

Presbyterian Church Government in Action

Acts 15:22-35

May 7, 2017

Greg L. Price

The Holy Spirit has demonstrated from Acts 15 that Jesus Christ, as King of His kingdom and church, has given a form of church government that proceeds from His throne with divine authority: Presbyterian Church government. Just as the doctrine and worship that Jesus authorizes is not optional but commanded, so likewise is the church government Jesus has authorized—it is not optional but commanded (it is of divine right). Jesus Himself made it clear that ministers and churches are not to be innovative and creative in doctrine, worship, or church government, but are simply to teach what He as King has commanded (“**teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you**” **Matthew 28:20**).

However, it is one thing to know what Jesus has commanded, but another thing to see Presbyterian Church government in action. Does Presbyterian Church government actually work in practice in the Church of Jesus Christ and between Churches of Jesus Christ? Does Presbyterian Church government bind many churches into one church and promote the peace, purity, and unity of Christ’s Church? You see, dear ones, many Independent and Congregational Churches will profess the unity of Christ’s Church—i.e. the spiritual unity of all regenerate Christians by way of vital union with Jesus Christ through the effectual work of the Holy Spirit (and we agree and rejoice with them in that truth). But such Independent and Congregational churches will not and cannot profess the *visible* unity of Christ’s Church (as taught in Scripture), because they believe and promote separate, autonomous churches that are not connected and bound together by way of the same doctrine, worship, and church government through common church courts. Only Presbyterian Church government binds congregations together as one visible expression of Christ’s Church within a nation under one government of ministers and elders who together are all under the rule of one King, Jesus Christ.

Let us continue our study through Acts 15 as we will see Presbyterian church government applied in practice in order to preserve the peace, purity, and unity of Christ’s Church: (1) **A Synodical Letter Authoritatively Sent to Sister Churches** (Acts 15:22-29); (2) **A Synodical Letter Received by Sister Churches with Due Submission** (Acts 15:30-35).

I. **A Synodical Letter Authoritatively Sent to Sister Churches (Acts 15:22-29).**

A. How have we thus far seen Presbyterian Church government exhibited in Acts 15?

1. A controversy arose in the Church of Antioch over what was necessary to be saved—faith alone in Christ alone, or faith in Christ plus circumcision or any other qualification (Acts 15:1)?

2. Though there were sufficient ministers, apostles, prophets, and elders in the Presbyterian Church of Antioch to resolve this matter, they determined that this was a matter of such great significance for the whole Church of Jesus Christ that a Synod should be formed in Jerusalem where ministers, apostles, prophets, and elders of Churches from Antioch and Jerusalem should convene and authoritatively rule on this question (Acts 15:2) and perhaps from other Churches (Acts 15:23). That is Presbyterian Church government in action.

3. Once the Synod had convened, there was debate on the matter among those present rather than an inspired apostolic ruling being immediately delivered (Acts 15:7). Peter did not rule by inspiration, but appealed to God’s work in bringing Cornelius and all those gathered in his home to Christ by faith alone and into the Visible Church (Acts 15:7-11). Paul and Barnabas did not rule by inspiration, but appealed to the miracles God performed through them in confirming the gospel they preached to the

Gentiles—faith alone in Christ alone (Acts 15:12). James did not rule by inspiration, but appealed to Scripture (Amos 9:11-12). This was Presbyterian Church government in action and an example to follow.

B. Now we shall see the united decision of this Presbyterian Synod in resolving this first and most important controversy over how a sinner is made right and acceptable before God. Once again, this will evidence Presbyterian Church government in action in preserving the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church (Acts 15:22-29).

1. First, the Synod in Jerusalem (the apostles and elders) resolved to send two chosen and qualified men to accompany Paul and Barnabas in explaining the official and authoritative letter that was written to encourage the Gentile brethren in Christian truth and fellowship (Acts 15:22,25-27).

a. Great care here is taken by the Synod in Jerusalem to assure Gentile believers that they are on an equal footing with Jewish believers—that there are not two different ways to be justified before God (the Jewish way and the Gentile way) and that there are not two different Churches of Christ (the Jewish Church of Christ and the Gentile Church of Christ). And just in case there were still some of those affected by the false teachers or those opposed to the truth preached by Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, leading men from among the elders in Jerusalem were chosen to confirm all that Paul and Barnabas would say (Judas [Acts 1:23] and Silas [Acts 15:40]).

b. Note that what this letter says about Paul and Barnabas would have been a stinging rebuke against the false teachers and a ringing endorsement of the gospel of grace through faith alone in Christ alone. Barnabas and Paul are called "beloved" ("our beloved Barnabas and Paul" Acts 15:25) because they had "hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 15:26).

