

Ecclesiastical Government (2nd)

(Today we continue studying the subject of “Ecclesiastical Government” and will show the basic distinctions between the government of the Baptist and Protestants.)

Previously, we noted that denominationalism that is generally practiced today is not scriptural. Likewise, we saw that the English word church was derived from the Greek word that means the house of the Lord or that which belongs to the Lord. Further, we discovered that this English word church was substituted for the Greek word ἐκκλησία, which means congregation or assembly. Today we will begin by discussing the fundamental differences of ecclesiastical government between that of the Protestants and the Baptists.

It is true that there are many different forms of ecclesiastical government. There are various structures of catholic governments (such as, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and others), a range of hierarchical structures where an overarching governmental structure rules over independent congregations (i.e., Methodists, Pentecostal, Assembly of God, and such like), congregations where a ruling body of ministers (generally designated as elders) that rule over the congregations, and then is a form where a group of people meet together and virtually have no organized structure of government and, yet, such groups still follow the leadership of one or more individuals. Obviously, there are many different shades of governments in between these extremes; however, our study is primarily focusing on the basic differences between that of the Protestants and the Baptists. Sadly, many congregations today that identify themselves as being Baptists often follow a modified form of Protestant government.

Chapter thirty-one, of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says, “For the better government, and further edification of the Church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called Synods or Councils.” The confession further states that “magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with, about matters of religion” and that “[i]t belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cares of conscience ... to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and the government of His Church.” Many other functions are described regarding synods and councils. Also associated with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is a document entitled “The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government.” In this confession as published by the by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1970, “The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government” declares that “church government” is given under various kinds. After discussing various officers and their duties within a “particular congregation,” it says, “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.” (It should be noted that church here is not capitalized as in Chapter thirty-one of the confession.) Further, it is stated, “Synodical assemblies may lawfully be of several sorts, as provincial, national, and oecumenical [*sic.*] 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.” These assemblies and synods are of various types and may be limited to a congregation, or over a group of congregations, or over a province, or even over domination. As with the Anglican Church of England, it would be over a national church and may involve magistrates. All of this is confusing and I doubt that the average member of such religions is able to understand the functions and duties of each of these different ruling bodies.

The 1643/1644 *London Baptist Confession of Faith*, Chapter thirty-three, says “Jesus Christ hath here on earth a spiritual kingdom, which is His Church, whom He hath purchased and redeemed to Himself as a peculiar inheritance; which Church is a company of visible saints, called and separated from the world by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of faith of the gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement in the practical enjoyment of the

ordinances commanded by Christ their head and king.” Then in Chapter thirty-six, it states that “every Church hath power given them from Christ, for their wellbeing, to choose among themselves meet persons for elders and deacons ... for the feeding, governing, serving, and building up of His Church; and that none have any power to impose on them either these or any other.” (It is to be noted that in this confession the word church is capitalized in every place. Even the word “churches” is likewise capitalized.) The 1689 *London Baptist Confession of Faith* and adopted as the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* in America in the early 1700’s, says that “each of these churches thus gathered according to his mind” (that is, the mind of Christ) “declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe, with commands and rules for the due and right exerting and executing of that power.” To avoid being further wearisome, I will not give other quotes. Needless to say, that the Baptists have a simple form of government in that the congregation has all its authority from the Lord and nothing outside the congregation has any power over it. I might add that we shall further show that there are no auxiliary organizations other than the congregation as instituted by the Lord for the work of propagating the gospel and defending the faith. The only authority instituted by the Lord is the congregation. Now that we have given the basic positions of the Protestants and the Baptists, we shall study the Scriptures and see what God would have us to believe and practice.

Since the Protestants assert that there are various kinds of assemblies, councils, synods, and other forms of governments that rule over congregations, we shall look at their basic scriptural references and see if these governmental types are supported by the New Testament. We must bear in mind that we are discussing the New Testament congregation and the governmental authority is to be found in the New Testament and not in the theocratic government of Israel in the Old Testament.

The first passage given from the *Westminster Confession* to support synods or councils is Acts 15:2, 4, 6. These verses are as follows: “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. ... 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. ... And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.” While there are other things to consider from this chapter to know the full matter of this situation, let us look at these verses and see what is stated in them. Actually verse one through verse thirty-three are to be considered for the full picture.

Verse two makes no sense unless we read verse one and the ending verses of chapter fourteen. Some men from Judea went to Antioch in Syria and were teaching one could not be saved unless he was “circumcised after the manner of Moses.” Paul and Barnabas opposed this teaching. Verse two says that “they determined” that Paul, Barnabas, and others go to Jerusalem concerning this matter. Who were the “they” that sent Paul and the others? Obviously, Paul and the others did not send themselves. It was the congregation at Antioch. Verse four declares that Paul and the others from Antioch were received not only by the apostles and elders, but by the congregation at Jerusalem. Verse six implies that only the apostles and elders (Paul and his company are not mentioned in this verse) considered the matter.

When we study these verses in context we find that this was not an independent council or synod separate from the congregation. This was an issue between two separate congregations—Antioch and Jerusalem. The congregation at Antioch sent Paul and the company to Jerusalem since the Judaizers came from there. It is worthy of note that as Paul and the company passed through Phenice and Samaria nothing is mentioned about this “church trouble.” However, they did declare about the conversion of the Gentiles. We should learn from this. When there are issues between two congregations the matter should not be shared with others. The principle of Matthew 18:15 should be followed. Many congregations, as well as their members, would be spared of troubling issues if this was practiced and Christianity would be a better witness to the world. Allow me to say again that this situation was between two independent

congregations and, therefore, the matter should be settled between them. This was during the early days of Christianity and the New Testament apostles were still alive and living in Jerusalem and functioning in (and not over) the congregation there. Obviously, their presence gave weight to what was resolved in this meeting.

I regret to say that our time is up for today and we will have to continue with this issue in our next podcast. I pray this study is a blessing to you. Farewell.