

Ecclesiastical Government (7th)

(Our study today is the conclusion of why the Protestants believe in synods and councils that rule ecclesiastically over independent congregations as found in the *Westminster Confession* and under “The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government” of that confession.)

We left off in our previous study reviewing the *second* reason as found in “The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government” to support that “many particular congregations may be under one presbyterial government” ... “[b]y the instance of the church of Ephesus.” Their *first* support for this is (1) that Paul was there “for the space of three years,” (2) “special effect of the word is mentioned,” (3) “a distinction of Jews and Greeks,” (4) “that Paul stayed there until Pentecost,” and (5) “of a particular church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, and then at Ephesus.” We saw that these suppositions and the scriptural references given do not support their “Presbyterial Church-Government” declarations.

The *second* and *third* reasons for asserting that the “church of Ephesus” was composed of more than one congregation are (1) “that there were many elders over these many congregations, as one flock,” and (2) that the congregations “were under one presbyterial government.” For believing that there were multiple elders at Ephesus, Acts 20:17, 25, 28, 39, 36, and 37 were referenced. It is obvious that the congregation at Ephesus, as well as other congregations, had a multiple of elders. For example, the epistle to the congregation at Philippi included the “bishops and deacons,” Philippians 1:1. (That the word bishop and elder are one and the same office will be addressed later.) Are the Protestants willing to equally affirm that there were multiple congregations in Philippi because “deacons” is likewise used in this verse with the word bishop? To make such an argument for the use of the word “elders” in Acts chapter twenty, why not do likewise with the word “deacons” in Philippians 1:1? Nevertheless, the premise of a plurality of elders was previously addressed and it would be redundant to do so again here. Acts 20:28 says, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” These elders (plural) were to minister to the flock (singular). If there were more than one congregation in Ephesus, why did the Holy Spirit inspire the writer of Acts to write flock (singular)? This would be an excellent place for the Lord to clarify the Protestant affirmation by simply supplying the word flocks instead of flock. (By the way, the word “overseer” is the same Greek word for “bishop” in Philippians 1:1. We plan to discuss this later.)

Some use Acts 20:28 to say that it includes more than a single congregation because it says that God purchased the “church of God,” and since Christ died for more than a single congregation the “church of God” must literally include more than that. This is not necessarily so because, as we have seen before, I Corinthians 12:27 designated that congregation at Corinth as “the body of Christ” or as the Greek text bears out “a body of Christ.” Therefore, each New Testament congregation is “a body of Christ” and “of God.” Equally, Christ died for each congregation. It is sad that the ideal of globalism is affecting the interpretation of the Scriptures by placing emphasis on the whole family of God at the expense of the “house of God,” I Timothy 3:15. (Notice that this verse uses “house”—singular and not plural.)

The *third* reason for believing “many congregations were one church, and that they were under one presbyterial government” is supposed to be supported by Revelation 2:1-6 connected with Acts chapter 20:17, 28. We have previously address the use of the English words “church” and “churches” in Revelation and will not burdened the listener by doing so again.

Since we have addressed *Of Classical Assemblies* from *Westminster Confession* under “The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government,” we will devote some time to the section entitled *Of Synodical Assemblies*. Since it is not too large, we shall supply the whole section.

The scripture doth hold out another sort of assemblies for the government of the church, beside classical and congregational, all which we call *Synodical*. [Referenced here is Acts 15, 2, 6, 22, 23.]

Pastors and teachers, and other church-governors, (as also other fit person, when it shall be deemed expedient,) are members of those assemblies which we call *Synodical*, where they have a lawful calling thereunto.

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.

As you may have noticed, the only paragraph with a scriptural reference is the first one and the verses given are from the conference held in Jerusalem in Acts chapters fifteen. There is no need to address that since it was previously discussed. When reading from the second paragraph regarding the members of such assemblies it referenced pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, (as also other fit person, when it shall be deemed expedient).” I remember reading recently of an incident in the life of Archibald Alexander. When he was a “young and promising pupil” (not an elder or yet an ordained minister) a Presbyterian minister by the name of William Graham desired Alexander to attend with him at the General Assembly in Philadelphia in 1791 as “a ruling elder.” Though Alexander “was little satisfied with the arrangement,” he “acquiesced.” *The Life of Archibald Alexander, D.D.* by James W. Alexander, pp. 90-91. I do not think this is generally practiced by the Protestants, but I believe is worthy of note that it has been done.

I am surprised to say the least and astonished to say the most that people will go to such lengths to try to support the idea that our Lord authorized or approves of His kingdom as functioning today in the New Testament congregation under any kind of “subordination of congregational” government. We must never forget that the Lord made it clear that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) and that the congregation is to govern over its own affairs and not to include civil authorities, I Corinthians 6:1-8. Also, when James and John had their mother to ask the Lord to allow them to sit on His right and left in authority over others (Matthew 20:20), He (the Lord) was “much displeased,” Mark 10:41. Our Lord further instructed them that they were not to “exercise dominion” over one another as the Gentiles, Matthew 20:25-28. Instead of exercising authority over each other they were to be ministers and servants. Even the apostle Peter instructed in his epistles that the elders are not to take the oversight of the flock by “constraint” and neither are they to be “lords over *God’s* heritage.” I Peter 5:1-3. It might also be noted that Peter referred to himself as an elder and not some hierarchical officer setting in authority over the people of God, nor of a congregation. The passage further says that the elder is “among” the flock and not over the flock as some ecclesiastical hierarchy. They are to live among the flock of God as an example of how the flock is to live. Today there are too many ministers, deacons and various designated officers in congregations and denominational headquarters that are poor examples of a disciple of Christ. Too often the message proclaimed by such men follows the proverb of “Don’t do as I do; do as I say.” While the apostle Paul would not claim to be sinless, he did say, “Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me,” and “Be ye followers of me, even as I also *am* of Christ,” I Corinthians 4:16; 11:1. There are other passages where Paul gave exhortations of this kind to other congregations.