

CHAPTER 26 - THE CHURCH

The Universal Church

1. *The catholic or universal church is invisible in respect of the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace. It consists of the whole number of the elect who have been, who are being, or who yet shall be gathered into one under Christ who is the church's head. The church is the wife, the body, the fulness of Christ, who 'fills all in all'.*
2. *All persons throughout the world who profess to believe the gospel and to render gospel obedience unto God by Christ are, and may be called, visible saints, provided that they do not render void their profession of belief by holding fundamental errors or by living unholy lives; and of such persons all local churches should be composed.*

(a) **The universal church as *invisible*** (Section 1). Note that the word “catholic” = universal, and does not refer to the Roman Catholics. Three things are taught here about the church:

1. There is a *universal* church. Most of the 115 times the word ‘church’ is used in the Bible refer to the local church. Note the following verses that clearly refer to more than a single local church - Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 1:22, 5:23-25,27, Colossians 1:18,24, Hebrews 12:23.
2. The universal church consists of all the *elect*. Not just God's people in the New Testament, but also His people in the Old Testament such as Abraham. Although as an outward institution we can say that the church began with Christ's coming, as the final form of God's people it includes the Old Testament saints. As “the wife, the body” of Christ, it includes all those who are in union with Him (Ephesians 4:15-16, 5:23,27, Colossians 1:18,24), as there are not many wives or bodies. The bride of Christ at the last day will include all those saved in every age (Ephesians 5:27, Revelation 21:9-14). Thus Dispensationalism, which makes a total distinction between the church and Israel, is proved wrong.
3. The universal church is *invisible*. It is invisible only “in respect of the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace”. We cannot directly see the Spirit's regenerating work (John 3:8); we cannot perfectly judge another person's grace; visible churches are imperfect manifestations of the invisible church. Yet there is no invisible church distinct from the visible. The universal church is always visible, even if not perfectly so.

(b) **The universal church as *visible*** (Section 2). There is no true member of the universal church who does not confess Christ's Name and obey Him outwardly. Such alone are to be the members of local churches. No profession of faith must be counted genuine if it is contradicted by refusal to forsake any false teaching or ungodly way. See descriptions of church members in Rm.1:7, 1 Cor.1:2. So wrong to claim to belong to universal church if not eligible to belong to local and visible church.

The Perpetuity of the Universal Church

3. *The purest churches under heaven are liable to be troubled by mixture and error, and some have so far degenerated as no longer to be churches of Christ at all, but 'synagogues of Satan'.*

Nevertheless, Christ always has had a kingdom in this world of such as believe in Him and profess His Name, and He ever will have such a kingdom to the world's end.

It is clearly stated that the visible, universal church of Christ will not be destroyed (Matthew 16:18). Persecution has come and gone with the aim of stamping out the church, but it has not. Many have predicted it, but their predictions have not come true. Worldliness threatens to make the church irrelevant, but there is still a remnant. Sometimes it seems that the church might destroy itself from within by sin (such as the Corinthian church, and see 3 John 9-10), or even by apostasy (Revelation 2:5), and many local churches have ceased to exist, such as the seven in Asia in Revelation 2-3. Christ keeps His own and will gather them to Himself on the last day.

The Authority of the Universal Church

4. *The Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church. By the appointment of the Father, all authority requisite for the calling, establishment, ordering and governing of the church is supremely and sovereignly invested in Him. It is impossible for the Pope of Rome in any true sense to be the head of the church, for he is the antichrist, described in Scripture as 'the man of sin', 'the son of perdition', who 'exalts himself' in the church against Christ and 'above all that is called God', whom 'the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of His coming'.*

(a) The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of His church.

This is the positive statement about authority in the universal church. Read the following passages that make this clear – Ephesians 4:15-16, 5:23, Colossians 1:18, 2:19. This headship involves two ideas:

1. *Administrative* headship. This is like the headship of the husband over the wife. Note that it is not bare authority, because Christ is also the “Saviour” of His body; and the husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:23,25). The headship is exercised for the benefit of those ruled. Christ is truly the final authority in His church, and He administers His rule through the Scriptures and elders who rule by those Scriptures in the church. How important therefore, to sit under pastors who rightly handle the Word of God. How important that you make the Scriptures the object of your study, so that you *know* the will of your Head.
2. *Organic* headship. The head not only rules, but it also makes growth of the body possible. The church is totally dependent upon Christ for everything - without Christ it has no life (John 15:5). For your growth in the Christian life you must first be united to the body, and then to a body that is united to the Head (Ephesians 4:16). Do not expect to grow by yourself, but as you are in church fellowship. How does the church express its total dependence upon Christ? Above all in prayer. How essential that we pray earnestly together as a church!

