



When Church People Disagree: Division or Discernment?

SESSION 1

| *How can Christians live together faithfully in the midst of disagreement?*

Introduction

Several denominations in the United States are wrestling with division, even to the degree that members are considering breaking away to become part of a different denomination. The identified trigger for schism is usually a particular issue over which there is significant disagreement. However, the *process* by which such issues are addressed can be a significant factor toward fragmentation. How can Christians live together faithfully in the midst of disagreement? Is there a better way to make decisions than the win/lose method of majority vote?

Extreme advocacy, confrontation, debate, judgment—these attributes of what John Shanley calls a “courtroom culture” are familiar to church members, particularly those whose governance includes the use of parliamentary procedure. Church bodies have used debate as a means to derive the truth and majority rule to determine the direction of the Holy Spirit. The church has made good use of parliamentary procedure and majority rule for many years. Parliamentary procedure can provide order, be used with civility and respect, be grounded in prayer, and result in an outcome the whole body is willing to support. Majority rule is certainly better than decisions made by default or determined by one person or railroaded by a small minority.

On the one hand, majority rule simply reflects that the whole body can do only that which most of the participants are willing to do. On the other hand, parliamentary procedure and majority rule have limitations as means for the church to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit and build up the body of Christ. This is especially

true when applied to a matter over which there may be considerable, conscientious disagreement.

Christians are called to be one in Christ. Through our baptism we become members of an eternal community that is quite diverse. If we are at all honest, we admit that it is not easy to live in this oneness, for there is rich diversity within the body of Christ and at times significant areas of disagreement. Learning to live with differences is difficult, as is relinquishing efforts to have one’s own preferences apply to everyone. Loving one’s neighbors requires surrender, patience, and forbearance.

Many passages in Scripture call the church to show such respect and love, witnessing to its unity in Jesus Christ.

Dynamics of Parliamentary Procedure

Christians are called to work as one body to discern the mind of Christ who is the Head. When they engage in decision making, they are not to represent the will of the majority but to discern the will of Christ. Churches with participatory governance do not allow proxy voting based on the belief that those who gather together in a prayerful assembly will best be able to discern how the Holy Spirit is moving in their midst. Yet Christians at times feel threatened by one another and respond defensively. The dynamic of defensiveness often plays



AMERICA'S COURTROOM CULTURE

There's a symptom apparent in America right now. It's evident in political talk shows, in entertainment coverage, in artistic criticism of every kind, in religious discussion. We are living in a courtroom culture. . . . We are living in a culture of extreme advocacy, of confrontation, of judgment, and of verdict. Discussion has given way to debate. Communication has become a contest of wills.¹

John Patrick Shanley

itself out by seeking control and victory over one's "opponents." Increasingly, church members and even members of organizations outside a particular church are caucusing with like-minded persons before meetings and lobbying others to take their predetermined position. This results in little distinction between how the church functions and how other organizations or political systems function.

The church aspires to view the neglect by any one part of the church of the other parts as a misuse of its polity. Yet few members may recognize that the process of parliamentary procedure can feed such neglect. Those who are well versed in parliamentary procedure; are quick thinking, assertive, rational, or verbally persuasive; or have an Anglo heritage have a considerable advantage over those who are unfamiliar with the process, are reserved or intuitive, need more time for reflection, or are from a non-Anglo cultural background.

Another drawback of parliamentary procedure is that the process tends to shape a body's deliberations in such a way that members must take sides before considering carefully a full range of possibilities. Some important questions and creative options may not be explored and full information may not be revealed because all contributions are funneled into categories of either "for" or "against" a motion. Debate in support of or opposition to a motion requires persons to take positions and tends to pit them against one another as opponents.

The Harvard Negotiating Project discovered predictable consequences of beginning debates by taking positions:

When negotiators bargain over positions, they tend to lock themselves into those positions. The more

you clarify your position and defend it against attack, the more committed you become to it. . . . Your ego becomes identified with your position. . . . As more attention is paid to positions, less attention is devoted to meeting the underlying concerns of the parties. Agreement becomes less likely. . . . Positional bargaining thus strains and sometimes shatters the relationship between the parties.²

Factors toward Schism

The less that people work together to become more conscious of their own and one another's beliefs, assumptions, and interpretations, the more likely they fragment into segmented groups. Many denominations are seeing a proliferation of like-minded groups and we/they thinking, increased mistrust and reactivity, and heightened feelings of powerlessness and self-righteousness. In some cases schism has occurred or is on the horizon.

A variety of factors contribute to schism. Many members leave as a matter of conscience, not seeing a way forward with the larger body. Among them are those who choose to withdraw rather than find a way to live with differences, work for change, or engage those with whom they disagree to try to influence them. The "courtroom culture" of society has permeated the church. This is an era in which denominational identity and loyalty mean little to many people. Some do not value the connectional nature of the church or view denominationalism as a breach of the church's witness to unity in Christ. Some may view the church like they do any other organization: as a voluntary association based on agreement rather than based on God's formation of the church in which "there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-5).

Schism may also be exacerbated by how majority rule is applied. For example, the likelihood of schism grows if a governing body meets and makes a decision on a crucial matter affecting the whole church without proper consultation or attempting to build consensus. The likelihood of schism also grows when a governing body assumes the simple majority to be sufficient for taking action binding on the conscience of a large minority. Those who demand premature action may give inadequate attention to the convictions of a large minority.

