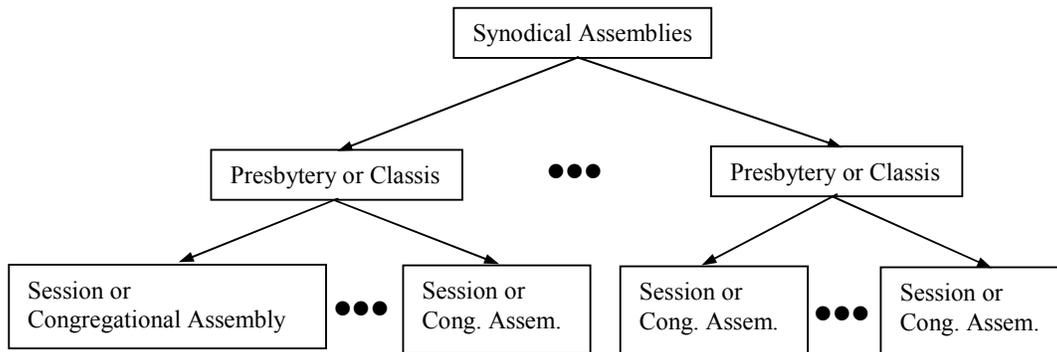


**Introduction**

As mentioned in our comments on the previous chapter, our Confession does not clearly state what form of Government is to be considered legitimate. The Westminster Assembly, however, also produced a document known as *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*. In this document, it is declared:

It is lawful and agreeable to the Word of God, that the Church be governed by several sorts of assemblies, which are congregational, classical and synodical (s.v., “Of Church-Government, and the several sort of Assemblies for the Same”).

The relationship between the three levels of governing assemblies may be pictured as follows:



It is the conviction that individual church sessions should come under the oversight of presbyteries or classes (comprising of representative ministers and elders from the sessions) that distinguishes Presbyterian churches from a Congregational or Independent churches.

The biblical basis for this conviction is laid down in *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* (s.v. “Of Classical Assemblies”), viz.:

THE scripture doth hold out a presbytery in a church.

A presbytery consisteth of ministers of the word, and such other publick officers as are agreeable to and warranted by the word of God to be church-governors, to join with the ministers in the government of the church.

The scripture doth hold forth, that many particular congregations may be under one presbyterial government.

This proposition is proved by instances:

- I. **First**, Of the church of Jerusalem, which consisted of more congregations than one, and all these congregations were under one presbyterial government.

This appeareth thus:

- a. *First*, The church of Jerusalem consisted of more congregations than one, as is manifest:
  - 1st, By the multitude of believers mentioned, in divers [places], both before the dispersion of the believers there, by means of the persecution, and also after the dispersion.
  - 2dly, By the many apostles and other preachers in the church of Jerusalem. And if there were but one congregation there, then each apostle preached but seldom; which will not consist with Acts vi. 2.

- 3dly, The diversity of languages among the believers, mentioned both in the second and sixth chapters of the Acts, doth argue more congregations than one in that church.
- b. *Secondly*, All those congregations were under one presbyterial government; because,
  - 1st, They were one church.
  - 2dly, The elders of the church are mentioned.
  - 3dly, The apostles did the ordinary acts of presbyters, as presbyters in that kirk; which proveth a presbyterial church before the dispersion, Acts vi.
  - 4thly, The several congregations in Jerusalem being one church, the elders of that church are mentioned as meeting together for acts of government; which proves that those several congregations were under one presbyterial government.

And whether these congregations were fixed or not fixed, in regard of officers or members, it is all one as to the truth of the proposition.

Nor doth there appear any material difference betwixt the several congregations in Jerusalem, and the many congregations now in the ordinary condition of the church, as to the point of fixedness required of officers or members.

- c. *Thirdly*, Therefore the scripture doth hold forth, that many congregations may be under one presbyterial government.

## II. *Secondly*, By the instance of the church of Ephesus; for,

- a. *First*, That there were more congregations than one in the church of Ephesus, appears by Acts xx. 31, where is mention of Paul's continuance at Ephesus in preaching for the space of three years; and Acts xix. 18, 19, 20, where the special effect of the word is mentioned; and ver. 10. and 17. of the same chapter, where is a distinction of Jews and Greeks; and 1 Cor. xvi. 8, 9, where is a reason of Paul's stay at Ephesus until Pentecost; and ver. 19, where is mention of a particular church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, then at Ephesus, as appears, Acts xviii. 19, 24, 26. All which laid together, doth prove that the multitude of believers did make more congregations than one in the church of Ephesus.
- b. *Secondly*, That there were many elders over these many congregations, as one flock, appeareth.
- c. *Thirdly*, That these many congregations were one church, and that they were under one presbyterial government, appeareth.