(1) The "name" of our Lord Jesus Christ signifies all that He is and all that He has accomplished. Paul and Barnabas were willing to suffer to exalt the honor and glory of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). They were not suffering to exalt their own names, but the person and work of Jesus Christ. They were standing for His doctrine, worship, church government, and His commandments (including the Lord's Day) because it is His authority that stands behind these truths. How can we say we honor Jesus Christ if we do not honor every Lord's Day the very day that celebrates His glorious resurrection from the dead? How often are you more concerned for your own honor than you are for the honor of Jesus Christ? Dear ones, where there is little honor of Jesus, there will be little willingness to suffer for His glorious name.

(2) How often do we shirk from following Christ simply because we do not want to appear to be too extreme or too radical in our stand for Christ and His truth? We are afraid at times to hazard our comfortable lives in order to get off of the fence and to make it known that herein I stand with Jesus Christ and I can do no other. We prefer a mediocre Christianity—not too hot and not too cold—lukewarm. But the problem with that, dear ones, is that Jesus says He will not tolerate such mediocrity and going through the motions (Revelation 3:15-17). Token prayers and half-hearted worship is striving for mediocrity. Urgent prayers and whole-hearted worship and communion with Christ are indications that we are striving to be hot and fervent for Christ (Malachi 1:12-13). Are you offering the left-overs of your faith, love, obedience, and worship to the Lord? God is not impressed with our mediocrity. God is not impressed with our holding in one hand Jesus Christ while holding and not letting go of this world in the other hand. Jesus does not want half of your heart; He demands all of it! Dear ones, I pray you will stand with me in standing with Paul and Barnabas as those who willingly hazard their lives, their reputations, their comforts and relationships in this life for the exaltation and glory of Jesus Christ.

c. The word "pleased" (Acts 15:22) points to the authoritative decision of the Synod ("decided" or "determined" from which the noun "dogma" is derived). That same word is used in Acts 15:22 ["pleased"]; Acts 15:25 ["it seemed good"]; and in Acts 15:28 ["it seemed good"]. These were not decisions rendered by a pope, or by only apostles (acting as prelates or bishops), or by one congregation

alone, but rather decisions rendered by apostles and elders from at least two Presbyterian Churches (if not more). This was Presbyterian Church government in action.

2. Second, the Synod communicated not by mere word of mouth, but officially sent a letter that made clear the ruling of the Synod to the Gentile Churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (Acts 15:23). There was no lack of attempt on the part of the Synod to make clear their ruling—by authoritative letter and by authoritative mouths. They sought to remove any confusion about their response to this controversy. It may not be popular for a Church court to rule on a controversy that arises and divides a congregation, but that is their calling and why Christ has given to them the keys of the kingdom. Those who seek popularity should not seek office in the Church of Jesus Christ. It is not leadership to allow error to lead astray the flock (or your family)—that is acting as a hireling, not as a faithful shepherd who is to guard the flock of Jesus Christ.

3. Third, the false teachers that fomented this disruption in the Church of Antioch were censured (Acts 15:24).

a. They “troubled you” (not simply annoyed you, but disturbed and destroyed your peace by proclaiming that the Gentiles must add to faith alone in Christ alone circumcision and Old Testament ceremonies in order to be justified before God).

b. They were “subverting your souls” (a military term used for dismantling and plundering a city—these false teachers were doing the same thing to the Gentile believers in Antioch). They were not there to enrich the flock, but to rob the flock of the truth given to them by the Holy Spirit in the teaching and preaching of the pure gospel (John 10:10).

c. They “went out from us”. This phrase may be used in a local sense (from Jerusalem to Antioch), but may also be used in an ecclesiastical sense to indicate they betrayed and deserted the assembly of the faithful (1 John 2:19).

d. They had not been officially sent by the Presbyterian Church of Jerusalem (“to whom we gave no such commandment” Acts 15:24). These false teachers made a pretense of having come from James (James 2:11), but they had no orders from the apostles or elders in Jerusalem to promote their heresy to the Church of Antioch. They had sent themselves to disrupt the peace, purity, and unity of the Church. They were ambassadors of the devil to promote error and dissension rather than ambassadors of Jesus Christ to promote the peace, purity, and unity of Christ’s Church.

4. Fourth, the Synod included in their letter their exhortation to the Gentile believers that they abstain from and avoid all association with idolatry (Acts 15:28-29). These decrees were “necessary”, not optional, in order to show love for God and for their brethren.

a. Once again, “for it seemed good” or was determined by the Holy Ghost and by us. First and most importantly it was determined by the Holy Ghost as the evidence was presented, and it was also determined by us (the Jerusalem Synod). Every faithful church court should make the same statement (so also should the decisions we make).

