

History and Survey of the Westminster Confession of Faith



Leadership College: Module 2
Part 3: Church Polity
Of Church Censures (ch. 30)
Of Synods and Councils (ch. 31)

Ch. 30 – Of Church Censures

1. The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.

Church Government begins with the theme of Headship

➤ Genesis 1

- Man superior in creation – in God’s own image (vs. 26).
- Given the Creation Mandate “having dominion over” all creation vs. 28).

26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

28 And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

Headship from the Beginning

➤ Genesis 2 – Headship in Marriage

- The man is given the charge of carrying out the creation mandate (vs. 15).
- The covenant of works is established introducing federal headship (vs. 16-17).

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Headship from the Beginning

➤ Genesis 2 – Headship in Marriage

- The woman is made to be a “helper fit” (vs. 18, 20).

18 Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” ...

20 The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.

Headship from the Beginning

➤ Genesis 2 – Headship in Marriage

- The Lord institutes marriage and defines the marriage relationship (vs. 22-24).

22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

23 Then the man said,

*“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”*

24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Headship from the Beginning

- Genesis 3 – Consequences of Sin
 - The marriage relationship (headship) is corrupted (vs. 16-17).
 - All creation is corrupted (vs. 17-19).

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

¹⁶ To the woman he said, ... “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.”

¹⁷ And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife ... cursed is the ground because of you; ... ”

Headship from the Beginning

- Genesis 3 – Gospel Hope by way of Federal Headship
 - Deliverance comes not from the wife but from the fruit of the womb (vs. 15)
 - The husband names the wife Eve (vs. 20)

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

²⁰ The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

Headship from the Beginning

- Leadership Under the Patriarchs
 - Models of imperfect men as heads of families
 - Accounts demonstrate the growth of character with growth in faith
- Genesis 17
 - The covenant mark indicates federal unity.
 - Such unity speaks of the perpetuating of headship in the home and leadership in the church.

⁴ “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ... ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, ... ¹³ So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.

With the expansion of God’s people
into a nation,
Leadership moves from one person
to governance of his church
through elders.



The Church's Elders – Old Testament

- Elders first appear in Gen. 50:7:

So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt,

- & then the elders appear prominently
in the story of the Exodus:

Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, (Ex. 3:16, ESV)

The Church's Elders – Old Testament

- Moses had to have the approval of the elders:

Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. ... And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped. (Ex. 4:29, ESV)

- And the cooperation of the elders in instructing the people about the Passover:

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans, and kill the Passover lamb. (Ex. 12:21, ESV)

The Church's Elders – Old Testament

- The elders were prominent with Moses
in the wilderness:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. (Ex. 17:5, ESV)

- And in the confirmation of the covenant:

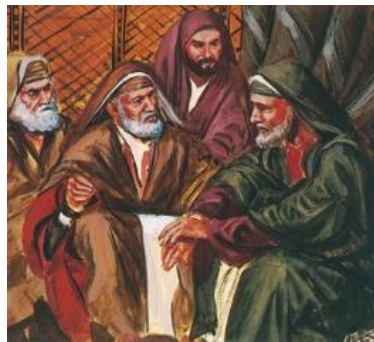
Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. (Ex. 24:1, ESV)

The Church's Elders – Old Testament

- So, far from being just Moses leading the Israelites,



- The elders were the ones
in the lead with Moses.



Moses corrected toward Eldership – Exodus 18

- “Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening? ... What you are doing is not good.” (vs. 14, 17)
- “Look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people ...” (vs. 21)



The Church’s Elders – New Testament

- The elders are still there in the New Testament.
 - But here, the elders led the people in rejecting Jesus.
 - They transpired to put Jesus to death. (Mt. 16:21; 21:23; 26:47; 27:1, etc.)
- Jesus rejected these wicked men but not the office.
 - His apostles served as the first elders of the New Testament church,
 - and they raised up other elders for the coming generations.

