

“Synods and Councils”
(WCF 31:1-5)

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: *[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.]*

I. What are Synods/ Councils?

A. They are church/ecclesiastical assemblies.

1. Biblical example: The Acts 15 Council.

2. Historical examples: The Ecumenical Councils.

a. There were seven in all.

b. The first four are more familiar:

(i) The Council of Nicaea (325): rejected Arianism (belief that the Son is of a similar, but not same, substance with the Father).

(ii) Council of Constantinople (381): rejected Arianism and Macedonianism (which denied the deity of the Spirit and said the Son of the same substance with the Father); revised the Nicene Creed with regard to the Spirit.

(iii) Council of Ephesus (431): rejected Nestorianism (Christ exists as two persons), proclaimed Mary as the Theotokos (God-bearer/mother of God, as opposed merely to Christotokos, Christ-bearer/mother of Christ), rejected Pelagianism (Adam and Christ only examples).

(iv) Council of Chalcedon (451): rejected Eutychianism/monophysitism (that Christ has only one nature); affirmed the hypostatic union (both natures of Christ distinct and separate, but united in one person).

3. Independency: Councils held as needed.

4. Presbyterianism: Synods/Councils are held on regular basis.

a. Presbytery – all the ministers and one elder from each local fellowship in a geographic region – generally meets twice a year.

b. General Assembly – representative ministers and elders from each Presbytery – generally meets once per year.

B. Generally, their purpose is to aid in the government and edification of the whole church.

1. The church is one body under one Head with representative leadership over each local body.

2. An assembly would be a representative meeting of the leadership/elders, under Christ, to deal with issues important for the wellbeing of the whole body.

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; 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.

II. Who may call a Synod or Council?

A. Westminster's view.

1. Ideally, the magistrate is to call the Synod.

a. The magistrate was given authority to protect and serve the church:

(i) "Kings will be your guardians, and their princesses your nurses. They will bow down to you with their faces to the earth and lick the dust of your feet; and *you* will know that I am the LORD; those who hopefully wait for Me will not be put to shame" (Isa. 49:23).

(ii) We are to pray that they exercise their responsibility for the church in a godly way: "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties *and* prayers, petitions *and* thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

b. This was also the Old Covenant arrangement:

(i) Example: Jehoshaphat (2 Chr. 19:8-11).

(ii) "Hezekiah became king *when he was* twenty-five years old; and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name *was* Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. He did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done. In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the LORD and repaired them. He brought in the priests and the Levites and gathered them into the square on the east. Then he said to them, 'Listen to me, O Levites. Consecrate yourselves now, and consecrate the house of the LORD, the God of your fathers, and carry the uncleanness out from the holy place. For our fathers have been unfaithful and have done evil in the sight of the LORD our God, and have forsaken Him and turned their faces away from the dwelling place of the LORD, and have turned *their* backs. They have also shut the doors of the porch and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense or offered burnt offerings in the holy place to the God of Israel. Therefore the wrath of the LORD was against Judah and Jerusalem, and He has made them an object of terror, of horror, and of hissing, as you see with your own eyes. For behold, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this. Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the LORD God of Israel, that His burning anger may turn away from us. My sons, do not be negligent now, for the LORD has chosen you to stand before Him, to minister to Him, and to be His ministers and burn incense.' Then the Levites arose: Mahath, the son of Amasai and Joel the son of Azariah, from the sons of the Kohathites; and from the sons of Merari, Kish the son of Abdi and Azariah the son of Jehallelel; and from the Gershonites, Joah the son of Zimmah and Eden the son of Joah; and from the sons of Elizaphan, Shimri and Jeiel; and from the sons of Asaph, Zechariah and Mattaniah; and from the sons of Heman, Jehiel and Shimei; and from the sons of Jeduthun, Shemaiah and Uzziel. They assembled their brothers, consecrated themselves, and went in to cleanse the house of the

LORD, according to the commandment of the king by the words of the LORD. So the priests went in to the inner part of the house of the LORD to cleanse *it*, and every unclean thing which they found in the temple of the LORD they brought out to the court of the house of the LORD. Then the Levites received *it* to carry out to the Kidron valley. Now they began the consecration on the first *day* of the first month, and on the eighth day of the month they entered the porch of the LORD. Then they consecrated the house of the LORD in eight days, and finished on the sixteenth day of the first month. Then they went in to King Hezekiah and said, ‘We have cleansed the whole house of the LORD, the altar of burnt offering with all of its utensils, and the table of showbread with all of its utensils’” (2 Chr. 29:1-18).

2. But if the magistrate is an enemy of the church, Christ’s ministers may call the assembly, according to the example of Acts 15.

B. OPC’s view.

1. “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” (from above section 1).
2. The OPC does not believe it to be the magistrate’s role in the New Covenant to call assemblies.
 - a. Based on the example of Acts 15, the church must do so.
 - b. They may do so as often as they believe necessary for the good of the Church.

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.

III. What is the purpose of Synods and Councils?

- A. They are to perform duties related to their sphere of authority with a view to the well-being of the whole church.
 1. They are to resolve controversies of faith, such as those dealt with at Jerusalem, Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon.
 2. They are to resolve cases of conscience – moral issues, such as those having to do with the Sabbath, stealing, adultery, or what aspects of the Law of Moses still need to be observed, etc.
 3. They are to set down rules and directions for the public worship of God and the government of His church.
 4. They are to receive and adjudicate cases appealed to them from the local body, such as the matter of the Judaizers in the Galatian churches.
 5. Just about every branch of the Christian Church has seen the value of and held some form of Church Council.

- B. Should we submit to the authority of Councils? Why?
1. If the decision they reach is agreeable to God's Word, we should submit to it, because it is God's Word and has His authority.
 2. We should also submit to it because it is ministered through a body invested with ministerial authority by God: "Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe" (Acts 16:4).
 3. But if what they say doesn't agree with God's Word, we are duty bound not to submit to it, for to do so would be to give up the liberty Christ purchased for us: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also" (WCF 20.2).

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.

IV. Are Synods and Councils to be looked at as an infallible rule of faith?

- A. No Synod or Council is infallible.
 1. Councils may err – there is no promise from the Lord of infallibility.
 2. Many have erred, as is seen in later Councils.

- B. They are not to be used as rules of faith or practice, but as a help in each.
 1. Their purpose is to help the church understand the Word of God, which is our sole authority, and to minister that Word, not their own doctrines and rules.
 2. "Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).
 3. "So that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5).

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 common wealth, 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.

V. What are the limits of the Synod's or Council's power?

1. They are to respect the sphere of their commission.
2. Yet, they are to intervene in civil affairs:
 - a. If they believe the situation requires it, they are humbly to petition the magistrate.
 - b. If they are asked for advice.