b. As we saw last Lord’s Day each of these mentioned acts were rituals associated with the idolatrous feasts of pagans at their temples. Gentile believers must flee the temptation to attend the celebrations for anniversaries or for civil events with pagan family and friends at the pagan temples. That is the place where these acts and rituals would take place. To attend would compromise their testimony for Jesus Christ and their separation from idolatry (2 Corinthians 6:16-18). To attend would possibly lead other Gentile believers to sin against their conscience by doing the same and possibly lead them back into idolatry. To attend would offend their Jewish brethren and cause further division between Jewish and Gentile believers. “Flee idolatry!”

c. Dear ones, whatever God has not commanded and authorized for us in His Word to be used in our worship of Him is idolatry. It is not *direct idolatry* in worshipping a false God (in violation of the First Commandment), but it is *indirect idolatry* in worshipping the one true God by means of our own human innovation and creativity (a violation of the Second Commandment). Should we do unnecessary work

or gather for parties and watch programs on TV or on our computers that have nothing at to do with exalting and glorifying God? Does God call the Sabbath Day His? Is the Lord's Day ours or the Lord's? How will we ever be able to hazard our lives for Jesus Christ if we are not even willing to devote the whole Lord's Day to Him? We may not be fleeing actual idols in pagan temples, but we are commanded to flee all idolatry—all worship we would offer to God that He has not commanded (whether holy days, whether man-composed hymns in worship, whether use of instruments in worship which He has not commanded in the New Covenant, whether religious symbols or representations of any divine person of the Holy Trinity). Worship is about God not us. It is giving ourselves to Christ, then giving Him the choice portion of our worship in what He has commanded and preparing ourselves to meet with Him with hearts of faith, love, and obedience. Our God is infinitely great and glorious and deserves the best we have to offer, not the left overs of our life that we might give to a pet.

II. A Synodical Letter Received by Sister Churches with Due Submission (Acts 15:30-35).

A. Not only does Presbyterian church government issue forth on necessary occasions authoritative decrees (as we have just seen in Acts 15:22-29), but Presbyterian church government also issues forth on the same occasions a due submission by faithful members of Christ's Church to those decrees. Why? (1) Because they are agreeable to God's Word; (2) Because Christ has invested those church courts with His authority (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 31:3). When a decision is agreeable to Scripture, a faithful church court speaks with the authority of Jesus Christ (binding and loosing, Matthew 18).

B. Here we see that the Gentile believers in the Church of Antioch did not resent that Presbyterian church government, but readily and joyfully submitted to it as to their comfort and encouragement in the faith (Acts 15:30-31). Dear ones, we should have such respect for God's Word that whenever it is brought to us to correct us, to direct us, to comfort and encourage us, we should humbly receive it regardless of the messenger. But especially should we receive the Word when it comes to us through the ordinance of Christ's ministers and elders. While God yet grants us such ordinances for our good and for God's glory, may you and I receive with joy and humility the gospel, the instruction, the correction, and the comfort of the Lord Jesus through them (Hebrews 13:17). Such godly submission has never been popular with man, but it is popular with the faithful among God's people, and it is approved of God.

C. Jesus used His officers to instruct and encourage the flock. Personal Bible reading is very important and this we should not fail to do in our secret worship and family worship, but note the continual emphasis throughout the Book of Acts upon the ministers of Christ and their calling to feed and lead God's people on behalf of Christ the Good Shepherd (Acts 15:33-35). We neglect this gift from Christ to our own detriment. May God raise up many faithful shepherds to feed and lead Christ's flock! Let us rejoice, dear ones, for divine right Presbyterian church government that we have seen here in action—not an ivory tower government that is theoretical, but one that is practical in defending the flock against false teaching and feeding the flock the truth of Jesus Christ.

Dear ones, as I close today, never forget that there is salvation and acceptance before God only in the person and work of Jesus Christ—His perfect life of obedience, His substitutionary death for sinners who trust in Him, and His bodily resurrection from the grave. The false gospel of the sect of the Pharisees could save no one because it was looking to what man can add to what Jesus has done. The false gospel exalts our self-righteousness and down plays the total depravity of man. Our only hope of eternal salvation is now and for all eternity in Jesus Christ and none other. Dear friend, receive Him as He calls you through the gospel.

But remember as well, Jesus not only loves the gospel (and so should we), but Jesus loves God's moral law

(and so should we). Jesus hates legalism wherein we seek to make ourselves acceptable before God on the basis of something in us or something performed by us. God's law is to be our delight as Christians (Psalm 119:47). It cannot be our delight in order to find favor with God. It must always be our delight in order to show our love and gratitude to Jesus for His love, mercy, and grace in saving us, giving Himself for us and to us, and giving us an eternal inheritance that is reserved with His name on it forever and ever. Dear ones, self-righteousness will condemn you. Christ's righteousness will justify you.

The Synod of Jerusalem clearly and faithfully settled and confirmed salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone. I pray it is a settled, unchangeable truth that you have embraced by faith alone as well. Amen.

Copyright 2017 Greg L. Price.