Our present study is, however, not so much on classical assemblies as it is on synodical assemblies. Indeed, the astute student of our Confession will realise that nothing is said about presbyteries or classes in it. This is so because the not all the members of the Westminster Assembly were Presbyterian. The Assembly was in that sense ecumenical, and therefore the Confession produced by it allowed for differences in church polity, though the fact that a whole chapter is reserved to discuss synodical assemblies, does indicate a leaning towards Presbyterianism.

## **On the Convening of Synodical Assemblies**

*31.1 For the better government, and further edification of the Church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called Synods or Councils.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Acts 15:2, 4, 6

*The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* (s.v. “Of Synodical Assemblies”), in agreement with this assertion, states:

THE scripture doth hold out another sort of assemblies for the government of the church, beside classical and congregational, all which we call Synodical.

Pastors and teachers, and other church-governors, (as also other fit persons, when it shall be deemed expedient,) are members of those assemblies which we call Synodical, where they have a lawful calling thereunto.

Synodical assemblies may lawfully be of several sorts, as provincial, national, and oecumenical.

It is lawful, and agreeable to the word of God, that there be a subordination of congregational, classical, provincial, and national assemblies, for the government of the church.

Notice how according to the Assembly, synodical assemblies, unlike congregational and classical assemblies, need not consist only of elders and ministers in the same denomination. It can be œcumenical and national, which was precisely what the Westminster Assembly itself was.

- The basis for this assertion is found largely in Acts 15, which describe the meeting of the Jerusalem council or as the case appears to be, the first synodical assembly of the early church. The record is telling:

<sup>1</sup>And certain men which came down from Judæa taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. <sup>2</sup>When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.... <sup>4</sup>And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received *of the church, and of the apostles and elders*, and they declared all things that God had done with them.... <sup>6</sup>And *the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter*.... <sup>22</sup>Then pleased it *the apostles and elders, with the whole church*, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: <sup>23</sup>And they wrote letters by them after this manner; *The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia* (Acts 15:1, 2, 4, 6, 22–23).

Notice that it was the apostles and elders who met to consider the matter at hand. It is likely that these elders and apostles were regularly serving in different congregations seeing that number of believers at Jerusalem was quite large, and seeing that the apostles preached so frequently that there was a necessity to free them from administrative work (Acts 6:2). If it were one large congregation, they would hardly be so busy since there are so many of them. And since there are more than one congregation and yet one church, it must have been, as shown earlier, that they were ruled not only by Sessions (for each congregation) and by a Presbytery (for, perhaps, the whole of Jerusalem). If there were a Presbytery in Jerusalem, it is not difficult to see that the members of Presbytery (whether in whole or in part) must have made up the synodical assembly together with members from the presbyteries of Antioch, Syria, Cilicia, etc.

- Such synodical assemblies, when they are convened, would certainly, as in the case of the Jerusalem Assembly, serve the purpose of “better government, and further edification of the Church,” for “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety” (Prov 11:14).

- But notice the less than dogmatic language of the Confession. Why is this the case? Does it not reflect the fact that it is not also easy or expedient to convene synodical assemblies. Some of these difficulties is suggested in the next paragraph of our Confession.

*31.2 As magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with about matters of religion;<sup>1</sup> so if magistrates be open enemies to the Church, the ministers of Christ, of themselves, by virtue of their office, or they, with other fit persons upon delegation from their churches, may meet together in such assemblies.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Isa 49:23; 1 Tim 2:1–2; 2 Chr 19:8–11; 29; 30; Mt 2:4–5; Prov 11:14; <sup>2</sup>Acts 15:2, 4, 22–23, 25.

- In the Adopting Act of the Church of Scotland in 1647, it was noted that it is only in the case of churches “not settled, or constituted in point of government,” that the civil ruler may call for synodical assemblies of ministers. Indeed, in such a case, the ministers may meet synodically without commission from their churches. But in the case of churches that are settled or constituted, then the ministers and elders may meet together in such assemblies as often as necessary whether they have the approval of the magistrate or not.<sup>1</sup>
- The keys to understanding why the civil magistrate is allowed to call synodical assemblies are twofold: firstly, Isaiah 49:23 refers to kings as nursing father; secondly, the kings of Judah did, with God’s approval, intervene to set the Church in the Old Testament on the right path again (e.g., 2 Chr 19:8–11; 2 Chr 29, 30); and thirdly, Proverbs 11:14 teaches: “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.” This surely demands that a Christian civil magistrate should seek the council of the officers of the church.
- In the case of a nation that is constitutionally and societally multi-religious, the revision of the First General Assembly of the American Presbyterian Church in 1789 may be more applicable and less open to dispute until such a time as the nation should in the providence of God become Christian:

*For the better government, and further edification of the Church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called Synods or Councils:<sup>a</sup> 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;<sup>b</sup> and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the Church.<sup>c</sup>*

<sup>a</sup>Acts 15:2, 4, 6; <sup>b</sup>Acts 15; <sup>c</sup>Acts 15:22–23, 25.

