

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 2: THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

What the Church Is Before It Considers What the Church Does

Lesson 5

THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

One Church, Many Assemblies

The church universal exists in the local; the local participates in the universal and neither can be rightly understood without the other.

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

Ephesians 4:4–6, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Ephesians 4:4–6; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Revelation 1:4, 11; Acts 15:1–35; Colossians 4:16

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Paul's great confession in Ephesians 4:4–6 stands as one of the most compressed and majestic statements of the church's unity in all of Scripture: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." Seven unities, stacked in deliberate succession, grounded not in institutional agreement or organizational structure but in the singular realities of the triune God and His saving work. There is one church because there is one Lord, one Spirit, one Father. The unity of the church is a Trinitarian reality before it is an ecclesiological one, and no ecclesiology that loses sight of that Trinitarian foundation will be able to hold the church's unity and diversity together with theological integrity.

And yet the church that Paul addresses with this great confession of unity is not a single congregation meeting in a single location. She is a diverse collection of local assemblies, in Ephesus and Corinth, in Thessalonica and Philippi, in Rome and Colossae and Antioch, each with its own pastoral challenges, each constituted by its own membership of named and known individuals, each administered by its own appointed elders, each administering its own ordinances, and each exercising its own discipline. The one church exists as many churches. The universal body of Christ is instantiated in particular, concrete, geographically bounded local assemblies. And the relationship between the one and the many, between the universal church and the local church, is one of the most practically important questions in the entire doctrine of the church.

Previous lessons have laid the necessary groundwork for this question. Lesson 3 established that the word *ekklesia* is used both locally and universally in the New Testament. Lesson 4 showed that the invisible church, the totality of the elect, is related to but not identical with the visible church in her local expressions. This lesson now takes up the question directly: how do the universal church and the local church relate to one another? What is the theological status of the local congregation? What does the autonomy of the local church mean, and what are its proper limits? What bonds of fellowship, accountability, and cooperation properly connect autonomous local congregations to one another and to the broader body of Christ? And how do we hold together the church's present fragmentation with the eschatological unity that the New Testament promises?

The pastoral stakes of this question are higher than they might initially appear. A congregation that understands itself as merely a local franchise of a larger universal institution will surrender its proper autonomy under Christ and Scripture to a denominational or hierarchical authority that the New Testament does not authorize. A congregation that understands its autonomy as license for complete isolation from the broader body of Christ will impoverish itself, lose the corrective voice of the wider community, and gradually drift into an ecclesiological parochialism that mistakes self-sufficiency for faithfulness. The path between these errors runs directly through the New Testament's own picture of the relationship between the local and the universal church, a picture of genuine interdependence without hierarchy, genuine cooperation without coercion, and genuine unity in Christ that transcends every organizational boundary.

I. THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

One Body, One Lord, One Hope, The Church in Her Totality

A. Defining the Universal Church

The universal church, what the ancient creeds call the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church”, is the totality of all believers in Christ Jesus across all times, all places, and all cultures: every man, woman, and child who has been genuinely regenerated by the Holy Spirit and united to the Lord Jesus Christ by living faith, from Abel to the last saint who will enter glory before the return of the King. She is the body of Christ in its full, cosmic extent, the community for whom He died, which He is presently building (Matthew 16:18), and which He will one day present to Himself in glory without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:27). She is not an organization with a headquarters, a constitution, or a membership database. She is a community defined entirely by her relationship to Christ: those who are in Him, by the Spirit’s sovereign work of regeneration and effectual calling, are members of the universal church, regardless of what denominational label they wear or what local congregation they attend.

The New Testament’s primary locus for the universal church concept is the letter to the Ephesians, where Paul speaks of Christ as “head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:22–23). The scope is unmistakably cosmic: the church here is not a local assembly but the universal community of all who are united to the exalted Christ. Ephesians 3:10 speaks of the church’s cosmic function, the display of God’s manifold wisdom to the principalities and powers, in terms that cannot be restricted to any single local congregation. Ephesians 5:25–27 speaks of Christ giving Himself for “the church” and presenting her to Himself in glory, a scope that encompasses all the elect of every age, not merely the believers of any particular city. And Ephesians 4:4–6 grounds the unity of the church in seven universal realities, one body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, God and Father, that are not the property of any local assembly but of the whole community of the redeemed.

The Nicene Creed’s four classical attributes of the church, one, holy, catholic, apostolic, are primarily attributes of the universal church, though they have implications for every local expression of that universal body. The church is one because she belongs to one Lord and is animated by one Spirit. She is holy because she is set apart by God for His purposes and is progressively being sanctified by His Spirit. She is catholic, a word that simply means “universal” or “whole” in its original Greek sense, prior to any Roman appropriation, because she encompasses all believers across all times and places, without ethnic, geographic, or cultural restriction. She is apostolic because she is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20) and because her doctrine is the doctrine entrusted to the apostles and preserved in Holy Scripture. Every local congregation participates in these four attributes by virtue of its genuine connection to the one universal church through union with Christ.

B. The Unity of the Universal Church and Its Trinitarian Ground

Paul’s sevenfold confession in Ephesians 4:4–6 is the most concentrated theological statement of the universal church’s unity in the New Testament, and its structure repays careful attention. The seven unities are arranged in three groups, corresponding broadly to the three persons of the Trinity. The first group, one body, one Spirit, one hope, is pneumatological: the body is constituted and animated by the Spirit, and the hope is the eschatological

inheritance of those in whom the Spirit dwells as a deposit and guarantee (Ephesians 1:13–14). The second group, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, is Christological: the Lord is Christ; the faith is the body of apostolic doctrine entrusted to His apostles; the baptism is the ordinance of entry into His covenant community. The third group, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all, is theological in the classical sense: the Father whose sovereignty over, presence in, and provision through all things is the ultimate ground of the church's unity.

