

6.07

BIBLICAL DECISION-MAKING AND THE BOARD OF ELDERS

Question: "Should the Elders of HCC amend the statement in the Bylaws which states that 'the unanimous consent of those [Elders] present shall be required to adopt any vote or resolution' (Art. IV, Section C, paragraph 4)?"

Conclusion: The general principle of Scripture is that all believers are to live in harmony with each other. We are to avoid arguing over words [I Tim. 6:4-5; 2 Tim. 2:141, secondary issues of the faith, etc. This is a foundational principle. And so, the Elders should seek unity on all matters brought before the Board.

There are, however, no specific Scriptures which outline the procedures which might be used to achieve this. Nor does Scripture specify that a lack of unanimity is an indicator that God is trying to stop a particular decision.

Unity may exist even when unanimity does not. Therefore, I would propose a change in the Bylaws to read as follows: "In its deliberations and decision-making, the Board of Elders shall seek the mind of the Lord in the light of the Scriptures, shall be sensitive to the congregation and its individual members, and shall strive for unanimity within the Board."

Unanimity -- "The state of being unanimous; complete agreement in opinion or purpose. (unanimous < L unus "one" + animus "mind")"

Unity -- "The state, property, or product of being united, physically, socially, or morally; oneness, opposed to division, plurality. (unity < F unite < L unus "one")"

Unite -- "[Selected] to join in action; to combine; to become or be merged into one; to join together for action, act in conjunction."

Scriptural Considerations

[Review each example of group decision-making in Scripture and the principles residing in each passage.]

Jn. 17:23 -- "I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

Not organizational but organic unity. [NT Th, 721, Guthrie]

Rom. 15:5-6 -- "May the God who gives you endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." [Spirit of Unity; Unity of Worship]

Phil. 2:2 -- "make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." [NIV note: "Not uniformity in thought but the common disposition to work together and serve one another -- the 'attitude' of Christ (v. 5; see 4:2; Ro 12:16; 15:5; 2 Co 13:11)."]

Eph. 4:3 -- "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Acts 5:33ff -- Men in the Sanhedrin (the elders of Israel) wanted to put the apostles to death. vs. 35, "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men." Gamaliel disagreed.

All think one thing, except one.

If the one cannot convince the rest that they are taking the wrong course, the one will submit to the rest in the spirit of unity. (This does not mean to say that they are unanimous in their decision -- only "united".)

Do not get the sense here that one will "blocked"/stifled the course or intentions of the rest as in enforced unanimity. [v. 38, "Therefore, in the present case I advise you"], the majority should give careful consideration to the one and be willing to delay action to study the argument of the one.

The one must be willing to see any weakness in his own position and concur with the collective wisdom of the rest.

The minority must be able to persuade the majority of the error of their position [v. 40 "His speech persuaded them"], otherwise the majority shall preside.

The minority must be given opportunity to persuade the majority.

Where there is not a clear majority, all will pray and ask for wisdom from God, then come back for further review of the issue. On critical issues, the council may decide to do this even when only one dissents.

Acts 15:25 "having become of one mind"

The apostles and the elders of Jerusalem after much debate (v. 7) sent a letter to the Gentiles in Antioch etc. detailing the conclusions.

We see in this chapter a process -- whether it was procedural for the early church or just happened to work out this way, we do not know -- in which:

- 1) an issue (v. 4) was presented;
- 2) debate ensued (vv. 5-7);
- 3) arguments and evidence supporting position was presented (vv. 7-12 [Who is the "multitude"? Apostles and elders? Marshall thinks it was the whole church. p. 249]);
- 4) a conclusion was reached (vv. 13-21, especially v. 19);
- 5) consensus was reached as to what action to take (v.22) -- the church ["assembly"] was somehow involved in this -- whether a presentation was made by the leaders to which the church joyfully assented or whether they were more actively involved in the decision of what to do (?), we do not know.

Again we face the old problem of trying to decide (on the basis of the statement in v. 25 -- if in fact the correct reading of the text indicates unanimity) whether the process and conclusion of the debate was intended to be prescriptive or descriptive. In other passages we would normally highlight this difference and argue for the need to understand that the events set forth in Acts are descriptive, though we draw out some useful principles. This allows for breadth of choice in application.

I doubt that v. 25 was intended to be prescriptive, though it should be the aim of the elders at Highlands -- and perhaps it was the *modus operandi* of the Jerusalem elders. [Would this have been the *modus vivendi* they would have prescribed for us?] What we do not know, additionally, is what happened when there was not unison at the end of a debate. Was a conclusion or verdict given by a James, a you would expect from a judge? Not exactly. Could one have blocked the action here? I doubt it. James and Peter had clearly made a decision -- James giving a concluding statement sounding much like the verdict of a judge (v. 19). No doubt some still (wrongly) believed that Gentiles should be circumcised.

v. 19 "this is my vote" -- "James acts more or less as chairman; he winds up the debate, and formulates the motion which he puts to the meeting." F. F. Bruce

v. 24 -- sounds like an open rebuke of "some [lit.] from us" -- meaning from among the leadership in Jerusalem? it appears so. See Galatians 2.

v. 25 -- genomenois homothumadon "having met together" F. F. Bruce (also translated this way by Barclay, P. 117) [Bruce notes on p. 74 that homothumadon is a favorite adverb of Luke -- used ten times in Acts. The only other use is in Romans 15:6.]

