

## Week 31, Wednesday, August 24, 2022: of Synods and Councils

WCF 31:1: *For the better government, and further edification of the Church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils. (a)*  
(a) Acts 15:2, 4, 6.

Denominations are a necessary extension of the local plurality of elders. Engelsma writes, “... the unity of the church demands, not only that the members of the local congregation live at peace, but also that the congregation be joined in a federation of congregations.”<sup>636</sup> Further, “Churches should not exist in isolation or be unrelated to each other.”<sup>637</sup> First, presbyteries are assemblies of church sessions (usually several times a year) within a geographic range to discuss and decide on church business. Synods, Councils, or General Assemblies are regular meetings (usually annually) of Presbyteries within a national (sometimes international) denomination. Session continues to focus great time and attention on this need of our church (for at least eight years) with intense and intricate communications with various denominations. Please pray for the Lord to guide us in being yoked to a Presbytery (we are in affiliate relations with the RPCGA and seeking full fraternal relations), with John Murray’s sobering words to heed: “... the sure road to decline and eventual heterodoxy is exclusive absorption with the work and witness of the local congregation.”<sup>638</sup> Further, while condemning the World Council of Churches saying, “John 17:21 must not be divorced from John 17:20”, Murray writes, “... while spurious unity is to be condemned, the lack of unity among

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<sup>636</sup> Engelsma, *Bound to Join*, 117. He cites the following Scriptural examples: “The twelve tribes of Israel were federated in the nation of Israel ... that were distinct tribes and that their unity as one kingdom was essential. ... In the New Testament ... All the churches were united in the apostolic office ... the Jerusalem synod of Acts 15 ... to I Corinthians 7:17: ‘And so ordain I in all churches’ ... The congregations in the New Testament were *autonomous*, that is, self-governing ... but they were not *independent* of each other. They lived in embryonic denominational federation.” (118).

<sup>637</sup> Sproul, vol. 3, 166. Sadly, his church is independent (see <http://www.saintandrewsonline.org/about/who-we-are/history-identity>). Murray admonishes us: “We cannot consider our own individual witness to Christ as independent of the witness which is borne by the branch of the church to which we belong ... we must not take lightly the matter of severing our connection with one denomination and joining another ... it is to desert the corporate responsibility which we vow in our local situation if we do not apply it in the broader context of the church as a whole.” Murray, “Corporate Responsibility”, in *Collected Writings* vol. 1, 276, 277.

<sup>638</sup> Murray, “Corporate Responsibility”, *Collected Writings*, vol. 1, 278. He adds, “... we cannot absolve ourselves of responsibility in relation to the condition and state of the whole church of Christ.” As well, “Faith imbued with zeal for the honour of Christ and the glory of God will have no sympathy with the defeatism which is, after all, but disguised fatalism” (279). In the Westminster Assembly committee procedures that produced “The Form of Presbyterian Church Government”, when debating the validity of church assemblies submitting to higher courts (necessary accountability to a fuller body), the Assembly passed Gillespie’s proposal, “That Matt. xviii., holding forth the subordination of an offending brother to a particular church, it doth also, by a parity of reason, prove a subordination of a congregation to superior assemblies.” Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion*, 172.

churches of Christ which profess the faith in its purity is a patent violation of the unity of the body of Christ, and of that unity which the prayer of our Lord requires us to promote.”<sup>639</sup>

WCF 31:2: *As magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with, about matters of religion;(b) 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.(c)*  
(b)Isa. 49:23; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; 2 Chron. 19:8-11; 2 Chron. 29-30; Matt. 2:4-5; Prov. 11:14. (c)Acts 15:2, 4, 22-23, 25.

Here is another challenging section to understand in relation to 23:3, 30:1, and 31:1. If they only mean here “consult and advise” the magistrate, certainly this is agreeable. Some think, however, that what follows in this paragraph seems to suggest the norm would be assemblies as only called by the magistrate (King as head of the church), while the churches may meet on their own if the king is corrupt. The Church of Scotland adopted the WCF with a disclaimer about this paragraph. The RPCNA rejects it outright in its constitutional *Testimony*, and most American Presbyterian churches have re-written it. It is this kind of issue for which the Scottish Covenanters suffered greatly during