This Trinitarian structure of the church's unity has a crucial implication: the unity of the church is not something she achieves by human effort or organizational alignment. It is something she has been given, grounded in the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit, secured by the Spirit's incorporation of all believers into the one body of Christ, and sealed by the Father's sovereign claim over all who are His. Paul's exhortation to "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3) is an exhortation to maintain and express a unity that already exists, not to create a unity that has yet to come into being. The universal church's unity is an eschatological reality being progressively manifested in history, not a human project being constructed from the ground up.

The practical implications of this Trinitarian grounding are significant. It means that genuine Christian fellowship, the *koinōnia* that crosses every denominational boundary and binds together believers who have never met and may never meet, is not a sentimental illusion but a real participation in the one body of Christ. The Baptist pastor in East Texas and the Reformed pastor in Edinburgh are genuine brothers in Christ, members of the same universal church, participants in the same one Spirit, heirs of the same hope, servants of the same Lord, bearers of the same faith, subjects of the same Father. Their organizational independence does not diminish the reality of their unity; it merely means that their unity is expressed at the level of the one universal church rather than at the level of any shared institutional structure. This is a unity that should produce genuine humility, genuine charity, and genuine cooperation wherever the one Lord is being served and the one faith is being confessed.

II. THE LOCAL CHURCH

A Complete Expression of the Body of Christ in a Particular Place

A. The Primacy of the Local Church in the New Testament

If the letter to the Ephesians is the primary New Testament locus for the universal church, the overwhelming emphasis of the New Testament as a whole falls on the local congregation. Of the approximately one hundred and fourteen occurrences of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, the vast majority refer to a specific local assembly: the church at Corinth, at Thessalonica, at Philippi, at Rome, at Laodicea. The churches of Galatia (Galatians 1:2), the seven churches of Asia (Revelation 1:4, 11), the church in someone's house (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2), these are the referents of the vast majority of New Testament ecclesiological language. The local church is not the New Testament's afterthought, a reduced and imperfect expression of the real thing; she is the church in her normal, historically concrete, operationally relevant form.

The New Testament's pastoral correspondence makes no sense apart from this local primacy. Paul writes to the Corinthians about factions, sexual immorality, litigation among members, questions about marriage and the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts, because he is writing to a specific community of named and known individuals in a specific city, whose specific failures and specific gifts he knows in detail. He writes to the Philippians with warmth

and partnership because he has a particular history with a particular community in Philippi. He writes to the Colossians about the false teachers threatening a specific local assembly and instructs them to exchange letters with the Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16), because two particular congregations in neighboring cities need to be strengthened by the same apostolic word. The New Testament's ecclesiology is thoroughly local before it is universal, and any ecclesiology that privileges the abstract universal over the concrete local has inverted the New Testament's own priorities.

The local church is not a franchise of the universal institution, receiving its identity and authority from a larger organization of which it is a part. She is a complete, self-contained expression of the body of Christ in her particular place. Paul's words to the Corinthian congregation are representative: "to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling" (1 Corinthians 1:2). The church at Corinth is "the church of God", not a branch office of the church of God headquartered in Jerusalem or Antioch or Rome. She is the church of God in that city, with the full dignity, authority, and responsibility that that designation entails. Her identity is grounded not in her connection to a larger institution but in her connection to Christ, who is as fully and completely present in a two-hundred-member congregation in East Texas as He is in the largest and most celebrated church in the world.

B. What the Local Church Is Organized to Do

The local church, as a visible gathering of baptized believers in a specific place, is organized for five interrelated purposes that the New Testament consistently presents as constitutive of genuine church life. First, the gathered worship of God through the public reading and preaching of Scripture, prayer, the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and the administration of the Lord's Supper. Second, the ministry of the Word in its full breadth, expository preaching, systematic teaching, catechesis, and the pastoral counsel that applies the Word to the specific circumstances of individual members. Third, the administration of the ordinances, baptism as the ordinance of entry into the visible community, and the Lord's Supper as the ordinance of ongoing covenant renewal and proclamation of the Lord's death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). Fourth, the mutual care and edification of members through the exercise of spiritual gifts, practical service, financial generosity, and the bearing of one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Fifth, the pursuit of the Great Commission through local evangelism, church planting, and the support of missionaries to unreached peoples.

These five purposes are not a menu from which a congregation chooses according to its preferences and strengths; they are the constitutive activities of any genuine local church. A congregation that preaches the Word but neglects the ordinances, or that administers the ordinances but neglects mutual care, or that pursues mission but abandons corporate worship, is not a fully functioning local church. The local church's health is measured by the faithfulness and integration of all five purposes, not by the excellence of any single one. This is why the homogeneous unit principle, the missiological strategy of planting churches around shared demographic characteristics, produces communities that may be effective in one or two of these purposes while structurally incapable of the full diversity of mutual care and edification that the New Testament envisions. The local church is designed to be a community in which people who would not naturally choose one another's company are bound together by the one Spirit into a covenant community of genuine mutual obligation.

The local church is also the New Testament's primary context for the exercise of spiritual gifts. First Corinthians 12–14, Ephesians 4:11–16, and Romans 12:3–8 all address the distribution and exercise of gifts in the context of the local assembly. The gifts are given not for individual edification, not so that each member might have a richer

private spiritual experience, but for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7): the building up of the body in love (Ephesians 4:16), the mutual encouragement of members (Romans 1:12), and the ordered worship of God in the assembly. This means that a Christian who is not regularly present in and accountable to a local congregation is a Christian who is not exercising his or her gifts in the context for which they were given, and is therefore not contributing to the building up of the body that the Spirit intended when He distributed those gifts. The gifts belong to the body; the body is the local church; and the local church is where the gifts are to be used.

III. THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Self-Governing Under Christ and Scripture

A. The Biblical Basis for Local Church Autonomy

The autonomy of the local church, the conviction that each local congregation is self-governing under the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, without being subject to any external ecclesiastical hierarchy, is one of the defining ecclesiological commitments of the Baptist tradition, and it is grounded in the New Testament's consistent pattern of addressing local congregations as responsible, accountable communities under Christ's direct headship. The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3, which we examined in Lesson 4, are addressed directly by the risen Christ to each congregation, not to a regional bishop who speaks for all seven. The epistles of the New Testament are addressed to specific local congregations, not to a governing council or ecclesiastical hierarchy that then relays their content to the local communities. The pattern is one of direct accountability: the local church answers to Christ through His Word, not to any human institution interposed between them.

The Baptist understanding of local church autonomy does not mean that each congregation operates in complete independence from the rest of the body of Christ, as though the decisions made by elders and members within the four walls of a single building were no one else's concern. It means that the final governing authority in the local church is Christ Himself, exercised through His Word as interpreted and applied by the elders and congregation, and that no external ecclesiastical body, no pope, bishop, presbytery, synod, association, or convention, has the authority to override the local congregation's decisions about its own membership, discipline, doctrine, or practice. This is a principled conviction about where final ecclesial authority resides, not a practical indifference to the wisdom of the broader Christian community.

The New Testament's language about the local church consistently reinforces this autonomy. The church at Corinth is commanded by Paul to judge those inside her (1 Corinthians 5:12–13), a responsibility that belongs to the local assembly, not to an external court of appeal. The process of church discipline in Matthew 18:15–20 concludes with “tell it to the church”, the gathered local assembly, not a regional council. The qualification standards for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are addressed to the local congregations that will appoint and oversee those elders. The instruction to receive members (Romans 15:7), to restore the fallen (Galatians 6:1), and to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) is addressed to the local community that knows its members well enough to carry out those responsibilities with genuine pastoral care. Local church autonomy is not a Baptist invention; it is the consistent implication of the New Testament's ecclesiological practice.

B. The Proper Limits of Autonomy

Autonomy does not mean infallibility, and it does not mean isolation. A local church that invokes its autonomy as a reason to refuse any external accountability, to resist any fraternal correction, or to operate as though the wisdom of the broader body of Christ were irrelevant to its own decisions has misunderstood what autonomy means. The local church is autonomous from external hierarchical governance; she is not autonomous from the authority of Scripture, from the wisdom of the historic confessional tradition, or from the fraternal counsel of sister churches. The pastor who refuses to hear the concerns of trusted colleagues in the ministry because “our church is autonomous” has confused institutional independence with pastoral isolation, and the latter is as dangerous to a congregation as the former would be limiting.

The proper limits of local church autonomy are best understood in terms of what the autonomy is designed to protect and what it is not. Autonomy protects the local congregation’s freedom to govern itself under Christ and Scripture without being coerced by any human institution. It does not protect the local congregation from the natural consequences of doctrinal unfaithfulness, from the concern of sister churches that observe her departure from the apostolic deposit, or from the accountability that comes with living in genuine Christian fellowship with other congregations. A local church that departs from the faith once delivered to the saints cannot appeal to its autonomy as a shield against fraternal correction. Autonomy is a protection of legitimate self-governance, not a license for theological self-determination.

The 1689 Confession handles this balance carefully in Chapter 26.14–15, acknowledging that while each local church is autonomous in its internal governance, the churches may and should “communicate about matters of controversy” and “give advice in cases of difficulty” to one another. The assembly of messenger-representatives from multiple churches is advisory, not authoritative; it speaks with the moral weight of collective wisdom, not with the coercive authority of a governing body. This is precisely the model demonstrated in Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council, which we will examine in detail in Section V. The Council did not issue binding legislation to the churches of the Gentile world; it commended a resolution to those churches for their reception, trusting the authority of the apostolic word and the persuasion of the Spirit to accomplish what institutional coercion would have damaged. That model of fraternal counsel without hierarchical control is the New Testament’s own pattern for inter-church relations.

IV. THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF LOCAL CHURCHES

Autonomy Without Isolation

A. New Testament Patterns of Inter-Church Cooperation

The autonomy of the local church in the Baptist tradition does not produce, and has never been intended to produce, a collection of isolated, self-sufficient congregational islands with no meaningful connection to one another. The New Testament’s own portrait of inter-church relations is one of vigorous, voluntary cooperation in mission, generous resource-sharing across geographic and ethnic lines, and the active pursuit of mutual encouragement and accountability. The Pauline mission itself was a model of inter-church cooperation: Paul planted congregations, appointed elders, moved on, wrote letters, sent representatives, collected offerings from

established churches for struggling ones, and worked to build a network of local assemblies that were organizationally independent but missionally interdependent.

The collection for the Jerusalem church is one of the most instructive examples. Paul spent years organizing a financial gift from the Gentile churches of Macedonia and Achaia for the impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8–9). This was not a requirement imposed by an ecclesiastical authority; it was a voluntary expression of the genuine fellowship that united congregations across every cultural and geographic divide. Paul’s theology of the collection is explicitly ecclesiological: the Gentile churches owe a debt of gratitude to the Jewish Christians who were the source of the gospel’s first proclamation, and the gift is a visible demonstration of the unity of the one body of Christ across the Jew-Gentile divide that Christ’s death has broken down (Ephesians 2:14–16). The financial cooperation of local churches is not merely a practical matter; it is a theological statement about what the universal church is.

Paul’s instruction to the Colossians, “When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea” (Colossians 4:16), demonstrates a pattern of inter-church communication and shared theological formation that is entirely consistent with local church autonomy. The churches of Colossae and Laodicea are not merged or governed by a common authority; they are neighboring congregations who share apostolic letters because they share a common need for apostolic instruction. The exchange of letters is a form of fraternal ministry, the recognition that what strengthens one congregation can strengthen another, and that the resources of apostolic teaching are the common property of the whole body of Christ.

B. The Sending and Supporting of Missionaries

One of the most practically significant expressions of inter-church cooperation in the New Testament is the sending and supporting of missionaries and church planters. The church at Antioch is the paradigm: “While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2–3). The church at Antioch acts as a sending community, not a parachurch organization, not a mission agency independent of the local church, but a local congregation that recognizes, equips, commissions, and sends its own members into the missionary task. And when Paul and Barnabas return, they report back to the church at Antioch (Acts 14:26–27), maintaining the accountability of the missionary to the sending congregation.

