

*ECCLESIOLOGY*  
**THE VISIBLE CHURCH**  
Lesson 23

**Higher Authority/Graded Courts**

**I. THE MEANING OF CHURCH**

- A. The word “church” in the singular in the New Testament may mean not just a single local church, but a collection of two or more local churches in a given locality. The “church at Jerusalem” (Acts 11:22; 15:4) probably had at least ten thousand people and must of necessity included several local congregations which of necessity had to meet in several (if not many) locations (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7).
- B. This same concept was true for “the church at Antioch” and “the church of Ephesus” and “the church of Corinth” as the church grew numerically. They were all home churches.
- C. It would be reasonable that these churches were bound together in doctrine and practice. Each church had its own elders but obviously met together in what Presbyterians call a presbytery—groupings of local churches in a geographical area. In 1 Tim. 4:14, Paul described Timothy’s ordination as being done by a body of elders (presbyters). It is logical to assume this was elders of various churches in a given location.

**II. THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL (Acts 15:1-35)**

- A. The Church at Antioch was disturbed by certain teachers from Judea (Judaizers) who said the circumcision was necessary for salvation (15:1). This was a serious doctrinal issue.
- B. Paul and Barnabas got into a heated discussion with these Judaizers (15:2). They were false teachers and false doctrine must be exposed and erased from the church.
- C. The presbytery of Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem to get the wisdom of the Apostles and elders (15:3-4a).
- D. The “apostles and elders” met in a general meeting to discuss this whole doctrinal issue (15:6). This was a council not just an arbitrary decision by Apostles.
- E. There was “much discussion” which indicates some serious debate, even heated discussion (15:7).
- F. Key speeches were made by Peter, Barnabas, Paul and James (15:6,12-13). These were the respected fathers.
- G. The council reached a conclusion with which the whole church concurred (15:22-23).
- H. The council (Apostles, elders and churches which made up the church of Jerusalem) decided to send representatives with a written letter to Antioch,

Syria and Cilicia (15:22-23). This decision affected more than just those of the church at Antioch (15:41).

- I. Paul, Silas and Timothy delivered “the decisions” (*dogmata*) of the Jerusalem Council “for the people to obey” (16:4).
- J. Eight years later James and the elders in Jerusalem could recognize the “our decision” had been carried out in Paul’s ministry (Acts 21:25).
- K. Conclusion. In Acts 15, we have a clear example of a local or regional church body submitting a problem to a more general council of the church’s officers, whose decisions become the rule of all the churches being established. NOTE: If a local church would have disagreed with the decisions of the Jerusalem Council and refused to obey, we can assume there would be further discussion (perhaps in another council). The local congregation would then have the right to submit to the will of the wider body of believers or else depart from the fellowship. The Apostles and elders surely reserved the right to excommunicate the erring local church from the body of believers who are not true to the Faith.

### III. THE PRESBYTERY AT EPHESUS (Acts 20)

- A. Paul called a meeting of the elders of the church at Ephesus. These were most likely elders from the various local churches which made up the church at Ephesus. Perhaps they were actually representatives of the elders of the church at Ephesus.
- B. Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 took place in what Presbyterians call a presbytery meeting.

### IV. CONCLUSION

“There is, therefore, significant Scriptural evidence for the existence of graded courts of the church in New Testament times. The measure of responsibility and authority of these various levels of church bodies is not defined in detail, and it is true that apostles and their delegates (such as Timothy and Titus) were still on the scene in a way that prevents the church today from reproducing an exact parallel” (Will Barker, *“Defining The Philosophical And Theological Basis For Our PCA Structure”*)