

Parliamentary Procedure for Presbyterians

Understanding the theological and practical reasons for using a parliamentary process

Introduction

Every great accomplishment in mission and ministry began with a decision. Long ago or recently, with difficulty or ease, someone or (more often) some group made a decision to do or say something. That's how we believe God's work gets done on earth.

For Presbyterians, how we make decisions isn't just a clerical detail or bureaucratic decision. The way we go about coming together, speaking and listening, waiting and praying, deciding and doing is a process that, like everything else, belongs to God. Therefore, how we make decisions matters, and our process has substance. The method itself proclaims something about what we believe and reflects the presence of God's Spirit in our work.

Parliamentary procedure is certainly not the only way to make decisions. But it is a good way—a way that has served for generations as an avenue for Christians to honor the presence of the Spirit in one another through attentive listening, focused conversation, clear outcomes, and protected consciences. Particularly in a Presbyterian polity, in which we believe Christ's will is best discerned by communities of leaders striving together to find it, parliamentary procedure presents a way for every voice to be heard in a decision that can truly be said to belong to the community.

Unfortunately, many people today do not use parliamentary procedure in any other setting, and so they find its rules and details intimidating. Sometimes it is an impediment, rather than an aid, to confidence in our work of discernment. This study aims to assist those who find themselves in decision-making situations with understanding the basis, and the basics, of this time-tested approach to discernment.

A Theological Foundation for Parliamentary Procedure

At the basis of any decision making in a church is the idea that the Holy Spirit guides and directs us. While some of how



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this works is mysterious in its details, Scripture is clear that God is present in believers, calling forth particular gifts for ministry. Among these gifts are those that lend themselves to leadership—referred to in Scripture in various ways: apostleship and prophecy, teaching and preaching. In the church's earliest days, some who manifested these gifts were set aside for leadership roles, and as early as in the book of Acts, they were gathering in councils to seek common ground and make decisions together that became the work of the collective church.

In today's world, one way to implement such an understanding is through Presbyterian polity. Believing that the Spirit is present in all the believers of a community, the whole community elects those whom it believes possess the necessary gifts of discernment and leadership. These leaders, in a service of ordination, are called to a special ministry, subordinating their own agendas to God's will. They believe this is best discerned by coming together, speaking and listening, and coming to a shared decision with which the body then moves forward together. Parliamentary procedure is common to Presbyterian settings because it presents a way to honor the presence of the Spirit in each believer, while still crystallizing those varying views into one common decision.

Fundamental to parliamentary procedure is another Christian principle: the idea that justice demands all persons be honored as the children of God that they are. Justice requires that the outcome of a group's process reflect the will of that body, which is why majority rules in parliamentary process; rather than have one person (whether a bishop or a monarch or a

civil leader) bear the authority, a majority-rules system says that each person is valued equally.

But justice also demands that those in the minority—even a minority of one—find their rights and perspectives honored, as well. And so parliamentary procedure protects the minority. It allows for debate on both sides of an issue. It requires higher voting thresholds for actions that limit someone’s freedom to speak. It permits appeals and reconsiderations of actions where the chair or the majority may have acted in error (as human councils will surely do). And crucially, by allowing people to vote in dissent (rather than demanding unanimity in every action), individuals are permitted to exercise their conscience freely, even when the majority has opted to go a different direction. So it is that voting—which many seem to find somehow tainted by its use in secular legislative bodies—is actually a way to preserve two bedrock principles for Christian living, as played out in our decision-making process: freedom of conscience and clarity of vision.

Why: The Practical Reasons for Using Parliamentary Process

What’s so special about *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised*? Was this Robert even a Presbyterian?

Actually, Henry M. Robert was a Baptist, but he really did develop his now-famous rules in response to his dissatisfaction with his own performance in leading a church meeting. “Robert’s Rules” are the most familiar set of parliamentary guidelines in America and they are commended in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Sharing a common parliamentary authority is a helpful way to ensure consistency throughout the church, and numerous resources are available for those seeking to gain deeper understanding or more specific knowledge about these rules.

