

Of Synods & Councils

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Date: 04 February 2018

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[0 : 00] Now, as most of you will know, we've been working in the previous weeks through the biblical basis behind the now closing chapters of our church's Confession of Faith.

And we come this morning to the biblical basis behind chapter 31, which is entitled, not terribly excitingly, but entitled nevertheless, Of Synods and Councils.

And the thrust of what the Confession teaches, of course, is that we need to have such bodies as Synods and Councils for the better government and the further edification, that is the building up of the Lord's people and of the church.

And that whilst, yes, the civil magistrate or the government or the crown can call together such assemblies, we've got biblical basis for that, of course.

And so likewise, if they choose not to, then the church can do it itself. And that they are, therefore, to administer the church. They are to organize questions and differences of opinion.

[1 : 02] Because just as we mentioned with the children, we're all individuals, we all come at things from slightly different angles. And sometimes it needs the collective wisdom of the church guided, we trust, by the Holy Ghost, to determine what is the right way to proceed.

Where God gives clear instruction in his word, there isn't really any room for debate. If God says it, we do it. And if God says this, you do this. And if God says you abstain from that, or this is forbidden, or that is forbidden, then likewise, you are forbidden from it.

But there may be cases in which we say, okay, well, that's true, but then how do we unpack that?

What does it mean in practice? How do we outwork the practicalities of obedience here?

And that is one of the things that councils, synods, assemblies, presbyteries even, are meant to do.

To determine controversies of faith, cases of conscience, rules for the better worship and administration of church government, and so on.

And likewise, if there's a suggestion that people haven't been doing their duty as faithful as they should, to whom do you appeal, if not to a synod or a council or a greater gathering of the Lord's people.

[2 : 21] And in determining such things, of course, it is that the authority that these bodies have is given them from the Lord. Now, the passage that we read today from Acts chapter 15 is really taken as being the definitive instance of, you could say, either a gathering of the elders and apostles, and of course, that's simply what our word presbytery means.

It's from the Greek presbyteroi, meaning elders, a gathering of elders, either ruling elders or teaching elders. This is a greater gathering of the whole church in that day, or all its leaders coming together in Jerusalem.

And this, we who are Presbyterians say, look, this is your first general assembly. And of course, those who think that the church should be governed by bishops will, of course, find room for it too, saying, ah, yes, but look, somebody gives the final decision at the end, there's your bishop speaking, and so on.

But in terms of gatherings of the Lord's people, synods, councils, this is the chapter that is really taken as being definitive. And whilst it is only, you'll notice that what they are determining is not how to govern the land.

They're not saying, right, we've decided now how Pontius Pilate should rule Judea. Let's send him a memo and tell him what we think and how he should do it. They're not undertaking anything that is of civil government, or is, if you like, political in that sense.

[3 : 45] It is purely to do with that which is of the church, that which is ecclesiastical, that which is how to outwork the faith. The faith they all agree on, but it's just how that works out in practice.

And that is the purpose of gathering so-called synods and councils together. And from the general rule, which of course the Confession of Faith deals with the heads of the general rule, we can look at this chapter and see an example of how it is worked out here.

Now, remember something. Remember that to us, with hindsight, it seems obvious what the answer should be. Here we are, you know, 2,000 years later on, and the vast majority of Christians in the world are not Jewish people.

So they are Gentiles. So we think, well, of course it had to go and include all the Gentiles. Of course that's the way it had to go. But remember, it was not so obvious to them. Within just a decade or two of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and his ascension into heaven, the apostles are all there, with the exception, of course, of Judas, who has taken his own life, and of James, the brother of John, who has now been executed by Herod.

And so all the apostles other than that and all the elders and leaders of the church are there. And remember that these people are all Jewish. These people have never known until the conversion of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and his followers and his friends and so on, and others who may now be choosing to believe the gospel in outlying cities like Antioch and others, all the core of the church is all 100% Jewish.

[5 : 34] And so they don't really know exactly how they should deal with what do we do about Gentiles. Are they, if they're going to be grafted into the promises to the fathers, to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, are they meant to be circumcised as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were?

Are they meant to become Israelites first, like the proselytes were in the synagogues, who are people of Gentile background, who had converted completely, totally, absolutely to Judaism. They had become Israelites by profession, by faith, by being circumcised. They had completely, totally resigned their old nationality and identity and become Jews, to all intents and purposes. Is that what was required now of these new Christians? And we think it's obvious what the answer should be. But remember that it says, verse 5, we think, oh, here's the Pharisees again causing trouble.

