

The Politics of Church

Acts 15:1-12, 22-29

sermon digest

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Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we consider our commitment to "work together for consensus as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), seeking to discern the will and purpose of God rather than engaging in win-lose divisions of the body."

Will Rogers used to say, "I am not a member of any organized party; I am a Democrat." His humorous comment has found numerous applications including church organization. To say, "I am not a member of any organized church; I am a Baptist-Methodist-Presbyterian," is in itself a statement of political choice–decision by chaos. In spite of my frequent past denials, the church is a political body. The church has often idealized herself as a holy community under the total control and direction of God, but that ideal has never been achieved. Like any other human community, churches must make choices. The method of decision-making, church government, is optional but the necessity of decision is not. Thus, *politics is the process by which organized communities make decisions*. Married couples and families, unions, corporations, boards, cities, and congregations become political entities when they process decisions. The process either leads to a step together in an agreed direction or in conflict, divorce, and division.

We have a problem with human nature. Where two are more are gathered even in the name of Christ, conflict is potential. I attended a conference a few years ago led by George Bullard, a nationally recognized author and facilitator for church planning and conflict resolution. Like many of my colleagues in ministry attending the conference, I was there because I was dealing with an escalating problem in the church for which I lacked adequate preparation and education. The practical issues of church management were not addressed in the academic study of church history, pastoral care, biblical interpretation, and theology. Although I had been known to comment, "I am a pastor, not a politician," I awoke to the reality that every gathering of human beings is a political event. Even the word for church *ekklesia* in the Greek New Testament has roots in the political democracy of the Greek city-state. The word, literally "called out," described the gathering of the community forum to process a decision.

In a segment on church anger, Bullard described a study of group conflict which classified levels of anger from mild disagreement to physical violence. He described a few incidents where church forums dissolved into division, name-calling, and fist-fights. Academic study of the Bible and church history had not provided easy answers, but it also had not ignored the problem. The story of the church from the beginnings in Acts through the great schism of Eastern and Western Christianity and the Protestant Reformation is about constant conflict. For example, the Emperor Constantine is credited with determining a process to settle theological disputes when he found his newly adopted religion in conflict over the place of Jesus in relation to God and humanity. Constantine had little interest in the theological arguments, but the peace of the Empire depended on church unity. He called the bishops together in 325 at Nicea to form a council and to settle the dispute by debate and decision of the bishops. The result was the Nicene Creed defining the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The process became a model. Decision by ecumenical council was a political process that continued to be employed right up to Vatican Council II in 1962.

Neither the Bible nor church history provides a simple form of church government that guarantees harmony, peace, success, and absolute truth. Church governments generally fall into three categories: *episcopal*, rule by bishops; *presbyterian*, rule by committee or board; *congregational*, rule by the congregation. All three forms of church government have some support in the New Testament, but none has proven to be without flaw.

How shall fallible human beings come to agreement on the will of God for any decision that we must make? We cannot avoid the personal authority of Apostles in the New Testament. The problem is that we cannot find any Apostles around today to ask for directions. The fact that Apostolic authority got passed on to bishops in the church solves the problem only if you agree with the transfer from Apostles to bishops. Some decisions were made in the church because of a miracle that overwhelmed consent from the people, or even a vision or voice from heaven that was agreed as a direct communication from God. The Bible alone was the authority for Reformation Christians, but who has not faced decisions for which either there was no clear biblical direction or there were conflicting opinions. We cannot overlook the

process by which the Apostles chose a successor to Judas. They agreed on two candidates and cast lots for the final decision.

The political objective in the church is consensus concerning the will of God. Our “Grace Covenant” was the product of both good and bad experience with church order. We attempted to stay in touch with the reality of human nature. In the closest kind of relationship in marriage and family, people who love each other often find themselves in disagreement. The old rule, “discuss neither religion nor politics,” is a tactic of avoidance that works only to the degree that people do not have to work together for common goals. The reality of church-life means that we will have to make decisions together and that we cannot always avoid issues over which we are divided. The question in family and church is not how to win but how to come together. Consensus is not about defeating someone else. It is not about being unanimous in opinion. It is about coming together, listening patiently and carefully to one another, speaking the truth in love to one another until we can reach consensus. Consensus is a point where most of us can give consent to a decision even if we do not totally agree.

Luke Timothy Johnson, *Decision Making in the Church* (pp.48-49), expressed surprise that the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15 has not been given more significant attention as a paradigm for church decision making. Scholars see the question of accepting Gentiles into the church without Jewish circumcision as the central event of the entire book. In spite of the facts—the story may be condensed to the point of oversimplification, it has definite contradictions in the statements of Paul in Galatians 2, and it did not end the controversy—the principles for making church decisions in Acts 15 provide a model for consensus in the church.

After Paul and Barnabas returned from their missionary journey, “certain individuals” visited Antioch to insist that Gentiles had to be circumcised before they could be accepted into the church. A rigorous debate with Paul and Barnabas followed. Then the Apostles and the elders gathered in Jerusalem. After much debate Peter told of his experience with the Gentile Cornelius. The assembly listened to Paul and Barnabas tell of the evidence of the Spirit’s work among the Gentiles. Finally, James, the brother of Jesus, offered a suggestion that set some ritual requirements on Gentiles but not the demand of painful circumcision of adult males. The assembly agreed with James and an apostolic decree was sent out instructing the churches.

The process provides a model for church decision: (1) When it seemed that a conflict of opinions was emerging, they called an assembly of church leaders. (2) The assembly gathered to speak and to listen. When leaders of the church like Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James spoke, the people listened. (3) An agreement was reached that considered elements of truth on all sides. It was not a compromise so much as an consideration of the diversity of truth. (4) An Apostolic decree was issued to provide guidance for all churches.

The problem did not end at Jerusalem, but the decision of the church set directions that continue to reach us today. Almost nothing remains of the controversy of the early church. Does anyone debate circumcision as a requisite for church membership today? Who takes seriously the food restrictions on ingesting blood or eating strangled animals? Although sexual morality is indeed a problem of our time, getting to the bottom of the meaning of biblical fornication is not easy.

All that is left is the people. I recall a “bull-session” at seminary during a presidential election season. After opinions had been offered on all sides, one of my friends quipped that what we need is a benevolent dictator. I do not agree with the focus of power here, but I do agree that the issues reside in the hearts of people rather in the methods of decision.