The most important thing to understand about the process is the reasons we are using it, not the nitty-gritty details of each paragraph and section. The rules are intended as instruments to discernment. The rules are not the end of the process themselves, only a means. And they are not intended to constrain anyone from accomplishing their will; rather they are intended to enhance and expedite the group’s process of finding the course that is truly the will of the community, under the guidance of God’s Spirit. Needless to say, different sizes and types of groups will apply these rules differently, as will groups with more or less experience using them. There is nothing inappropriate about applying the rules flexibly, as situations dictate. But the basic principles should be observed to ensure fairness and justice for all participants.

It’s also important to remember the limitations of parliamentary procedure. This is a decision-making tool, but sessions and other governing bodies are about more than making decisions. Sometimes they are about prayer and caregiving. Sometimes people need to vent. Sometimes they need to support each other. Sometimes they just need to talk. These are all okay, and the wise leader will provide opportunities for all these. But we shouldn’t confuse “just talking” with healthy decision making. When it comes time to discern something together, we should use the best process for reaching that outcome. And parliamentary process has served the church well.

How: The Basics

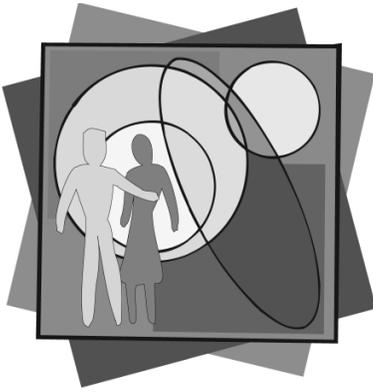
At its best, parliamentary process is not a daunting collection of obscure rules and procedures. It is common sense. When people are made to feel like they don’t understand how to participate, and therefore choose not to participate, the rules are being completely misapplied. A skilled moderator—with the help of a clerk or parliamentarian—will help even the most confused or inexperienced participants to seek the outcome they desire in a way that is fair to both them and the entire body. It is never out of order for a member to ask for help: “Moderator, here’s what I want to do. How do I do that?”

To bring this vision to reality, it is not essential that everyone in a group know Robert’s Rules like the back of their hand, or that everyone have laminated lists of motions at the ready. But it *is* important that everyone have a general understanding of the principles behind the rules; then the outcomes can be seen as the truly shared work of the group, rather than the victory of one group of advocates over another.

Getting Clear: Motions and Debate

The most important contribution that parliamentary process makes to a group’s decision making, and the thing most lacking in group discussions that don’t use such a process, is its emphasis on clarifying what, exactly, is being discussed. A body can do nothing in parliamentary process without a *motion*. A motion simply says “I want to do ‘x’” and invites the rest of the group to say “Yes, that’s what we want, too,” or “No, we don’t want that; let’s try something else.” (The various types of motions are in the box on the next page.)

A participant wanting to propose something for action says, “*I move* that the session establish Sunday, September 1, as the date for Sunday school to begin for all ages.” Sometimes, it is best to put complicated motions in writing; simpler or uncontroversial motions do not require this. Usually, someone needs to *second* the motion—this simply assures that the person mak-



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ing the proposal is not a “lone wolf” just tying up the body in knots but rather proposing something that actually has some support. Often, committees or other groups within the larger body bring these basic recommendations, often called *main motions*; in these cases, the motion requires no second, since presumably at least two people already support it.

Once a motion is “on the floor,” in the absence of any proposed changes, the group begins *debate* or *discussion* of the main motion. Ordinarily, a person speaks only once to a particular motion, at least until everyone else has had a chance to speak. A debate then alternates between those speaking in favor and those speaking against a motion. If there are only persons wanting to speak on one side of an issue, it might not be necessary to continue discussing it. When the group has talked itself out, it’s time to vote. Unless . . .

Seeking the Most Agreement: Amending and Perfecting

Sometimes, people generally support the idea of something but think the specifics can be improved. In the previous example, some of the session might not think September 1 is the right day to start Sunday school, but it doesn’t mean they oppose Christian education! So a member might say, “I move that we amend the motion to strike ‘September 1’ and insert ‘August 18.’” If there is a second, then she would explain her rationale.

