

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 1: PROLEGOMENA — WHY ECCLESIOLOGY MATTERS

The Foundation Before the Framework

Lesson 2

THE CHURCH IN THE HISTORY OF DOCTRINE

From the Apostles to the Present — How the Church Has Understood Itself

The church that ignores her past is doomed to borrow the errors her forebears bled to correct.

“Those who know nothing of church history are condemned to repeat its errors.”

Key Texts: Acts 2:42–47; Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Timothy 3:15; Jude 3

“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

The church did not drop from heaven fully formed in the year A.D. 33 and immediately assume the institutional and theological shape that any given tradition today would recognize as normative. She was born in the power of Pentecost, shaped by apostolic teaching, tested by persecution and heresy, distorted by the slow accumulation of human tradition, recovered, at least in part, through the fires of Reformation, and refined through centuries of controversy, confession, and faithful labor. To study the doctrine of the church without attending to this history is to study a river while ignoring its entire course, to see only the water passing before you now, without comprehending whence it came, what channels it has carved, and what debris it carries. Historical theology is not an antiquarian indulgence. It is the responsible stewardship of a doctrine that has been purchased at great cost and handed down through great sacrifice.

Lesson 1 established why ecclesiology matters: the church is the blood-purchased, Spirit-indwelt, triune-purposed community of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth, and the instrument through which His manifold wisdom is displayed to the watching universe. This lesson asks a different but equally necessary question: how has the church understood herself across the centuries, and what has that understanding cost her? The answer is at once inspiring and sobering, inspiring because the Spirit has never left the church without witness to the truth, sobering because the history of ecclesiology is also the history of some of the most consequential and destructive errors the church has ever entertained.

The structure of this lesson follows the broad movements of church history: the apostolic community, the patristic era, the medieval church, the Reformation and its tributaries, the Baptist contribution and the 1689 Confession, and the modern landscape. We close with a consideration of what has been called the Reformed Baptist recovery, the attempt, in our own generation, to reclaim the confessional, covenantal, elder-led ecclesiology that the Particular Baptists articulated so carefully in the seventeenth century. The governing question throughout is not merely “what did they believe?” but “what can we learn from them?”, and what warnings should their failures press upon us as we build the church in our own day.

A word of methodological orientation is in order before we begin. This lesson surveys more than two thousand years of church history in a single sitting, and it does so with a confessional conviction and a pastoral purpose. It is not a neutral academic survey. It reads history through the lens of Scripture, which means it is prepared to say, without apology, that some of what the church has believed and practiced across the centuries was faithful to the apostolic deposit, and some of it was not. The Reformation was not merely one option among several; it was a necessary and largely faithful recovery of what Scripture actually teaches about the gospel and the church. The Baptist tradition, with its insistence on regenerate membership and believer’s baptism, represents a further and important clarification of what the new covenant community is meant to be. These are convictions the series holds from the beginning and will defend from Scripture throughout.

I. THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

The Gathered Community of the New Testament

A. *The Pattern of Acts 2*

The most concentrated portrait of the apostolic church in the New Testament is found in Acts 2:42–47: “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Four marks structure the life of this community: the apostles’ teaching, fellowship (*koinōnia*), the breaking of bread, and prayer. These are not organizational principles; they are the DNA of the church in her earliest expression.

What is immediately remarkable about the apostolic community is both its continuity with the Jewish assembly and its decisive newness. The first believers were Jewish men and women who continued to gather in the temple courts, the sacred space of covenant assembly, while simultaneously breaking bread in their homes and forming an intimate fellowship constituted by their shared reception of the gospel. The apostles’ teaching was not a new philosophical school; it was the authoritative interpretation of the whole Old Testament in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, mediated through those whom the Lord had personally authorized as witnesses. And the community that formed around this teaching was recognizably distinct from the broader Jewish population, not by ethnic or geographic markers but by the possession of the Holy Spirit, the confession of Jesus as Lord, and the practice of baptism in His name.

The apostolic church scattered across the Mediterranean world through the missionary labors of Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and others was not a single monolithic institution but a fellowship of distinct local assemblies, the church at Corinth, at Thessalonica, at Philippi, at Ephesus, at Rome, each with its own gifts and struggles, each in correspondence with the apostles and with one another, each a complete expression of the body of Christ in its own place. The New Testament epistles are, above all, the pastoral correspondence of the apostolic age: letters written to real communities addressing real crises of doctrine, ethics, leadership, and fellowship. They are the ecclesiological laboratory in which the doctrine of the church was not merely articulated theoretically but forged in the heat of pastoral necessity.

B. *The Apostolic Deposit and Its Authority*

The apostolic church understood herself to be the custodian of a fixed deposit of revealed truth, a body of teaching received from the Lord through His appointed witnesses and not subject to revision or supplementation by subsequent generations. Jude’s urgent appeal is representative: “I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3). The phrase “once for all handed down” (*hapax paradotheise*) is emphatic. The faith is not an open-ended conversation that develops

organically with the passing centuries; it is a finished deposit, delivered through the apostles, and the church's task is not to improve upon it but to guard and transmit it.

This conviction about the finality and sufficiency of the apostolic deposit has direct and permanent implications for every ecclesiology that succeeds the apostolic age. The church in every generation derives her authority not from apostolic succession, the unbroken chain of episcopal ordination that Rome and some Anglican traditions claim, but from apostolic doctrine: fidelity to the teaching of the apostles as preserved in Holy Scripture. The test of the true church is not institutional lineage but doctrinal faithfulness. This is why the New Testament can speak of believers "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 2:20) without requiring that every congregation stand in a traceable line of episcopal succession. The foundation is the teaching, not the office; the deposit, not the pedigree.

