

Chapter 26: Of the Church I

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1 The catholic (universal) church

Renihan says this about chapter 26:

The central person in chapter twenty-six is the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to keep that in mind as we work our way through the material. It is always pointing back to Christ and the power that belongs to Him. When seeing the language of lordship in chapter twenty-six, it is a reminder of the centrality of the Savior. Everything focuses upon His will, His purpose, and what He determines to do. Five times in the fifteen articles we find assertions of Christ's appointment or of His mind. These are recurring reminders that He is at the center of the doctrine and practice presented¹.

Renihan considers the first four paragraphs a unit, and introduces them like this:

Paragraphs 1–4 describe the invisible and visible aspects of the church of Christ. They assert that it is universal and consists of visible saints. No individual congregation is perfect; every one of the churches described is imperfect and subject to faults. The true church never ends, and Christ alone is the Lord. In paragraph four, it asserts that the true power in the church belongs to the Lord Jesus².

1.1 Its Identity

1.1.1 As invisible ¶ 1

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

¹Renihan. Location 9816.

²*Ibid.*

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.(1)

Waldron identifies three key words in this paragraph (Waldron 366): universal, elect, and invisible.

1. The Church is universal

The words “catholic,” and “universal,” are synonymous here. The word “catholic” comes from the Greek words *kata*, and *holos*. So the phrase “catholic church” literally means “regarding the entire church.” I’m not sure why we let the Papists keep that word. Probably every denomination would say it’s part of the whole Church. In this sense, the words “catholic” and “protestant” are not mutually exclusive terms.

The church is universal and local. Most uses of the word ‘Church’ in the New Testament are used of a local church. Yet there are verses where Christ is said to be the head of the church. It’s true: he *is* the head of the church in Holland. But, because of the context of certain passages, it would be absurd to think we were talking about Christ being head of only the church in, say, Ephesus. The scripture speaks of “the Church” (singular; capital ‘C’) without qualification; but it also speaks of, say, a church in Antioch, or of “churches” (plural).

- Matthew 16:18 - You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church (singular)
- 1 Corinthians 12:28 - God has appointed apostles, prophets, teachers etc. for “ *the* Church”
- Ephesians 1:22; 4:11-15; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32 - *The* church is his body, he gave apostles, prophets, shepherds, teachers, etc for the building up of “*the* Church”. “ *The* Church” is his body.
- Colossians 1:18, 24 - The church described as the body.
- Hebrews 12:23 - “ *the* assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven”

2. The Church consists of the whole number of the elect

The term ‘elect’ includes both the Church as we know it now, and true Israel before the incarnation of God the Son. Therefore, the whole number of the elect is one single body.

On one hand, national Israel was a type of the Church. In Romans 2, Paul says,

he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: ²⁹ But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

This idea of the “circumcision of the heart” isn’t a new application from Paul. In Deuteronomy 10:15-16, Moses says,

the LORD had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day. ¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.

In Galatians 6:15-16, Paul says,

¹⁵ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. ¹⁶ And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

In Philippians 3:3, he says, “ *we* are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh”

All these passages set Israel as type, next to the Church as anti-type, or fulfillment. The paedobaptists totally flatten this to maintain their one-to-one connection between circumcision and baptism.

But the Church is more than a fulfillment of a type; it’s a fulfillment of prophecy. When the Holy Spirit came in power at Pentecost, Peter explained that it was a fulfillment of Joel.

At the First Jerusalem Council, James addressed the Church,

¹⁴ Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. ¹⁵ And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, ¹⁶ After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: ¹⁷ That the residue of

men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

In 1 Corinthians 10:11, he explains that the events of the book of Numbers was an example to [our fathers], “but they were written for our instruction, on whom the end () of the ages has come.” The “end of the ages” there doesn’t mean Armageddon. The Greek word is *telos*, meaning “end” in the sense of “goal” or “purpose.” In Hebrews the New Covenant is said to make the Old one Obsolete.

So the church is a fulfillment of Israel as type, and a fulfillment of prophecy; and all history was leading up to the incarnation of God the Son, and his claiming of his kingdom. That’s what the church is. Our confession says that the “whole number of the elect” is “gathered into one under Christ”

In John 10:14-17, Jesus says “other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.”

In Ephesians 2:12-19, Paul explains that those who were far off were brought near and both groups (Israel, and the Gentiles) are “reconciled to God in one body through the cross.” The dividing wall of hostility has been brought down.

So there is a biblical distinction between Israel and the church on the one hand. On the other hand “the bride of Christ is composed in the last day of the saved from every age.” Old testament saints are really saints. There is one body—one bride. But we also avoid collapsing the two covenants into one as the paedobaptists do.

