

Ecclesiastical Government (5th)

(We are continuing our study of why the Protestants believe in synods and councils that rule ecclesiastically over independent congregations as found in the *Westminster Confession* under “The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government.”)

In our previous podcast, we were reviewing “The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government” from the *Westminster Confession* and why they maintain that “the church of Jerusalem ... consisted of more congregations than one, and all these congregations were under one presbyterial government.” We examined the first two arguments under this first point. They were (1) a multitude of believers; (2) a multitude of ministers. Now we will consider their *third* reason as to why they believe the “church” of Jerusalem consisted of more than one congregation. It is “the diversity of languages among the believers, mentioned both in the second and sixth chapter of the Acts.” In Acts chapter two, we find Jews from about fifteen different countries gathered at Jerusalem attending the feast of Pentecost. While they were Jews it is not unreasonable to think that in addition to the language of the country where they were living that they also knew the Hebrew language. Paul was not only a Jew, but a Roman citizen from the city of Tarsus; therefore, it is likely he knew Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. In fact, in I Corinthians 12:18, he said that he spoke “with tongues” (languages) “more than” all of them. However, those that preached on the day of Pentecost spoke in the language of the various countries from which the Jews lived. Nevertheless, the three thousand converts (Acts 2:41) were added to the one hundred twenty (Acts 1:15) composed one ἐκκλησία (congregation) at Jerusalem. There is nothing said in Acts chapter two to indicate different assemblies aligned with individual languages. This has to be assumed to fix a preconceived form of ecclesiastical government. The idea of different languages from Acts chapter six can only be derived from the Hebrews and Grecians in verse one and the synagogue of the Libertines, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicia, and Asia that were disputing with Stephen. However, the synagogue was not a New Testament congregation but it appears they were not speaking different languages in their synagogue worship or wherever they were disputing with Stephen. It has to be read into the text to assume that Stephen was discussing with the people from all those different countries in different languages. As for the Hebrews and Grecians in verse one, this was a description of styles and customs and that the Grecians did incorporate the Greek language into their lives whereas the Hebrews generally did not, but there is no indication of separate congregations because of this. If there were separate congregations with each its own language, why was there murmuring that the Grecians widows were neglected and why is it that the seven men (generally assumed to be deacons) that were selected all Grecians as indicated in the Greek language by their names?

“The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government” *second* premise that the “church of Jerusalem” consisted of more than one congregation is “All those congregations were under one presbyterial government.” Then four points are supplied to support their argument.

The *first* point is, “They were one church.” Since the word church should be congregation or assembly, why the distinction? In other words were the formers of the confession saying it was a church of churches, or a congregation of congregations? No, they were intending to force the English word church to mean something separate from congregation as practiced by the Catholics for hundreds of years and adopted by the Protestants to support their hierarchical ecclesiastical government. Let us keep in mind that our Lord Jesus Christ set up His New Testament congregation to be the pillar and ground of the truth (I Timothy 3:15) and to maintain the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19). Our Lord did not establish some ecclesiastical authority to rule over and govern the individual candlestick in which He dwells (cf. Revelation 1:12-15, 20). Christ is not honored and glorified in ecclesiastical hierarchies; He is

worshipped, honored, adorned, and glorified in the congregation of God as the gospel is proclaimed and the ordinances preserved according to the truth of the Scriptures.

The *second* point to support that “All those congregations were under one presbyterial government,” is “[t]he elders of the church are mentioned.” By this the writers of the confession are saying that the elders of the “church” are separate and above the congregation. However, a multiplicity of elders or ministers of any kind do not infer a multiplicity of congregations. There are many congregations that have more than one elder or pastor. As I previously stated, I was blessed to co-pastor a congregation for approximately fifteen years. Even Acts 20:17 states that Paul “called for the elders of the church” (congregation) at Ephesus. To say (by implication) that the word “church” in Acts 20:17 includes more than one congregation at Ephesus, then why did the Holy Spirit say in the letter to the Galatians “the churches of Galatia” and not to the church of Galatia? Equally, our Lord distinguished between the church (congregation) of Ephesus from that of Smyrna, Pergamos, and the other churches (congregations) of Asia. (See Revelation chapters one through three.) In fact, the Holy Spirit inspired John to write to the seven churches (congregations) and then singled out each church (congregation) in the singular. One has to assume what is not stated in the Scriptures to infer anything differently. To assume or imply synods or any kind of council or assembly as an ecclesiastical authority over individual congregations from Revelation chapters one through three is to read it into the Holy Scriptures. Let it be emphasized, the congregation at Ephesus in Revelation is the same congregation that had “elders” in Acts 20:17, and it is the same congregation to whom the letter to the Ephesians was written. And the congregation at Ephesus was just as much a “body of Christ” as the congregation at Corinth, cf. I Corinthians 12:27. Remember that this passage reads “ye are the body of Christ.” Since the definite article is not supplied before the word “body” in the Greek text, it may well be interpreted “ye are *a* body of Christ” (Emphasis mine—JKB.)

The *third* argument to support that “All those congregations were under one presbyterial government,” is as follows: “The apostles did the ordinary acts of presbyters, as presbyters in that kirk; which proveth a Presbyterian church before the dispersion, Acts vi.”

Obviously, the apostles were serving as ministers to the congregation in the early days of Christianity, but this in no way proves that they function as a separate ruling body over the congregation of Jerusalem. As I Corinthians 12:28 states, the Lord set the gift of apostle in the congregation first. Acts 6:2-3 reads, “Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples *unto them*, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.” Notice that it was the “twelve” that called the disciples. Remember in Acts chapter one, the congregation of “an hundred and twenty” were assembled together and Peter advised them (the hundred and twenty; not the eleven apostles) to select one to replace Judas. Matthias was selected as an apostle by the congregation. (Remember that according to Acts 2:41, 47 the baptized believers on the Day of Pentecost and afterward were added to the “church” [congregation]; the congregation of “an hundred and twenty” in chapter one.) In other words, the apostles were in the congregation and, as was Matthias, and he was selected by the congregation. The apostles were not a ruling body over and above the congregation; they were of the congregation.

We must bring to your attention that this *third* argument speaks of “presbyters in that kirk.” (By the way, the Greek word for “presbyter” is translated as “elder.”) *Wikipedia* (which summarizes it well) gives the basic meaning and etymology of kirk as follows:

As a common noun, *kirk* (meaning ‘church’) is found in Scots, Scottish English, Ulster-Scots and some English dialects, attested as a noun from the 14th century onwards, but as an element in placenames much earlier. Both words, *kirk* and *church*, derive from the Koine Greek **κυριακόν**

(δομα) (kyriakon (δομα)) meaning *Lord's (house)*, which was borrowed into the Germanic languages in late antiquity, possibly in the course of the Gothic missions.

Again we find that the idea of an ecclesiastical hierarchy under the identity of “kirk” is proclaimed by individuals who desire to follow the meaning of the Greek word κυριακόν instead of ἐκκλησία for the congregation. This mixing and swapping of words instills confusion among the people of God and causes them to be enslaved to an ecclesiastical hierarchy that rules over them and brings them into captivity to rules, regulations, and auxiliaries that were never instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ. Is it any wonder that there are so many ideas and opinions about ecclesiastical government? But our time is up for today. The Lord willing we shall continue this study in our next broadcast.