

CHAPTER 31

OF SYNODS AND COUNCILS

Synods or Councils are meetings of church officials from more than one local congregation. Some churches, with an independent form of government, do not recognize any church government other than the local church. Presbyterian bodies recognize the authority of the elders from the various churches acting together.

Propriety of Synods and Councils

“1. For the better government and further edification of the Church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils; and it belongeth to the overseers and other rulers of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, and the power which Christ hath given them for edification and not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies; and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the Church.”

In matters that affect the church, no congregation is an island to itself. The Lord established a government, and provided an example in the days of the apostles. The Jews developed a form of government based on the synagogue. Each synagogue had a body of elders, chosen by the people. These elders would govern the local synagogue. The elders of the various synagogues in a region would meet on a regular basis as a sanhedrin, to decide cases brought before it from the synagogues. The leading elders, priests, and scribes from the nation would meet in Jerusalem in the Great Sanhedrin, which unified all the synagogues together.

When Jesus taught about the government of the church in Matthew 18, he used the structure of the synagogue government, and his brother James used the very term synagogue to describe the Christian assembly (Jas 2:2). The Apostle Paul had elders ordained in each church, just as in the synagogues (Acts 14:53).

The clearest example of this structure is found in Acts 15. When there was a controversy in some of the churches about circumcision and the Jewish law, the apostles did not simply rule on the matter using their authority. Rather, they provided an example for the future. They called for a council, comprised of the “apostles and elders” from all the churches (Acts 15:1-4). It was the “apostles and elders” who disputed the points, arrived at a solution, and informed the churches about their ruling (Acts 15:6, 22, 23 [Greek, “the apostles and elders, your brothers”]; 16:4). This type of meeting would have been impossible if the apostles had truly believed in independent church government.

Now, of course, we do not have apostles, but we do have elders—teaching elders (ministers) and ruling elders. These are the men who gather in our presbytery and synod meetings to govern the churches.

Note the purpose of these meetings: further edification and better government. If the presbytery and synod do their jobs properly, the churches will have better government and the people will be edified in their Christian faith and walk.

Authority of synods and councils

“2. It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially, to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his Church; to receive complaints in cases of mal-administration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his Word.”

Areas of authority:

- Determine controversies of faith (what should we believe?)
- Determine cases of conscience (what should we do in a particular situation?)
- Establish rules for public worship (how should we conduct our worship services?)
- Receive complaints (was this case handled properly and judged rightly in the church or lower court?)

We note that in all these areas, the power of the synod or council is ministerial, and must be based on the authority of the Bible, not its own judgment. In matters not specified in the Bible or our Constitution, the members and churches are to be left free (Form of Government 1:9, “All powers not in this Constitution specifically granted to the courts of the Church are reserved to the congregations respectively, or to the people”).

The authority of the synod or council is upheld in two ways:

- The decision itself is biblical, having the force of God’s Word behind it (“to be received with reverence and submission”).
- The decision has been reached by the officers of the church, who are to be obeyed in any case as they carry out their appointed function, unless they command what God’s Word forbids (“the power whereby they are made”; church members are to obey and submit to the church officers who carry out their duties, Heb 13:7, 17).

Limitations of synods and councils

“3. All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both.

“4. Synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”

These paragraphs point out the fallible nature of all human councils. Since the apostles’ times there have been numerous councils, some encompassing the whole Christian world, others more local or sectarian. While many have been true to the Bible, many others have taught obvious error and heresy. Most church councils held during the Middle Ages supported the Roman papacy and its false doctrines.

Generally, most Christian churches recognize the first six ecumenical councils, held in the early centuries of the church, as teaching orthodox, biblical doctrine. Other outstanding councils include the Protestant councils at Dordt and Westminster. The Bible Presbyterian Church also recognizes the assemblies of the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A. prior to its apostasy, as well as its own presbyteries and synods. Yet we realize that all these councils were fallible, and cannot be quoted as the same as the Word of God.

Not only are councils limited by their fallibility, but also by the subjects they are competent to discuss and decide upon. They must limit their activities to ecclesiastical matters. Church councils are not the place to discuss politics, economics, art, or other controversial subjects, except as they are directly related to the teaching of the Bible. On the other hand, councils are to exercise great care so as not to subordinate the work of the church to that of the state or any other agency.