?

While we may also be inclined to take this doctrine for granted, many groups, including Eastern Orthodoxy flat-out deny such a concept.

The following commentary on the matter may prove helpful:

If we use the term, we must, like the Confession, use it very carefully, because there is no invisible church distinct from the visible church... The universal church is always visible, even if it is not perfectly or completely visible. The universal church spoken of in Ephesians is visible (Ephesians 1:22, 3:10, 21; 4:4, 11-13 cf. I Corinthians 12:28). The universal church could be persecuted and so had to be visible (Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1-2; 9:31; cf. Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6). One may not credibly profess to be a member of the invisible church while despising membership and fellowship in the visible church.

In what sense, then, is the church 'invisible? It is invisible because we cannot directly see the work of the Spirit which joins a person to Christ. It is invisible because we cannot perfectly judge the truth of another person's grace. It is invisible because the church as a whole is not yet a perfected, earthly reality. Visible churches are only imperfect and partial manifestations of it.³³¹

There are several passages that demonstrate that the work of the Spirit is not always immediately evident, nor can we perfectly judge the evidences of grace in another person's life.

1 Samuel 16:7

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

Matthew 7:22-23

22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

2 Timothy 2:19

But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

1 John 2:19

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.

Paragraph two also teaches that the church is visible and is composed of "visible saints". This is made evident by passages such as Matthew 18:15; Matthew 28:15-20; Acts 2:37-42; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 5:1-9. On this point, Waldron comments: "While the universal church is not perfectly or

³³⁰ Ibid., 367-68.

³³¹ Ibid.

completely visible, it is practically visible. There is no true Christian who does not confess Christ's name and obey him outwardly."³³²

Paragraph 3: The Church's Perpetuity

Though this paragraph begins with several cautions about the dangers facing the church, it affirms that the church will ultimately prevail over the gates of hell (Matthew 16:18, 24:14, 28:20; Mark 4:30, Psalm 72:26). Waldron adds:

We need not fear that the name and church of Christ will ever vanish. Atheists predict it. Novelists write about it. Voltaire prophesied it, but his home was turned into a place where Bibles were printed. We may claim these promises in our prayers for our own local church. While we have no absolute promise that our own local church will continue, we do know that Christ's universal church will always visibly continue. The way in which he has appointed for that to happen is in local churches like ours. Thus we may pray that he would build his church and defeat the forces of Satan through us!³³³

Paragraph 4: The Church's Authority

Paragraph 4 asserts that Christ, and not the Pope or any other human authority is the head of His church. (Col. 1:18; Eph. 4:11-16; 1:20-23; 5:23-32; 1 Cor. 12:27, 28; John 17:1-3; Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 5:31; John 10:14-16).

Paragraph 5.

In the execution of this power wherewith he is so intrusted, the Lord Jesus calls out of the world unto himself, through the ministry of his word, by his Spirit, those that are given unto him by his Father, that they may walk before him in all the ways of obedience, which he prescribes to them in his word. Those thus called, he commands to walk together in particular societies, or churches, for their mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which he requires of them in the world.

John 10:16; John 12:32; Matt. 28:20; Matt. 18:15-20

Paragraph 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; 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.

Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 2:41,42, 5:13,14; 2 Cor. 9:13

Paragraph 7.

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

Matt. 18:17, 18; 1 Cor. 5:4, 5, 5:13, 2 Cor. 2:6-8

³³² Ibid., 369.

³³³ Ibid.

Exposition

Paragraphs 5-7 address the mandate, membership, and authority of the local church.

