

How Old Is Presbyterian Church Government?

Acts 15:6-12

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When we think of that which is necessary for a faithful church to maintain in its testimony for the truth of Jesus Christ, we often think of biblical doctrine and scriptural worship (which a faithful church will certainly uphold and defend). But how often do we consider the necessity of a faithful church to subscribe to biblical church government in its testimony for the truth of Jesus Christ? The Church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual kingdom that is ruled by the most glorious King—Jesus Christ. He has not left His kingdom without a government, as if every member was simply free to do whatever one thinks is right in his/her own eyes. Just as it would lead to absolute anarchy in any country if there were no law and order and if there were no government that brought the country together under common laws and leaders, so the same would be the case in the Kingdom and Church of Christ.

Church government is not just for ministers, elders, and deacons to understand and appreciate; it is for all Christians to love as a gift from Jesus Christ to His Church (Ephesians 4:11-12). Church government is the glue that holds together a society of Christians (whether large or small) in proclaiming the true gospel of Jesus Christ, in teaching the sound doctrine of Jesus Christ, in practicing the pure worship of Jesus Christ, and in administering the faithful discipline of Jesus Christ. A nation and a family will self-destruct (sooner or later) if there is not a civil government or a family government that draws members together under godly leadership and laws for the common benefit of all, and so the Church of Jesus Christ will likewise self-destruct (sooner or later) without a scriptural church government.

Which brings us to ask, what form of church government has Christ of old established in His Word? The three particular options include **Congregational**—rule by the local congregation (Baptist and Independent Churches); **Episcopal**—rule by the hierarchy of a bishop, archbishop, or pope (Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some Lutheran Churches); and **Presbyterian**—rule by elders in congregations, presbyteries, and synods. It is the conviction of this church that the scriptural form of church government appointed by Jesus Christ in His Word is the Presbyterian form of church government, which will find expression (though not an exhaustive expression) in our text this Lord's Day. The main points from our text are the following: (1) A Presbyterian Synod Formed to Defend the Gospel of Grace (Acts 15:6); (2) The Defense of Peter for the Gospel of Grace (Acts 15:7-10); (3) The Defense of Paul and Barnabas for the Gospel of Grace (Acts 15:11).

I. A Presbyterian Synod Formed to Defend the Gospel of Grace (Acts 15:6).

A. Some might think such a subject to be boring and irrelevant to our Christian lives. But I respond that the Holy Spirit certainly saw this to be a matter of great importance to the church because He has introduced church government into the text we are considering as the biblical means of exposing error, declaring the truth, and maintaining the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church. Now that unity is of utmost importance to the Lord Jesus (John 17:20-21) and to His apostles (1 Corinthians 1:10)—a unity based upon a common confession of biblical truth in doctrine, worship, and church government (Matthew 28:20).

B. As we saw in the previous section of Acts 15, a serious contention had broken out in the Church of Antioch when Jewish-Christian false teachers from Jerusalem had arrived in Antioch promoting a perversion of the gospel of grace (Acts 15:1).

1. These false teachers essentially declared that Gentiles must become Jews in keeping the Old Testament ceremonial law (circumcision, dietary laws, etc.) in order to be saved by God. Thus, their false gospel was faith in Jesus Christ plus the works of the law. Faith alone in Christ's redemptive work alone was not enough—obedience to the law was necessary in order to be justified (declared righteous by God through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone).

2. From Galatians 2, Paul stated that before these false teachers arrived in Antioch, Peter, Barnabas, and the other Jewish Christians were eating Gentile food with the uncircumcised Gentile Christians. It was called "unclean" food by God in the Old Testament for a time while the Old Testament Church was in its minority years in order to maintain a distinctness and separation from the idolatry and lawlessness of the Gentiles. But those Old Testament ceremonial ordinances were nailed to the cross of Jesus Christ and abolished (Colossians 3:14) so as to make Jews and Gentiles one in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28).

3. However, once these Jewish false teachers from the Church of Jerusalem arrived in Antioch, Peter, Barnabas, and the other Jewish Christian stopped eating with the uncircumcised Gentile Christians and had their own tables at which they ate or their own homes at which they ate. Paul publicly rebuked the hypocrisy of Peter declaring (in effect) that his separation from the Gentile believers was teaching by example that salvation was not by grace through faith alone in Christ alone, but that obedience to the Old Testament ceremonies was needed as well in order to be saved and fully incorporated into the Church of Jesus Christ.

4. Although Peter repented before all at the rebuke of Paul (for Peter stands to defend the gospel of grace with Paul in the Synod of Jerusalem), the dissension within the Church at Antioch was so great that the Presbytery (ministers and elders) of Antioch officially sent a delegation to the Presbytery (ministers and elders) of Jerusalem in order to expose the error, confirm the truth, and preserve the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church.

