

Sunday Evening, August 4, 2024  
Ac 20:17–28; Ac. 15; 1 Pet. 5:1–3; Heb. 13:17  
**CHAP. XXXI. - Of Synods and Councils**

*Bold italics, the addition to American Confession. And ~~strikeout~~ where the American Confession changed.*

1. For the better governing and further edifying of the church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils. ***Overseers and other rulers of particular churches, by virtue of their office and the power which Christ has given them for edification and not for destruction, have authority to appoint such assemblies and to convene together in them as often as they judge it expedient for the good of the church.***
- ~~2. As magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with, about matters of religion; so if magistrates be open enemies to the church, the ministers of Christ, of themselves, by virtue of their office; or, they, with other fit persons, upon delegation from their churches, may meet together in such assemblies.~~
2. Synods and councils have authority ministerially to decide controversies of faith and cases of conscience, to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God and government of his church, and to receive and authoritatively act on complaints of maladministration in the church. If the decrees and decisions of these synods and councils are in accordance with the Word of God, they are to be received with reverence and submission; not only because of their agreement with the Word, but also because of the authority by which they are decided, as being an ordinance that God has appointed in his Word.
3. Since apostolic times, all synods and councils, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred. Therefore, they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice; but to be used as a help in regard to both.
4. Synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing but that what pertains to the church. They are not to intermeddle in civil affairs which concern the state, except by way of humble petition in extraordinary cases, or by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they are required to do so by the civil authority.

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- I. Church Government Is Connectional Sect 1
  - A. Each Congregation Is Ruled by a Plurality of Elders  
Ac. 20:17, 28; Ac. 14:23; Titus 1:5; (Also Ac. 15:2, 1 Pet. 5:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:23)
  - B. Each Congregation Is Connected to the Larger, Regional Church
    1. Church Structure Began at the Level of the House Church  
Ac. 8:3; Rom.16:5; Col. 4:15; 1 Cor. 16:19
    2. Many House Churches Comprised the Church Within a Larger Region  
Ac. 9:31; 1 Tim. 4:14; Eph. 1:1; Gal. 1:2; 2 Cor. 8:23
    3. These Regional Church Also Met in a Larger Council or "National" Church  
Ac. 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 30; 16:4; 2 Cor. 8:22–9:5

II. Church Government Is Not State-Ruled (Erastian) Sect 2

III. Church Government Is Derivative Sect 2

A. Church Leadership Is Subordinate (Leaders can only apply Scripture)

Ac. 15:15, 19, 22; 16:4; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; FOG, III, 3

B. Church Leadership Is Ministerial, Not Imperial (Leaders cannot have a dictatorial spirit) 1 Pet. 5:1–3

C. Church Leadership Is Declarative Not Legislative (Leaders have no authority to make additional rules for the Christian life) Matt. 28:19–20; 1 Cor. 15:3; Gal. 5:12–13 (Mk. 7:9f; 1 Cor. 3:10–15)

D. Church Leadership Is Binding, Not Just Advice Giving Heb. 13:17

IV. Church Government Is Fallible Sect 3

Eph. 2:20; Ac. 17:11; 1 Cor. 2:5; (2 Cor. 1:24 cf Isa. 8:19-20; Matt. 15:9)

V. Church Government Is Spiritual Not Temporal (Not Political) Sect 4; OPC FOG, III, sect 4

A. The Individual Believer Has Obligations to the State

Matt. 5:13; Matt. 5:14–16; Phil. 2:15; (Eph. 5:11; Jas. 1:27; Matt. 10:42; Gal. 6:10); Heb. 10:24

B. But the Corporate, Visible Church Is Not to Be Involved Towards the State

Jn. 18:36; Lk. 12:13–14; Matt. 22:21

Second Book of Discipline: “Diligence should be taken, chiefly by the Moderator, that only ecclesiastical things be handled in the assembly, and that there be no meddling with anything pertaining to the civil jurisdiction.”

J. C. Ryle, a 19th century Anglican bishop, wrote, “Controversy and religious strife, no doubt, are odious things; but there are times when they are a positive necessity. Unity and peace are very delightful; but they are bought too dear if they are bought at the expense of truth.... It was a pity that Arius taught error about Christ’s person: but it would have been a greater pity if Athanasius had not opposed him. It was a pity that Tetzal went about preaching up the Pope’s indulgences: it would have been a far greater pity if Luther had not withstood him. Controversy, in fact, is one of the conditions under which truth in every age has to be defended and maintained, and it is nonsense to ignore it.” (source unknown)