

## Ecclesiastical Government (3<sup>rd</sup>)

(Today in our study on the subject of “Ecclesiastical Government” we will show that the council at Jerusalem in Acts chapter fifteen included the whole congregation and was under its authority.)

In our previous study, as we closed, we were studying Acts 15:2, 4, and 6 because these verses were supplied by the Protestant confession to support synods or councils. We noted that to get the full context, the latter part of chapter fourteen to verse thirty-three of the fifteenth chapter of Acts must be studied. From the context it was determined that “certain men” from Judæa arrived at Antioch in Syria and taught that unless one “be circumcised after the manner of Moses” he could not be saved. (Obviously, if this were true females could not be saved since they could not be circumcised, but that is another topic.) The congregation at Antioch sent representatives comprised of “Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them” to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the apostles and elders of the congregation at Jerusalem “about this question.” (Verse twenty-two tells us that the discussion included the whole congregation at Jerusalem.) Therefore, this was an issue between two separate congregations—the congregation of Antioch in Syria and the congregation at Jerusalem. Since this was still in the early days of Christianity, the apostles were still living at Jerusalem. Previously, the apostle James was killed by King Herod. Though Herod attempted to kill Peter at that time, he was blessed to escape and go into another place (Acts 12:17) for a while. Now at the time of this conference at Jerusalem, Peter was back since he at one point addressed the audience. Acts 15:4 declares that Paul and those with him were received not only by the apostles and elders, but of the congregation at Jerusalem.

The Protestants would have us believe that issues were considered and resolved by the council at Jerusalem composed of apostles and elders alone. After all, do not verses two and six indicate this? Verse two says “Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them” were to go “to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question,” and verse six says that “the apostles and elders came together for to consider this matter.” After much discussion, Peter spoke. Then Barnabas and Paul spoke. Following these, James, who by some believe to be the pastor of the congregation at this time, spoke. Many believe him to be the apostles designated as James the less or James the son of Alphaesus. However, after this, we read, “Then pleased it the apostles and elders, *with the whole church,*” [emphasis mine-JKB] to select Judas Barsabas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas and, obviously, those that came with them, back to Antioch with a letter. (The KJV supplies “letters” but though several people were involved in writing the consensus of the meeting, there is no indication by the Greek text that more than one letter was constructed.) What is generally omitted or overlooked in this meeting is that the conclusion was not by the apostles and some elders of unknown origin. It was with the approval of the whole congregation of Jerusalem, Acts 15:22. They, the congregation, made it clear that they did not send out the judaizing Pharisees (cf. Acts 15:1, 5). While the letter was to “the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia,” it was written in such a way to include all Gentiles. Judas and Silas were to go as messengers of the congregation at Jerusalem with the letter to testify of the truth of its contents. Though the judaizing Pharisees were spreading their perverted gospel wherever they went, this meeting was a result of the congregation at Antioch sending messengers to the congregation at Jerusalem inquiring if they (the Jerusalem congregation) had sent them out. The council in Acts chapter fifteen was not some independent synod or council ruling over a congregation or congregations. The authorized delegates from the congregation at Antioch were sent to Jerusalem to question that congregation if they had sent out those who were troubling the people with words and subverting the souls (Acts 15:24) of the congregation at Antioch. The Jerusalem congregation, along with the apostles who were there at that time, sent the letter and messengers to the troubled congregation at Antioch saying that they did not send them out. Acts

chapter fifteen was a matter that involved two separate congregations and was resolved by the representatives from Antioch and the congregation at Jerusalem. Again, we say that the council in Acts chapter fifteen was not some independent synod or council ruling over a congregation or congregations. It definitely was not called by civil rulers or magistrates. It was not called and resolved by a group of ministers. It was not classical, synodical, provincial, national, or ecumenical. It was not an issue resolved by a ruling body of elders within a single congregation, nor was it resolved by a ruling body of elders of two independent congregations. It was an issue between two congregations and resolved accordingly.

The *Westminster Confession* in the *second* article of Chapter XXXI affirms that civil “magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers” or other “fit persons” to meet together. Some passages of Scripture are referenced, but they have nothing to do with the government of the congregation. The closest passage is that of the conference at Jerusalem as given in Acts chapter fifteen and we have already studied it. Definitely, civil magistrates did not call together those that attended that meeting. The confession also referenced I Timothy 2:1-2 where we are to pray for “kings, and for all that are in authority,” but that was given to us by the Apostle Paul and not by any civil authority. Also this passage was not for the purpose of a synod or any other council. We are exhorted to pray for rulers so that “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” The Lord Jesus Christ distanced His kingdom from that of worldly governments when He told Pilate that His “kingdom is not of this world,” John 18:36. Caesar has no place in the congregation of the Lord. (As a side note: allow me to say that the congregation of God does not have to go to Caesar for authority to exist and those that receive their governmental status have subjected themselves to Caesar’s authority. However, that is another study which we do not have time to do at this time.) Worldly organizations and governments are not to be connected with the congregation of the Lord. We are not to be entangled with the world because we have been called out of the world (John 15:19); therefore, why should the magistrates of the world have the authority over the congregation of the Lord. Besides, the Scriptures tell us that the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God (I Corinthians 3:19) and that the congregation is not to go before worldly judges and rulers to govern over it, I Corinthians 6:1-5. The Lord’s house is not to be governed by the wisdom or authority of the world. The congregation of God is to govern over its own affairs.

In the *third* article of Chapter XXXI of the *Westminster Confession* in addition to Acts chapter fifteen, Acts 16:4 and Matthew 18:17-20 are given to support synods and councils for government of the congregation. Obviously, the Protestant confession considers denominational organizations and structures in addition to the congregation to be a church, but as previously discussed in earlier podcasts the Greek translation should be congregation or assembly instead of the English word church.

Acts 16:4 says, “And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem.” Though this verse says that the decrees “were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem,” we must not forget that “the whole church” (congregation) was included (Acts 15:22). In other words, the congregation at Jerusalem wanted everyone to know that the judaizing Pharisees were not sent out by them and that what the judaizing Pharisees were teaching was not believed by the congregation at Jerusalem. Equally, since the apostles were residing at Jerusalem at that time and were ministering in the congregation there, they equally agreed with conclusion. It is true that the ministry of the apostles was unique, but they in no way lorded over the congregations. (We plan to show this more conclusive in future studies.) Since the letter to the congregation at Antioch was also addressed to those in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:23), Paul and Silas went through those regions and confirmed those congregations, too, Acts 15:41. After leaving those regions, they traveled to other congregations previously established by Paul and Barnabas and shared with them what was determined at Jerusalem. Certainly, these meetings were not a synod or any other such like council. We know that the judaizing Pharisees no doubt were in those areas too because Paul reminds the congregations in Galatia about him confronting Peter when he was distancing himself from the Gentiles. (See Galatians 2:11-21.) Therefore, it was essential that Paul and Silas relate to the

congregations wherever they went what took place at Jerusalem and assured not only Antioch but congregations in every place that the judaizing Pharisees were not sent out by the congregation at Jerusalem.

However, our time is up for today. The Lord willing, we will take up our next podcast with Matthew 18:17-20 as we continue studying this subject.