C. As we now begin reading at Acts 15:6, this coming together of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem was the first recorded Presbyterian Synod of the New Covenant (occurring in about the year 49-50 a.d., some 17 years after Paul's conversion and some 10 years after the conversion of Cornelius—the first recorded Gentile convert). Let us consider the significance of this Synod that convened in Jerusalem to preserve the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church. Note the following necessary aspects that demonstrate that this was a Presbyterian Synod that met here in Acts 15:6.

1. This was not a social reason that brought the brethren together in Jerusalem (in other words, they didn't just miss one another and decide to get together for fellowship), but rather was due to a scandalous controversy over the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 15:1). One of the purposes of Presbyterian Synods is to apply the key of knowledge (teaching) to controversies that disturb the peace of the church (an appeal to a higher court when possible).

2. There was the appointment of official church officers by the Churches of Antioch and Jerusalem as delegates to convene together for the purpose of declaring the truth concerning this controversy (Acts 15:2,6). A Presbyterian Synod employs ordained elders (1 Peter 5:1)—whether apostles (extraordinary), prophets (extraordinary), pastors (ordinary), teachers (ordinary), ruling elders (ordinary). There may have been even church officers from other locations (besides Antioch and Jerusalem) as well, since this letter is sent to other locations (Acts 15:24). This was not simply a Synod of the apostles functioning as bishops, but of "the apostles and elders" (*presbuteros*) as we see in Acts 15:2,4,6,22,23; Acts 16:4. This was not an extraordinary apostolic Synod where immediate revelation from God was given to the apostles with no discussion necessary. This was an example to be followed in future Presbyteries and Synods as evidenced by the fact that the apostles functioned here as elders of the Church together with other elders who together discussed and debated the issue at hand.

3. There was not only discussion and debate about the place that the Old Testaments

ceremonies and ordinances had in salvation (Acts 15:6,7a), but there was also an authoritative decision reached by the Synod (called “decrees” in Acts 16:4 from the Greek word *dogma*, i.e. authoritative teaching). It was not authoritative because apostles were present, but because it was agreeable to the Holy Spirit and to the Synod so ruling on behalf of Christ (Acts 15:28). This did not make the Synod (or any Presbyterian Synod since then) infallible and incapable of error. However, because Christ the King has appointed these officers and such Presbyterian Synods (and Church Courts) to rule in His kingdom, to oppose the rulings of such Synods (Presbyteries and Sessions) when they are agreeable to the Word of God is to oppose Jesus Christ Himself. It is not simply resisting the authority of God’s truth in the ruling, but is also resisting the authority of Christ’s ordained officers who rule on Christ’s behalf.

4. Thus, because a lawful Presbyterian Synod (or Presbytery) issues a “decree” that is agreeable to Scripture and is authoritative from Christ (“whatever is bound in earth is bound in heaven” Matthew 18:18), it is necessary to submit to that decree as issued from the Lord Jesus, the King, through His officers (Acts 15:30-31; Acts 16:4-5). Although it is to benefit of the Church within a nation when possible to have a Presbyterian Synod (consisting of many Presbyteries and particular congregations), Jesus makes it clear that His authority to rule is not based upon the greater number of ministers and elders that convene and rule, but is rather based upon His authority (even when 2 or 3 that meet in Christ’s name, Matthew 18:19-20). With our modern technology, such a meeting of lawful ministers and elders can even happen by phone or by computer about controversies and matters that concern the church from different countries (as with Antioch, Syria, Cilicia, and Jerusalem). If there is a mutual consent and agreement in the Terms of Communion between elders and members, there can exist a Presbyterian church government exercised internationally when expedient and edifying to the church. And even if a small congregation or society of Christians does not have a lawfully ordained minister or have lawfully ordained elders, these may still meet together as a Presbyterian congregation because they embrace these principles presented above, even if they do not yet have the benefit of having such church officers (and for such they pray and labor in the Lord that the Lord Jesus would give them such godly and learned men as officers in ministering to them on behalf of Christ).

D. How old is Presbyterian church government?

1. At least as far back as this Presbyterian Synod in Acts 15, where the gathering of elders (*presbuteroi*) to settle an ecclesiastical controversy is cited in Acts 15:2,4,6,22,23; Acts 16:4. The word “presbytery” is found in 1 Timothy 4:14 (*presbuterion*).

2. There was likewise a corresponding Presbyterian church government in the Jewish Church: the synagogue=session (Matthew 10:17); the presbytery=presbytery (Acts 22:5, *presbuterion*); and the sanhedrin=synod (Matthew 26:59, *sunedrion*). Consider the words of Jethro to Moses who spoke of different levels of courts within Israel (Exodus 18:21 [Jethro counsels Moses to appoint godly rulers of 1,000s, 100s, 50s, and 10s]; 2 Chronicles 19:8 [King Jehoshaphat appoints priests and elders to hear cases as a supreme Synod in Jerusalem that arise from the synagogues of the cities]). Thus, we may say that Presbyterian church government in some form goes back to the organization of the Old Testament Church. It has been around for a long time, and is appointed by the Lord in His Holy Word. Neither Congregational (Independency) nor Episcopalian forms of church government can claim such a biblical and historical warrant. Presbyterian church government is alone of divine right and divine law as revealed in Scripture. This is what the Holy Spirit reveals was convened in Acts 15:6.

