

LESSON FOUR

COUNCILS

Ed. Note:

Bro. Hiscox does explain the authority issue concerning Councils. However, we want the issue to be very plain so it was deemed appropriate to insert this Editor's Note.

Councils have no authority whatsoever. They are strictly advisory.

There is no higher ecclesiastical authority than the Local Church. It is the body of Christ and recognizes no head except Christ and no authority but the Word of God. If a council is called it is strictly for wise counsel concerning a matter under consideration by the Local Church that requests that a council be enjoined.

Calling a council together is a very unusual course of action by a Local Church. Almost all matters can be decided by a thorough examination of the Scriptures by the pastor and the other members of that Local Church and deliberation on the matter within that local body. Only in the most unusual circumstance would a council be called. Generally the pastor of the Local Church has already sought out wise counsel from other, and generally more experienced, pastors and scholars known to the pastor to be fundamental and biblical in their normal approach to all matters. This coupled with the intense examination of the Scriptures by the pastor and the other members of the church and deliberation of the matter as a group, led by the pastor who should be the most knowledgeable in the Scriptures coupled with the wise counsel he has already sought out, should be able to give them an answer in nearly every case. Only in the most extreme circumstance, when the Church's most assiduous examination of the matter has not brought an answer, would the Church, led by the pastor, call for a council to deliberate the matter.

Even then, the council's only purpose would be to examine the issue and give biblical counsel concerning it to the Church that called it. Beyond that, the Local Church can decide to accept or reject the counsel of the Council. The Council itself having absolutely no authority over the Local Church that called it but acting, rather, in strictly an advisory capacity.

Dr. VBK

Whether one believes in councils or not is a matter of personal conviction. The following section will be useful as a guide for those who do believe they are biblical and useful.

COUNCILS.

IT is usual on various occasions of ecclesiastical action, to convene councils for advice and co-operation. Ministers, as the chief actors in such bodies, should understand the proper sphere of council action, and the true limits of council authority. Especially important is it for ministers to understand this, since, though they are usually composed in part of laymen, the clerical members are commonly in the majority, and are supposed to take the lead of affairs and give direction to the action taken. A few of the leading features and principles are the following:

1. Councils have no antecedent right of existence, and no original authority for action. Their existence depends on those who convene them, and their authority to act is derived from the same source. No company of persons, not a church, has the right to convene themselves, organize and take action on ecclesiastical matters which have not been committed to them.

2. Councils may be convened by churches or individuals—more commonly by churches—to give advice and aid in matters to be submitted to them when convened.

3. Councils are usually convened by sending letters to such churches as they may choose—a majority of which should be those in the immediate neighbor-

hood—asking them to send their pastor, and one or two—usually two—messengers to sit in council with them. These letters are called *letters missive*, and constitute the only authority for the assembling of the body, and the charter under which it is to act, when assembled.

4. The *letters missive* should distinctly state when and where the council is to meet, and what churches and individuals are invited to attend.

5. The *letters missive* should also distinctly state what are the matters on which they are expected to act. It is an admitted principle, sanctioned by general usage, that an ecclesiastical council cannot be convened under a roving commission, to act on any subject that may chance to come up; but must confine its action strictly to the matters specified in the letters by which it was convened. Of course all those letters should be uniform.

6. Parties cannot properly convoke a council to investigate or pass judgment on the case of persons with whom they hold no ecclesiastical connection; such as a member or pastor of another church than that with which those convoking the council are connected. But one church may call, and ask a council to advise them as to their duty in respect to some other church with which they are in fellowship.

7. It is not an uncommon practice for those calling a council, to invite, in addition to churches, certain individuals, whose presence may, for reasons, be desirable. To this custom, although it constitutes a somewhat mixed commission, there seems to be no reasonable objection.

8. Councils differ from Committees of Conference, in the fact that the former are composed wholly or chiefly of messengers appointed by churches, and the latter, of individuals personally invited, and acting without any church appointment.

9. The Council, when convened at the hour designated, organize by the election of some member as chairman, and some other one as clerk. These elections are usually on nomination. Prayer is then offered for divine guidance. After this the credentials of messengers are called for, and the clerk makes a list of members. Then the object for which the body is convened is stated—usually by reading a copy of the *letter missive*. By this the Council knows what it is desired to do. Further explanations, and a discussion of the subject then follow, concluding with such action as the body may decide on.

10. A Council when organized can neither increase nor diminish the number of its members. Its composition is formed by those who called it, and cannot be changed by any other authority. For that reason it cannot admit other persons to membership, nor can it exclude any of those who have been called and appointed to constitute it.

11. But, as an exception to this rule, all deliberative bodies have the primal and inherent right to protect themselves against insult, disgrace, and such interruption as would prevent the object of their meeting. Such conduct on the part of any member, therefore, during the proceedings, would make his expulsion justifiable.