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<sup>639</sup> Murray, “The Nature and Unity of the Church”, *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, 334-335. What he adds expresses the heart of the Session of PECA as we look for a Presbytery and denominational home with which to yoke: “It is to be admitted that the fragmentation and lack of co-ordination and solidarity which we find within strictly evangelical and Reformed Churches create a difficult situation, and how this disunity is to be remedied ‘in the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace’ is a task not easily accomplished. But what needs to be indicted, and indicted with vehemence, is the complacency so widespread, and the failure to be aware that this is an evil, dishonouring to Christ, destructive of the edification defined by the apostle as ‘the increase of the body into the building up of itself in love’ (Eph. 4:16), and prejudicial to the evangelistic outreach to the world. If we are once convinced of this evil, the evil of schism in the body of Christ, the evil of disruption in the communion of saints, then we have made great progress. We shall then be constrained to preach the evil, to bring conviction to the hearts of others also, to implore God’s grace and wisdom in remedying the evil, and to devise ways and means of healing these ruptures, to the promotion of united witness to the faith of Jesus and the whole counsel of God.” With that being shared, while we expect Murray has a 2-office view behind what we share next that would need thoughtful consideration for consistency with our 3-office (Confessional) view, we also are encouraged by his words elsewhere: “The importance of the local congregation is therefore paramount and it is in the local congregation that the presbyterian principle must first be exemplified ... If and when it so happens that a particular congregation of God’s people is not able, for reasons of geographical isolation, or for reasons of loyalty to the whole counsel of God, to establish a broader fellowship with other congregations of life faith and practice, that congregation must not consider itself pre-empted from discharging all the rights and prerogatives, as well as duties, of presbytery ... The presbyterian principle begins at the level of the particular flock or congregation, and if, for good reasons, it does not extend further than one congregation, we are not to deem it un-presbyterian. To be concrete, to that local presbytery belong all the functions that Christ has accorded to presbytery.” *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, “The Form of Government”, 348-349. See also the Westminster Assembly’s “Form of Presbyterial Church Government” subsection on the “extraordinary” way of examining and ordaining ministers at the end of the document, number 1. This being said, we are concerned to set things better in order and Pastor (who was ordained only officially by our local Session, though an RPCNA pastor presided and joined in with the laying on of hands but with no official representation from the RPCNA) wants to explore the following by Dickson with the EPC Australia should we be received by them (also with implications from the book, *Order in the Offices*): “... any one single congregation with one pastor only hath not the power of ordination, an instance of which cannot be given either from precept or practice in all the New Testament. Nay, the ordination of ministers in the New Testament was always performed by a college of pastors associate together (*Acts* 6:6; *I3:1-3*; *I Tim.* 4:14).” (Dickson, 251)

the “Killing Times”. Our church does not take exception here (correctly interpreted and applied)<sup>640</sup>. Van Dixhoorn reminds us that “The Westminster assembly itself was called by the Long Parliament, a revolutionary political body engaged in a civil war with forces loyal to King Charles I.” He cites Isa. 49:23, 2 Chron. 19:8-11; 2 Chron. 29-30, and Prov. 11:14 as texts they would have understood to apply.<sup>641</sup> As well, “this confession of faith was first entitled, *The humble advice of the Assembly of divines, now by authority of Parliament sitting at Westminster, concerning a Confession of Faith.*”<sup>642</sup>

WCF 31:3: *It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine 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; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word.(d)*

(d)Acts 15:15, 19, 24, 27-31; Acts 16:4; Matt. 18:17-20.

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<sup>640</sup> Most “full subscriptionists” to the original Standards express something like the Church of Scotland, “which in officially adopting the confession for its use in 1647, qualified some parts of paragraph 2 to apply only to churches which had not yet settled a church government. The qualifying declaration had the effect of supporting the existence of the Westminster assembly and validating the Church of Scotland’s part in it. It also suggested that a magistrate’s involvement in calling a synod would be the exception, not the rule.” Van Dixhoorn, 412.

<sup>641</sup> Van Dixhoorn, 411. Still, in what follows, he supports the American version, which was revised in this chapter after the Revolutionary War; in 1788, the first paragraph was expanded, the second deleted. (411-412).