Marshall, p. 243. The decision reflected a compromise position "in order not to offend the consciences of the strict Jewish Christians." [Bruce, p. 289. There seems to have been agreement that this represented no compromise of principle. It can be seen rather as a voluntary restriction of liberty in regard to food, in order not to offend those with weaker consciences. Rom. 14:1-15:6; 1 Cor. 8]

Marshall, p. 254. "James proposal met with the agreement of the entire assembly. The point is worth stressing; it means that the extremist Jews had lost the argument and agreed to follow a more liberal policy. They apparently accepted their defeat without bitterness or recrimination."

genomenois homothumadon, Acts 15:25

- literal translation -- "it seemed good to us becoming of one mind, chosen men to send to you with the beloved of us Barnabas and Paul,"
- Barclay, p. 117 "We have therefore decided, when we were met together, to choose men and to send them to you, with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,"
- Bruce, P. 302 "having met together"
- NASB "it seemed good to us, having become of one mind [marginal note, or having "met together"]
- NIV "so we all agreed" ["all" seems to be derived from the second Greek clause; the other three words appear to be derived from the first clause]
- NEB "we have resolved unanimously"
- KJV "It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord"
- JB "and so we have decided unanimously"
- Phillips "we are unanimously agreed to send you chosen representatives"

Other occurrences of homothumadon in NT:

- Acts 1:4 "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer"
- 2:1 (t.r.) "they were all with one accord in one place."
- 2:46 "And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple"
- 4:24 "And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said"
- 5:12 "and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico."
- 7:57 "and they rushed upon him with one impulse."
- 8:6 "And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip"
- 12:20 "and with one accord they came to him"
- 18:12 "the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul"
- 19:29 "and they rushed with one accord into the theater"
- Rom. 15:6 "that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

A & G, p. 569

- "Unanimity" comes from the Greek word homothumadon.
- The word is used in Acts 1:14; 2:1 t.r., 46; 7:57; 8:6; 12:20; 18:12; 19:29; 20:18 v.1.; Rom. 15:6 meaning "with one mind or purpose or impulse." Acts 15:25 meaning "unanimously." In Acts 5:12, and in other passages, it may only mean "together." [A&G, p. 569]
- [See H. J. Cadbury, JBL 44, 1925, 216-218.]

TDNT Vol. 5

- “This word denotes the inner unity of a group of people engaged in an externally similar action. It can thus be rendered ‘with one mind’.” [TDNT, Hans Wolfgang Heidland, 5:185] Denotes an inner unity which demonstrates itself in unified action.

Acts 15:25 -- “Here it confers particular weight on the decision of a corporate body.” [5:185]

Regarding the word’s use in secular Greek sources: “First, the term does not denote the personal sympathy of those participating, but material interest in a specific action. Demosthenes (Or., 10, 59) calls upon the people to set aside personal feelings and instead work homothumadon to resist the plans of Philip. Secondly, this common material concern is not based upon a similarity of inclination or disposition but upon an event which comes on a group from without (e.g., the hostility of Philip in Demosthenes) and provokes a common reaction.” [5:186] 1) Does not necessarily imply that all are in agreement on all points. 2) However, on at least one significant point they are in agreement -- and this agreement results in unified action. 3) One’s personal feelings may have to be set aside in order to achieve homothumadon. 4) Some external impetus is needed to compel them toward this unified action, even though the action itself might be contrary to the nature of some of the participants. (Such as the fearful going to fight a war, or the merciful shunning someone refusing to repent of their sin.)

In the NT the word is used “to stress the inner unanimity of the community.” Used in connection with 1) listening to apostolic teaching, 2) prayer. “We are well acquainted with the many personal and material tensions in the first congregations. But these tensions are continually transcended when the community addresses itself to the magnifying of the one Lord (R. 15:5).” [5:186] No reference seems to be made to the decision-making process of the church, except Acts 15:25.

Other References:

- Judith 15:2
 - Wisdom 10:20
 - 3 Maccabees 5:20
 - Jos., Ant. 15, 277; 19, 357
- “In the LXX 36 times, 14 in Job, 16 in the Apocrypha. In Job it occurs always with [Heb.] yahad and yahdaw, elsewhere rendered [Grk.] hama (Isa. 43:9) and epli to auto (Jos. 11:5).. Its use in Job is due to the poetic love of sonority.” [5:186, note 2]

Etymology: “with the same emotion,” “with the same mind,” “unanimously”

Other Thoughts

If the Holy Spirit is the one guiding the Elders, will he guide them in different ways/directions? [unanimity] Different ways -- yes -- according to gifting and understanding of issues. Will an

uninformed man, filled with the Spirit, be able to agree with someone informed and filled with the Spirit? Yes. In a spirit of unity. Recognizing he is uninformed and receiving no red flags in his spirit to keep him from agreeing.