Ch. 30 – Of Church Censures

1. The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.

Various Views of this Relationship

- Roman Catholic – church over state
- Erastianism – magistrate over church (as well as over civil)
- Reformed – 2 ordained auth.s distinct from one another – one is spiritual (eternal), the other physical (temporal)
- Anabaptist – liberty of conscience view:
magistrate rules over the 2nd table of the Moral Law
but not over the 1st Table
- Presbyterian – separate ordinances both accountable to God

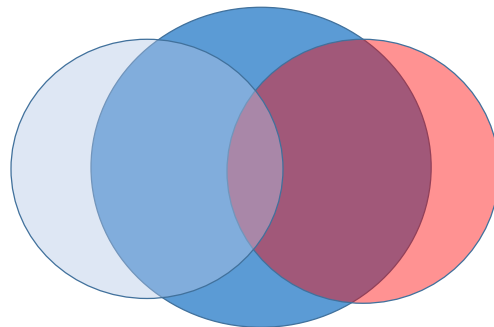
Ch. 30 – Of Church Censures

2. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, (Rom. 9:7, ESV)



Perpetual
governance of the
visible church by
elders

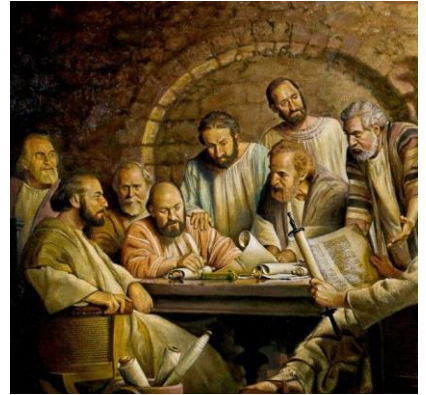


Elders who exercise the
“keys of the kingdom”
(Mt. 16:19)

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (1 Jn. 2:19, ESV)

The Keys of the Kingdom – Mt. 16:19

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."



Galatians 2:1-14

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem ... And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)— ... added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised ... , and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, ...

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ... "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

2 Peter 3:16-17

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

Plurality of Elders

- The class of Apostles was temporary – not passed down in succession.
- The office of bishop (*episkopos*) is not a third office added in the New Testament age but is equivalent to that of elder (*presbuteros*) (cf. Acts 20:17, 28).
- The office of elder was always perpetual and understood to be continued (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1).
- The role of elder was collegiate rather than singular (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6; 15:22-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 22:5; 24:1; 25:15; most of Paul's letters).
- It will be elders who are represented before the throne of God after all else is accomplished.

*Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.
(Rev. 1:4)*

The Exercise of Discipline – Matthew 5:23-26

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The Exercise of Discipline – Matthew 18:15-20

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

¹⁶ *But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*

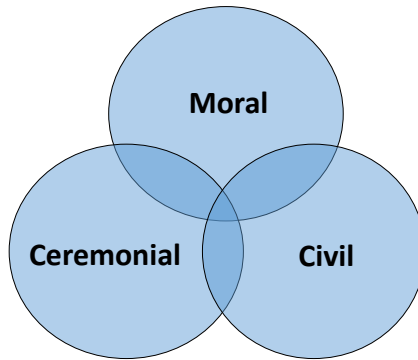
¹⁷ *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

¹⁸ *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*

¹⁹ *Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*



The Proper Extent of Jurisdiction within the Visible Church



Moral Law – Right & Wrong

Gen. 1:1

Rev. 20:15

Ceremonial Law – anticipating the Messiah

Gen. 3:15

Jn. 19:30



Civil Law – Israel’s Unique Theocracy

Ex. 19:12

2 Chron. 26:21



The Moral Law = ‘Christian Worship’

Regulative Commands

1. No other gods
2. No images in worship
3. No not take the name of God in vain.
4. Remember and revere the Lord’s Day



Regulated Worship

1. Prayer
2. Reading/Preaching of the Word
3. Singing of psalms
4. Sacraments
5. Religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions

The Moral Law = 'Christian Ethics'

Positive Command

5. Honor Father/Mother
6. Do not murder
7. Do not commit adultery
8. Do not steal
9. Do not bear false witness
10. Do not covet



Negative Prohibition

5. Do not dishonor parents
6. Protect human life
7. Support/defend marriage
8. Respect private property
9. Protect neighbor's reputation
10. Learn contentment

Ch. 30 – Of Church Censures

3. Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

4. For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the church; according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.

Ch. 31 – Of Synods and Councils

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.

One or two offices of elder?