The church at Philippi is the clearest example of a supporting congregation: “You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs” (Philippians 4:15–16). Paul’s language is explicitly commercial, “giving and receiving,” a term from the world of financial partnership, because the relationship between the Philippian church and Paul’s missionary work is a genuine partnership, a joint venture in the gospel. The local church that supports missionaries is not merely writing checks to a cause; she is extending her own missionary reach through those she supports, and she shares in the spiritual fruit of their labor (Philippians 4:17).

The New Testament’s model of missionary sending and supporting through local churches is one of the most important ecclesiological principles for the contemporary church’s engagement with the Great Commission. The para-church mission agency, whatever its practical usefulness, is not the New Testament’s normative instrument

for missionary work; the local church is. This does not mean that mission agencies have no legitimate role, but it does mean that their role is properly one of service to the local church's missionary mandate, not a replacement of it. The local church that abdicates her missionary responsibility to parachurch organizations has not fulfilled the Great Commission by proxy; she has subcontracted a responsibility that belongs to her and that she must one day give account for to the Lord who entrusted it to her.

V. THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

The New Testament Model for Inter-Church Consultation

A. The Crisis and Its Resolution

Acts 15:1–35 records the first and most significant instance of inter-church consultation in the New Testament, and it provides the clearest model for how autonomous local churches may and should seek wisdom from the broader community when a doctrinal crisis exceeds the capacity of a single congregation to resolve. The crisis was fundamental: certain men from Judea had come to the church at Antioch and were teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation, that Gentile believers must be circumcised according to the custom of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). This was not a minor pastoral disagreement; it was a direct assault on the gospel of grace that Paul and Barnabas had been preaching throughout their missionary journey. The Antioch church, unable to resolve the dispute internally, sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders there.

The Jerusalem Council that convened in response was neither a denominational assembly exercising binding jurisdiction over the churches nor a casual gathering of interested parties offering unsolicited opinions. It was a deliberate, prayerful consultation of the recognized apostolic witnesses and elders of the Jerusalem church, convened to address a question of fundamental doctrinal importance whose resolution would affect the entire network of churches in the Gentile world. Peter testified to the Spirit's equal reception of Gentile believers. Paul and Barnabas reported the signs and wonders God had accomplished among the Gentiles. James, drawing on the prophetic testimony of Amos 9:11–12, argued that the inclusion of the Gentiles was the fulfillment of God's own redemptive promise, not a departure from it. The Council's conclusion was unanimous: "We should not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:19).

The letter the Council sent to the Gentile churches is instructive in its form as well as its content. It does not say "The Jerusalem Council, exercising its authority over the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, hereby decrees." It says: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials" (Acts 15:28). The language is of the Spirit's leading and the Council's counsel, not of hierarchical decree. The churches receiving the letter are not compelled by institutional authority to accept its conclusions; they are commended to the authority of the Holy Spirit and the apostolic testimony. The reception of the letter by the churches (Acts 15:31: "when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement") is a voluntary reception of genuine wisdom, not coerced submission to an external governing body.

B. What the Jerusalem Council Models for Today

The Jerusalem Council establishes a precedent that the Baptist tradition has generally followed in its understanding of associational fellowship: autonomous local churches may voluntarily seek and offer fraternal

counsel to one another on matters of doctrinal or practical importance, without any such counsel carrying the force of binding jurisdiction. The model is advisory, not legislative; persuasive, not coercive; grounded in the authority of Scripture and the apostolic deposit, not in the authority of the gathering body itself. This is the model that the Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century followed in their associations, gatherings of messenger-representatives from multiple congregations, convened for mutual encouragement, doctrinal consultation, and cooperative mission, without any pretension to authority over the internal governance of any participating congregation.

The practical value of the Jerusalem Council model for the contemporary church cannot be overstated. Local churches face doctrinal and pastoral challenges that exceed the wisdom of any single eldership. The isolation of a congregation from the broader body of Christ, from the corrective voice of sister churches, from the theological resources of the wider confessional tradition, from the fraternal accountability of those who share the same doctrinal commitments, is not a form of faithfulness; it is a form of impoverishment. The congregation that says “we are autonomous; we do not need anyone’s counsel” has confused institutional independence with spiritual self-sufficiency, and the latter is a form of pride that makes it vulnerable to exactly the kinds of doctrinal and pastoral errors that fraternal counsel is designed to prevent.

The Jerusalem Council also models the proper relationship between apostolic authority and local church governance. In Acts 15, the apostolic testimony carries decisive weight precisely because the apostles are the authorized witnesses of the risen Christ, the recipients and transmitters of the once-for-all apostolic deposit. In the post-apostolic age, the apostolic authority is exercised not through living apostles but through the apostolic Word, through Holy Scripture, interpreted in the light of the confessional tradition that has distilled the church’s understanding of that Word across the centuries. The “judgment” that James pronounces in Acts 15:19 is an exegetical judgment, a reading of Amos 9 in the light of God’s redemptive purposes, and it is that exegetical character that makes it authoritative. Inter-church consultation in the present age exercises genuine spiritual authority when and only when it is grounded in the careful, faithful, communally accountable interpretation of Holy Scripture.

VI. THE CONFESSIONAL BOND

Doctrinal Unity Across Organizational Independence

A. What the Confessional Bond Is and Why It Matters

The confessional bond is the fellowship that unites congregations that share a common confession of faith, not by organizational connection, but by theological conviction. Churches that subscribe to the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, for example, share a common understanding of Scripture, salvation, the church, the ordinances, and the last things that creates genuine theological fellowship across every geographic boundary and organizational independence. This confessional fellowship is not merely sentimental; it is doctrinal, grounded in a shared reading of Scripture, tested over centuries of use, and embodied in the very structure of each congregation’s worship, preaching, membership practices, and governance. Two congregations that have never met may nonetheless be genuine partners in the gospel because they hold the same doctrinal convictions about what the gospel is, who the church is, and how she is to be ordered.

