

Synods

Our question for this month is very appropriate in view of the fact that the Synod of our Protestant Reformed Churches has just finished its annual meeting. The question is: “What is the Biblical warrant for Synods (or General Assemblies as they are called in Presbyterian denominations)?” The question could be applied to Classis (Presbytery in Presbyterian circles) meetings as well.

First a word of explanation for those who are not acquainted with such meetings. Classis or Presbytery meetings are usually regional meetings of a denomination in attended by representatives of every congregation in that region. Synods or General Assemblies are meetings representative of a whole denomination.

In our churches we have two Classes, East and West and the meetings of these bodies are attended by a minister or elder or two elders from each congregation in the Classis. The two Classes meet two or three times a year. Our Synod, which meets once every year is attended by five ministers and elders from each Classis, a total of twenty men, who meet to do the work that pertains to the whole denomination. In Presbyterian circles all ministers and elders are allowed to attend meetings of Presbytery and General Assembly.

There are who are opposed to such meetings. Usually they are from churches that are independent in their church government and do not believe in denominations or other such federations. They are usually critical of such meetings especially because they think that such bodies assume for themselves powers that belong only to the local congregations and become in Reformed and Presbyterian denominations a kind of superpower like the papacy which destroys and takes away the “autonomy” of the local congregation.

That autonomy of the local congregation is its “self-rule.” The only ruling authority that Christ has given to the church is given to the elders in the local congregation. There are no “higher” authorities such as bishops and cardinals. Nor ought Synods and General Assemblies, if we have them, be considered to be higher authorities that can dictate to the local congregations and by which a denomination is ruled from the top down. Synods and Classes may not be higher authorities than the elders in the church.

Nevertheless, there is good Biblical warrant for such meetings. That warrant is found first of all in the fact that we are called to endeavor to keep unity in the church (Eph. 4:3). That unity must be kept not only within the local congregation but as much as possible with others as well. We are keeping that unity when we establish denominations and work together as a denomination in doing Christ’s work. Independentism is wrong!

The great biblical example of such cooperation is found in Acts 15 which tells the story of the Jerusalem council. In connection with the missionary work of the Apostle Paul among the Gentiles and controversy over circumcision the apostles and elders met together in Jerusalem to consider these matters on behalf of all the churches. That this was more than a local meeting is evident from the fact that Paul and Barnabas were there, though Antioch was their home church, and from the fact that letters were sent to all the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia informing them of the decisions of the council. That meeting could very well be called the first Synod.

That such assemblies often take to themselves more power than they should and become ruling bodies in the churches goes without saying. These abuses, however, do not mean that Synods and Classes are wrong in themselves.

In our churches we try to avoid some of these abuses by having Synods and Classes that do not have permanent officers. Indeed, our Classes and Synods are not permanent bodies but are dissolved when the meetings are finished. We also try to avoid abuse by limiting what these assemblies may do - they may take up only such matters as come to them from the consistories. So too we consider these bodies as having only advisory power. They cannot discipline, administer the sacraments, preach the word or do any of the work that belongs to the local church. They exist only for the purpose of ensuring that unity is maintained and that the churches do together the work that must be done before Christ returns.

R. Hanko