For the exercise of this headship Christ has been given all the authority necessary by the Father. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me” (Matthew 28:18). On this basis He sends out His people to make disciples. “...He has put all things under His feet and made Him head over all things for the church...” (Ephesians 1:22). Christ has supreme authority for the sake of the church. What a glorious truth. We should find it no problem to joyfully and unreservedly submit to such a head. Is that your response to the reading and hearing of the Scriptures?

(2) The Pope of Rome is in no sense the head of the church.

It is not surprising that the Confession identifies the Pope of Rome with the antichrist, as it was the Roman Church that had been a violent persecutor in opposition to Protestantism (read Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*). The persecuting harlot of Revelation 17:1-14 is pictured as seated upon seven mountains, and it is well known that Rome is built on seven hills. There is no question that the

whole Roman Catholic system has put itself in the place of Christ (the literal meaning of ‘antichrist’). Christ never made Peter the head of the church; there is no evidence that Peter ever became a bishop in Rome, and it is not totally sure that he ever was in Rome at all; and the present Pope of Rome cannot truly trace his succession back to Peter. If he were the head of the church, then let him show it by ruling the church according to the revealed Scriptures, and not by adding tradition as being of equal authority. Let him clearly proclaim that there is salvation only in Christ, on the basis of the grace of God, and through faith alone. Note that the descriptions given of the Pope of Rome are from 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

The Origin of the Local Church

5. In the exercise of the authority which has been entrusted to Him, the Lord Jesus, through the ministry of the Word and by His Spirit, calls to Himself out of the world those who are given to Him by His Father, that they might live in His sight, rendering Him the obedience prescribed by Him for them in the Scripture.

He commands those thus called to form particular societies or churches to promote their common welfare, and to engage in the public worship which He requires them to carry on while they continue in the world.

Note how this continues from section 4 by showing how Christ exercises that authority given to Him in establishing local churches.

(a) **How does Christ establish local churches?** (lines 1-4). It is the work of His saving power calling sinners out of the world and into obedience. For the idea of calling, see chapter 10 of the Confession.

(b) **Why does Christ establish local churches?** (lines 5-7). Having called to salvation those the Father had given Him, what does He want them to do? He wants them to gather together in local churches. This is the foundation of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), for it is in the church, with elders who teach, that this Commission is to be carried out. And this is exactly what the apostles did wherever they went (see Acts 14:21-23, Titus 1:5). Note the specific purposes:

1. Manward – building up of believers in their obedience to all the commands of Christ, including church-planting, and
2. Godward – various aspects of public worship which is the fruit of being built up.

Membership in the Local Church

6. The members of these churches are saints by reason of the divine call, and in a visible manner they demonstrate and declare, both by their confession of Christ and their manner of life, that they obey Christ’s call.

They willingly consent to hold fellowship together according to Christ’s instructions, giving themselves to the Lord and to one another as God wills, and yielding full assent to the requirements of the Gospel.

Membership is far more than having one's name written on a church roll; it is very practical:

(a) **The basis of membership** (lines 1-3). They must have experienced the divine call to salvation that makes them saints. The reality of this call is revealed by two things:

1. A confession of Christ in baptism (Acts 2:38,41, 8:12, 9:18, 10:47-48, 16:15, 18:8), something that was assumed of every church member in the New Testament (see Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27, Colossians 2:12).
2. A manner of life of obedience to Christ as the evidence of genuine discipleship. Both of these things are seen and are to be deliberated upon when receiving new members into the church.

(b) **The duties of membership** (lines 4-6). Membership is not to be entered into blindly, but is a formal "consent" to fulfil stipulated Biblical duties. Many churches have made it into a covenant, renewed every year by the members. Such promises are to be made 'willingly'. The duties are only what Christ has instructed, but such instructions are to be carried out in fellowship together. This can only be done, like the Macedonians in their giving, by first giving oneself to the Lord and then to the brethren (2 Corinthians 8:5). This is why Christians in the early church were constantly found together (see Acts 2:42-47). How much are you found together with God's people?

The Authority of the Local Church

7. To each of these churches thus gathered according to the divine will made known in His Word, the Lord has given all the power and authority requisite for the carrying on of the forms of worship and discipline which He has appointed for their observance. This extends to the provision of such commands and rules as are needful for the right and proper use of the power conferred on the churches.

