

Presbyterianism 101

ALL TO GOD'S GLORY:
Synods & Councils
(WCF 31)

The Christian Life: Communion

- **The means of grace:** The government of the church is one of the vital ways God cares for His saints, nurtures spiritual growth
- **Erastian Church Government vs. Reformed**
- **Re-Formed Practice:** Church Government patterned after the testimony of the Scripture
 - Distinct Ends
 - Distinct means
 - Distinct Censures

The Means of Church Gov't (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: and it belongeth to the overseers and other rulers of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, and the power which Christ hath given them for edification and not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies; and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church.

The Means of Church Gov't (31.1)

- **Synods, Assemblies, Councils expressions of the Church**
 - The individual congregation is *not* the final unit or of the church, though it is the most visible
 - Synods (e.g. General Assembly, Presbytery) are comprised of overseers (TEs?) and other “rulers” (REs?) of particular congregations

The Means of Church Gov't (31.1)

- **Synods, Assemblies expressions of the Church**
- **Assemblies are for Better Government**
 - Not essential but for the better health
 - Church is not governed by mob/democracy
 - Congregation manages her affairs with regard to other branches of the Church, Body of Christ
- **Review and Control:** the whole is in the parts and the parts are in the whole

Calling an Assembly (1647 | 31.2)

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.

Calling an Assembly (1647 | 31.2)

- **Revised by the Americans:** different civil setting, but that is not the reason to revise;
 - Disagreement with the proof texts: not proven!
 - Kirk of Scotland “Adopting Act” strongly qualifies (i.e. limits) this statement
- **Changes:**
 - “Other fit persons” i.e. Parliament?
 - Christ has given power to the Church: Headship

Nature of Church Power (31.2)

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.

Nature of Church Power (31.2)

- **Threefold Task of Church Synods**
 - Determine Controversies of Faith
 - Creeds confessions
 - Examine, select officers, etc.
 - Order Public Worship, other Issues
 - Receive Complaints and Appeals
- **cf. 30.2 “power of keys”**

Nature of Church Power (31.2)

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- **Church Power:** ministerial and declarative
 - Elders act as servants of Christ; we can declare only what seems apparent (we may not exclude someone from the Church triumphant)
 - Church speaks only where Christ has given voice
 - No power to compel obedience
 - Distinction from OC Power
 - Councils may err, but they are help to faith

Nature of Church Power (31.2)

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- **Synodical Authority**
 - Received with Reverence *because* it agrees with the Word of God, which is binding on conscience
 - Councils are a means of grace by which God makes known His will

Matt. 18:16-17, *But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

Fallibility of the Church (31.3)

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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.

Fallibility of the Church (31.3)

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- **Errors:** may error, *many* have erred!
- **Helpful:**
 - Not rule of faith and practice, may be changed
 - Help to faith: strengthen faith through teaching and summary, clarify faith
 - Easier to systematically summarize the Bible than re-read scripture every time there is a controversy

Limit of Church Power (31.4)

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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.

Limit of Church Power (31.4)

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- **Scope of Power:** ministerial and declarative, so speak only to ecclesiastical issues (theology, practice)
 - **Spirituality of the Church:** not a “dirty word,” but a clear scriptural principle: Jesus doesn’t take this up!
- Luke 12:13-14,** *Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?”*

Limit of Church Power (31.4)

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- **Spirituality of the Church:** not a “dirty word,” but a clear scriptural principle: Jesus’ Kingdom separate from civil government and her mission is not worldly, but eternal

John 18:36–37, *Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”*

Limit of Church Power (31.4)

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- **Church is not to meddle in civil affairs**
 - Church may not tell people how to vote;
 - Church has no right to prescribe medication
 - Spirituality of the Church not an excuse to turn a blind eye to sin
- **Church has a duty to teach re: Civil Magistrate**
 - Duty to honor the magistrate
 - Duty of ethics and morals

Limit of Church Power (31.4)

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- **Church is not to meddle in civil affairs**
- **Church has a duty to teach re: Civil Magistrate**
- **Two Exceptions**
 - Extraordinary cases concerning interest of Church
 - When civil magistrate requests input, advice