3. Because a smaller body or congregation does not presently enjoy a Presbytery or Synod does not mean it is not Presbyterian. For it has in principle what it may lack in practice.

II. The Defense of Peter for the Gospel of Grace (Acts 15:7-10).

A. After there had been a significant amount of discussion and debate about the keeping of the Old Testament ceremonies and salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, Peter stands up to give his judgment in the matter (Acts 16:7). It does not appear that Peter acted as moderator of this Synod (let alone as the pope); for he did not speak first (there was discussion that preceded his discourse), nor did he speak last to draw the matter to a conclusion (James did that). Peter is not the supreme pontiff exalted over others in this Synod. Peter stands and addresses the Synod as a faithful apostle and elder (who had just recently been publicly reprimanded by Paul for his sinful example in separating from the Gentile Christians in Antioch and had surely repented publicly as well, Galatians 2). Peter feared what these false teachers might do to his ministry among the Jews, and he fell into hypocrisy, but he was no hypocrite because he repented and sought the forgiveness of God and man. He stands here alongside Paul for the gospel of grace. Peter's life is a demonstration of the perseverance of the saints.

B. Peter rehearses in his speech how God used him to take the gospel to the Gentile household of Cornelius (Acts 15:7). Peter in raising this landmark case of the uncircumcised Cornelius and his household in coming to Christ and into the Visible Church means that this question of requiring Gentiles to be circumcised before they can be justified before God was settled about 10 years earlier than this Synod in Jerusalem. So why was this Synod necessary if the crucial point had already been settled 10 years earlier (Acts 11:18)? It was necessary for our instruction and help in knowing the revealed will of God concerning the government that Jesus the King has established in His Church. Consider what Peter states here that reveals that Cornelius was saved by grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone apart from any law or work.

1. God gave the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and those who believed (Acts 15:8). This was evidenced by their speaking in other languages just as God wrought upon the apostles and others on the Day of Pentecost). The Holy Spirit did not wait until they were circumcised or kept the ceremonial law, or any other act of obedience on their part. They believed and received the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:14; Romans 8:9).

2. God purified and cleansed the sin from the hearts of those Gentile believers at the house of Cornelius BY FAITH ALONE (Acts 15:9). Nothing more is added—thus the absence of anything else means it was by faith alone that those Gentiles were cleansed and justified. Peter says that the same full pardon of sin that we Jews received from God, the Gentiles likewise received when they believed.

3. Peter now addresses that sect of the Pharisees who required circumcision and obedience to the law in order to be justified in Acts 15:10. Peter says when you require something more than faith alone in Christ alone to be justified, you are tempting God—you are challenging God and His authority, His grace, and the sufficiency of Christ's obedience and sacrifice. You are in a dangerous position, Peter says, because you cannot challenge God (without repentance) and get away with it. And yet when you require Gentiles to be yoked with the heavy burden of the many constant ceremonies, cleansings, and dietary laws, you require of them what we and our fathers found to be such a great burden to bear. Jesus came to remove such a yoke from off our necks that we might be yoked to Him and His righteousness and sacrifice for us through faith alone (Matthew 11:28-30). Dear ones, you are yoked to Jesus Christ by faith alone? There is no hope in being yoked to anyone or anything else. But being yoked to Christ doesn't mean we can do whatever we want to do thereafter—we are yoked to Christ that we may serve Him in loving obedience to His moral law and commandments—to His doctrine, worship, and church government (1 John 5:3).

4. Peter's summary statement is found in Acts 15:11. It is by grace alone—grace that must be earned is not grace (Romans 4:4).

III. The Defense of Paul and Barnabas for the Gospel of Grace (Acts 15:11).

A. Peter's speech brought all disputation to an end, and there was silence when Paul and Barnabas stood up to declare all the mighty works which God wrought through them in confirmation of the

truthfulness of the gospel of grace which they preached to Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13:38-39). Paul and Barnabas are not pointing to themselves as miracle-workers (as so often happens by these false teachers on TV and radio). Paul and Barnabas are rather declaring the miracles God worked through them (so that God receives the glory); and these miracles were confirmation from God that the gospel of free grace that they preached was approved by God. God put His own stamp of approval by way of miracles on the gospel of grace (Hebrew 2:3-4). The miracle that confirms the gospel of grace in your life and mine is a changed heart and life.

B. Dear ones, any other gospel preached than what Paul preached which claims that miracles confirm that minister or ministry is lying (they are lying wonders that are given to deceive as are claimed by the multitudes in the Church of Rome, 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). That is why we must not follow signs and wonders, but rather the truth. The scriptural truth of Jesus Christ will not mislead and deceive, but signs and wonders may lie to us and lead us astray. The gospel will not deceive.

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