The cessationist conviction that this series holds, that the miraculous sign gifts, including the gifts of prophecy and tongues as operated in the apostolic age, ceased with the close of the apostolic era, is directly relevant here. If the apostolic deposit is closed and sufficient, then the church has no need of a continuing revelatory office to supplement or correct it. The Spirit's work in the church is not to generate new revelation but to illuminate and apply the revelation already given. The pastor's authority in the pulpit is not the authority of a prophet receiving fresh words from God; it is the authority of a herald faithfully proclaiming the word that has already been delivered. This distinction, between the prophetic and the pastoral, is one of the most important in the entire history of ecclesiology, and it will surface repeatedly throughout this series.

II. THE PATRISTIC ERA

Development, Drift, and the Seeds of Rome

A. The Rise of Episcopal Polity and the Bishop of Rome

The transition from the apostolic age to the patristic era (roughly the second through fifth centuries) brought with it a gradual but consequential shift in ecclesiological structure. In the New Testament, the terms episkopos (overseer) and presbyteros (elder) appear to be used interchangeably for the same office (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5–7; 1 Peter 5:1–2), and the plurality of elders governing a local congregation is the normative pattern. By the second century, a three-tier distinction had emerged in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch: bishop, presbyter, and deacon, with the bishop as the singular monarchical leader of a city church, distinct from and superior to the presbyters beneath him. This was a development of polity that went beyond the explicit teaching of the New Testament and planted the seeds of hierarchical ecclesiology that would bear increasingly problematic fruit in subsequent centuries.

The theological rationale for episcopal authority was initially and primarily pastoral: the bishop was the visible center of unity for the local church, the guarantor of orthodoxy against the gnostic and other heresies that threatened to fragment the communities of the second century. Cyprian of Carthage (third century) gave this logic its most influential formulation: "He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother." For Cyprian, unity with the bishop was unity with the church, and unity with the church was the condition of salvation. The pastoral concern behind this formulation was legitimate, schism and heresy were destroying communities that the apostles had planted, but the ecclesiological weight placed on the episcopal office went

considerably beyond what Scripture authorizes. The authority of the church was being identified with the authority of the office-holder rather than with the authority of the apostolic Word.

The concentration of ecclesial authority in the bishop of Rome followed a trajectory that took several centuries to solidify but whose direction was already visible in the patristic period. The church of Rome, as the church of the imperial capital and the putative foundation of Peter and Paul, enjoyed a prestige that no other local church could match. This prestige gradually became the basis for a claim to jurisdictional primacy. Leo the Great (fifth century) articulated the doctrine of Roman primacy with particular force, identifying the bishop of Rome as the heir of Petrine authority over the universal church. The exegetical foundation for this claim, Matthew 16:18 read as the institution of Peter as the first pope, was and remains contested; the better reading is that the rock upon which Christ builds His church is Peter's confession of Christ as the Son of the living God, not Peter's personal office or his successors in Rome. But the claim had been made, and its consequences for the next millennium of church history were profound.

B. Augustine and the Donatist Controversy

The most theologically significant ecclesiological controversy of the patristic era was the Donatist crisis in North Africa, which produced in Augustine of Hippo the most sophisticated ecclesiological thinking of the ancient church. The Donatists, a rigorist movement that arose in the aftermath of the Diocletianic persecution (early fourth century), insisted that the validity of the sacraments depended on the moral purity of the minister who administered them, and therefore that clergy who had handed over the Scriptures to Roman authorities (the *traditores*, "those who handed over," from which the word "traitor" derives) had forfeited both their office and the sacramental validity of everything they had administered. Baptisms performed by lapsed clergy, the Donatists argued, must be re-administered. The Donatist church understood itself as the pure, undefiled remnant of the true church, untainted by the compromises of the Catholic majority.

Augustine's response was a masterwork of ecclesiological reasoning that shaped the tradition in ways still felt today. Against the Donatist insistence on ministerial purity, Augustine argued that the validity of the sacraments depends not on the moral character of the minister but on the authority of Christ who instituted them, the principle known as *ex opere operato* in its later Scholastic formulation. More profoundly for the history of ecclesiology, Augustine developed the distinction between the church as it appears in the world, the *corpus permixtum*, the mixed body of wheat and tares, and the church as it truly is before God: the company of the elect, known only to Him. The Donatists had confused these two. They sought to make the visible church coextensive with the invisible; they sought a perfectly pure assembly in this age, when Scripture teaches that the separation of wheat and tares awaits the final judgment (Matthew 13:30). Augustine's warning stands against every perfectionist ecclesiology in every age: the church in this world is always a mixed body, and the attempt to constitute a visibly pure church by excluding all who fall short of the required standard ends, invariably, in schism and pride.

And yet, and this is a tension Augustine himself felt but did not fully resolve, the Baptist tradition will insist that Augustine's corrective, necessary as it was against Donatist perfectionism, must not be taken so far that the church becomes content with a membership that includes the visibly unconverted by design. The *corpus permixtum* is a description of the inevitable reality of the visible church, not a prescription for ecclesial policy. The church should pursue, with humility and realistic expectation of partial success, the ideal of a regenerate membership, not because she can achieve the invisible church's perfection in this age, but because the new covenant promise and

the integrity of her witness demand the effort. Augustine's wisdom about the limits of visible church purity must be held alongside the Baptist insistence on the church's covenantal responsibility to constitute herself, as far as possible, as the community of the genuinely converted.

III. THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

The Papacy, the Sacramental System, and the Eclipse of the Congregation

A. The Institutionalization of the Church

If the patristic era planted the seeds of hierarchical ecclesiology, the medieval period brought them to full and often oppressive flower. The theological developments of the medieval church produced an ecclesiology in which the institutional hierarchy, pope, cardinals, bishops, and priests, became so thoroughly identified with the church herself that the congregation as an active, covenantal community was effectively marginalized. The local assembly became, in practice, the passive recipient of sacramental grace mediated by a sacerdotal caste, rather than the gathered community of believers who, together under elder oversight, were responsible for the worship, discipline, and mission of the body. The people of God became the audience for a performance they did not understand, the Mass was conducted in Latin, a language inaccessible to the vast majority of the laity, rather than active participants in the covenant life of the assembly.