But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed. These are not enemies of Jesus, remember. These are people who now, with their devotion to the law and bringing every detail of life under the teaching of God's commands and laws.

[6 : 49] These are people who are convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. These are not like the old Pharisees that were nitpicking at Jesus and trying to destroy him and so on. These are the Pharisees which believed.

These are, if you like, good Pharisees. These are Christian Pharisees which believed. But they still think that Gentiles, when they become Christians, should likewise become Israelites.

Because as far as they see it, logically, the law is given to God's people, the Moses and the Israelites and so on. And there were others who joined themselves to that group of people, you know, like Ruth and others in the past.

And they became Israelites, to all intents and purposes. And other people had and did convert to Judaism and they became Israelites. So why can't all these Gentiles do the same?

After all, we're the ones with the law, with the prophets. This is our inheritance. This is our heritage. They are welcome to join in. But they have to become one of us first. And that to them seemed absolutely logical.

[7 : 55] It seemed the right outworking of God's word as they understood it. So let's not poo-poo them and say, oh, well, it's obvious they were going against God. You know, they thought it was needful to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

Of which they saw, recognizing Jesus of the Messiah as the crowning glory of the law. But keeping the law to them was a way of honoring God. It wasn't a way of earning salvation.

And the apostles and elders came together for to consider the matter. And notice verse 7. When there had been much disputing, Peter rose up and said unto them, men and brethren.

So the apostles and the elders, they've all come together to consider this matter. Why is there much disputing? If it's so obvious. It is not obvious to these first century Jewish believers exactly which way the church should go.

Yes, the Lord has at this stage converted some Gentile believers without them first becoming Jews.

But, you know, the apostles are still content to send Jewish letters to them and say that, well, you abstain from fornication, from blood, from things strangled, from things offered to idols.

[9 : 12] You keep that much. And then the rest, you follow your own faith in Christ and all that it teaches you. And so keep away from these things. And that will mean that you're not breaking with your Jewish brothers and sisters who also believe in Christ.

Keep these things. Now, why even lay these things on them? Now, we would suggest to you, understanding from the scripture, that because they are coming at it from such totally different angles.

Gentiles are coming at it from a point of view where the world is saturated in idols and gods. Where you can't so much as buy a piece of meat in the marketplace that hasn't been sacrificed to an idol somewhere.

Now, it's very difficult to get meat that doesn't have the blood in it. Do you eat it or don't you eat it? Are you meant to live like a Jew or not like a Jew? Plus the fact that to the unbelieving Gentiles, immorality was just endemic.

It was normalized. Everybody just indulged their base animal instincts, right, left and center. And they thought nothing of it. The Jews were almost unique amongst ancient peoples in that they kept themselves within the sanctity of the marriage bond.

[10 : 27] Or they were meant to. That was the teaching of the God they worshipped. And this was different. This was unique. And this is one of the things that the apostles are saying. They keep themselves from fornication, from things, strangle, from blood, from things offered to idols.

And if they keep within these tram lines, then there will be a visible difference between themselves and the rest of the Gentile world. And there will be a visible similarity to themselves and the believing Jews.

But at the same time, they won't have to become Jews first. Is this a right way to work it out? We could say God had already converted Gentiles. But given that now they want to know how they outworked their Christianity.

Should they go ahead and become circumcised? Should they go ahead and become Jews? Should they change in order to fit in with their existing brethren? Or is God doing a new thing here?

These are some of the things which the church had to decide upon. And it's not because, oh well, one is right and one is wrong. If there hadn't been arguments on both sides.

[11 : 36] If there hadn't been a certain amount of scriptural evidence on both sides. Then there wouldn't have been this disputed. This is one reason why the church needs gatherings of its ruling elders and teaching elders and commissioners and so on.

In the various levels of church courts. You know, we've got our local church session, which is the local elders. And so you've got the presbytery. That's a gathering of elders, teaching elders and ruling elders from a whole area.

And then, theoretically, you've still got the synods, which is a whole provincial area. And then you've got your general assembly, which is people coming together from the whole country. In order to determine any questions that may arise.

But also, not just say, oh well, there's no disputes today. What can we do? Well, let's all just go home. Because there's the ordinary ongoing running of the church. There's the ordinary working of the different things the church is involved in.