The Church's Mandate

Many perspectives on the mandate have been offered. Wayne Grudem has argued that the church's mandate is threefold: ministry to God in worship, ministry to believers through nurture, and ministry to the world through evangelism and discipleship.³³⁴ John Calvin said of the church's mandate and identity, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."³³⁵ The framers of the Confession largely highlight the important ministry of the Word. Waldron summarizes their perspective when he writes:

The central manward ministry of the local church is the building up of believers in their obedience to all the commands of Christ. Ordinarily and normatively, teaching the disciples of Christ to observe all his commands demands the existence of officially recognized elder/teachers in the local church. The church may be, but it cannot well be, without such pastor-teachers. It is often said that while one church may be strong in the teaching of God's Word to God's people, other churches may be strong in music, fellowship, social concerns, or evangelism. Such reasoning is false. Teaching the Word is an essential and central manward function of every church (I Timothy 3:15).³³⁶

The Church's Authority

The remainder of this lesson will focus on the unique authority of the local church. While many denominations contend for a hierarchical or connectional form of church government, a careful analysis of the Bible's teaching plainly reveals the principle of independent authority among local churches.

Samuel Waldron has been careful to qualify that this is not independence from Christ's authority as Priest-King. Rather, it means that "no ecclesiastical authority in the visible church has jurisdiction over the local church."³³⁷ In addition, Waldron notes that "each local church has been given sufficient authority to order its worship and discipline."³³⁸ In contrast to presbyterian or episcopal forms of church polity, the principle of independence insists that each local church is responsible to carry out its God-given purpose under the authority and according to the mind of Christ as it is revealed in the Bible.

This principle of independent congregational authority can be clearly demonstrated from God's Word in the following ways: the local church's possession of the keys of the kingdom, the practice of church discipline, and the local church's individual accountability before God. Furthermore, the case for church independence is strengthened when one correctly interprets passages that appear to contradict this principle, such as Acts 15.

³³⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England : Grand Rapids, Mich: Inter-Varsity Press ; Zondervan Pub. House, 867).

³³⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.9, 1023.

³³⁶ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 373.

³³⁷ Samuel Waldron, "Lecture 30: The Relationship of the Universal and Local Governments," lecture, ST26 Doctrine of the Church, Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary, Owensboro, KY, accessed November 14, 2025.

³³⁸ Ibid.

In the first place, the independence of the local church can be seen in the fact that each local church possesses the “keys of the kingdom” that are referenced by the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 16:19. While teaching about the advance of His Church against the gates of hell, Christ remarked: “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.” While some argue that this passage lends support to the concept of apostolic succession, there is simply no basis for this claim. Rather, this passage teaches that the church possesses a delegated authority from the living God as the agent of His kingdom.³³⁹ As MacArthur has observed, the church has the privileged responsibility of binding, loosing, and declaring “the judgment of heaven based on the principles of the Word.”³⁴⁰

This is a remarkable authority assigned to the church. More remarkable still is that this delegated authority is not wielded by an ecumenical council or convention of bishops, but by each genuine local church. This can be seen by the fact that Matthew 16:19 is further explained and applied by Christ in Matthew 18:15-20. Upon comparing the two passages, the similarities and repetition of language are striking. Whereas Matthew 16:19 teaches that the keys of the kingdom are to be used in conjunction with the church’s binding and loosing, Matthew 18:18 clearly shows that this binding and loosing is inextricably linked to the discipline of the local church. The fact that this discipline, and the turning of the keys of the kingdom, are exercised by the local congregation is made obvious in Matthew 18:20, where Christ adds: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” With this additional context, one learns that Christ’s special presence is with each local church, irrespective of its size, as it exercises the authority granted to it as a key-holder of the kingdom of heaven. Waldron notes that this shows “the complete sufficiency of the power given to the local church.”³⁴¹ Citing this passage, the Puritan minister John Cotton adds: “the key of church-privilege or liberty is given to the Brethren of the church... For all particular churches are of equal liberty and power within themselves, not one of them subordinate to another.”³⁴²

In another passage of Scripture that is closely related, it is observed that the ongoing practice of church discipline carried out by the church in Corinth also supports the principle of independence. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, one reads about the exercise of church discipline with respect to a man engaged in sexually immoral conduct. When read carefully, it becomes obvious that Paul is both familiar with Matthew 18:15-20, and that he is seeking to apply this passage to the misconduct taking place in Corinth. Especially noteworthy is 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, where Paul writes: “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 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.” From this passage, two very important truths should be noted. Firstly, the Apostle Paul does not unilaterally excommunicate the immoral man, but he counsels the church to exercise its God-given authority in the matter, and only once it is assembled. Secondly, as the church exercises this authority, it does so with the power of the risen Lord Jesus. Again, the special presence of Christ is experienced by the congregation as it turns the keys of the kingdom.