The sacramental system that developed through the medieval period is perhaps the most consequential ecclesiological legacy of that era. By the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the church had formally defined seven sacraments, baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, holy orders, and matrimony, each understood as a channel of grace operative by virtue of its proper administration by an ordained minister (*ex opere operato*). The effect was a thorough sacramentalization of Christian life, in which the layperson's access to saving grace was entirely mediated through the institutional church and its ordained clergy. This was not a minor distortion. It was a fundamental misidentification of where saving grace is located, in the Word of God received by faith, not in the rite administered by a priest, and it produced centuries of spiritual bondage for ordinary men and women who could not approach God except through a sacerdotal intermediary.

The doctrine of papal infallibility, though not formally dogmatized until the First Vatican Council in 1870, was the logical culmination of a trajectory of papal supremacy that had been building since the patristic era. The claim that the bishop of Rome, when speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals, speaks with the infallibility of Christ Himself, is the ultimate institutionalization of ecclesial authority, the concentration of the teaching authority of the universal church in a single human office. From a Protestant and Baptist perspective, this is not merely an ecclesiological error but a soteriological and Christological one: it displaces the sole authority of Scripture by placing a human institution in the seat of final doctrinal judgment. The Reformation's battle cry of *sola Scriptura* was, at its core, an ecclesiological assertion: the church is not the source of authority; she is the servant of the authority of the living God as He speaks through His written Word.

B. The Witness of the Pre-Reformation Dissidents

The medieval period was not without its voices of protest. Alongside and beneath the monolithic institutional structure of the medieval church, there ran a persistent thread of dissent from men and women who found in

Scripture a vision of the church that the hierarchy conspicuously failed to embody. The Waldensians, a movement founded by Peter Waldo in twelfth-century Lyon, insisted on vernacular Bible reading, lay preaching, apostolic poverty, and simplicity of worship, principles that brought them into immediate conflict with Rome and earned them centuries of persecution. John Wycliffe in fourteenth-century England attacked the authority of the papacy, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and the corruption of the clergy with a thoroughness that anticipated Luther by more than a century. His followers, the Lollards, continued to circulate his writings in the vernacular and to gather in informal communities of Scripture-reading long after his death.

Jan Hus in Bohemia took up Wycliffe's program with passionate conviction and paid for it with his life at the Council of Constance in 1415, burned at the stake for heresies that a later generation would recognize as substantially evangelical. The movement that bore his name, the Hussites, divided into moderates and radicals, and the radical wing, the Taborites, developed an ecclesiology of remarkable simplicity and independence from the medieval hierarchy: a gathered community of believers, governed by Scripture alone, practicing a simplified form of worship and rejecting the authority of the papacy. These pre-Reformation dissidents are not an embarrassing footnote to church history; they are evidence that the Spirit never left the church entirely without a witness to the apostolic vision, even in the centuries when the institutional church most thoroughly obscured it. They are also a reminder that the recovery of biblical ecclesiology has always come at a cost, a cost that the comfortable Western church of our own day has largely been spared and must not take for granted.

The lesson the pre-Reformation witnesses press upon the church in every age is one of both courage and humility. Courage: the institutional authority of the church, however ancient and impressive its claims, is not self-validating. It must answer to Scripture, and when it fails to do so, the obligation to speak the truth does not diminish. Humility: the reformers of every generation are themselves capable of the very distortions they oppose. Wycliffe's courage did not prevent his disciples from fragmenting into competing factions. The Taborites' rejection of the hierarchy did not prevent them from developing their own forms of ecclesiastical coercion. The history of dissent is not a history of unalloyed faithfulness; it is a history of imperfect men and women doing their best to recover what the Spirit had never entirely let the church forget.

IV. THE REFORMATION

Luther, Calvin, and the Anabaptist Vision

A. Luther and Calvin: The Magisterial Reformation

Martin Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517 was an ecclesiological act before it was anything else. The theses challenged the sale of indulgences, but indulgences presupposed the entire medieval sacramental and ecclesiastical system: papal authority, the treasury of merit, purgatory, sacerdotal mediation. To pull on the thread of indulgences was to unravel a theological fabric that had been woven over more than a millennium. Luther's recovery of justification by faith alone, the doctrine on which, as he insisted, the church stands or falls, had immediate and radical ecclesiological consequences. If the sinner is justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, then the sacramental system as a mechanism of merited grace collapses. If every believer has direct access to God through the mediation of Christ alone, then the sacerdotal priesthood as a necessary

intermediary collapses. If Scripture alone is the final authority for faith and practice, then the papal magisterium as the church's supreme doctrinal authority collapses.

Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (drawn from 1 Peter 2:9–10) did not abolish the pastoral office but demystified and relativized it. The ordained minister is not a priest in any sacerdotal sense, he does not stand between the people and God, offering sacrifice on their behalf. He is a servant of the Word, called and trained to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments in the assembly of believers. Every Christian, by virtue of his union with Christ the great High Priest, is a priest before God, with direct access to the Father, the right to pray and intercede, and the responsibility to offer himself as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). This was a recovery of profound pastoral significance, breaking the stranglehold of the sacerdotal class on the ordinary Christian's relationship with God.

John Calvin's contribution to ecclesiology was more systematic and arguably more enduring than Luther's. Calvin's recovery of the marks of the true church, the faithful preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments, with church discipline often added as a third mark, gave the Reformed tradition a theological criterion for evaluating the authenticity of any given assembly that remains indispensable. Calvin also developed a careful doctrine of church government, distinguishing four offices (pastors, doctors or teachers, elders, and deacons) and insisting on a plurality of elders as the governing structure of the local church. His implementation of church discipline in Geneva, though imperfect and at points coercive in ways a Baptist would rightly criticize, represented a serious attempt to recover the integrity of the church's membership and the moral coherence of her witness.