3. The Church is invisible

Our confession—unlike the Westminster—qualifies this word invisible by saying that it may be called invisible “with respect to the internal work of the Spirit of truth and grace.” *Visibly* Paul planted, [and] Apollos watered; but *invisibly*, God worked giving the increase.

(Read Matthew 13:18-23) When a plant springs up, there’s a visible bit, and an invisible bit. We had a Sunday School years and years ago where the teacher pointed out that of the four types of ground, three of them had a genuine testimony, but only one lasted. As if to really make the point, he left the faith. I had edifying discussions with him over the Word, his doctrine was solid, he was going to bible college; I

think we were even supporting him. *Visibly* this guy was the real deal. *Invisibly* he had “no firm root in him”.

(Read Mt 13:24-30) Wheat and tares are present. The distinction isn’t completely visible yet. We can deceive one another about our standing with Christ; and we probably do so more than we realize.

Last time I covered this chapter, someone came up afterward and pointed out that the field in this parable is the world, not the church. I am, and was referencing this parable to show that there are those who may present what appears to us to be visible fruit, while lacking the invisible part. At the time, I didn’t grasp why the church/world distinction was so significant to point out, but Renihan sheds some light. He points out that,

In contrast to the Presbyterian system, which understands texts such as Matthew 13.38 (“The field is the world.”) to be an oblique reference to the visible universal church as a mixed entity, the Baptists reject this idea and assert that the catholic church consists only of those who are truly regenerate³.

David Dickson, in his commentary on the WCF says, “The field (to wit, the universall visible Church) where the seed is dayly sown, is called The world.” In other words, the field is the world, and the world is the universal visible Church(!). So it’s clear that the Presbyterians think about this very differently from us. The little parenthetical statement in our paragraph actually changes the meaning fairly significantly.

In light of that, I want to stress that, we Baptists don’t think the church is the world. Though there may be tares among us, even at church—and they may even be members in good standing—we would say they’re not in the invisible church, even if they have us fooled. There’s no such thing as unbelievers as party to the New Covenant.

When we talk about the universal, invisible, elect church, we’re talking about what Jeremiah was talking about in chapter 31, vss 33-34.

³³ But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the
house of Israel;
After those days, saith the LORD,
I will put my law in their inward parts,

³Renihan. Location 9850.

And write it in their hearts;
 And will be their God,
 And they shall be my people.
³⁴ And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour,
 and every man his brother, saying,
 Know the LORD:
 For they shall all know me,
 From the least of them unto the greatest of them,

In the Old Covenant, one had interest through blood, and the sign was circumcision. The New Covenant is by regeneration, faith, adoption. These are invisible activities of the Spirit. If the Lord raises us to new life, as a new creation, under the New Covenant, then it can be said “they all shall know me” from the least to the greatest. And the New Covenant, is really new, and has a new sign in baptism.

So, back to Waldron’s three keywords. If you were to imagine a Venn diagram with a circle for “elect,” a circle for “universal,” and a circle for “invisible,” they would be coextensive. They would completely overlap.

1.1.2 As visible ¶ 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 error everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible saints;(2) and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted(3).

When we’re talking about the visible church, we’re talking about its members, its earthly institution and work. This visible bit wouldn’t be here without the invisible working of the spirit, and the effectual calling.

Have you ever heard someone say “I believe in God, I just don’t believe in the church”? It’s like saying I know God exists, I just don’t think he does anything. I know folks say that because of some bad experiences of the saints, or even tares in the church. But the church was created by Christ. This is the kingdom of Heaven at hand. The existence of the Church is an evidence of God’s invisible activity. The existence of tares in it doesn’t prove there’s no wheat.

Waldron expands a little more on this visible *vs.* invisible business. He says,

[T]here is no invisible church distinct from the visible. In other words, the universal church is always a visible, organized institution... The universal church is always visible, even if it is not perfectly, or completely visible. The universal church spoken of in Ephesians is visible. The universal church could be persecuted and so had to be visible. One may not credibly profess to be a member of the invisible church while despising membership and fellowship in the visible church⁴.

