

Chapter 26: Of the Church II

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1 The local church

Renihan says,

Paragraphs 5–13 address matters of Christ’s power, tackling the question, “How does He express His power as the central figure in the life of the church?¹”

1.1 Its originating mandate ¶ 5

In the execution of this power wherewith He is so intrusted, the Lord Jesus calleth out of the world unto Himself, through the ministry of His Word, by His Spirit, those that are given unto Him by His Father,(9) that they may walk before Him in all the ways of obedience, which He prescribeth to them in His Word.(10) 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.(11)

The paragraph says that the church is the result of the effectual calling, and thus ties in with Chapter 10. The first sentence “of this paragraph is simply a summary of doctrine presented earlier, pulling the threads of the Confession together².” Waldron calls this the foundation of the mandate of the church; Christ himself originates it. In Revelation 1:12, Jesus isn’t standing in the midst of some lamp stands he found. They’re his. He set them up.

Sam Waldron says “the effectual calling takes place by means of the Word, by the power of the Spirit and according to the pattern of God’s electing purpose. The call to salvation comes to us in the context and framework of

¹Renihan. Location 9816.

²Renihan. Location 10129.

the Great Commission.” As we mentioned earlier the Great Commission is fulfilled by the institution of the church, and the confession alludes to it, and cites it here.

On the matter of walking together, the Scripture reference given by our confession is the famous passage on discipline. Let’s read Matthew 18:15-20.

¹⁵ Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. ¹⁷ And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. ¹⁸ Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Note that the confession here using this passage to show us how to a) walk together, b) mutually edify one another.

Note how ready members must be to forgive one another in order to accomplish this. Two verses later (v. 22), Jesus effectively removes any cap on how many times you forgive anyone, even for the same sin over and over again. And he doesn’t tell us to judge motives. Unless we have credible evidence to the contrary, we have to take a repenting brother or sister at their word.

Note that this passage in Matthew is principally telling us how to keep walking together as people who are both called to Christ, and yet still sinners. Putting someone out of the fellowship is the absolute last resort, but even this measure is intended to edify. How are we supposed to treat heathens and tax collectors? With love. Call them to Christ. Maybe they’re not brothers, but they are made in the image of God. So this is one of the ways the church is to teach all nations.

Note the weightiness of a local church’s decision here. Once the church decides the impenitent person isn’t a brother after all, Jesus says whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and wherever two or three are gathered, there am I in their midst. That is, Jesus agrees with the assessment of the local church. Therefore, if one church decides it must

regard someone as a heathen, or a tax collector, it doesn't make sense to just go to another local congregation. You can probably "get away with it"—in a sense—by deceiving them, but your standing with God—though it was decided by a local congregation with the presence of Christ—is unchanged. While there are cases of churches which are not churches at all through heresy, disobedience, or cult of personality, it makes little sense to leave a serious, dutiful, bible-believing church because you think they're wrong. Perhaps you think justice miscarried. We'll see in a later paragraph, that this calls for patience, not desertion.

While the bible is perspicuous, the bible is largely meditation literature. There is a lot in here that should cause us to sit in our favorite thinking chairs, puff on our pipes, and ponder. But have you noticed how clear the commands get when it's addressing situations with high human emotions? In these places the scripture is *most* perspicuous. Proverbs 5:8 basically says if your way happens to go by an adulteress' house, find another way. II Timothy says to flee youthful lusts. Just run away. No need to put on your thinking cap and figure out what to do; no call to assay your strength and maturity. And so, here in Matthew, we're given a clear step-by-step to follow. I don't know about you, but almost every time I've seen difficulties, splintering, and splitting in a church, it was when this easy step-by-step either *wasn't* followed, or couldn't be endured.

1.2 Its defined 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;(12) 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.(13)

The first half of this paragraph calls back to paragraph two, concerning the visible church. What are these visible saints to do according to this paragraph? They're to voluntarily walk with other saints according to Christ's instructions. What does "giving themselves up" mean here? It means humble subjection. It means submission to appropriate authority, and humility in our interacting with one another.