B. The Anabaptist Vision: A Gathered, Believers' Church

The Radical Reformation, the diverse movement generally designated "Anabaptist" because of its insistence on believers' baptism, pushed the ecclesiological logic of the Reformation further than Luther or Calvin were prepared to go. Where the magisterial Reformers retained the practice of infant baptism and, with it, the assumption of a territorial or national church in which all citizens were presumed to be members of the church by virtue of their baptism in infancy, the Anabaptists insisted that the church could only be constituted by those who had personally professed faith in Christ and received baptism as a public sign of that profession. The church, on this vision, is not a mixed body of believers and unbelievers organized along territorial lines; she is a gathered community of the genuinely converted, visibly separated from the world, living under the discipline of the brotherhood.

The ecclesiological vision of the Anabaptists was both genuinely radical and genuinely biblical. Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and their colleagues in Zurich were not merely reforming the church; they were reconceiving her fundamental nature. Their insistence on a believers' church, voluntary membership, the ban (church discipline), the rejection of the state-church fusion, and the separation of the church from the coercive power of the magistrate represented a recovery of the apostolic pattern that the Reformers in Zurich and Geneva were not prepared to follow. They paid for these convictions dearly. Felix Manz was drowned in the Zürich River in January 1527 on the orders of the city council, a martyr's death administered by a Protestant city that found the Anabaptist vision of the church more threatening to the established social order than helpful. Thousands more followed him across the continent in the subsequent decades, persecuted by both Catholic and Protestant authorities.

The Baptist tradition that will occupy the next section of this lesson stands in significant continuity with the Anabaptist vision, though it developed independently in seventeenth-century England through a distinct line of

descent. The separating Puritans and General and Particular Baptists drew on the Anabaptist inheritance even as they developed their own theological framework, and the convergence of these streams produced the English Baptist tradition that gave us the 1689 Confession. The Anabaptists' most enduring contribution to ecclesiology is their recovery of the principle that the church is constituted by personal faith and public confession, not by birth, territory, or infant baptism. This principle, however costly it proved in the sixteenth century, has become the convictional foundation of the Baptist tradition and of every ecclesiology that takes seriously the new covenant community's defining characteristic: that all its members shall know the Lord.

V. THE BAPTIST CONTRIBUTION

Regenerate Membership, Believer's Baptism, and the 1689 Confession

A. *The English Baptist Tradition*

The Baptist movement in seventeenth-century England emerged from the Separatist wing of the Puritan movement, those who concluded that the Church of England was too thoroughly corrupted by its inherited Catholic structures to be reformed from within and must be abandoned in favor of gathered congregations constituted by personal conversion. The General Baptists, following the work of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in the early seventeenth century, developed an Arminian soteriology alongside their Baptist ecclesiology. The Particular Baptists, so named for their commitment to particular (or definite) atonement, the doctrine that Christ died specifically for the elect, combined the Baptist ecclesiological vision with a Reformed soteriology drawn from Calvin and his heirs. It is the Particular Baptists who are the primary confessional ancestors of the tradition this series represents.

The four defining distinctives of the Baptist tradition, as the Particular Baptists articulated them, are: regenerate church membership (only those who give credible evidence of genuine conversion should be admitted to the church); believers' baptism by immersion (baptism is properly administered to those who have personally professed faith, and the proper mode is immersion, as signifying burial and resurrection with Christ in Romans 6:3–4); congregational governance with covenantal accountability (the congregation is the final seat of ecclesiastical authority under Christ, exercised through the gathered assembly of members, with elders leading and the congregation affirming); and the liberty of conscience under the lordship of Christ (no civil or ecclesiastical authority may coerce the conscience in matters of religious conviction; Christ alone is Lord of the conscience). These four distinctives are not merely ecclesiastical preferences; they are ecclesiological convictions drawn from a careful reading of the New Testament and grounded in the new covenant theology that this series endorses.

The most significant and practically far-reaching of these distinctives is regenerate church membership. It is the conviction that stands at the intersection of soteriology, biblical theology, and ecclesiology, and it has consequences for every other aspect of church life. A church committed to regenerate membership will practice church discipline, because the integrity of her membership roll is a theological matter, not merely an administrative one. A church committed to regenerate membership will practice believers' baptism, because baptism is the sign of the new covenant, and the new covenant is not entered by birth but by regeneration. A church committed to regenerate membership will take the process of membership reception seriously, asking candidates to share their testimony, examining their understanding of the gospel, and receiving them into the

covenant community through the affirmation of the body. None of this makes the church infallible in her judgments about who is genuinely regenerate; it makes her responsible.

B. The 1689 Second London Baptist Confession

The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, adopted by the Particular Baptist churches of England in 1689, is one of the most carefully crafted ecclesiological documents in the history of Protestant Christianity. Modeled closely on the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and the Savoy Declaration (1658), it systematically presents the Baptist ecclesiological vision within the framework of a thoroughly Reformed theology. Chapter 26, “Of the Church,” presents the ecclesiological convictions that this series will develop at length: the invisible church as the totality of the elect; the visible church as the gathered assembly of saints and their children (a formulation reflecting the Particular Baptists’ practice of including their children in the worshiping community, though not in the membership proper until they profess faith); the local church as autonomous under Christ and Scripture; the offices of elder and deacon as the biblical form of church government; the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as the New Testament’s appointed signs of covenant membership and covenant renewal; and the principles of church discipline as the means of preserving the purity and witness of the assembly.