12. But if any member of a Council be dissatisfied

with the presence of any other member, he can himself withdraw, and refuse to act. He has no other remedy.

13. Usage has not decided that any specified number of messengers appointed, shall constitute a *quorum* essential for action. Any considerable number, or even a very small number present, usually proceed to action, especially if the case be one involving no special difficulty. If the case be important and difficult, action should not be taken without a full representation. In all important cases certainly, it would be a salutary rule if adopted, that no action should be taken, unless a majority of those actually called to constitute the council were present. But so diverse are the opinions of those who act on councils, as well as those who have convened and desire them to act, that no rule fitted to all occasions, can probably be adopted.

14. It must be accepted as a fundamental and universal rule, that within the area of Congregationalism and Church Independency at least, all councils are *advisory* only; they never have, and cannot have any ecclesiastical *authority*. They can only consider such subjects as are submitted to them; and they bind individuals and churches only so far, as they choose to submit themselves to their judgment and advice. Their province is simply *counsel*—what their name implies; never and in no sense, are they church courts for adjudication, much less legislative bodies for the enactment of laws.

15. A council may adjourn from time to time, if necessary to complete the purpose for which it was

convened. But it cannot perpetuate a continued existence, as a standing court of appeal. When its object is accomplished, it expires by limitation; but a formal vote to *dissolve*, or to adjourn *sine die*, is usually passed.

16. Before adjournment, the minutes of the proceedings are read, corrected and approved, and a certified copy is ordered to be given to the parties by whom it was called.

17. When once dissolved or adjourned, the body is extinct, and cannot convene again at its own option or by its own authority. If convened again, it must be by the same authority, and by a process similar to that which first brought it into existence.

18. It is not proper for one Council to sit in judgment on, or review the action of another Council. But a matter, not satisfactorily adjusted by one, may be referred to a second.

19. When a second is called to consider some matter already submitted to a previous Council, the second should, so far as possible, embrace all the members of the previous one, with such additional members as will be likely to counterbalance any local or personal prejudices or any want of information or experience, which may possibly have influenced the former meeting.

20. A Council may be called by a single church, or by several churches acting in concert; or by a single individual, or by several individuals acting in concert. The *letters missive* should of course distinctly state by whom the call is issued, as well as the object for which it issued.

21. Councils called to adjust and settle difficulties, are usually designated as either *mutual* or *ex parte*. A *mutual* Council is one as to which the different parties to the difficulty, unite in the call and reference. An *ex parte* Council is one called by one party to the difficulty.

22. An *ex parte* Council should not be called until all proper efforts have been made for, and failed, to secure a *mutual* Council.

23. Parties not uniting in calling a council, can have no rights or standing in the body when convened; but as a matter of courtesy, and for the sake of obtaining all possible information, they may be heard by consent of the body and those who called it.

24. Parties calling a Council cannot be members of it, and have no rights of action with it, except to place before the body all the information in their possession.

25. An *ex parte* Council, when convened, cannot by its own action transform itself into a *mutual* Council. This change can be effected only by the consent and agreement of the different parties involved in the difficulty.

26. When a *mutual* Council is to be called to adjust difficulties between a church and some of its members, the letters convening it should be sent out, by and in the name of the church, and not of the individuals. But the fact of its being by mutual agreement of the parties, should be stated in the letters.

27. A Council cannot sit to review and pass judgment on the action of any other church than that which has called, and submitted its case to it; nor

can a Council properly be called for such a purpose. No body of men has the right to try, and pass judgment on an independent church. Such a body would thereby become judicial—a church court.

28. But either churches or individuals may call a Council to advise them what is their duty in relation to a church deemed heretical in doctrine, or irregular in practice; or for other reasons thought important.

29. Members when aggrieved by the action or attitude of their church, and failing to secure a mutual Council, before proceeding to call one *ex parte*, should lay the matter before some neighboring church or churches, and request them to call one, for advice, either to the aggrieved members, or to the churches calling it; or to both. This effort failing, the members can themselves proceed to issue a call.

30. If when invitations are received to unite in a Council, those receiving them do not approve the object of the call, and decline to act, they should at once notify the party calling it, to that effect, giving their reasons for non-concurrence. These facts should be laid before the body when convened. But it is better to respond, if the call be issued from any respectable source, and by one's presence prevent any unfortunate action, rather than permit it by absence.

31. It is a course of very questionable propriety, for a Council to require the parties to a difficulty to bind themselves at the beginning, to abide by whatever decisions the body may reach. For, it is hardly consistent with the rights of conscience to pledge one's self beforehand to a course of action contingent

on future and unforeseen events. And as a matter of fact, such pledges, when made, are seldom kept.

32. Councils for the adjustment of questions involving church action should not be called unless the need seems imperative. And against all tendency to relieve churches from their appropriate responsibility, to intrude upon the sphere of their just authority, or to undermine their absolute independence—against all this, Councils should constantly and sacredly guard.

END LESSON FOUR