<sup>642</sup> Van Dixhoorn, 422. Dickson, a contemporary of the Divines providing the Confession’s first “commentary” just a few years after its production, helps us understand their balanced thinking: “May not the ministers of the church, of themselves, by virtue of their office, meet in assemblies with other fit persons, upon delegation from their churches, when magistrates are open enemies to the Christian religion? Yes (*Acts* 15:2, 4, 22-25) ... Well then, do not the Erastians err who maintain that the ministers of the gospel have no right or power in themselves or by virtue of their office to meet in a synod or council? Yes ... May magistrates lawfully call a synod of ministers and other fit persons to consult and advise with about matters of religion? Yes (*Isa.* 49:23; *I Tim.* 3:1-2; *Matt.* 2:4-5; *Prov.* II:14) ... it is the duty of the civil magistrate, being born within the church, to take care that peace and unity be preserved and kept in the church; that the truth and Word of God be entirely and soundly preached and obeyed; that blasphemies and heresies be kept under and suppressed; that all corruptions in worship and discipline be reformed; that all God’s ordinances be lawfully established, administered, and preserved. And if it should happen that both church and state judicatories should make an universal defection from the purity of doctrine and worship received and acknowledged, it is the duty of a godly king, by virtue of his regal power and authority, to set about a work of reformation and to call and command all ranks of people to return to the true worship and service of God (*Isa.* 45:23; *Psa.* 122:7-9; *Ezra* 7:23, 25-28; *Lev.* 24:16; *Deut.* 12:5-6, 12; *I Chron.* 13:1-9; *2 Kings* 23:1-36) ... [this also is proven] From the example of Constantine, that did convocate the first Nicene Council; from Theodosius the Elder, that did call the first Council of Constantinople; from Theodosius the Younger that did call the first Council at Ephesus; from Martianus, that did call the Chalcedon Council.” (252-254) Also relevant for consideration is the following documented position by a full-subscriptionist denomination to the original Westminster Standards in terms of how we may understand these church-state sections of the Confession without needing to edit or amend them: “... the Civil Magistrate does not possess jurisdiction or authoritative control over the regulation of the affairs of Christ’s Church”. This is stated within the fuller question, number 4, of “Questions to be put before Ordination” of Elders and Deacons in *The Practice of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland*, 124 (Appendix II). It references the Claim, Declaration, and Protest adopted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1842 (which also should inform us).

The purpose of synods and councils is to rule over the faith and life of the Church. So long as their decisions are “consonant to the Word of God”, they are authoritative and to be submitted to: “... the *Confession* rejects the principle of the Independents, or Congregationalists, that all church authority resides in the local congregation, and that wider assemblies have only an advisory role.”<sup>643</sup> Again, this is the Biblical example (Acts 15 and 21) where Paul himself met with and reported to the Assembly in Jerusalem, and respected and carried out their decisions: “The council of Jerusalem did not merely give advice, but pronounced an authoritative decision ... and the churches were not disobedient to the will of the council.”<sup>644</sup> The NT churches were one *interdependent* church: “The believers in every place [in the NT] were associated in separate but not independent churches, for they all remained subject to a common tribunal.”<sup>645</sup> Berkhof helpfully explains this issue of the “loci of authority”: “The major assemblies do not represent a higher kind of power than is vested in the consistory or session. The Reformed churches know of no higher kind of ecclesiastical power than that which resides in the consistory [Session]. At the same time their authority is greater in degree and wider in extent than that of the consistory. Church power is represented in greater measure in the major assemblies than in the consistory, just as apostolic power was represented in greater measure in twelve than in a single apostle. Ten churches certainly have more authority than a single church; there is an accumulation of power.”<sup>646</sup> We might say, rather than “higher church courts”, “broader church courts,” though not without a ruling nature (by vote of presbyters not a decision of a small, elite group). Van Dixhoorn reminds us with disclaimers that, “... it cannot be forgotten that a synod also serves ‘authoritatively’ ... It is because Christ gives his power and because we follow his Word that assemblies have limited power ... and real power ... The Word of God is always to bind the consciences of Christians, and those who speak truly from it should be heeded ... the difference between the private opinions of some people and the confirmed decisions of councils, is seen in Acts 15 ... They refer to their decisions as ‘requirements’ (*Acts* 15:28), as ‘decisions ... reached by the apostles and elders’ to be ‘delivered’ and observed (*Acts* 16:4).<sup>647</sup> The RPCGA BCO does allow for leniency on non-essentials for local pastors and congregations (each denomination can vary on what is or isn’t non-essentials).