- Those who may be called visible saints are those:
 1. Professing the faith of the Gospel
 2. Obedience to God (by Christ) according to the Gospel
 3. Not destroying your profession by foundation-undermining error
 4. Not living an unholy life
- Congregations ought to be made up of those who may be called visible saints.
- 1 Corinthians 1:2 - There's a "church of God which is *at Corinth*". They're sanctified, and called to be saints.
- Romans 1:7-8 - There's a church in Rome whose faith is talked about through the world ().
- Acts 11:26 - It was at the local church in Antioch that Christians were first called Christians.
- Matthew 16:18 - thou art Peter, and upon this rock... .
- Matthew 28:15-20 - Baptizing, teaching all nations. This implies an institutional presence. We're baptized into a physical, visible body. Teaching all nations is a long term project. Such a vision demands an institution that outlasts the natural lives of its members. When culture isn't rushing headlong into sin, it tends to move like molasses. Revivals are nice, but we—as the church—are called to a long haul job. It's a multi-generational task.
- 1 Corinthians 5:1-9 - There is a local body that someone can be put out of.
- [1 Timothy 3:14-15] - the local church as the "house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

⁴Waldron. p. 368.

1.2 Its Perpetuity ¶ 3

The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error;(4) and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan;(5) 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.(6)

Waldron explains this paragraph as expressing the Church's perpetuity in spite of a seeming improbability.

- Churches can sin
 - 1 Corinthians 1:11; 5:1; 6:6; 11:17-19 - In the Corinthian church there were contentions; fornication; lawsuits before unbelievers; divisions at communion. (As an aside, I'll just mention that it was still a church, and Paul didn't relax the command to submit to the elders.)
 - 3 John 9, 10 - Diotrephes loves to have the preeminence
- Churches can apostatize
 - Revelation 2:5 with 1:20 - "remember from where you are fallen" with "the seven golden candlesticks"
 - 1 Timothy 3:14-15 - that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.
- On top of that we can add that the world's governments try to crush it

However the Church's continued existence and ultimate success are guaranteed certainties.

- Matthew 16:18; 24:14; 28:20 - the gates of hell shall not prevail; the end won't come until the gospel of the kingdom is preached in all the world; [the great commission]
- Mark 4:30-32 - the Kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed. It starts small, and ends up bigger than everything. It begins as a dot, and ends up as an environment to live in.

- Psalm 72:16-18 - when the King's Son reigns, the people flourish, and his name continues as long as the sun.
- Isaiah 9:6-7 - of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.

None of these passages say “maybe.”

The story from Josiah's reign could be included here for support. Starting in II Kings 22, King Josiah had decided to invest some cash in sprucing up Solomon's temple. In verse 8, Hilkiah, the high priest, “found a book of the Law in the house of the Lord”. How long were they missing that? The 55 year bad reign of Menasseh was long enough for the scribes, priests, and government officials to completely forget it. One generation, and the light had nearly gone out. The book of the Law, by itself, with no preacher resulted in a revival. They just read it. It was unfortunately only a top-down affair, the force of which didn't remain with the people of Judah for long. But it's clear from this story that, no matter how dim the light gets, the Holy Spirit can rekindle it with the Scripture alone if he wills it.

1.3 Its Authority ¶ 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;(7) 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.(8)

1.3.1 The true head of the church, the Christ

- Colossians 1:18 - “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”
- Matthew 28:18-20 - “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go. . .” etc.
- Ephesians 4:11-12 - “And *he* gave some, apostles. . .” *etc.* Think about who put the elders where they are when you think you don't like how they're leading and maybe you should visit other churches.

1.3.2 The false head of the church, the Antichrist

- 2Th 2:2-9 - a falling away, the man of sin revealed; he who restrains; deception and signs and wonders; destruction with the brightness of His coming.
 - Waldron, on page 370, and our church constitution, in Article 4, makes an exception here on the identity of the Antichrist. The pope calls himself the vicar of Christ instead of the Holy Spirit. That sounds a little like 2 Thessalonians 2:4. If the antichrist of first and second John can be identified as the man of lawlessness of 2 Thessalonians, then the shoe kinda fits, and I can hardly blame the writers of the confession. I’ve always heard *that* there are exegetical reasons to delete this bit of the confession, but I’ve yet to hear anyone make the case. Waldron makes no case as to why, he just says it’s OK to delete it on exegetical grounds (Waldron 370). Here’s the best I could come up with on my own steam:
 - a. We don’t have enough info definitively identify *anyone* as *the* antichrist, or the “man of lawlessness.”
 - b. We probably shouldn’t identify this “man of lawlessness” with *the* antichrist or even talk about a single antichrist. The word antichrist comes from John, who doesn’t acknowledge one antichrist, but rather says there are many.
 - c. So who exactly is this “man of lawlessness” who will be destroyed by the brightness of Christ’s coming? Beats me. But, I’ll admit it doesn’t take a lot of straining to get the glass slipper on the Pope’s foot.
 - d. Please speak up if any of you have thoughts on this.