The confessional bond matters for several practical reasons. First, it provides a framework for inter-church fellowship, accountability, and cooperation that does not require organizational hierarchy. Congregations united by a common confession can seek and offer fraternal counsel to one another, share pastoral resources, cooperate in church planting, and hold one another accountable to the doctrinal standards they jointly profess, all without any single congregation exercising authority over another. Second, the confessional bond provides a standard by which departures from the apostolic deposit can be identified and addressed. A congregation that progressively departs from the convictions of the confession it has subscribed to is departing in a way that the confessional community can recognize and name, creating the conditions for fraternal correction. Third, the confessional bond connects each local congregation to the historic stream of the church's theological reflection, preventing the insularity that produces theological novelty and the loss of hard-won doctrinal clarity.

It is worth being precise about what the confessional bond does not claim. It does not claim that agreement with a human confession is the basis of genuine Christian fellowship; the basis of genuine Christian fellowship is union with Christ through the one Spirit. It does not claim that congregations outside the confessional tradition are not genuine churches; the marks of the true church are the faithful preaching of the Word and the right administration of the ordinances, not subscription to the 1689 Confession. It does claim that congregations that share a common confession have a closer fellowship, a more ready basis for cooperation, and a more accountable form of inter-church relationship than congregations that share nothing but a vague evangelical identity. The confessional bond is a gift to the church's visible unity, not a substitute for her invisible unity in Christ.

B. The 1689 Confession as a Bond of Fellowship

The 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith has served as the primary confessional bond among Particular (Reformed) Baptist churches for more than three centuries, and its usefulness for this purpose has only increased as the contemporary evangelical landscape has become more theologically fragmented. Congregations that subscribe to the 1689 Confession share, at minimum, the following doctrinal commitments that are directly relevant to inter-church fellowship: a Reformed soteriology grounded in the doctrines of grace; a Progressive Covenantal understanding of the relationship between the Testaments; a Baptist ecclesiology of regenerate membership, believers' baptism, elder-led congregational governance, and church discipline; a Protestant sacramental theology in which the ordinances are signs and seals rather than instruments of saving grace; an amillennial or historically orthodox eschatology; and a commitment to the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture as the sole final authority for faith and practice. These shared convictions create a genuine theological fellowship that is more substantive than generic evangelical solidarity and more flexible than organizational denominationalism.

The 1689 Confession also serves as a catechetical resource for the formation of church members in the full range of Christian doctrine, ensuring that the theological convictions that bind the confessional community together are not merely the property of the eldership but are owned and understood by the whole congregation. A church whose members know and have reflected on the 1689 Confession's teaching on the church (Chapter 26), on salvation (Chapters 9–18), on Scripture (Chapter 1), and on the last things (Chapter 31–32) is a church whose inter-church fellowship will be genuinely theological rather than merely relational. The confessional bond is strengthened, not weakened, by the theological formation of ordinary members who can articulate what they believe and why.

A brief word of pastoral caution is in order regarding confessional subscription. The confessional bond is a means to an end, the end being genuine, theologically accountable, doxologically serious Christian fellowship. It becomes a snare when it is treated as an end in itself, when confessional subscription becomes a mechanism for excluding from fellowship all who do not hold every article of the confession with equal conviction, or when the letter of the confession is invoked as a substitute for the living engagement with Scripture that the confession was always designed to serve. The 1689 Confession is a tool in the hand of the Holy Spirit for the formation of congregations and the preservation of the apostolic deposit; it is not the Holy Spirit itself, and the congregation that treats it as such has turned a valuable instrument into an idol.

VII. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Laboring for Unity in the Already-and-Not-Yet

A. *The Present Imperfection of the Church's Visible Unity*

The universal church's unity, as Paul declares it in Ephesians 4:4–6, is a present reality grounded in seven Trinitarian facts. But the visible expression of that unity is manifestly and painfully incomplete. The body of Christ is divided into thousands of denominations, associations, and independent congregations, separated by disagreements about baptism, polity, eschatology, worship practice, the nature of the atonement, and a hundred other theological questions of varying significance. Some of these divisions represent genuine and necessary separations over gospel-level issues; others represent the accumulated weight of historical accidents, cultural preferences, and institutional self-interest that have little to do with the truth of Scripture. The visible church's fragmentation is both a theological scandal and a missiological liability, and any ecclesiology that is honest about the New Testament's vision of unity must reckon with it seriously.

Paul's prayer for the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in Ephesians 2–3 was not merely a theoretical hope; it was addressed to a specific fault line, perhaps the most fundamental in the ancient world, that the cross had broken down and the Spirit was healing. The Jew-Gentile unity of the early church was a miraculous demonstration of exactly the kind of visible unity the New Testament calls the church to embody: not a lowest-common-denominator fellowship that erases genuine differences, but a costly, Spirit-empowered unity that holds together genuine diversity in the one body of Christ. The church in every subsequent age is called to the same costly work, to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3) in ways that are concrete, visible, and genuinely cross-cutting, not merely theological in the abstract.

The visible church's present fragmentation should be held with a combination of honest grief and realistic patience. Honest grief: the divisions of the church are not theologically neutral; they represent failures of love, failures of doctrinal clarity, and failures of the kind of patient, truth-seeking engagement that might have preserved unity without sacrificing faithfulness. The ecumenical task, the pursuit of genuine unity among genuinely faithful churches, is not a liberal project that sacrifices truth for peace; it is the pastoral responsibility of every congregation that confesses the one body, one Spirit, one Lord of Ephesians 4. Realistic patience: the visible church's full unity will not be achieved before the return of Christ. The eschatological hope is not the gradual convergence of all Christian traditions into a single visible institution; it is the gathering of all the elect into

the presence of the Lord, who will at last present them to Himself as the one bride, the one body, the one holy temple, fully and visibly united in His glory.