---

<sup>1</sup> “It is further declared, That the Assembly understands some parts of the second article of the thirty-one chapter only of kirks not settled, or constituted in point of government: And that although, in such kirks, a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, may be called by the magistrate’s authority and nomination, without any other call, to consult and advise with about matters of religion; and although, likewise, the ministers of Christ, without delegation from their churches, may of themselves, and by virtue of their office, meet together synodically in such kirks not yet constituted, yet neither of these ought to be done in kirks constituted and settled; it being always free to the magistrate to advise with synods of ministers and ruling elders, meeting upon delegation from their churches, either ordinarily, or, being indicted by his authority, occasionally, and *pro re nata*; it being also free to assemble together synodically, as well *pro re nata* as at the ordinary times, upon delegation from the churches, by the intrinsical power received from Christ, as often as it is necessary for the good of the church so to assemble, in case the magistrate, to the detriment of the Church, withhold or deny his consent; the necessity of occasional assemblies being first remonstrated unto him by humble supplication.”

## **On the Purpose of Synods and Councils**

*31.3 It belongeth to synods and councils ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for 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.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Acts 15:15, 19, 24, 27–31; 16:4; Mt 18:17–20.

- When the council of Jerusalem met, it is clear that the decision arrived were not merely advisory but authoritative. This is why, in the synodical letter, it could be said: “For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things” (Acts 15:28). If it was advisory, this language would be out of place. Luke understood the same when he referred to what was decided on by the council as “decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4).
- Based on Acts 15 and Matthew 18:17–20, our Confession infers that the following may be ministerially (i.e., not absolutely since Christ alone is the law-giver) determined by the council:
  - a. Controversies of faith—such as when there is a dispute concerning doctrine or interpretation of Scripture.
  - b. Cases of conscience—i.e., pertaining to Christian liberty or conduct relative to matters of indifference.
  - c. Manner and rules for worship and government of the Church as far as left to be determined by the light of nature, i.e., in circumstances or if you like, secondary issues.
  - d. Complaints—such as in the case of mal-administration. These are to be received, investigated and a verdict given.
- The “decrees and determinations” of the councils, when handled down to the congregations “are to be received with reverence and submission,” “if consonant to the Word of God.” But the basis for their reception must not just be because they are in agreement with the Word of God, but because of the “power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in His Word.”

The implication of this statement is that if the synod should make a decision which it regards as being consonant with the Word of God, but a particular congregation believes that it is a matter of indifference (not contrary to the Word), then, it must still submit to it as authoritative. For example, a synod may decree that the ministers under her purview may not administer the Lord’s Supper in any congregation other than in the same denomination. All ministers of the denomination must then submit to the decision even if they do not agree with the ruling.

## **On the Limitations of Synods and Councils**

31.4 *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.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Eph 2:20; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor 2:5; 2 Cor 1:24.*

- This statement refutes the Romish claim that councils and popes are infallible. The only rule infallible of faith for the church is the Holy Scripture and it is the duty of members and officers of the church to test everything that is decreed against the Scripture as the Bereans did (Acts 17:11). History has also shown that councils do err, as Shaw neatly illustrates:

“In the Arian controversy, several councils decreed in opposition to that of Nice. The Eutychian heresy was approved in the second council of Ephesus, and soon after condemned in the Council of Chalcedon. The worship of images was condemned in the Council of Constantinople, and was approved in the second Nicene Council, and again condemned at Francfort. Finally, the authority of councils was declared, at Councstance and Basil, to be superior to that of the Pope; but this decision was reversed in the Lateran” (*Shaw, 369*).

31.5 *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.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Lk 12:13–14; Jn 18:36.*

As our Confession denounces any Erastian interference of the civil government on any matter purely ecclesiastical or spiritual, so it it also denounced any interference of the church or her councils on the civil affairs of the land, *contra* Papalism.

The church and her synod should only interact with the civil magistrate on matters pertaining to the civil affairs of the commonwealth, when she is required by the civil magistrate, or when,—in extraordinary circumstances,—the satisfaction of conscience requires her to submit a humble petition or advice.

—JJ Lim