The 1689 Confession also addresses the relationship between the local church and the broader community of churches. Chapter 26.14–15 acknowledges that while each local church is autonomous, churches may and should maintain fellowship with one another, seek counsel from one another in cases of difficulty, and cooperate in the work of the gospel. This is not a presbyterian model of denominational governance, in which a higher assembly has binding authority over local congregations; it is a congregationalist model of voluntary cooperation among autonomous churches united by a common confession. The distinction matters because it locates final ecclesiastical authority in the local congregation under Christ, not in any external body, a principle that is both ecclesologically important and historically contested.

The usefulness of the 1689 Confession for this series lies not merely in its doctrinal content but in its confessional function. A confession of faith is the church’s public answer to the question: what do you believe Scripture teaches? It is an act of corporate theological responsibility, the willingness of a community to commit its convictions to writing, to hold itself accountable to those convictions, and to commend them to the evaluation of the wider church. The Particular Baptists who subscribed to the 1689 Confession were not hiding their theology behind a wall of denominational privacy; they were commending it to the public judgment of Scripture and the broader Protestant tradition. That same spirit of open, accountable, Scripture-grounded theological conviction animates this series. We hold the 1689 Confession not as a final authority but as a faithful summary of what Scripture teaches, a summary that has proven its depth and usefulness across more than three centuries and that provides an invaluable framework for the study of ecclesiology.

VI. THE MODERN LANDSCAPE

Fragmentation, Recovery, and the Ongoing Ecclesiological Challenge

A. *The Megachurch, the House Church, and the Emergent Church*

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have produced a bewildering proliferation of ecclesiological models, each representing a response, sometimes thoughtful, sometimes reactive, to the perceived failures of the previous generation's church structures. The megachurch movement, which came to prominence in North America in the 1970s and 1980s through figures like Bill Hybels (Willow Creek Community Church) and Rick Warren (Saddleback Church), sought to reach the unchurched by removing perceived barriers to attendance: formal worship structures, theological jargon, expectations of doctrinal knowledge, and anything that might make a religious outsider feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. The result was a model of church that was, by design, maximally accessible and minimally demanding. Whatever pastoral evangelistic instincts drove this model, its ecclesiological consequences were severe. When the primary question driving church design is "what will the unchurched find attractive?" the answer tends to produce a community shaped by consumer preference rather than apostolic pattern.

The house church movement, which gained significant momentum in both the West and the Global South in the late twentieth century, represents a different kind of reaction: a rejection of the institutional church in favor of intimate, informal gatherings in homes, often without ordained leadership, formal structures, or creedal accountability. The house church movement draws its energy from the genuine insight that the apostolic church met in homes and that the professionalization and institutionalization of the church has often come at the cost of genuine community, mutual accountability, and every-member participation. These insights are not wrong. But the house church movement, in its more radical expressions, has tended to elevate the informal gathering over the ordered assembly, the relational over the doctrinal, and the experiential over the confessional in ways that the New Testament does not sanction. The church of the New Testament was not a house church movement in the modern sense; it was a community with recognized leadership, doctrinal accountability, and ordered worship, which happened to meet in homes because it had no other option.

The emerging and emergent church movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s represented perhaps the most thoroughgoing theological challenge to traditional Protestant ecclesiology from within the evangelical world. Figures like Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, and Doug Pagitt questioned not merely the structures of the church but the doctrinal convictions that had undergirded those structures, the nature of atonement, the exclusivity of salvation through Christ, the authority and clarity of Scripture, and the church's right to make doctrinal claims with anything approaching certainty. The emergent church was, at its core, a postmodern ecclesiology: a community constituted not by doctrinal conviction but by shared questions and common journey. Whatever pastoral concerns motivated its proponents, the emergent church's abandonment of confessional certainty produced not a more authentic community but a community without the theological content to sustain either worship or mission over the long term. Many of those communities have since dissolved or drifted into theological liberalism.

B. *The Reformed Baptist Recovery*

Against the backdrop of this modern fragmentation, there has emerged in the last several decades what may fairly be called a Reformed Baptist recovery: a renewal of interest in, and commitment to, the confessional, covenantal, elder-led, congregationally accountable ecclesiology represented by the 1689 Confession and the Particular Baptist tradition. This recovery has been driven by several converging streams: the broader Reformed renewal associated with figures like Martyn Lloyd-Jones, J. I. Packer, and R. C. Sproul, who recovered the doctrines of grace for a new generation; the specifically Baptist expression of that renewal in figures like Ernest Reisinger and the founders of the Founders Ministries; the recovery of a robust biblical theology that has given Reformed Baptist ecclesiology its progressive covenantal foundation; and a growing disillusionment, among thoughtful evangelicals, with the shallow ecclesiology and theological rootlessness of the megachurch model.

The Reformed Baptist recovery is not a nostalgia movement. It does not seek to reproduce seventeenth-century church life in the twenty-first century as a museum exhibit. It seeks to recover the theological convictions of the Particular Baptist tradition, regenerate membership, believers' baptism, elder-led congregational governance, the primacy of expository preaching, the right administration of the ordinances, the practice of church discipline, and the priority of the local church in the mission of God, and to implement those convictions faithfully in contemporary contexts. It is a movement of theological substance and pastoral seriousness, and this series stands within and in service of that recovery.

The most important thing to be said about the Reformed Baptist recovery, however, is not what it is recovering but why it matters. It matters because the church's faithfulness to the apostolic deposit is not a matter of institutional preference or denominational pride; it is a matter of obedience to the Lord who purchased her and who has promised to build her. Every generation of the church faces the temptation to accommodate the ecclesiological convictions of Scripture to the pressures and preferences of its cultural moment, and every generation that succumbs to that temptation leaves a weakened and confused church to the generation that follows. The Reformed Baptist recovery is, at its best, a refusal of that accommodation: a determination to let Scripture, not culture, define what the church is, how she is governed, and what she is for. That is the spirit in which this series is offered.