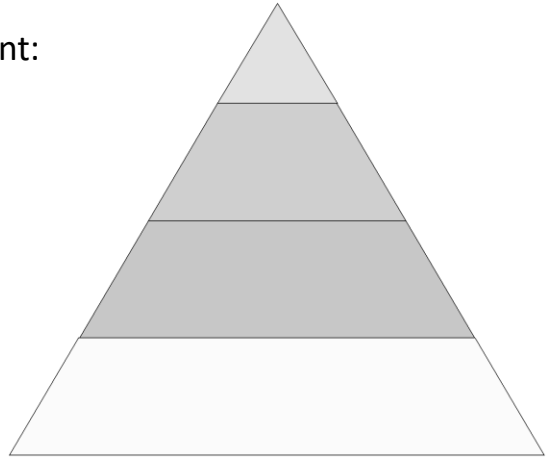
- “Overseer” – teaching elder
- “other rulers” – ruling elders

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (1 Tim. 5:17, ESV)

Church government

Three common forms of church government:

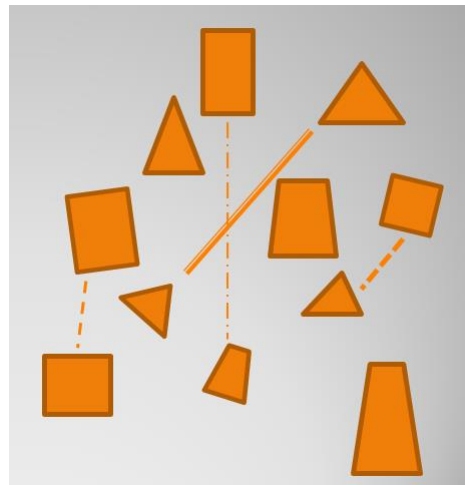
- Hierarchical



Church government

Three common forms of church government:

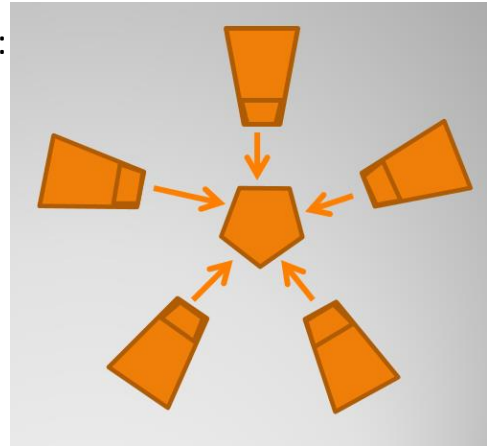
- Hierarchical
- Independent



Church government

Three common forms of church government:

- Hierarchical
- Independent
- Presbyterian



Ch. 31 – Of Synods and Councils

2. 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.

Ch. 31 – Of Synods and Councils

2. It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine ...

- the presence of spiritual authority requiring recognition;
- but not absolutely so –
 - not declaratively as equal to the authority of Scripture,
 - not inerrantly so as would be the claim of a pope –
- but with the responsibility God has given to his officers.
 - As in Acts 15? – yes (the consensus of the elders)
 - no (for that decision was part of the Wd of God).

Ch. 31 – Of Synods and Councils

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Ch. 31 – Of Synods and Councils

3. 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.

The Emergence of the Roman Catholic Church

Latin used in prayer and worship, imposed by Pope Gregory I	600
Prayers directed to Mary, dead saints, and angels	600
Kissing pope's feet began with Pope Constantine	709
Veneration of cross, images, and relics authorized	786
College of Cardinals established	927
Canonization of dead people as saints initiated	995
Attendance at Mass made mandatory	1000
Celibacy of priesthood, decreed by Pope Gregory VII	1079
Rosary, repetitious praying with beads, invented by Peter the Hermit	1090
The sale of indulgences established to reduce time in purgatory	1190
Transubstantiation, proclaimed by Pope Innocent III	1215
Confession of sins to priests, instituted by Pope Innocent III	1215
The doctrine of seven sacraments affirmed	1439
Tradition claimed equal in authority with the Bible, Council of Trent	1545
Apocryphal books declared canon by Council of Trent	1546

Ch. 31 – Of Synods and Councils

3. 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.

4. 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 commonwealth, 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.