There's the day-to-day life and breath and feeding of the Lord's people. Now, if you think in terms of a household. You think in terms of how much work there is in just an ordinary household.

[12 : 51] How often are your bins emptied? Well, once a party. How full are your bins when they're emptied? Oh, there's always loads of junk in them. Why? As soon as they're emptied, you think, oh, that should be it now. Now they should stay empty.

No, but ordinary life generates more packages, more wrappings, more rubbish, more ash, more all the junk that detritus of ordinary living.

You need to buy more food. No matter how much you pig out one day, you're still going to need to eat the next day or the day after. Because you need to eat. You need to have clean clothes every so often.

You need soap. You need all the things that daily life needs. And as you go through it, you use it up. And so as these things get up, you have to replace them and so on.

And so it is with the ordinary business of living the Christian life. The Lord's people can't just say, oh, well, we got fed by the word of God that day. That's it till next year.

[13 : 44] That's it till three months down the line. Just as we have to eat every day. We have to be fed by God's word on a regular basis. We should be maintaining our relationship with the Lord day by day, individually and in families.

But also as we come together week by week. We should be feeding that. It should be strengthened. We need it just as the running of a household needs all this input, all this constant activity.

The place doesn't stay clean by itself. You have to keep at it. Food doesn't cook itself. You have to keep at it. Dishes don't do themselves. You have to keep at it.

So likewise in the running of the life of the church, week by week, day by day, we have to be fed.

We have to have our questions answered. We have to have our prayer life fed.

Ordinary decisions have to be taken on a regular basis. The fabric of the church, the outworking of what committees are meant to do and so on. Looking after those who are housebound or who are in need or whatever.

[14 : 46] All these things the church had to be concerned with. The church still has to be concerned with. And it's not glamorous. Just like most of ordinary daily life isn't glamorous.

It's just required. And the ongoing life of the church, these committees and councils and assemblies have to deal with. Sometimes things go wrong. Who do we look to?

We look to the gatherings of the rulers and elders and so on. So that's what they're doing here in Acts 15. It's not always obvious what route the church can go down.

If there aren't arguments on both sides, if the word of God is crystal clear and without doubt, then the church shouldn't even be debating it. They should just be following exactly what the word of God says.

But what if you've got scripture on both sides? What if you've got an uncertainty as to genuinely which way the church should go?

[15 : 46] That is what they've got here. And as we say, only looks obvious to us. Because we're standing with 2,000 years of hindsight. They thought they had 2,000 years of hindsight from Abraham all the way up now to the New Testament times.

They thought, of course they have to be circumcised. We have to be the Lord's people. But this is perhaps the distinction which the Holy Ghost gave to the church at that time.

They had to be the Lord's people. But just because up until that time the Lord's people had always been the Jews, didn't mean that the Lord's people were going to be confined to the Jews anymore. Yes, they had to be the Lord's people. Yes, they had to eschew and turn their back on idolatry and all the ways of paganism and false gods and immorality.

But to go the whole way with the law and circumcision and all the Old Testament requirements, that wasn't necessarily required of them. God was calling new people into relationship with himself.

[16 : 57] Now, James, as we see here from verse 13 onwards, he sums it up and says, To this agree the words of the prophets as it is written.

Now, he's quoting from Amos chapter 9, verses 11 and 12, which if we'll read it in the Old Testament there, you'll see that it says the following.

It says, In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches that are all, and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen.

Now, there's a key phrase, and of all the heathen, or nations, or Gentiles, it's the same word in the Hebrew, which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this.

Now, this is what he makes reference to all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called. Why doesn't it sound exactly the same in the Acts as it does in Amos? The reason for this is, as most of you will know, the New Testament is written in Greek, the Old Testament is written, for the most part, in Hebrew.

[18 : 07] And if you take terminology and verses from one language and put them into another, it's never exactly the same. And you might think, well, why doesn't James just quote the Hebrew?

And then we'll have it exact word for word. Almost certainly what James is quoting, or what is being written here, of his having quoted, is being written from the Greek Old Testament.

The Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, as it was there, then was translated into Greek before the time of Christ, because we've gone to the stage then when most, even Jewish people, couldn't read Hebrew, couldn't speak it.

It was the language of devotion, it was the language of the synagogue, of worship, and a lot of people couldn't speak it. So they put the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. In other words, they put the Old Testament into Greek, and it's from this Greek version that James' words are being taken. That's why it sounds slightly different from what you just read if you look back into Amos. You see it is slightly different. But the key thing is, it is about building up again the ruins of God's tabernacle of David, that the residue of men, the remnant of men, might seek after the Lord.