Large Assemblies and Consensus

The World Council of Churches (WCC) became aware of the danger of division through some of its constituencies. The WCC is the most comprehensive Christian organization in the world, with about 347 member churches from 120 countries. Its constitution describes its primary goal as “to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.”³ After more than fifty years of governing its life under the rules of debate similar to *Robert’s Rules of Order*, its board of directors, the WCC Central Committee, decided to embrace building consensus as the primary mode of decision making by the WCC. In large part this was spurred on by the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church leaders, who were continually in the minority and outvoted on significant matters. As the WCC expanded from its original European and North American roots to include churches from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, more member churches were unfamiliar with parliamentary procedure. They were also uncomfortable with how such processes limit people to adversarial “yes” and “no” categories when the group often wants to imagine, explore, and discuss alternative possibilities.

The kind of governance that the WCC Central Committee wanted to pursue would strive

to be as simple as possible and only as complex as necessary; to be transparent; to enhance participation . . . across the whole group; to check the possibility of domination by any participant or small group; to manage with courtesy, respect and grace discussions where participants bring deeply held, contending perspectives on matters at the heart of their Christian convictions; to provide orderly deliberations and timely decisions; to explore creative alternatives; to check the power of a few participants to obstruct decisions when the vast majority is ready to move; to check the power of any moderator (chair) to steer the deliberations in directions other than those desired by the body; and to strengthen the capacity of the churches in fellowship in the WCC to engage in common witness and service.⁴

The World Council of Churches experienced the use of consensus building at its assembly in February 2006 and plans to continue to use and refine this process.

THE BIBLE CALLS THE CHURCH TO SHOW RESPECT AND LOVE

1 Corinthians 1:10
1 Corinthians 3:3–11
1 Corinthians 12:4–7, 12–13
1 Corinthians 12:24b–26
Ephesians 2:13–14, 18–22
Ephesians 4:1–6, 14–16
Philippians 2:2–4
Colossians 3:12–15

Another church body that has adopted a consensus-seeking process over the past ten years is the Uniting Church in Australia. Their General Assembly meets for seven days every three years, with 270 delegates. They are very intentional that their discernment of the Holy Spirit is based in the context of Christian community. Their “Manual for Meetings” begins with a section on the formation of community. It is expected that 20 percent of their meeting time will be spent in worship and community building. At the meeting in August 2003, each plenary began with worship and Bible study. In the afternoons, delegates met in assigned discussion groups to talk about issues that were before the assembly. Morning and afternoon teas were also important times for community building. The presentation of business followed a threefold pattern with an information session, a deliberative session, and a decision session.

Organizational Dynamics

The church can benefit from research in the field of organizational development. For example, the Harvard Negotiating Project developed a method to replace positional bargaining that they named “principled negotiation on the merits.” It has four basic dimensions that draw people to build relationships and work together to meet goals:

People: Separate the people from the problem.

Interests: Focus on interests, not positions. (Interests are needs, desires, concerns, and fears. Positions are proposed solutions.)

Options: Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do.

Criteria: Insist that the result be based on some objective standard.⁵

The Rev. Norman Shawchuck, after many years of working with churches in conflict, believes that *all* effective management of conflict entails the following steps:⁶

1. Generate valid and useful information and share it with all the parties involved.
2. Support free and informed choice. Identify areas of agreement to enable parties to make decisions collaboratively. Identify areas where there is not agreement, so that each party may reach its own independent decisions, share those with the other party, and collaboratively decide how to live and work together in spite of differences.
3. Motivate personal commitment to the agreements that are reached and share responsibility for monitoring their implementation.

Through these steps control is shared among those who have competence and are involved in the issue. The group joins efforts in the protection of each person. Issues that were not previously discussed can be addressed, and assumptions can be tested and reconsidered. Advocacy is balanced with inquiry. Inquiry involves persons authentically working together to surface conflicting viewpoints in order to explore and test them openly. Participants are all on the same team, seeking to reduce blind spots and inconsistencies and to deepen understanding of one another's underlying beliefs and interests. This allows for less defensiveness interpersonally and decreases dysfunctional group dynamics.

Communal Spiritual Discernment

Within the tradition of the church, there is a spiritual practice that incorporates the wisdom from organizational development and the learning from the church bodies described above. It is called communal spiritual discernment. Communal discernment draws on the church's rich spiritual disciplines of prayer, scriptural study, the

Lord's Supper, and the practice of mutual forbearance in love. Communal discernment honors the identity Christians are given in their baptism as members of the one body of Christ. It manifests the church's call to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Session 2 of this study will provide a fuller exploration of communal discernment.

I experienced the transforming power of this process as a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. The task force consisted of twenty persons with quite diverse theological viewpoints on some of the major issues that are dividing the Presbyterian Church today. In our four years of working together, we did not seek to determine who was right and who was wrong, but rather we focused on the question, "How shall we live together faithfully in the midst of disagreement?" By using a communal discernment process we found unanimity in making several recommendations to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for ways that church members could build up the body of Christ, honor their own consciences, continue to seek God's truth, and respect differences. We had a profound experience of the Holy Spirit opening our minds and hearts to one another.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. John Patrick Shanley, *Doubt—A Parable* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2005), vii.
2. Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 4–6.
3. Constitution of the World Council of Churches, <http://wccw.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/vilemov-02-e.html>.
4. "Interim Report on Consensus Procedures," World Council of Churches, Central Committee Meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, 26 August–2 September 2003.
5. Fisher et al., *Getting to Yes*.
6. Norman Shawchuck, *How to Manage Conflict in the Church* (Leith, SD: Spiritual Growth Resources, 1994), 46–47.