WCF 31:4: *All synods or councils, since the Apostles’ times, 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 both.*(e)

(e)Eph. 2:20; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 2:5; 2 Cor. 1:24.

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<sup>643</sup> Spear, 162.

<sup>644</sup> Green, 225.

<sup>645</sup> Charles Hodge, 416.

<sup>646</sup> Berkhof, 591-592. Sproul points out that, “The presbytery or classis has many of the responsibilities handled by the bishop in an episcopal system” (vol. 3, 168).

<sup>647</sup> Van Dixhoorn, 417. John Murray agrees: “The decrees that were issued by the council were regarded as having regulative force throughout the whole church.” (“The Form of Government”, in *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, 350). He also summarizes the issue nicely: “The consideration, however, that should be deemed primary and basic in this connection is the unity and community of the church as the body of Christ. The local congregation is indeed the church of Christ, but so are all the assemblies of God’s people ... That each congregation should be entirely independent in its government is incompatible with the oneness of the body of Christ.” (350)

A local church should share its authority in sessions, synods, and councils, but higher courts must not put themselves on the same or higher authority than God's Word (like the R.C.C.). "These decisions [of Presbytery or Synod] are authoritative, except in cases where they are explicitly declared to be merely advisory. They are binding on the churches as the sound interpretation and application of the law,--the law of Christ, the King of the Church. They cease to be binding only when they are shown to be contrary to the Word of God."<sup>648</sup> Note that there is a place for elders on every level of government to record their formal minority dissent to a decision, with written reasons. Another example is that the RPCGA has "Position Papers" for the denomination but they are not binding on particular congregations or ministers but only advisory; and they have to go before churches for feedback before being voted upon at General Assembly.

WCF 31:5: *Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude, nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth; unless by way of humble petition, in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate. (f)*  
(f)Luke 12:13-14; John 18:36.

As the civil magistrate has no ecclesiastical authority over the courts of the Church, so the Church has no civil authority over the governors of the land. Both are under the authority of King Jesus, and both are to serve Him by His holy Law: "The line between the state and the church is distinctly drawn ... While the ends of the two institutions are distinct in nature, they are not contradictory, but complementary. These two powers, both ordained of God, are not intended to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another."<sup>649</sup> This statement contradicts the interests of the Roman Catholic Church then and now.<sup>650</sup> Thus, a pastor should not also be at the same time a minister of the State. But we should seek to raise up Christian men to run for public office so that the State better governs by Christ's Law over the land so that we receive Christ's blessing over our nation. Wayne Spear shares this example:

The life of William Wilberforce is a powerful example of how this can work. As a young man, he was a wicked and worldly member of the House of Commons. When he was converted to Christ, he thought he should leave the Parliament and become a minister of the gospel. However, John Newton, the converted slave-ship captain, advised him to remain in the Parliament and to use his influence there for Christ and for righteousness. Wilberforce labored for some 30 years to end Britain's involvement in the African slave trade, and eventually that goal was achieved. Church courts are not to be political pressure groups. But by teaching the truths of Scripture, the church encourages followers of Christ to be salt and light in the world. [see the movie, *Amazing Grace*, for a dramatic telling of this story; a DVD is available in PRPC's library]<sup>651</sup>

*Some concluding thoughts by Thomas Watson, from "A Sermon Against the Roman Catholic Church":*

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<sup>648</sup> Berkhof, 592.

<sup>649</sup> Green, 225.

<sup>650</sup> Van Dixhoorn, 421.

<sup>651</sup> Spear, 163-164. Sproul is helpful here again, "The church is supposed to be the conscience, not the government" (vol. 3, 172).

“Hold fast the Doctrine of the true Orthodox Protestant Religion: the very filings of this gold is precious. Keep all the Articles of the Christian Faith; if you let one fundamental article of your Faith go, you hazard your Salvation. When Samson pulled down but one Pillar, immediately the whole Fabrick tumbled: so, if you destroy one Pillar, if you let go one Fundamental of Truth, you endanger all.”

**Assigned Readings for August 31, 2022:** “Of the State of Man after Death, the Resurrection of the Dead, and the Last Judgment”

- WCF 32 and 33 and corresponding Scriptures
- WLC 83-90, 188-196 and corresponding Scriptures
- WSC 98-107 and corresponding Scriptures