B. Laboring for Unity Without Sacrificing Truth

The practical challenge for the Reformed Baptist congregation is to pursue genuine visible unity with other faithful Christians while maintaining the confessional distinctives that give that congregation its particular form and character. This is not a tension that can be resolved by simply choosing one value over the other, by abandoning confessional distinctives in the name of broad evangelical fellowship, or by insisting on perfect doctrinal agreement as the condition for any meaningful inter-church relationship. The New Testament holds both values simultaneously: Paul exhorts the Ephesians to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3) and to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), and both of these exhortations are addressed to the same community in the same passage.

The practical resolution lies in a careful differentiation of the levels at which unity is sought and the doctrinal stakes at each level. At the level of the gospel, the nature of salvation, the authority of Scripture, the Trinity, the resurrection of Christ, the church has no room for compromise. Those who deny these are not simply Christians with whom we disagree; they have departed from the faith once delivered to the saints, and the appropriate response is not ecumenical dialogue but doctrinal contention (Jude 3). At the level of confessional distinctives, baptism, polity, eschatology, the details of soteriology, there is genuine room for differentiated fellowship: a Baptist congregation can recognize a Presbyterian congregation as a genuine church of Christ even while maintaining that the Presbyterian practice of infant baptism is in error, and can seek fraternal cooperation in areas of genuine doctrinal agreement without pretending that the differences do not matter. At the level of personal Christian fellowship, the recognition of brothers and sisters across every organizational divide, the foundation is nothing other than the one body, one Spirit, one Lord of Ephesians 4.

The eschatological hope of the church’s full visible unity is, above all, a spur to humility in the present. Every genuine Christian tradition holds some truths well and fails at others. The Baptist tradition’s strengths, regenerate membership, believers’ baptism, local church autonomy, the primacy of the Word, are genuine contributions to the church’s understanding of what the new covenant community is called to be. But the Baptist tradition has its own failures: the tendency toward congregational fragmentation, the occasional loss of liturgical depth, the periodic slide into an anti-confessional populism that prizes simplicity over theological precision. The ecumenical humility that the New Testament calls for is not a willingness to abandon what Scripture clearly teaches; it is the willingness to recognize that the church in her fullness is larger than any single tradition’s grasp of the truth, and that the gathering of all the elect into the presence of the Lord at the last day will be a revelation not only of how much was right, but of how much was partial.

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

Ephesians 4:4–6, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Universal Church	The totality of all genuine believers in Christ across all times, places, and cultures, the body of Christ in its full cosmic extent. Defined by union with Christ through the Spirit, not by organizational connection. Called “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” in the historic creeds. The universal church is presently expressed in many particular local assemblies.
Local Church	A particular, visible gathering of baptized believers in a specific place, organized under elder leadership for worship, the ministry of the Word, the ordinances, mutual care, and the Great Commission. The dominant referent of <i>ekklesia</i> in the New Testament. A complete expression of the body of Christ in its particular location, not a franchise of a larger institution.
Local Church Autonomy	The Baptist conviction that each local congregation is self-governing under the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, without being subject to any external ecclesiastical hierarchy. Grounded in the New Testament’s pattern of addressing local assemblies as directly accountable to Christ through His Word. Autonomy does not mean isolation from fraternal counsel or cooperative mission.
Catholic (attribute)	From the Greek <i>katholikos</i> , meaning “universal” or “whole.” One of the four classical attributes of the church in the Nicene Creed. The church is catholic in that she encompasses all true believers across all times, places, and cultures, without ethnic or geographic restriction. The word predates its Roman appropriation and carries no specifically Roman Catholic meaning in its original sense.
Associationalism	The Baptist model of inter-church fellowship in which autonomous local congregations voluntarily associate for mutual encouragement, doctrinal consultation, and cooperative mission, without granting the association governing authority over any member congregation. Modeled on the Jerusalem Council pattern of Acts 15: advisory, not legislative; persuasive, not coercive.
Jerusalem Council	The inter-church consultation recorded in Acts 15:1–35, convened to address the question of whether Gentile believers must be circumcised for salvation. The apostles, elders, and congregation of the Jerusalem church met with representatives from Antioch and issued a letter to the Gentile churches. The model for post-apostolic inter-church consultation: advisory authority grounded in Scripture, not hierarchical jurisdiction.
Confessional Bond	The fellowship that unites congregations sharing a common confession of faith, not by organizational connection but by theological conviction. Churches subscribing to the same confession (e.g., the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession) share a doctrinal framework for inter-church fellowship, accountability, and cooperative mission that transcends geographic and organizational boundaries.
Homogeneous Unit Principle	A missiological strategy advocating the planting of churches around shared demographic characteristics (ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status) to reduce barriers to conversion. Critiqued in this lesson as producing communities that may be effective in certain evangelistic purposes while structurally incapable of the full diversity of mutual care that the New Testament’s vision of the local church requires.
Ecumenism	The pursuit of visible unity among the divided expressions of the Christian church. Distinguished between a liberal ecumenism that sacrifices doctrinal truth for institutional unity and a confessional ecumenism that pursues genuine fellowship with all who confess the gospel while maintaining the distinctives that Scripture clearly teaches. The New Testament calls for both truth and unity; neither can be sacrificed for the other.

**One, Holy,
Catholic,
Apostolic**

The four attributes of the church confessed in the Nicene Creed (381 A.D.). One: the church belongs to one Lord and is animated by one Spirit. Holy: the church is set apart by God and progressively sanctified. Catholic: the church encompasses all believers universally. Apostolic: the church is built on the apostolic foundation and her doctrine is the doctrine of the apostles preserved in Scripture.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the local church is not a diminished or secondary form of the church but the church in her normal, historically concrete, operationally decisive expression. The congregation that meets in a specific building with a specific membership of named and known people, under the leadership of specific elders who know their people, administering specific ordinances to specific individuals, this is the church in the form that the New Testament consistently presents and prioritizes. To treat the local congregation as less important than some abstract universal church, or to invest in generic “christianity” while neglecting the specific covenant obligations of local church membership, is to invert the New Testament’s own ordering of priorities.