VII. WHAT HISTORY TEACHES

Seven Lessons from Two Thousand Years

A. *The Lessons of Faithfulness and Failure*

The history of ecclesiology is the history of a community that has never been entirely faithful and never been entirely abandoned. The Spirit has always maintained a witness to the apostolic pattern, even in the centuries of greatest institutional corruption, and that is a source of genuine encouragement. But the same history is also a record of the remarkable ingenuity with which sinful human beings have distorted the church's doctrine and life in ways that seemed, in each generation, like improvement or necessity. Seven lessons stand out from this long and complex story.

First: doctrinal faithfulness is the church's most basic institutional obligation. The church that prioritizes peace over truth, unity over fidelity, or growth over integrity will ultimately lose all three. The medieval church's accommodation of popular superstition, the emergent church's accommodation of postmodern epistemology,

and the megachurch's accommodation of consumer preference are variations on the same theme: the substitution of cultural acceptability for apostolic fidelity. In each case, the short-term gain in institutional stability or popularity was purchased at the cost of long-term theological vitality. The church that holds the line on doctrine does not always grow in the short term. But she builds on a foundation that will bear the weight of centuries.

Second: authority structures in the church must remain accountable to Scripture. The history of episcopalianism, from Ignatius to the papacy, is the history of a legitimate concern, unity and orthodoxy, producing an institutional solution that progressively exceeded its biblical authorization. The concentration of authority in a single office or person is, in the history of the church, always a vulnerability, because no human being is immune to the corruptions of unchecked power. The plurality of elders, mutually accountable to one another and to the congregation, and the congregation accountable to Scripture through its elders, is not a merely pragmatic arrangement; it is the ecclesiological form that best protects the church from the inevitable distortions of concentrated human authority. The polity matters because it is a structural expression of the conviction that Christ alone is Head.

B. The Church's Permanent Orientation

Third: the ordinances and the means of grace must not be either sacramentalized or trivialized. The medieval church made the sacraments instruments of saving grace mechanically operative by priestly administration; much of modern evangelicalism has made baptism and the Lord's Supper peripheral observances of minimal theological weight. Both distortions do violence to the ordinances' proper function as visible words of the gospel, enacted proclamations of the death and resurrection of Christ, and signs of the covenant membership and covenant renewal that belong to the people of God. The recovery of a robust theology of the ordinances, neither sacramental in the Roman sense nor dismissive in the revivalist sense, is one of the most important tasks of the Reformed Baptist recovery.

Fourth: church discipline is not optional. The church that refuses to practice discipline in the name of grace or inclusion has confused mercy with permissiveness and has, in effect, abolished one of the marks that Calvin identified as constitutive of the true church. The history of the church demonstrates with painful clarity that the assembly which will not confront sin in its membership eventually produces a membership that does not distinguish itself from the surrounding culture in any morally significant way. The practice of discipline is an act of love toward the sinning member, an act of integrity toward the watching world, and an act of obedience to the Lord who commanded it (Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5). The church that recovers its nerve on this point will be uncomfortable in the short term and healthier in the long term.

Fifth: the church's identity and mission are not defined by her cultural moment. The apostolic church was counter-cultural in the most radical possible sense, she proclaimed a crucified criminal as the Lord of the universe and demanded the exclusive allegiance of every person who heard the gospel, regardless of the social cost. The church in every subsequent age is called to the same counter-cultural faithfulness. The history of the church's capitulation to cultural pressure, whether the pressure of imperial Rome, of medieval feudalism, of Enlightenment rationalism, or of postmodern pluralism, is a history of ecclesiological failure. The church that recovers a robust sense of her own identity as the covenant community of the triune God, pillar of the truth, theater of His wisdom, and instrument of His mission, will not need the validation of the surrounding culture to know who she is and why she exists. Sixth: the confessional tradition is a gift, not a cage. The great confessions of the Reformation era, the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration, the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession, are not the final

word on any theological question, but they are the hard-won consensus of generations of careful biblical exegesis, and to ignore them is to impoverish oneself needlessly. Seventh: the local church in ordinary faithfulness is the ordinary means of God's extraordinary purposes. The history of the church is not primarily the history of her councils, her controversies, or her celebrated figures; it is the history of thousands of ordinary congregations in ordinary places, faithfully preaching the Word, administering the ordinances, making disciples, and loving one another across the centuries. The local church in East Texas that preaches the Word faithfully and loves its members well is participating in the same mission that the apostolic community in Jerusalem was pursuing on the day of Pentecost. That is the church that Christ is building. That is the church that will endure.

“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.”