Implications from Sam Waldron (p. 373ff)

1. “Members of local churches must be disciples of Christ who are joined to those churches by baptism”
2. “Discipleship, baptism, and church membership are intimately connected in the Great Commission. Discipleship, therefore, demands baptism, church membership and submission to the elder/teachers of the church.”
3. “A further implication of all this is that baptized disciples who leave one local church for another ought not to be, and ought not expect to be gullibly or automatically received by another local church.” There should be proof of their discipleship. Waldron mentions three examples: a. Their testimony of their experience of Christ b. letters of recommendation (This is why it’s better to transfer membership than to seek dismissal). c. manifest good conduct, and submission to the Lord, and his church

1.3 Its authoritative power ¶ 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.(14)

It says here that it is “to *each* of these churches” that Jesus “hath given *all* that power and authority, which is in any way needful...” That is, we baptists believe all the necessary authority for worship and discipline comes from Jesus, to each local church. Earlier, we reasoned that Christ’s headship left no room for a Pope to be another head. In the same way, we can reason that, since Christ has dispensed to local churches all the power necessary for carrying out his orders, there’s no room left for presbytery, synod, general assembly, or any other prelates above local churches. In the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2 and 3), Jesus holds each church individually responsible for its own discipline. The seven churches are not held responsible as a group.

Also notice the immediacy in Revelation 1. There’s nothing between Christ and the seven lamp stands which are the seven churches. Renihan says,

A church, well-ordered according to the pattern in the New Testament, is sufficient for every exigency and obligation. Whether matters of worship (2LCF 22) or discipline, it is a self-governing entity. To use familiar terms, it is autonomous and independent, organized according to what has been called Congregationalism³.

Someone may ask “But didn’t the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 express authority over all the churches?” Well, Acts 15:22 makes it clear that the Apostles were acting in this thing. So this really calls for care, and the distinction between what is descriptive, and prescriptive⁴. Apostles could speak with peculiar authority in the first days of the Church. Ephesians 2:20 says that “the household of God is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone”. If that’s not a special case, I don’t know what is. So when we look at what they do, or what authority they exercise, we should be careful.

Even more significant is the explicit words of Christ, and his presuppositions about what authority the local church has. A minute ago we referenced Matthew 18:17-18 where Christ gives the authority of discipline to local churches.

And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

In Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus expects each of the seven churches in Asia minor to independently exercise discipline over its members. He doesn’t call on any body of churches, or even the Apostles to this responsibility. And Paul also expects the church of Corinth to independently exercise the authority of discipline. 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 says,

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

This is really, *really* high authority.

³Renihan. Location 10235.

⁴Actually, this needs to be considered for all of Acts, or any narrative

Jesus says a prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and there's that old proverb that says familiarity breeds contempt. It's easy to think this is a small thing. I mean, we know each other pretty well; our elders, deacons, musicians, and teachers are humans just like us. We can look over the finances, and make decisions about the budget. Sunday mornings aren't complex, mysterious things. Wednesday nights aren't big fancy productions. Anyone can come and go as they please. But let's not let our familiarity with all this cause us to think less of what's going on here. This is bigger than Lansing—this is bigger than DC. This is bigger than our biggest personal grievances. This is the New Jerusalem, descending out of Heaven, and having the glory of God (Revelation 21).

2 Its appointed government

2.1 The identity of its government ¶ 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 entrusts them with, or calls them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders, and deacons.(15)

Once again, note that we've excluded any idea of an episcopate, or presbytery.

Acts 14:23 says "they had ordained them elders in every church".

Acts 20:17, 28 says:

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. . . . Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Note that "elders" and "overseers" are plural words.

For example, Philippians 1:1 says,

Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons

Just as paragraph 8 says that a local church, “organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members,” Paul addresses his letter to officers (bishops and deacons), and members (all the saints which are at Philippi).

Renihan points out that this phrase “gathered and completely organized,” is a

a tacit recognition that a church may exist while incomplete. Elders and deacons are not of the *esse* (essence) of a church; rather, they are of its *bene esse*, its well-being.

He continues, saying,

Thomas Goodwin recognized this distinction when he wrote, “They, that are a Body organized with all the Members, have all the priviledges of a Body; but a Church having a company of Elders, . . . is a body to Christ, and compleatly organized.” A completely organized church has both officers and members.