Once an amendment has been proposed, the only item under discussion is the amendment—not the main motion. This is another important contribution of parliamentary process: it helps the group focus on one issue at a time. If a person didn’t think there should be a Sunday school, the time for that discussion is not the debate on this amendment.

Once an amendment has been debated and voted up or down, the main motion returns to the floor as amended (or not). Then, additional amendments can be proposed. It is also possible to amend an amendment, although care should be

Types of Motions

Main Motions

These bring up an item of business for the group to consider, one at a time.

Subsidiary Motions

These seek to do something with the main motion. Examples include:

- Amend (by adding or deleting something)
- Limit or extend debate
- Postpone (for discussion later . . . or not)
- Previous question (that is, to close debate and take the vote right then on the pending matter)

Privileged Motions

These provide for certain procedural matters not relating to the current item of business, including:

- Take a recess
- Adjourn
- Call for the orders of the day (that is, get back on the agenda)
- Question of privilege (as the chair sees fit, someone may make a personal remark for the benefit of the group)

Note: Subsidiary and privileged motions must be dealt with first before the group works its way back to the main motion.

Incidental Motions

These are quick motions steps, usually not debated but rather dealt with quickly and simply, to clarify a group’s process or result. Some examples:

- Dividing the question (in order to vote on each part separately)
- Division of the assembly (that is, to demand a more careful count of the vote)
- Point of order (to correct an error of procedure)
- Suspension of the rules (requiring a 2/3 vote)

taken to provide for minimal confusion and maximum clarity, especially in an environment (like most church boards and committees) where motions are not being presented in writing or projected on screens. When it becomes clear that a group desires a more wholesale collection of changes, the process also allows for the group to propose an entirely new motion (a substitute motion) and try again.

Getting It Right: Voting, Postponing, and Revisiting

The ordinary process, when debate is completed, is to vote. (Members can also propose, through a motion, that debate be ended on a particular issue. Ending debate requires a two-thirds vote.) The moderator restates the question so everyone remembers what they are voting on, asks for people to vote yes or no (this can be done by voice, show of hands, or written ballot, as the group sees fit) and declares the result. The chair usually votes only to break or force a tie, which allows her or him to remain as neutral as possible.

Sometimes, however, the group isn't ready to vote. Perhaps some believe a proposal needs more work first. A participant might say, "I move that this matter be referred to the Christian Education Committee for report back to our next meeting." The *motion to refer*, which can be debated, has the effect of ending the discussion on the issue for now while an assigned group refines the proposal. Another option is simply *postponing* discussion to a later time, perhaps when more information is available.

Sometimes, a group does make a decision but then changes its mind. Parliamentary process provides for this possibility, but it does so with trepidation, since the majority has spoken. Therefore, the justice principles of parliamentary process make it somewhat more difficult to change a group's decision. Later in the same meeting of a body, a person may move that an action be "reconsidered," but only if that person voted with the prevailing side. (In other words, a person who voted on the side that did not prevail cannot force the body to continue discussing it simply because he or she disagrees with the outcome.) Or, at a future meeting, the body can decide "to rescind" its actions, but unless advance notice is given, such a vote would require two-thirds approval (since it is an action that threatens to undo the expressed view of a majority of the group's members, at least at some point in the past).

Generally speaking, a majority can decide most questions on behalf of a body. Actions that might limit the rights or silence the voice of a minority of members generally require a two-thirds vote. Examples include motions to limit debate, to suspend a group's rules, or to undo actions that have previously been taken (without advance notice).

Treating All with Respect: Decorum and Style

One of the most important contributions parliamentary process makes is its built-in commitment to preserving the dignity of each person through a system of conversation encouraging respect and kindness. Some people will find the process too formal, but formality can have a way of slowing down passions and encouraging real listening to each other. This is a good thing.

