

Rooted—A Journey Through the Westminster Confession of Faith

Session 51: Chapter 31~Of Synods and Councils

Introduction—There is no doubt that the church through the ages has benefited from synods and councils that have met in session to develop creeds, confessions and statements on issues critical to her well-being. The council that met in Jerusalem (Acts 15) provides a precedent. As Dr. Van Dixhoorn points out, one reason this council was significant was that it was comprised of elders in addition to the apostles who would eventually pass off the scene. As elders would continue to serve, so also the need for councils from time to time could be warranted.¹

- This chapter reflects the polity of Presbyterianism.
- But this chapter also bears the marks of a particular historical and local situation regarding civil authority. The Westminster Assembly was called into session by Parliament.²
- The idea that civil magistrates may call a council of the church cannot be supported biblically. Therefore American Presbyterians in 1788 revised the Confession insisting that “it belongs to overseers and other rulers” to call synods.³
- See *Confessing the Faith*, pages 411-414 for a fuller explanation. Our discussion will follow the modern version of the *RCF 1788 Text*.

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*31.1 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.*

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<sup>1</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, 2014, p. 410.

<sup>2</sup> The Long Parliament was a revolutionary body opposed to the crown of England. The Westminster Assembly met in the midst of the English Civil War.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, quoting from the *RCF (1788) Text*, p. 413.

## I. The Case For Councils

- The case can be made because of the precedent set in Acts 15 where four times (15.2, 4, 6, 23) reference is made to, not just apostles with their acknowledged authority, but apostles *and elders* coming together to consider the matter of Gentile believers and the Law of Moses.

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31.2 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 the 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.

II. Areas For Operation

A. The duties of synods include

1. controversies of faith
2. cases of conscience
3. directions for ordering public worship
4. polity,
5. handling complaints of maladministration

- B. When in accord with the Word, decrees and decisions should be received with reverence and submission.

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*31.3 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 are to be used as a help in regard to both.*

III. General Observations About Synods and Councils

- A. Synods and councils may err
- B. Synods and councils have erred
- C. They are not to be made the rule of faith or practice
- D. They may be helpful with regard to faith and practice

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31.4 Synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing but 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.

IV. The Limitations of Jurisdiction

- In the historical moment of the Westminster Assembly, it had been the position of the Roman Catholic Church to claim supremacy in civil as well as ecclesiastical matters.
- The issue of the church's relationship with the state has always been an area of debate. Speaking of more recent times, G.I. Williamson notes two instances in which the Church may directly concern itself with civil matters. "(1) When the State presents a direct threat to the spiritual concerns of the Church, the latter has the right to speak on that matter as an organized body. (2) When the civil authorities request from the Church a statement of opinion on matters involving morals, it would be the right and perhaps even the duty of the Church to comply."⁴

⁴ G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Philadelphia, 1964, p. 251.

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***Next Assignment: WCF 32.1-3  
Confessing the Faith: pages 425-433***

## **My Heart Is Filled With Thankfulness**

(Keith Getty and Stuart Townend)

My heart is filled with thankfulness  
To Him who bore my pain  
Who plumbed the depth of my disgrace  
And gave me life again.  
Who crushed my curse of sinfulness  
And clothed me in His light  
And wrote His law of righteousness  
With power upon my heart.

My heart is filled with thankfulness  
To Him who walks beside  
Who floods my weaknesses with strength  
And causes fear to fly.  
Whose every promise is enough  
For every step I take  
Sustaining me with arms of love  
And crowning me with grace.

My heart is filled with thankfulness  
To Him who reigns above  
Whose wisdom is my perfect peace  
Whose every thought is love.  
For every day I have on earth  
Is given by the King  
So I will give my life my all  
To love and follow Him.