We must believe that local church autonomy is a gift that carries with it real responsibilities. The gift is the freedom to govern the congregation under Christ and Scripture without ecclesiastical coercion. The responsibility is to exercise that governance with the wisdom, humility, and doctrinal faithfulness that the freedom was designed to protect. Autonomy exercised without wisdom produces ecclesiological isolation and theological self-sufficiency; autonomy exercised with wisdom produces congregations that are both faithful to their own convictions and genuinely engaged with the broader body of Christ through voluntary, fraternal, confessionally grounded cooperation.

We must believe that the church’s present fragmentation is not the final word. The sevenfold unity of Ephesians 4:4–6 is a present theological reality, however imperfectly expressed in the visible church’s divided state, and the eschatological hope is the full and visible manifestation of that unity at the return of Christ. This belief produces neither a premature triumphalism that pretends the divisions do not matter nor a resigned defeatism that gives up on the pursuit of visible unity. It produces a patient, truth-seeking, love-motivated labor for the kind of genuine inter-church fellowship that is possible in the present age, grounded in the confidence that the Lord who prayed for the unity of His people (John 17:20–23) will ultimately see that prayer answered in full.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel the weight of the sevenfold unity of Ephesians 4:4–6 as a summons to take the church’s unity seriously, not merely as a theological abstraction but as a pastoral and relational reality that makes claims on our behavior. The one body, one Spirit, one Lord who grounds the church’s unity is not indifferent to the divisions we create and maintain by our pride, our insularity, our doctrinal arrogance, or our institutional self-interest. We should feel the grief that the Spirit feels over every needless division, and we should feel the corresponding desire to pursue every form of genuine Christian fellowship that is available to us without the sacrifice of doctrinal faithfulness.

We should desire for this congregation to be a genuinely outward-facing local church, one that understands its autonomy as freedom for mission and fellowship, not as license for isolation. This means desiring to know and be known by sister congregations in the area, to seek and offer fraternal counsel across organizational boundaries, to support missionaries and church plants through concrete financial partnership, and to participate in the confessional community of Reformed Baptist churches in a way that is both theologically serious and relationally warm. The local church that is focused only on its own internal concerns has misunderstood what it means to be a member of the one body of Christ.

We should desire for the eschatological hope of the church's full visible unity to produce in us a genuine ecumenical humility in the present, the humility of those who know that their tradition, however faithful in many respects, is a partial grasp of a truth larger than any single community has fully apprehended. This humility does not soften doctrinal convictions; it places them in their proper proportion. We hold the Baptist distinctives because we believe Scripture teaches them, not because we believe that Baptists alone constitute the true church. We seek fellowship with all who confess the gospel, labor alongside all who serve the same Lord, and await with all the redeemed the day when the divisions of this age will be swallowed up in the perfect unity of the age to come.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Identify at least one other faithful, gospel-preaching congregation in your area, whether Baptist or from another tradition, and commit to a specific act of inter-church fellowship or cooperation in the next three months: a joint prayer meeting, a shared evangelistic effort, a pastoral conversation between elders, or a combined study or service project. Let the seven unities of Ephesians 4 motivate the initiative.
- Read Acts 15:1–35 as a model of inter-church consultation this week. Identify the problem, the process, the theological argument, the conclusion, and the manner in which the conclusion was communicated to the churches. Then ask: does this congregation currently have the kind of fraternal relationships with sister churches that would allow us to seek this quality of counsel in a moment of genuine doctrinal or pastoral crisis?
- If your congregation is not currently affiliated with any association, network, or confessional fellowship of like-minded churches, discuss with your elders whether such affiliation would strengthen the congregation's doctrinal accountability, broaden its missionary reach, and deepen its connection to the broader body of Christ. Autonomy without fraternal accountability is not a form of faithfulness; it is a form of ecclesiological isolation.
- Pray specifically this week for the five purposes of the local church identified in Section II: gathered worship, the ministry of the Word, the ordinances, mutual care, and the Great Commission. For each purpose, identify one specific way this congregation is fulfilling it well and one way it could grow. Bring those observations to an elder or pastor as a contribution to the congregation's ongoing self-assessment.
- Memorize Ephesians 4:4–6 this week as a confession of the church's unity. Let the seven unities shape the way you pray for the broader body of Christ, for congregations you will never visit, for believers you will never meet, for missionary efforts on the other side of the world, recognizing that the one Spirit who animates this congregation is the same Spirit who animates every genuine assembly of Christ's people wherever they are gathered.