For this reason, parliamentary process requires that all remarks be addressed to the chair. "Moderator, I rise to speak against this motion because I find it immoral and offensive for the following reasons" rather than turning to another member and saying "*You* are immoral and offensive because. . ." It is possible to speak with strong words without directly addressing one's opponents, and the discussion becomes one about ideas rather than persons and their integrity, intelligence, or wisdom.

There are other built-in protections in the process. A person must seek recognition in order to make a motion (and can't simply yell out their feelings from their seats). People may not interrupt another speaker to disagree with her. People must make motions or ask questions or speak, but they can't try to do all at the same time, ensuring that no individual is monopolizing the process.

Care is taken to preserve the body's respect for its chair (or as Presbyterians usually say, *moderator*). In large bodies, to maintain the chair as the center of authority (rather than the personality occupying it), the chair usually refers to himself or herself in the third person ("The chair recognizes Mr. Smith to speak"). This might not really fit in a smaller group, but even leaders of more informal discussions can still be attentive to staying "above the fray." Then, if it is necessary to rule a particular speech out of order or to suggest that debate move toward a decision, the chair will have enough respect from the group to guide the group effectively without the perception of being motivated by bias. It should also be noted that while some groups have a parliamentarian or clerk who can assist the moderator, only the person chairing the meeting has authority to rule on motions and conduct debate.

Key Issues with Parliamentary Procedure

In today's church, we wisely wrestle with several questions when we speak of using parliamentary procedure, especially around issues of controversy and challenge, often with great importance to the life of the church.

Polity vs. Politics

In the increasingly contentious environment of American politics, it is sometimes difficult to remember that it doesn't have to be that way. A church body can make motions and take votes without things automatically degenerating into partisan game playing and parliamentary maneuvering. In this difficult period, it is important to remember the essentials of Presbyterian polity, namely that we are called together not to represent the will of the people but to seek the mind of Christ.

Many participants in parliamentary-style debate will struggle to maintain a tone and spirit consistent with the Christian application of these principles, as opposed to the wrangling we observe when watching the U.S. Congress or the British House of Commons on television. This is an area for real attention in church bodies. At the same time, we should not assume that all disagreement is automatically a reflection of the secular divisiveness of our age. Sometimes the best ideas emerge from critically engaging one another, and the Scriptures are filled with cases where respectful disagreements among God's people conclude with new ways forward in doing God's work.

Seeking Consensus

One of the very popular trends right now in Presbyterian and other gatherings is consensus-based methods of decision making. The details of these processes go beyond the scope of this essay, but various ways of seeking broad agreement (rather than a sometimes narrow majority-rules decision) have been tried at ecumenical and denominational meetings. This movement grows out of a conviction that for some of the most vexing theological and social issues facing the church, a simple up-or-down, yes-or-no answer may not be possible without leaving brutal division and continued disagreement in its wake. Some have also observed that parliamentary process represents a particularly Western approach to decision making that is quite foreign to styles of conversation and discourse in other parts of the world, establishing an unintended cultural bias in our decisions. These newer methods of discernment merit further attention and exploration.

Still, no consensus-oriented process has yet reached the breadth of application that parliamentary process enjoys in churches. One reason is that consensus-based processes must work especially hard to preserve individual conscience—that is, to prevent the minority from being coerced into joining a consensus that is not really reflective of their convictions. By taking away the freedom to vote no, consensus runs the risk of riding roughshod over individual concerns. Most observers of consensus process in large bodies also agree that its successful use depends on having an extremely skilled moderator who enjoys a high level of trust in crystallizing group opinions and easing the body toward action, a situation that is not always present.

It's All About Trust

The bottom line with parliamentary procedure, or any other model of decision making, is that *trust* must be the foundation of our coming together—trust not in a particular system or method but trust in God and in each other.

Parliamentary process should work among groups of Presbyterians not so much because of the ingenuity of the system but because of the covenant that binds us and which the process happens to reflect. Ours is a covenant based on equality before God, shared confessional values, common commitment to seeking God's will, and respect for one another as sisters and brothers. When these covenant commitments guide our use of this process—which is itself born of the values of justice and fairness for all—then we will be faithful decision makers, well suited to seek and accomplish the will of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

About the Writer

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