

Ecclesiastical Government (4th)

(We are continuing our study of why the Protestants believe in synods and councils that rule ecclesiastically over independent congregations.)

In our previous lesson, we stopped as we were considering the verses assigned to article *three* of Chapter XXXI of the *Westminster Confession*. Our time expired before we could study Matthew 18:17-20. Let us study this passage and see if it supports the ideas of synods or councils that are outside the congregation of the Lord. To better set the passage in context let us begin with verse fifteen: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Obviously, this passage refers to a congregational setting. To deny this is to deny all reason and general understanding. As noted in a previous podcast, the congregation at Corinth was rebuked for going to the civil authorities regarding differences between members and not settling the matter within the congregation, I Corinthians 6:1-6. Paul put the matter before the saints at Corinth with a question: “I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?” Note that the verse points out that the “brethren” are those “among you”; that is, among the congregation at Corinth. Therefore, to assume that the Holy Spirit would have inspired Paul to teach the saints at Corinth differently from what Matthew recorded of the words of the Lord Jesus would be a dichotomy of the unity of the Scriptures. Our Lord taught that if one is offended then he is to go to the offender and seek reconciliation. However, if reconciliation was not achieved, the offended party is to take one or two others, but if there was still no resolution it should be reported to the congregation. The idea that an independent synod or council outside the congregation is involved is not consistent with the context.

Article *four* of the *Westminster Confession* does affirm that “all synods or councils ... whether general or particular” are to be “used as a help” to “the rule of faith, or practice.” The scriptural references supplied here are Ephesians 2:20; Acts 17:11; I Corinthians 2:5; and II Corinthians 1:24.

I am at a loss as to why Acts 17:11 was referenced to support any kind of synod or council of ecclesiastical government in the New Testament assembly. Paul and Silas were sent by the saints at Thessalonica to Berea. In Berea they went into the synagogue as was their custom and preached the gospel. The texts say, “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” Who were the “these” in Berea? They were Jews in the synagogue. A New Testament congregation was not in existent in Berea at that time. Surely, no one would suggest that Jews in a synagogue have any authority to form a synod or council to rule over or instruct a New Testament assembly. While it is true that all Christians, even an entire congregation, should search the Scriptures and receive the truth of the gospel as did those Berean Jews, but this passage of the Scriptures in no way teaches anything about a synod or council as advocated by the Protestants.

Since the other three passages are related to the work of the apostles relative to the New Testament assembly, we shall look at them together. Ephesians 2:20 says, “And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.” I Corinthians 2:5 states, “That

your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.” And then II Corinthians 1:24 reads, “Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.”

It goes without saying that the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles were the foundation of structure and formation of the New Testament congregation. In fact, the first congregation was comprised of apostles and those who accompanied them with the Lord. The writer of Hebrews in chapter two verse twenty-two quoted Psalm 22:22 which declares that our Lord sang in the midst of the congregation. The only place recorded in the Scriptures where Jesus sang was the night he instituted the Lord’s Supper, Matthew 26:30. Equally, when the three thousands were converted on the Day of Pentecost, it says that they were *added* to the congregation, Acts 2:41. Therefore, not only was the congregation in existence prior to Pentecost, but it was in existence that night in the upper room. The apostles were indeed essential and the first gifts to the household of faith (I Corinthians 12:28) but they did not lord it over any assembly. As Paul so elegantly said to Corinth in the two passages quoted above, he (along with the other apostles) ministered so that their faith would be in the power of God and not in the wisdom of men, and that they (Paul and other apostles and elders) would not have dominion over their faith but were their helpers. The idea behind the word helper is that of a fellow-laborer. These passages do not give any indication of a synod, council, or any kind of assembly that is separate from that of the “local church”—the congregation of God. These passages do not teach that there is some ecclesiastical hierarchy ruling over individual congregations.

From the *Westminster Confession* under “The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government,” it is stated, “The scripture doth hold forth, that many particular congregations may be under one presbyterial government.” It further asserts that this proposition is proved by various instances. The *first* assertion for proof of this is that “the church of Jerusalem ... consisted of more congregations than one, and all these congregations were under one presbyterial government.” We must remember that the English word “church” is not a translation of the Greek word ἐκκλησία. When Jesus used the Greek word ἐκκλησία in Matthew 16:18, He did not stop and say that He was meaning something different from the common usage, meaning, and understanding of the day. The English word “church” is derived from the Greek word for “the house of the Lord,” and King James gave certain rules to prevent ἐκκλησία being translated congregation. Therefore to say that “the church of Jerusalem ... consisted of more congregations than one” is to say that the congregation of Jerusalem consisted of more congregations than one. This is confusion to say the least and utterly nonsense to say the most. However, the writers give various passages to support this but one has to assume the premise because no verse plainly supports their position. They maintain—that because believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria under Saul’s persecution (Acts 8:1), that Peter stood up in the midst of disciples in Acts 1:15, that three thousand were added on Pentecost and they continued daily in the temple and from house to house afterward (Acts 2:41, 46-47), that five thousand were added later (Acts 4:4), including men, women (Acts 6:14) and a “number of disciples” along with “a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith (Acts 6:1, 7)—that all of this supports more than one congregation in Jerusalem. But oddly the Scriptures declare only one congregation. Then Acts 9:31 is supplied where years later that Paul was sent to Tarsus and it says “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria, and were edified; walking in the fear of the Lord, and the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.” However, this passage teaches the opposite of the confession’s premise because the region is not limited to Jerusalem. It says churches (congregations) “throughout all Judea ... Galilee, and Samaria.” To affirm that because there were congregations throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria indicates they were under or comprise the congregation at Jerusalem is mere assumption and reading into the Scriptures. Then Acts 21:20 is added in conjunction with Acts 9:31 as further support that the “church of Jerusalem consisted” of multiple congregations. When James and the other elders said to Paul that “many thousands of Jews there are which believe” etc., this does not imply that many congregations were under one so-called church.

The *second* premise to support the Protestant belief that the “church of Jerusalem” consisted of multiple congregations is that there were “many apostles and other preachers in the church of Jerusalem.” Their proof-text for this is Acts 6:2. This text does not prove any such things. There were many congregations in that day, as well as there are today, that have multiple ministers. In fact, I co-pastored for about fifteen years in a single congregation. Multiple ministers in a congregation is no proof of a hierarchical ecclesiastical government as believed by the Protestants.

Our time is up for today, the Lord willing well will continue with this topic in our next lesson.