The basic truth in this section of the Confession is that *each* local church has *all* the authority it needs to do whatever the Lord has commanded in His Word. This is to assert the independence of each local church under Christ as Head, over against the interference of any other earthly authority.

(a) **The Biblical basis.** The "keys of the kingdom of heaven" are given to the church (Matthew 18:18), which in the context of church discipline must refer to the local church. This is seen in the church at Corinth, where they had the authority to excommunicate a member of the church (1 Corinthians 5:1-5) - the power clearly originated with the Lord Jesus as the Head of the local church. If the local church has authority both to admit and expel members, then it also has the authority to do everything in between. In the letters to the seven churches of Asia (Revelation chs.2 & 3) each church is held responsible for its own members and their discipline, and there is no suggestion that other churches ought to intervene.

(b) **Problem of the Jerusalem Council** (Acts 15). Presbyterians appeal to this passage, not only to insist that the Jerusalem church exercised authority over many different local churches (vv. 22-29), but also that the meeting at Jerusalem was a church synod made up of elders representing many different local churches. There is just no evidence that elders from other churches, apart from the Jerusalem church, were present. The "apostles and elders" are clearly of the Jerusalem church (15:2,4,6,22-23, 16:4), and even exclude Paul and Barnabas. However, the Jerusalem church did have a unique authority because it was where the 12 apostles lived, and it was the first and mother church of all the rest.

(c) **Applications.** If the local church has such authority, it is a privilege to be a member of it, and there is an awful responsibility not to abuse its power, because there is no other court of appeal on earth. The local church thus has the liberty to follow Christ's Word.

The Government of the Local Church

8. *A local church, gathered and fully organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members. By Christ's appointment the officers to be chosen and set apart by the church as called and gathered, are bishops (otherwise called elders) and deacons. It is their special responsibility to arrange for the carrying out of what the Lord has ordained, and to use the powers entrusted to them for the execution of their duties; and such arrangements are to continue in the church until the world ends.*

(a) ***A local church must have officers.*** Out of the membership officers must be chosen, otherwise the church is not “fully organized according to the mind of Christ”. There were officers in the New Testament churches - in the churches established on the first missionary journey (Acts 14:23), in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4), in Philippi (Philippians 1:1), in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 5:12), Ephesus (1 Timothy 5:17-22), in the “Hebrews’ church” (Hebrews 13:7,17), in the dispersion churches (1 Peter 5:1).

(b) ***There are only two offices in the local church.*** There are bishops (=elders) and deacons. Note the following reasons why we must insist that there are only two such offices:

1. These are the only two offices mentioned in the New Testament for which details are given as to their qualifications and appointment (1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9). An apostle cannot be appointed because it is impossible to have the qualifications today (see Acts 1:21-22). We are nowhere given the qualifications for appointing a prophet.
2. Bishop/elder/pastor are not different offices, but each refers to the same teaching and ruling office in the church. Note how “elder” and “bishop” are used interchangeably in Titus 1:5 & 7. The officers in Ephesus are called elders (Acts 20:17), but are also called “bishops” (v. 28) who are to care for the “flock” (which is the work of the ‘pastor’). There were only two such offices in Philippi (Philippians 1:1), and note that there were many bishops in the one local church. There should be a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23, 1 Timothy 5:17). There are not three offices - pastor, elder and deacon. In 1 Timothy 5:17 the elders have different emphases in their work, with some spending more time and effort in preaching and teaching. This teaching should not be subtly denied by language such as senior pastor or assistant pastor.

(c) ***We are not at liberty to change this order.*** Elders and deacons are to do what the Lord has ordained in His Word, and these arrangements are to continue until “the world ends”. They must not be changed according to different cultures (socially or politically) because they are the will of the Head of the church.