In addition to the local church’s possession of the keys of the kingdom and its vital role in church discipline, the principle of independence can also be argued based on the local church’s individual accountability before Christ. In Revelation 2-3, one finds Christ’s words for the seven churches in

³³⁹ Joel R. Beeke, Michael P. V. Barrett, and Gerald M. Bilkes, eds., *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1385.

³⁴⁰ John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1997), 1423.

³⁴¹ Samuel Waldron, “Lecture 30: The Relationship of the Universal and Local Governments.”

³⁴² John Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Power Thereof, According to the Word of God* (Boston: Whipple & Co., 1644), 71.

the Roman province of Asia. In the case of several of these churches, Christ holds them to account for tolerating sin in their midst and offers stern warnings to each offending church. In speaking about the church in Ephesus, Christ warned of the removal of its lampstand if the congregation did not repent. This is no idle threat, but a terrifying ultimatum. In the words of Michael Wilcock, here Christ “threatens to destroy... the church herself, if she will not repent.”³⁴³ In the case of other churches, they receive their own sobering admonitions.

When considering this account in Revelation 2-3, it is notable that Christ does not rebuke one or more churches for the sins of another; nor does He rebuke a bishop or hierarchical church leader for the flaws in a particular region. Instead, each church is held accountable for its own sin and receives its own censure. On this point, John Cotton poses a question that suggests its own answer: “Now if these churches had not either of them sufficient power to purge out their own offenders, why are they blamed for toleration of them?”³⁴⁴ Without question, these individual churches are blamed for their own sin, because they each possessed a very real power to address the sins in their midst.

When one contends for the principle of church independence, it is almost inevitable that opposing parties will appeal to the gathering of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. Some will look at this chapter and assert that the gathering exercised authority over other churches, and constituted a council or synod, because it was composed of elders from multiple churches. It has been rightly pointed out, however, that there is no evidence that the elders of multiple congregations participated in this gathering. Paul and Barnabas were present, but it was the apostles and elders who made the final decision (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4).³⁴⁵ Acts 15:22 makes clear that this was not a regional meeting, but a particular meeting of the Jerusalem church, consisting of “the apostles, and the elders, with the whole church.” Furthermore, Waldron has asserted that this gathering’s authority cannot be viewed as normative for future churches for several reasons. He points out that this was the first church of Christianity, it was the church where the twelve apostles presided, and it was the church where its leaders “exercised an authority that can only be called apostolic (Gal. 2:9; 1 Cor. 15:7).”³⁴⁶ Simply put, the church in Jerusalem was unique and played a peculiar and unparalleled role in the life of the early church.

Based on these brief observations from Scripture, it is plain to see that the principle of church independence is thoroughly biblical and must therefore be carefully guarded. To neglect this principle is to undermine the clear teaching of Christ and His apostles. Furthermore, it is to deny the local church her privileged role as the key-holder of the kingdom of God. In the words of John Owen:

Particular churches or congregations, with their order and rule are of divine institution... Unto these churches, there is committed by Christ himself, all the ordinary power, and privileges that belong unto any church under the Gospel, and of them is required the observance of all church duties; which it is their sin to omit.³⁴⁷

³⁴³ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 44.

³⁴⁴ John Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven*, 91.

³⁴⁵ Samuel Waldron, “Of the Church.” In *A New Exposition of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 458.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ John Owen, *An Enquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Power, Order and Communion of Evangelical Churches* (London: Printed by J. Richardson for Nath. Ponder and Sam. Lee, 1681), 337.