Pragmatic considerations on how to arrive at a final decision when there is not unanimity may vary. I would suggest the following guidelines as stated above: careful consideration to the minority view and be willing to delay action in order to study the minority position.

When there is disagreement among the Elders, the majority should give careful consideration to the minority view and be willing to delay action in order to study the minority position.

The minority must be willing to see any weakness in its own position and concur with the collective wisdom of the rest.

The minority must be able to persuade the majority of the error of their position [Acts 5:40 “His speech persuaded them”] or offer some alternative position agreeable to all, otherwise the majority shall preside.

The minority must be given opportunity to persuade the majority.

Where there is not a clear majority, all will pray and ask for wisdom from God, then come back for further review of the issue. On critical issues, the council may decide to do this even when only one dissents.

“We will not always achieve unanimity, but we will always seek unity.”

Tentative Conclusions

We should always seek unity expressing itself in unanimity -- just as the entire Body should. But there may be times when unity must be expressed in the midst of diversity of reasoned opinion.

Any requirement for unanimity seems at best only inferred from scriptural passages. There is no direct scriptural teaching. Unity may be maintained where parties do not agree on unessential specifics.

We have always sought to act on the basis of “unanimity” (i.e., complete agreement, one mindedness), but sometimes when uncertainty was present or there was unresolved debate, we have settled for unity (i.e., agreeing to act in conjunction despite unresolved questions or contrary opinions). This is not the same question as whether or not to allow plurality, or whether or not, when there is a plurality of opinions on an issue, to resolve the question based on the opinion of the majority. My sense is that we should not express our decisions on the basis of plurality (“7 voted for, 3 against”), but on the basis of unity. Perhaps we could differentiate in our communication to the congregation between unanimous decisions and decisions made in

unity but with some reservations. For instance, “We were unified in our decision to _____, but there were some concerns that _____ might be the result.” Be more up front, open, and honest with our people. [We should not, however, name those that hold some dissenting opinion, thus creating divisions in the church based on personality preferences. E.g. “most were in complete agreement. However, Rich Lucas had some reservations.” Those who particularly identify with Rich Lucas might be tempted to adopt his reservations even if they might have fully agreed with the majority had they not known that it was Rich Lucas who expressed reservation with the decision.]

When one or more disagree with the general consensus and are unable to convince the rest, these must submit in a spirit of humility, thus achieving unity even though all do not agree. One must not be allowed to “block” an action without well-founded reasons that all (or most) concede to -- or at least admit the possibility that the one may be right. This demands humility on the part of all, since they can not depend on the negative vote of one to save the day if they are wrong. It is also fearful in that it will be contingent upon the majority to carefully consider the arguments of the minority before taking action contrary to their counsel. Additionally, it would require that the majority -- rather than “just because”.

If the minority, however, refuses to submit in a spirit of humility after given ample opportunity to present its position, the majority may override the minorities objections and proceed to act upon the majority decision.

Men must be chosen for the Council of Elders who are able to make wise, reasoned decisions.

On all issues unity and unanimity shall be sought. On most issues majority rules. Minority must be heard and the majority must give time to weigh the arguments of the one. After careful consideration the majority may overrule the minority or decide to defer any decision.

On critical issues we may wish to require unanimity.

[Look at Washington court system. In civil cases 5 out of 6 votes are required. In criminal cases unanimity is required.]

Survey of Positions by Various Teachers/Documents:

Team Concept: “Unanimity”

- p. 77 -- “Another motivation toward unity is simply to demand unanimity among the elders for any church action.” [No biblical justification given.]
- p. 167 -- No biblically reasoned argument for unanimity.
- p. 207 -- Reference to unanimity in a specific instance but no biblical justification.

Emmanuel Baptist Church “Constitution and By-Laws”, p. 3, “In its deliberations and decision-making, the Council shall seek the mind of the Lord in the light of the Scriptures, shall be

sensitive to the congregation and its individual members, and shall strive for unanimity within the Council.”

Overlake Christian Church Policy Manual, p. 7, “All decisions will be made on the basis of a unanimous agreement by the Elders.”

The Elders Handbook: A Practical Guide for Church Leaders, p., 29, “Unity also implies strenuous efforts by the eldership to arrive at consensus upon matters before them. Better to postpone, if possible, close decisions than to impose them by narrow voting margins. There will always be differences of opinion, of course, and sometimes a vote will be the only resolution of a matter which has begun to waste time. But, especially on questions dealing with faith and life, the eldership should search the Word for a common light. Bear in mind that the Word itself speaks with one voice on all crucial matters of faith and behavior.”

Grace Community Church (John MacArthur, Jr.): Allow a study period for dissenting person(s) to pray and search the Scriptures. When they come back together the dissenting person(s) must (1) give biblical reasons why the majority is wrong, (2) give an alternative not previously thought of, or (3) submit to the wisdom of the majority. [per Jim Amandus]

Bibliographic Sources:

A & G

TDNT, 5

The Elder Handbook

The Team Concept

Elders; MacArthur

Basic Bible Truths

EDth

New Testament Theology; Guthrie

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