

**Acts 14:26 - 15:1-35**

Sec 1. “For the better government, & further edification of the church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils: & it belongeth to the overseers & other rulers of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, & the power which Christ hath given them for edification & not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies; & to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church.”

- A. According to one source “A synod is a council of the Christian church. The word comes from the Greek σύνοδος; meaning an *assembly*, and is synonymous with the word *council* that comes from the Latin *concilium*.”<sup>1</sup>
1. Apart from the origin of the 2 words, regional meetings of the church have been typically known as “synods.”
  2. The ecumenical meeting of the entire known church was called a council as in the Council of Nicaea in 325 which dealt with the Arian heresy.
- B. The 1<sup>st</sup> thing we notice from **Acts 15:2** was that the church in Antioch— even with Paul the apostle & Barnabas there— could not handle the matter alone.
1. There was a great dissension & even a debate concerning the teaching of the Judaizers who taught, **“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:1).**
  2. Using the language of the WCF, those at the local church in Antioch asked for an authoritative doctrinal statement that would be “expedient for the good of the church” (sec 1).
  3. As sec 2 says: “It belongeth to synods & councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, & cases of conscience.”
    - a. The Jerusalem (council or synod)<sup>2</sup> settled a problem that was a controversy of faith & matter of conscience. The decision handed down brought peace to the church.
    - b. This local church made an appeal to a higher, authoritative body. In the case of the OPC, our regional synod or Presbyteries can make an appeal to a to a higher, authoritative body— the General Assembly.
- C. Sec 2 goes on to mention the other matters synods & councils are to handle ministerially. Both are “to set down rules & directions”:
1. “...for the better ordering of the public worship of God” [OPC’s *Directory for the Public Worship of God*].
  2. for the “government of his church.”
    - a. *The Form of Government*
    - b. *The Book of Discipline*

<sup>1</sup> <https://orthodoxwiki.org/Synod>

<sup>2</sup> Reformed authors have used both the terms “synod” and “council” to refer to Acts 15.

3. Still, there are further matters synods & councils are to handle ministerially. According to sec 2, both are “to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, & authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees & determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence & 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.”

a. All these matters can be handled at a regional Presbytery level.

b. When necessary, the General Assembly (GA) gets involved for major matters of controversy or appeals at the highest level.

1) This is reminiscent of Jethro’s advice to Moses: **“select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; & you shall place *these* over them as leaders of 1000s, of 100s, of 50s & of 10s. Let them judge the people at all times; & let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge” (Ex 18:21-22)**. Local congregations should be able to handle minor matters of dispute.

2) Especially when the GA makes a ruling or doctrinal statement that is “consonant [in agreement] to the Word of God,” the regional Presbyteries & local congregations ought to receive such with “reverence & submission” according to sec 2.

c. It is very important to know that your pastor & elders have someone to answer to in this life.

1) Ruling elders & gospel ministers (teaching elders) will have to give an account to God how they have watched over your souls according to **Heb 13:17**.

2) Before having to give an account to God as the ultimate authority, your Session has to give an account before the Presbytery of the South.

a) If someone does not like the ruling of the regional Presbytery, they can make an appeal to the General Assembly.

b) This is a blessing known as accountability which can keep church leaders from running “roughshod” over church members. It is a beautiful thing!

c) In “cases of maladministration” wherein a Session unjustly excommunicates a person or a family, having the right to file a complaint to a higher ruling body of the church is a great ordeal yet very worthwhile.

d. This whole process earnestly seeks to follow the Word of God which instructs us to have a connected church rather than each independent congregation acting as its own final authority in matters.

1) That should scare you!

2) Such independence is not the example given in **Acts 15**.