Jude 3, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Patristic Era	The period of the early church fathers, roughly spanning the second through fifth centuries A.D., during which foundational Christian doctrine was defined, defended, and confessed against heresy. Major figures include Ignatius, Cyprian, Athanasius, and Augustine.
Episcopal Polity	A form of church government organized around the office of the bishop (episkopos) as the primary authority in a geographic region or diocese. Distinguished from presbyterian (governed by elders) and congregational (governed by the gathered membership) polity.
Corpus Permixtum	Latin for “mixed body.” Augustine’s term for the visible church as a community containing both genuine believers and false professors, intermingled until the final judgment separates the wheat from the tares (Matthew 13:30).
Donatism	A fourth-century North African schismatic movement that insisted on the moral purity of the clergy as a condition for the validity of the sacraments. Opposed by Augustine, who argued that sacramental validity depends on Christ’s institution, not the minister’s character.
Transubstantiation	The Roman Catholic doctrine, formally defined at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), that the substance of the bread and wine in the Eucharist is literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ at the moment of priestly consecration. Rejected by Protestant and Baptist traditions.
Sola Scriptura	Latin for “Scripture alone.” The Reformation principle that Scripture is the sole final authority for faith and practice, superior to and independent of church tradition, papal decree, or conciliar decision. Foundational to all Protestant ecclesiology.
Anabaptist	Meaning “re-baptizer.” A designation (originally pejorative) for participants in the Radical Reformation who rejected infant baptism and insisted on believers’ baptism as the proper initiation into the church. Their ecclesiology emphasized a gathered, voluntary, regenerate community.
Priesthood of Believers	Luther’s recovery of 1 Peter 2:9–10, affirming that all believers have direct access to God through Christ the High Priest, and share in His priestly office of intercession, sacrifice, and ministry. Challenges the Roman sacerdotal monopoly on access to God.
Marks of the Church	The criteria Calvin identified for recognizing a true church: (1) the faithful preaching of the Word, (2) the right administration of the sacraments (ordinances), and (3) the faithful exercise of church discipline. Used to distinguish genuine churches from counterfeits.
1689 Confession	The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, adopted by the Particular Baptist churches of England in 1689. A thorough Reformed and Baptist confession of faith, following the Westminster pattern while articulating Baptist distinctives in soteriology, ecclesiology, and the ordinances. Chapter 26 addresses the doctrine of the church.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the church's history is part of the story of God's providential care for His people, and that studying it is an act of theological responsibility, not mere academic interest. The errors and recoveries of the past are not curiosities; they are warnings and encouragements directly relevant to the challenges of the present. The church that knows her history is better equipped to identify the recurring patterns of distortion before they take root, and better able to recognize the authentic marks of faithfulness that have sustained the witness of the gospel across the centuries.

We must believe that the confessional tradition of the Particular Baptists, culminating in the 1689 Confession, represents a faithful summary of what Scripture teaches about the church, a summary that deserves serious engagement and careful transmission. This is not a claim that the confession is infallible or that it has the last word on every theological question. It is a claim that the men who produced it were careful, learned, and Spirit-taught readers of Scripture, and that to dismiss their work without serious engagement is to impoverish one's own theological formation. We receive the confessional inheritance as a gift, not as a cage.

We must believe that the church's faithfulness to the apostolic deposit is non-negotiable. The history of ecclesiology is, in one reading, the history of the church's attempts to improve upon the apostolic pattern, to make the church more culturally relevant, more institutionally stable, more socially respectable, or more spiritually exciting than the gathered assembly of Word, ordinance, prayer, and mutual accountability that the New Testament describes. Every one of those attempts has produced distortion. The apostolic pattern is not a starting point to be left behind; it is the permanent form of the church's life, given by the Lord who purchased her and revealed through the apostles He commissioned.

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

We should feel a deep gratitude for the men and women across the centuries who held the line on the apostolic doctrine at great personal cost, the Waldensians in their mountain exile, Jan Hus in the flames of Constance, the Anabaptist martyrs in the rivers of Zurich, the Puritan ejections from the Church of England, and the long line of faithful pastors and congregations who preached the whole counsel of God when the culture rewarded something easier and more comfortable. We stand in their debt. The faith we have received was preserved for us through their fidelity, and that ought to produce in us both gratitude and a corresponding seriousness about our own stewardship of the deposit.

We should feel a holy dissatisfaction with ecclesiological mediocrity, with the shallow consumerism of the megachurch model, the rootless informality of the house church movement at its worst, and the doctrinal evasiveness of the emergent trajectory. These are not merely matters of personal taste or ecclesiastical preference; they are departures from the apostolic pattern that have real consequences for real people. The pastor and congregation that know the history will feel the weight of that history as a call to something better, not better in the sense of more culturally impressive, but better in the sense of more faithfully apostolic, more genuinely covenantal, and more deeply doxological.

We should desire to be a congregation that future generations will look back on with gratitude rather than with the pity reserved for those who accommodated themselves to their moment at the cost of their faithfulness. Every

generation of the church has the opportunity, by the grace of God, to receive the deposit of apostolic doctrine and pass it on undiminished to the generation that follows. That is not a small thing. It is the ordinary, faithful, unremarkable work of the local church, and it is, when all is said and done, the work that history records as the most enduring.

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

- Read Chapter 26 of the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith this week. Note which provisions you find clearly grounded in Scripture, which you find challenging, and which raise questions you want to explore further in this series. Come to the next session ready to discuss your observations.
- Identify one figure from the history of the church surveyed in this lesson, whether Augustine, Calvin, Felix Manz, John Bunyan, or another, and commit to reading at least one primary source from their hand or one biographical account of their ministry. Let the history be inhabited, not merely surveyed.
- Reflect honestly on the ecclesiological model that most shaped your own formation as a Christian. Was it primarily shaped by the apostolic pattern of Acts 2:42, or by one of the modern models surveyed in Section VI? In what ways has that formation been a gift, and in what ways has it left gaps that this series is beginning to fill?
- Pray this week for the faithful churches around the world that are preaching the apostolic gospel, practicing regenerate membership, administering the ordinances rightly, and exercising loving discipline, many of them under conditions of hardship, persecution, or cultural hostility that the comfortable Western church rarely faces. Give thanks that the Spirit has never left the church without a witness, and ask Him to make this congregation part of that faithful remnant in its own generation.
- As a congregation or study group, discuss: what would it look like for this church to function more fully as the apostolic pattern describes, devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer? What is one specific step this community could take toward that vision?