The Appointment of Officers in the Local Church

9. *By Christ's appointment, any person who has been qualified and given the necessary gifts by the Holy Spirit for the work of bishop or elder in a church, must be chosen and called to that office by the common suffrage of the church itself. He must be solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with the laying on of hands of the existing eldership, if there be such. Similarly, deacons are to be chosen by the common suffrage of the church and set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands.*

Note the following Biblical process:

(a) ***The candidates must be “qualified and given the necessary gifts by the Holy Spirit”.*** All those who are officers in the church are first of all Christ’s gifts to the church (Ephesians 4:11) and men to whom the Spirit has given the necessary gifts for the carrying out of the duties of that office (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

(b) ***The candidates must be “chosen and called...by...the church itself”***. The task of the church is to recognize only those given by Christ and gifted of the Spirit, and all such. So the ‘choosing’ is not an election where voting is done for candidates who are competing against each other for the same place. The emphasis is that *no one* may be appointed to office in the church without the “common suffrage” (= consent) of the church. If excommunication is only by the consent of the assembled church, so must appointment of officers be. So it was the brethren who chose the seven, what we call deacons (Acts 6:3). This could also be what happened in Acts 14:23, where the word translated “appointed” originally meant to vote by stretching out the hand. Therefore, no supposed higher authority, whether “bishop”, denomination or pope, may force an officer on an unwilling church.

(c) ***Those chosen must be “set apart” by the local church***. This is what we call ‘ordination’. It is a very solemn occasion, one of great importance to the church, and should be done with prayer - fasting as well in the case of elders (see Acts 6:6, 13:3, 14:23). The “laying on of hands” as a sign of fellowship and commission should be practised by the existing elders (Acts 6:6, 13:3, 1 Timothy 4:14, 5:22, 2 Timothy 1:6).

The Work of Pastors of the Local Church

10. *Pastors are required to give constant attention to the service of Christ in His churches; they are to engaged in the ministry of the Word and in prayer, and to seek the welfare of men’s souls as those that must give account to the Lord. It is therefore imperative that the churches to which they minister should give them, according to the churches’ ability, not only all due honour, but all such abundance of this world’s material good as will enable them to live in comfort, without the need to entangle themselves in secular employment, and which will also suffice to enable them to exercise hospitality towards others. Such an arrangement is required by the law of nature itself, and by the express command of our Lord Jesus, who has decreed that ‘they that preach the gospel should live of the gospel’.*

(a) *The work of pastors in the local church.*

1. *Generally* - Under normal circumstances they ought to be full-time in this work because it is such a large and responsible work. Paul gives his special reasons for working to support Himself in 1 Corinthians 9. There may be times when a church is newly established or the congregation is very poor when the pastors might have to help to support themselves.

2. *Specifically* - Like the apostles it is a work of “the ministry of the Word and prayer” (Acts 6:2,4). Anything else that hinders this ought to be put aside. Apart from study and prayer for preaching, the pastors must take care of the souls of men individually, especially church members (Hebrews 13:17), for the Lord will demand an account from them.

(b) *The duty of the local church to its pastors.*

The Confession assumes that they will be given “all due honour” (1 Thessalonians 5:12,13, Hebrews 13:17). In particular, care must be taken to make sure they are well provided for in terms of “this worlds’ material goods” so that they are able “to give constant attention to the service of Christ”. This is something that happens in everyday life, “the law of nature” (1 Corinthians 9:7). It is specifically commanded in the Bible (1 Corinthians 9:13-14, Galatians 6:6, 1 Timothy 5:17-18). In 1 Timothy 5:17 the “double honour” is in comparison to that given to widows (v. 3), and is clearly material (v. 18). Pastors in Kenya, especially in the rural areas, have a heavy burden of showing hospitality, and this ought to be taken account in their support. It is obvious that the congregation itself will suffer if they do not adequately provide for their pastors. Support should not be the lowest possible for a man and his family to survive, but with “abundance”.

Preaching in the Local Church

11. *Although it is the duty of the elders or pastors of the churches, according to their office, to be constantly active in preaching the Word, yet such a work is not to be regarded as confined wholly to them, for the Holy Spirit may qualify others for the same work by giving them the necessary gifts. In this case, when such men are approved and called to the work by the church, they may and ought to perform it.*

(a) ***Preaching is the duty of the elders/pastors.*** Like Timothy, it is the task of elders, especially those who “labour in preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17), to “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season...” (2 Timothy 4:2).

(b) ***Non-elders may also preach if recognized by the church.*** The gift for preaching might be given, separate from the office of elder. There are examples of such in the Scriptures - Philip (Acts 8:5), Christians scattered because of persecution (Acts 11:19-21). But such activity must always be in submission to the local church.