[19 : 22] And this is what it says in the original, that they may possess the remnant of Edom, Edom doesn't get a mention now in the New Testament, but of all the heathen. And as we say in the Hebrew, the word for heathen is the same as the word for Gentiles, which is the same as the word for nations.

Anybody who was of a nation other than the people of Israel was a Gentile, a heathen, a dog, basically, if they were outside the nation of Israel, as they thought in those days. And of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this. All the Gentiles, verse 17 of Acts 15, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Now, James could have quoted any number of other Old Testament scriptures which would have strongly hinted at the expanding of God's grace around the whole world.

In his name shall the Gentiles trust. He would be a light to the Gentiles and so on. Isaiah 4, for example, Fear not, for thou shalt not be ashamed, neither shalt thou be confounded, for thou shalt not be put to shame, for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth and thy widowhood.

[20 : 35] Thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left. Thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles and make the desolate cities to be inhabited. You know, reference to the Gentiles being brought in to relationship with the Lord is there in abundance in the Old Testament.

It's not quite clear why James has taken this relatively obscure verse, couple of verses in Amos, and made these his basis, but this is what is quoted.

And this sufficiently tells the story that God intends to bring in more who are not Jewish people. And this is the thing that he builds on what God has already said.

He said, this is the way the Lord intends to go. And the Holy Spirit is making that clear to them. The only reason the church is justified in going off in a new direction is because the Holy Ghost is telling them, this is how you are to understand the Scriptures.

You're not to break with the Scriptures. You're not to go against them, but you are to see them as fulfilled and pointing in this new direction.

[21 : 47] Now, of course, that particular idea can and has been taken by many at General Assembly or Synod as giving carte blanche to do whatsoever they choose.

Dependent, as they say, upon the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, that can then be taken to mean we claim the right of the Holy Spirit to do whatever we want, even if it's in defiance of God's Word.

There is no justification for that anywhere. To go against God's Word is to go against God Himself because the Spirit of God and the Word of God will not contradict each other.

And that is what we find here, that the Spirit of God, the Holy Ghost, is leading the church in this new direction to open out the inheritance of God's people.

Verse 28, It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to be God first, the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things, that you abstain from meats offered to idols.

[22 : 49] You're not going to shore up idolatry with your new faith. And from blood, which, of course, God forbade His people from eating. And from things strangled, if a beast was killed by strangulation, all its blood was still inside it.

So you don't eat that. And from fornication, which, if you will keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well. Now these may sound like all fairly basic, not big requirements, but even to make a distinction in themselves between their old life, where all these things were going to be, and their new life, now that they were following the God of Israel and His Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. For these Gentiles, this would be a huge change in lifestyle. All their former friends and colleagues would see, he doesn't eat this stuff anymore.

He's no longer doing this. He's changed his behavior. She's no longer living as one she did. What's happened? What's changed? Now in some ways, if they were to be able to say, oh, they've become Jews. Oh, well, that's it.

That explains it. But they're not becoming Jews. But they are following the Messiah of Israel. They are grafted into that inheritance. They're just as much Greeks as they were, just as much Romans as they were, or just as much Syrians or Cypriots or whatever they were before.

[24 : 10] They're just as much that. But now, they are the Lord's people. Because God is throwing wide the gates of this grace to bring in people of all missions.

Now, that the church has to decide and deliberate upon these things, we see from this chapter.

That they must do so in line with the word of God, likewise we see in this chapter.

That we have the Holy Ghost putting up clear distinction between the Lord's people, even Gentile ones, and simply the unbelieving world, we likewise see. What do we do if, for example, once the number of converts increases in a place and the prince or the king or the civil magistrate in a place likewise becomes a Christian?

Should he start directing the church? Well, no, he shouldn't. But it is okay to consult. I mean, even Herod the Great, although he was a tyrant, if you remember, Herod the Great called the wise men to him and all the the scribes and so on, he said, where is it that the Messiah is going to be born? Where is it that he's going to be coming into the world? And that's when they told him in Bethlehem and the man of Judah. And this was his perfect right to consult with the religious leaders to find out what it was that they could teach.