Nehemiah Cox, speaking about elders being ordained, says,

It is his Duty to take care of the due exercise of Discipline in the Church, and the right ordering of all things pertaining to the Government therof; He is the Overseer of God’s House, and is to rule therein, not in a despotical or lordly Way, but by the Testament of Christ, as becomes a Minister, and as one set over the Lord’s Heritage who are a voluntary People, and to be governed not with force and rigor, but with their own consent. All the Brethren have an Interest in the management of Church-Affairs, in the admission, and ejection of Members; yet this denies not a peculiar Concernment of the Elder in these things, and a neglect of their due Administration will especially be charged upon him, if guilty thereof. And in these things, great Prudence, Tenderness, Diligence, and Impartiality is required of him. It is a Matter of great importance, that the Gates of the Lord’s House, the goings out and comings in thereof be well look’d to. If Members be not received with due caution, our Number may be increased, but not our Joy, and if any be precipitantly, and without just cause ejected, the scandal and inconvenience will be as great⁵.

⁵Nehemiah Coxe, *Ordination Sermon*. Cited from Renihan. Location 10288.

There's a sort of subtle distinction to think about here. In paragraph 7, it says that authority is given to the churches. And we've inferred the possibility an incomplete church, lacking officers.

Matthew 20:25-26:

But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. ²⁶ But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister.

"The *execution of power* [is] the responsibility of appointed men⁶." Benjamin Keach explains that

the Power of the Keys, or to receive in and shut out of the Congregation, is committed unto the Church: The Political Power of Christ... is in the Church, whereby it is exercised in the Name of Christ having all lawful Rule and Government within it self. This power of Christ is exerted as committed to them by the Hands of the Elder appointed by Christ, ... And that the Power of the Keys is in the Church, appears to me from Mat. 18. If he will not hear the Church; it is not said, if he will not hear the Elder, or Elders. As also that of the Apostle, in directing the Church to cast out the Incestuous Person, he doth not give this Counsel to the Elder or Elders of the Church, but to the Church; so he commands the Church to withdraw from every brother that walks disorderly⁷.

Renihan summarizes the idea:

The judicial power of the keys is in the church, and the execution of power is in the elder(s). He admits into membership, or speaks the sentence of discipline, on behalf of the church. He does not act in this alone, nor as a representative of the eldership, but as the one duly charged with the responsibility of being the mouthpiece of the church⁸.

["By Authority of Christ committed unto me as Pastor of this Church."]

⁶Renihan. Location 10288.

⁷Benjamin Keach. *The Glory of a True Church, And its Discipline display'd*. (1697). Cited from Renihan. Location 10313.

⁸Renihan. Location 10313.

2.2 The appointment of its government ¶ 9

The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself;(16) 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;(17) and of a deacon that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands.(18)

- (16)

Acts 14:23 says,

And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

The word for ordained, or appointed here (cheirotonesantes) means to vote by stretching out the hand.

- (17)

1 Timothy 4:14 - the laying on of the hands of the presbytery:

Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by , with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.

- (18)

Acts 6:3 says,

Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

Note that the Apostles, acting as elders of the Jerusalem church, ask the gathered saints to keep an eye out for worthy folks for them to appoint. This is partly what's meant in our paragraph by "common suffrage". The saints may generally approve of someone. The elders do the ordaining, but not without the consent of the saints.

Acts 6:5-6 says,

And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

They put into action what the Apostles asked. The multitude chose a bunch of worthy guys, and the Apostles, acting as elders, ordain them.

Here “fitted” means having qualifications for office. And “gifted” means having the required abilities.

John Owen talks about common suffrage this way,

As to the nature of this Election, Call or Choice of a Person known, tried, and judged, meetly qualified for the Pastoral Office, it is an Act of the whole Church, that is, of the Fraternity with their Elders, if they have any. For a Pastor may be chosen unto a Church which hath other Teachers, Elders, or Officers already instated in it. In this case their concurrence in the choice intended, is necessary by way of common suffrage, not of Authority or Office-Power. For Election is not an Act of Authority, but of Liberty and Power, wherein the whole Church in the Fraternity is equal. If there be no Officers stated in the Church before, as it was with the Churches in the Primitive Times, on the first Ordination of Elders among them, this Election belongs unto the Fraternity⁹.

The same procedure is given for both elders and deacons: prayer with fasting, and laying on of hands.

⁹Owen. *True Nature of a Gospel Church*. Cited from Renihan. Location 10367.