Key Texts: *Ephesians 4:4–6; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Revelation 1:4, 11; Acts 15:1–35; Colossians 4:16*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- When you think of “the church,” do you primarily think of a universal, global reality or a particular, local community? What has shaped that instinct, your theological formation, your experience, your cultural background? How has this lesson begun to refine or challenge that default?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Ephesians 4:1–6 carefully. What is Paul’s exhortation in verses 1–3? What virtues does he name as the means of maintaining unity? What are the seven unities he names in verses 4–6, and how are they structured? How does the Trinitarian structure of the seven unities ground the church’s unity in something more fundamental than human agreement or organizational alignment?
- Read 1 Corinthians 1:1–2 and compare with Ephesians 1:22–23. In 1 Corinthians 1:2, how does Paul identify both the particular and the universal dimensions of the church in a single address? In Ephesians 1:22–23, what is the scope of the “church” that Paul has in mind? What does it mean for Christ to be “head over all things to the church” at this cosmic level?
- Read Acts 15:1–35. Trace the process: (1) the problem stated (verse 1), (2) the decision to consult Jerusalem (verse 2), (3) the reports given (verses 4–9, 12), (4) the theological argument from Scripture (verses 13–18), (5) the conclusion stated (verses 19–20), (6) the letter written and sent (verses 22–29), (7) the reception by the churches (verses 30–31). At each stage, what authority is being invoked? Is the Jerusalem Council’s conclusion binding legislation or persuasive counsel grounded in Scripture?
- Read Colossians 4:7–16. What network of inter-church relationships does this passage reveal? Who is being sent where? What letters are being exchanged? What mutual concerns are shared? What does this passage reveal about the practical interconnectedness of apparently autonomous Pauline congregations?
- Read Revelation 1:4, 11 and then the openings of Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14. To whom are the letters specifically addressed? What does the fact that the risen Christ addresses seven distinct local congregations individually, rather than “the church in Asia” as a single body, tell us about the theological significance of the local assembly as a distinct, identifiable community?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the local church is “a complete expression of the body of Christ in her particular place” rather than a franchise of a larger institution. What are the theological grounds for this claim? How does it affect the way a congregation thinks about its own identity, authority, and dignity? What are the practical differences between a “franchise” model and a “complete expression” model of the local church?
- The lesson draws a distinction between local church autonomy (freedom from external hierarchical governance) and local church isolation (disconnection from the fraternal counsel and cooperation of the broader body of Christ). Where is the line between these two? Can you think of historical or contemporary examples of churches that have crossed from the former into the latter? What are the warning signs?
- The Jerusalem Council’s letter says “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). What does this language claim for the Council’s conclusion? How is this different from the claim of papal infallibility or conciliar authority in Roman Catholicism? What is the proper basis on which an inter-church gathering may speak with genuine spiritual authority in the post-apostolic age?

- The lesson critiques the homogeneous unit principle on ecclesiological grounds: it produces communities that may be effective in certain evangelistic purposes while structurally incapable of the full diversity of mutual care that the New Testament envisions. Do you find this critique persuasive? Are there legitimate insights in the homogeneous unit principle that a Reformed Baptist ecclesiology can incorporate, even while rejecting its structural implications?
- The lesson argues that the church's full visible unity will not be achieved before the return of Christ. Does this eschatological qualification relieve the church of the obligation to pursue visible unity in the present? What is the relationship between "maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3, present obligation) and the future eschatological gathering of all the elect into full visible unity (future hope)?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- In what specific ways is this congregation currently expressing its membership in the universal body of Christ, through prayer, financial support, cooperative mission, or inter-church fellowship? In what ways is it falling short of the New Testament's portrait of a congregation that is genuinely engaged with the broader body of Christ? What is one concrete step toward greater engagement that could be taken in the next six months?
- Does this congregation currently have fraternal relationships with other local churches that could function as the Jerusalem Council model suggests, as sources of genuine doctrinal counsel in moments of pastoral or theological crisis? If not, what would it take to build those relationships? Who are the pastors and congregations in your area with whom such fraternal accountability would be both natural and genuinely valuable?
- The lesson identifies five constitutive purposes of the local church: gathered worship, the ministry of the Word, the ordinances, mutual care, and the Great Commission. Which of these five does this congregation most need to develop or strengthen? What specific, measurable step could the congregation take in the next year to grow in that area?
- Ephesians 4:3 calls the church to "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Is there a specific relationship within this congregation, between members, or between a member and an elder, or between families, that is strained or broken, and that this exhortation calls you to address? What would it mean to pursue reconciliation in that relationship as an act of theological obedience, not merely relational repair?

Prayer Focus

Read Ephesians 4:1–6 aloud before praying: “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” Pause after verse 3 before reading verses 4–6. The diligence Paul calls for in verse 3 is grounded in the sevenfold unity he confesses in verses 4–6. We are not creating unity; we are preserving and expressing a unity that the triune God has already established. Let that ground the prayers that follow: we pray from the security of a unity that is already given, asking God to make it visible in the life of this congregation and in the relations of His church around the world.

Pray for this congregation as a local expression of the one universal church. Give thanks that this assembly, however ordinary, however small, however imperfect, is a genuine expression of the body of Christ, animated by the same Spirit, confessing the same Lord, united to the same Father, as every assembly of genuine believers anywhere in the world. Ask God to deepen the congregation’s sense of its own dignity and calling: not the inflated dignity of a community that overestimates its own importance, but the humble dignity of a community that knows what it participates in when it gathers under the Word and around the Table.

Pray for the church beyond these walls, for the sister congregations in this city and region that are preaching the same gospel and serving the same Lord. Pray for the inter-church relationships that this congregation does or should have: for fraternal warmth where there has been indifference, for genuine theological engagement where there has been superficial politeness, for the courage to seek counsel from trusted colleagues when pastoral crises demand it, and for the grace to offer that counsel with the humility and love that the Jerusalem Council modeled. Pray specifically for the pastors of neighboring congregations by name if you know them, asking God to strengthen them in their ministries and to build genuine fellowship between their congregations and yours.

Pray for the global network of Reformed Baptist churches that share the confessional bond of the 1689 Confession. Give thanks for the hard-won theological inheritance that the Particular Baptist tradition has bequeathed to these congregations, and for the fraternal fellowship that common confession makes possible across every geographic and cultural boundary. Pray for the health and faithfulness of that confessional community: that it would hold the doctrines of grace with genuine conviction, practice regenerate membership and church discipline with pastoral wisdom, administer the ordinances with theological seriousness, and pursue the Great Commission with missionary urgency.

Close by praying for the full visible unity of the church at the return of Christ, the consummation of the sevenfold unity of Ephesians 4, when every genuine believer of every age will be gathered into the presence of the Lord and the prayer of John 17:20–23 will be fully and perfectly answered. Pray that the labors of this congregation for inter-church fellowship, confessional fidelity, and cooperative mission will be a small but genuine contribution to that eschatological gathering. Pray that the God who is over all and through all and in all would accomplish in the church, in this generation and in every generation, far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Ephesians 4:4–6; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Revelation 1:4, 11; Acts 15:1–35; Colossians 4:16

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

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