[25 : 35] He had gathered all the chief priests and scribes and the people together and he demanded them where Christ should be born. Herod had the right to do that as king, just as the civil magistrate has the right to consult with and to gather the Lord's people and to seek their guidance and their advice if he should so choose.

He or she should so choose. We've got, again, scriptural justification for it. 2 Chronicles 19, for example, from verse 8, moreover in Jerusalem did Jehoshaphat say of the Levites and of the priests and of the chief of the farmers of Israel for the judgment of the Lord and for controversies. When they returned to Jerusalem, they charged and say, Thus shall ye do in the feet of the Lord faithfully and with a perfect heart. And what cause soever shall come to you of your brethren that dwell in their cities between blood and blood between law and commandment, statutes and judgments, ye shall even warn them that they trespass not against the Lord and so wrath come upon you and upon your brethren.

This do, and ye shall not trespass. So he sets the church as it was in those days in order that they can deliberate, they can decide any controversies or disagreements in religion.

That's what synodic councils, what church courts are meant to do. Because although God's teaching is black and white, yet the application of it will not always be completely clear to us.

[27 : 01] because there may be on occasion more than one right answer or more than one possible right answer. Because God's word may be saying do this.

And another people, God's word might appear to be saying yes but you can also do that. And which is it? What in our circumstances in our day is the right way to go? And these are some of the reasons why the Lord's people have to meet together, why they have to decide, why they have to deliberate.

because God's word is clear and yet at the same time our lives need its application to our lives and the church can help and direct and guide and lead with that application.

That application never has the right to reverse what God says in his word. It never has the right to overrule God's word but it can show us ways to bring our lives into line with God's word and ways in which we are enabled rather to obey what he has already taught us and set out.

So this chapter as we say sets out these things. It is the definitive chapter taken as the ultimate authority for general assemblies and councils and synods and presbyteries and so on and of course that the elders and the rulers of the different churches met together frequently and decided on local affairs throughout the Roman Empire in those days and at that time.

[28 : 33] So we have our scriptural basis and we have the practical outworking of it. God wants his church to be ordered. God does not desire chaos.

He's not the author of chaos. He's the one who first brought order out of chaos with creation and he brought order and he brought light and he brought direction.

That is what he still seeks to give us and it's what we are taught to do both by the biblical basis behind our church's confession of faith and also by scripture itself.

When we come to it we see what the apostles and elders did and as we come to it ourselves in our day we can see how likewise we ought to be led.

It doesn't seem exciting and it doesn't seem glamorous but an awful lot of life isn't. Somebody writing about military preparations once described that the work of a regiment a regiment of soldiers whether they're cavalry or infantry whatever the piece may be an awful lot of it is not exciting and it's not directly battle concerned but the doing of the ordinary things faithfully day by day their ordinary drill their ordinary training their ordinary maintaining of their equipment and making sure that all their supplies and all their equipment is kept clean and ready and sharp and so that they're well drilled in all the obedience of orders that can make the difference the doing of these ordinary unglamorous behind the scenes things will make the difference between success and failure when battle does come it will be the soldiers that are well trained well prepared well equipped whose equipment is up to standard whose weapons are sharp whose powder is dry who have an adequate supply of all the things they need all the food all the tents all the camping gear all the transport all the links that they need all the supply of intelligence none of it is glamorous or exciting in itself but it makes the difference between victory and defeat and keeping all these things faithful in the background means that when the battle comes you stand ready to fight it now we're in a spiritual warfare we're in a warfare where the devil doesn't attack 24 hours every day seven days a week but he waits he bides his time just when you come down from the mountain top of a wonderful spiritual experience that's when he hits you in the valley or just when you think you're strong that's when he sweeps the feet from under you and brings you crashing down or just when you think things are going well that's when he gets in in a chink of the armor one way or another he's not so stupid as to be always at it sometimes he lets us be lulled into a false sense of security but if we keep up our supplies of spiritual grace if we maintain our communion with the Lord if we keep our spiritual fitness at the level it's meant to be if we commune often one with another like the councils and synods are meant to do remember what it says at the very end of the

[31 : 51] Old Testament in the book of Malachi then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another and the Lord hearkened and heard it and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord and that thought upon his name and they shall be mine said the Lord of hosts in that day when I make up my jewels if we keep the ordinary stuff going well and faithfully then when the time comes for battle and contest we shall be found ready we shall be found prepared we shall be in a strength not our own and the victory will be assured because the battle is not ours but the Lord's bless it I know I about it.

I know