Key Texts: *Acts 2:42–47; Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Timothy 3:15; Jude 3*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- How much of the church's history are you familiar with before beginning this lesson? What periods or figures have most shaped your understanding of what the church is and how she should function? What has that exposure led you to value or to be wary of?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Acts 2:42–47. What are the four marks of the apostolic community identified in verse 42? What does the description of life in verses 43–47 add to those four marks? What does it mean that “the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved”, what does this say about who is responsible for the church's growth?
- Read Jude 3. What does Jude mean by “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints”? What does the phrase “once for all” (hapax) imply about the nature of the apostolic deposit? What does “contend earnestly” require of those who receive it?
- Read Matthew 18:15–20. What is the process Jesus outlines for addressing sin in the church? At what point does the process conclude with exclusion from the community? What does this passage presuppose about the nature and boundaries of the local church?
- Read 1 Timothy 3:14–15 again alongside Acts 20:28–30. What do these two passages, together, say about the pastoral responsibility to guard the church's doctrine and the church's membership? What threats does Paul identify in Acts 20, and how do they relate to the institutional distortions surveyed in this lesson?
- Read Ephesians 2:19–22. What metaphors does Paul use for the church in this passage? What is the foundation of the church, and what does that mean for the doctrine of apostolic succession as Rome defines it? Who is the cornerstone, and what does His role in the structure imply about the authority structure of the church?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the shift from a plurality of elders to a single monarchical bishop was a development that exceeded the explicit teaching of the New Testament. Do you agree? What is the exegetical evidence for a plurality of elders in the apostolic church? What legitimate pastoral concerns drove the development of episcopal polity, and why were those concerns ultimately insufficient to justify the departure from the apostolic pattern?
- Augustine's corpus permixtum doctrine was a necessary corrective to Donatist perfectionism. But the lesson also argues that it must not be taken so far as to make the church content with a membership that includes the visibly unconverted by design. How do you hold these two truths together? Where is the line between realistic acknowledgment of the visible church's mixed nature and the Baptist commitment to pursue a regenerate membership?
- The Anabaptists paid with their lives for the conviction that the church must be constituted by personal faith and public confession rather than by birth and infant baptism. Does the costliness of a conviction validate it? What is the proper relationship between the willingness to suffer for a doctrine and the truth of that doctrine? How should the Anabaptist witness function in our own ecclesiological thinking?

- The lesson surveys three modern ecclesiological models, the megachurch, the house church, and the emerging church, and finds each of them deficient in important ways. Is this analysis fair? Are there genuine strengths in any of these models that the Reformed Baptist tradition should acknowledge and even incorporate? What would it mean to learn from these movements' best instincts while rejecting their most significant departures from the apostolic pattern?
- The lesson concludes with seven lessons from church history. Which of the seven do you find most urgently applicable to the present situation of the Western church? Which do you find most personally challenging? Which do you find most encouraging?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- If the apostolic church was characterized by devotion to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer, how would you evaluate this congregation's fidelity to each of those four marks? Which is strongest? Which needs the most intentional attention and development?
- The lesson argues that the confessional tradition of the 1689 Confession is a gift rather than a cage. How do you relate to that confessional inheritance? Do you find it primarily freeing or constraining? What would it take for you to engage it more seriously as a formational resource rather than an historical curiosity?
- Church discipline, one of the marks Calvin identified and a practice this lesson commends from the apostolic and Baptist tradition, is widely neglected in contemporary evangelical churches. What would need to change in the culture of this congregation for discipline to be practiced faithfully and lovingly? What fears or misunderstandings about discipline are most common in your experience, and how would you address them from Scripture?
- The lesson ends with a vision of the ordinary local church as the ordinary means of God's extraordinary purposes. How does that vision affect your own commitment to this congregation, its unremarkable routines of gathering, giving, serving, and praying? What would it mean to inhabit those routines with the theological weight this lesson has given them?

Prayer Focus

Before praying together, read Jude 3 aloud slowly: “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” Sit with the word “necessity.” Jude had something else he wanted to write about. He was compelled to write this instead. Let that urgency, the necessity of contending for the faith in the face of threat, shape the prayers that follow. This is not a lesson in history for its own sake. It is a summons to be faithful custodians of a deposit that has been purchased and preserved at great cost.

Give thanks, specifically and by name, for those men and women in the history of the church whose faithfulness in a particular moment preserved the apostolic deposit for us. Give thanks for Augustine’s clarity against the Donatists, for Luther’s courage at Worms, for Calvin’s careful ecclesiological labor in Geneva, for the Anabaptist martyrs who held the doctrine of the believers’ church against both Catholic and Protestant persecution, for the Particular Baptists who gave us the 1689 Confession, and for the faithful pastors and congregations in the generations immediately preceding our own who held the faith when holding it was not fashionable. Their faithfulness is a gift we received without earning it.

Pray for the church in her present moment of ecclesiological crisis and confusion. Pray for pastors who are navigating the pressures of consumer ecclesiology, institutional decline, and cultural hostility without compromising the apostolic deposit. Pray for seminaries and theological institutions that are training the next generation of pastors, that they would send men and women into the churches who are not merely competent practitioners but theologically formed, confessionally grounded, and pastorally courageous. Pray for the small and struggling congregations that are doing the most ordinary and least celebrated work of preaching, disciple-making, and community formation, that they would see themselves as participants in the mission of the triune God, not as failures in the mission of the market.

Pray for this congregation’s own ecclesiological health. Pray specifically that this body would be characterized by the four marks of Acts 2:42: devoted to the apostles’ teaching (in preaching, teaching, and personal study); to genuine fellowship (*koinōnia*, the costly sharing of life, not merely social pleasantness); to the breaking of bread (the right and frequent administration of the Lord’s Supper as a visible proclamation of the gospel); and to prayer (corporate, earnest, expectant prayer as the community’s dependence on God made visible). Ask God to make this congregation a congregation that, a hundred years from now, some future believer will look back on with gratitude as part of the faithful thread.

Close with the doxology of Ephesians 3:20–21, the same benediction with which the first lesson closed and with which every lesson of this series will close. The God who has preserved His church through two thousand years of her faithfulness and her failure is the same God who is at work in this congregation, in this generation, in this place. He is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think. To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever.

“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: Acts 2:42–47; Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Timothy 3:15; Jude 3

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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