

Ecclesiastical Government (6th)

(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 Presbyterial Church-Government.”)

Today we will continue looking at the Protestant position supporting their views of hierarchical synods, councils, and assemblies to rule over congregations as found in “The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government” from the *Westminster Confession*. We ended our previous podcast looking at the *second* premise that the “church of Jerusalem” consisted of more than one congregation which was that “All those congregations were under one presbyterial government.” We reviewed three of the four points to support their argument, and today we will continue by considering the *fourth* reason which is, “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.”

It should be noted again that the writers of the confession makes a distinction between the words “church” and “congregation.” Assuming you have followed our studies, you must remember that the English word “church” is derived from the Greek word for the “house of the Lord” and not from the Greek word ἐκκλησία which should have been translated congregation and not church. Therefore, for the Protestants to assume that the word “church” means something different from the word “congregation” is confusing and misleading at the least and dishonest at the most. *Secondly*, in the fourth reason, the Protestants assume that there were “several congregations in Jerusalem,” but this is not stated anywhere in the Holy Scriptures. *Thirdly*, they wrote that “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.” This, too, assumes that the “church” is something other than congregation and that the elders were members or officers of that ecclesiastical hierarchical and not of a congregation. They reference Acts 11:30; 15:4, 6, 22; 21:17-18 to support their position. The first passage is Acts 11:30. This verse must not be removed from the context because Barnabas was in Antioch because the congregation at Jerusalem sent him there, Acts 11:22. The elders did not send him. While he was there, he went to Tarsus and found Saul (Paul) and brought him to Antioch. After prophets from Jerusalem went to Antioch and told of the drought that was to come on Jerusalem, the congregation at Antioch determined to send financial support to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul. Notice that verse twenty-nine says, “Then the disciples ... determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea.” Therefore, those that sent Barnabas and Saul were the “brethren” or “disciples” and not an ecclesiastical hierarchy separate from the congregation at Antioch. (A study of the words “brethren” and “disciple,” especially in the book of Acts, will show that it often refers to the congregation at a particular place.) That verse thirty says they sent it to the “elders” is no proof that these elders were some officers separate from the congregation at Jerusalem. Too much cannot be made that the congregation at Antioch determined to send to the brethren in Judea by saying that it included more than Jerusalem. In Acts 12:19, it says that Herod went from Judea to Caesarea. By studying the context, clearly Herod went from Jerusalem to Caesarea. The second passage given is Acts 15: 4, 6, and 22. We previously studied this passage and found that the council in Jerusalem was not some ecclesiastical hierarchy composed of apostles and elders apart from the congregation at Jerusalem. Acts 15:22 says, “Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church ...” In other words, the apostles and elders were with the congregation at Jerusalem and not separated from or over it. Again, the passage in Acts 21:17-18 includes the brethren or congregation at Jerusalem.

This concludes the *first* position that “many particular congregations may be under one presbyterial government,” which was that the “church of Jerusalem ... consisted of more congregations than one.”

The *second* reason given to support that “many particular congregations may be under one presbyterial government” is “[b]y the instance of the church of Ephesus.” Their support for this is that Paul was there “for the space of three years,” “special effect of the word is mentioned,” “a distinction of Jews and Greeks,” “that Paul stayed there until Pentecost,” and “of a particular church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, and then at Ephesus.” Their scriptural references for these points are Acts 20:31; 19:18-20; 19:10, 17; I Corinthians 16:8-9, 19; Acts 18:19, 24, and 26. Since the first four points are only assumptions supplied by the writers and there is nothing in the passages given to sustain multiple congregations, there is no need to use valuable time in showing that these can equally apply to a single congregation. It is interesting that since a distinction is made by the confession between “church” and “congregation,” and the congregation is supposedly under the church, that the confession reads “a particular church” was in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. Obviously, the “particular church” in their house was a congregation, but the Protestants would have us to believe that the word “church” is something different from the word “congregation.” They can’t have it both ways. By doing so it only adds to the confusion that is generally found among professing believers, and the world, regarding “the church” and what it is. While the Scriptures do not say that there was a congregation in the house of Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, it is affirmed in Romans 16:3-5. (From Romans chapter sixteen, it appears that there were multiple congregations at Rome. Also, the epistle to Rome was addressed to “all that be in Rome, beloved of God, etc.,” while the epistles to Corinth and others were often designated as a “congregation” and where a letter was addressed to multiple congregations it was made clear; for examples as follows: Galatians 1:2, “unto the churches of Galatia”; Revelation 1:4, “to the seven churches which are in Asia.” Even Acts 9:31 makes such a distinction: “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria.”) However, while there was a congregation in the house of Aquila and Priscilla in Rome does not necessarily mean that such was the case in Ephesus. If there was a congregation in the house of Aquila and Priscilla in Acts chapter eighteen, it could have been the nucleus of the congregation at Ephesus which was later built up after Paul was there for the “for the space of three years” as found in Acts chapters nineteen and twenty. (You will notice that the confession references verses from these chapters before chapter eighteen.)

I find it interesting that when such arguments are made by the Protestants that the first three chapters of Revelation are ignored. There it is stated clearly that that letter was written and to be given to the “seven churches” (congregations) in Asia. One of those congregations was Ephesus. Surely, no one would suggest that there were seven denominations in that small area of the world. Also when Paul wrote to the church (congregation) at Colosse, he said that they should share their letter with the “church of the Laodiceans” and that the congregation at Colosse read the epistle he wrote to Laodicea, Colossians 4:16. These were individual congregations and not synods or some ecclesiastical hierarchy ruling over congregations. (Notice that the congregation at Colosse met in the house of Nymphas, Colossians 4:15; therefore, it is not unreasonable that the small congregation at Ephesus likewise met in the house of Aquila and Priscilla when they lived in Ephesus.) When our Lord addressed a congregation in the Book of Revelation He used the singular, but when He included more than one He used the plural. Can anything be clearer? Why read into the Scriptures of synods and other hierarchical systems to rule over individual congregations unless a denominational ladder or chain of command is intended to bring the masses under one ruling body for control? Such a structure did not come from the Scriptures, it does appear to be a version of and a continuation from the Catholics. Remember that the Protestants were trying to reform the Catholics; their intention in the beginning was not to start a new denomination or denominations.

When the Lord Jesus Christ established His congregation, it was not for the purpose of establishing an ecclesiastical hierarchy or a ruling body of ministers to lord it over the congregation. In fact, shortly before His crucifixion, two of His apostles, (James and John) wanted ruling authority, which caused the other ten to be “much displeased,” Mark 10:41. Listen to the words of our Lord: “Ye know that they

which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” If this was given to the apostles (the first gifts) what does it say of ministers, pastors, elders, and even deacons today? No we are not to form some ecclesiastical hierarchy to rule over the congregations. The congregation is the only authority which our Lord gave. But we will have more to say of this later because our time is up for today.