Discipline in the Local Church

12. *All believers are under obligation to join themselves to local churches when and where they have the opportunity to do so. It follows that all who are admitted to the privileges of church fellowship also become subject to the discipline and government of the church in accordance with the rule of Christ.*

13. *Any church members who have taken offence at the behaviour towards them of other church members, and who have obeyed the instructions laid down in Scripture for dealing with such cases, must refrain from disturbing the peace of the church, nor should they absent themselves from church assemblies or the administration of church ordinances on account of their being offended by certain of their fellow-members; but they must wait upon Christ in the further proceedings of the church.*

(a) ***Necessity of being under the discipline of the local church.*** This follows from the obligation to be a member of a local church (section 6). It is actually one of the privileges of church membership, one of the means the Lord uses to guarantee the perseverance of His sheep. There is the preventative discipline by the teaching ministry of the church. And there is the corrective ministry, which is such a blessing when a sheep goes astray. Those who do not join a church are likely to wander astray and get hopelessly lost.

(b) ***Private offences ought to be handled in a Scriptural way.*** Matthew 18:15-17 (Gal.6:1). They must be handled first privately, then only with witnesses and before the church, if there is no possibility of reconciliation. When it is brought before the church, the offended party must leave it in the hands of the church, so as not to disturb the peace of the church. Also, such problems ought not to be an occasion to be absent from church meetings, for such fellowship is a command of the Lord, irrespective of the conduct of others. Where possible, sin must be covered (1 Pet.4:8), and always forbearance must be shown (Eph.4:2-3).

Fellowship Between Local Churches

14. *All members of each local church are engaged to pray continually for the good and the prosperity of all churches of Christ, wherever located, and upon all occasions to assist all other believers, within the limits of their own areas and callings, in the exercise of their gifts and*

graces. It follows, therefore, that churches should seek fellowship with one another, so far as the providence of God provides opportunity for the enjoyment of such benefits.

15. *When difficulties or differences occur in respect of doctrine or church government, and peace, unity and edification are at risk, one church only may be involved, or the churches in general may be concerned. Again, a member or members of a church may be injured by disciplinary proceedings not agreeable to truth and church order. In such cases as these it is according to the mind of Christ that many churches in fellowship together should meet and confer together through their chosen representatives, who are able to give their advice on the matters in dispute to all the churches concerned. It must be understood, however, that the representatives assembled are not entrusted with any church power properly so called, nor have they any jurisdiction over the churches themselves to exercise discipline upon any churches or persons, or to impose their conclusions on the churches or their officers.*

Although local churches are independent as far as the exercise of church government is concerned, they ought not to be independent as far as church fellowship is concerned. In other words, local churches ought not to isolate themselves as if no other churches exist, but rather have a duty to fellowship together.

(a) ***Biblical basis for fellowship between churches.*** It is the clear will of the Lord that His people be one (Jn.17:21-23). In the local churches of the New Testament such oneness is expressed in the following ways: support of gospel workers from other churches (Rm.16:1-2, Phil.4:10-20, 2 Jn.5-11, 3 Jn.8-10); helping needy brethren in other churches (Rm.15:25-27, 2 Cor.8:1-7); communication between churches (Acts 15:1-2, Col.4:16, and the greetings sent from one church to another). Because of the impossibility of having practical fellowship with every other church in the world, it depends on the “providence of God” which are involved in such fellowship. It is to be expected that nearness of geographical location would encourage such fellowship - so the churches of Galatia (Gal.1:2), and the churches of Judea (Gal.1:22) and the communication between Colossae and Laodicea (Col.4:16). Then places where church members come from, as well as providential meetings with Christians from other places will determine that exact fellowship. We must ask ourselves if we are not too isolationist in Trinity Baptist Church. If so, what ways can we use to promote such fellowship?

(b) ***Problems such fellowship can solve.*** Two types of situation are presented:

1. *Problems of “doctrine or church government”.* This may involve one church or many, and is serious enough to threaten “peace, unity and edification”. For example, deviating from doctrinal standards (so Acts 15, Gal.2:2).
2. *Members being unjustly treated by a local church.* Inter-church fellowship can seek to solve problems where there is dictatorship and harshness in the local church, where discipline has not been according to Scripture. It gives the offended person a court of appeal.

(3) ***How inter-church fellowship can deal with such problems.*** If local churches are independent, then those assembled together can only give advice; they cannot force a local church to adopt any decision against their will. The much they can do is to refuse to fellowship with such churches. Those who have been dealt with wrongly will at least be enabled to have a clear conscience in the face of false discipline. Historically, like minded Baptist churches in a given area have formed a fellowship called an Association. Representatives meet together periodically for mutual edification through the Word, and to discuss together common problems. Only those who hold to certain doctrinal standards, for example, the 1689 Confession, can be members. We hope that such an Association will develop here in Kenya.