

Theoacademy

BEING PRESBYTERIAN PREPARATION FOR ORDERED MINISTRY

Session 9: The Councils of the Church

Theocademy

A ministry of the
Synod of Mid-America

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Getting started

Before watching the video, consider the following questions.

- When you hear the word “polity,” what thoughts or memories come to mind?
- What do you know about parliamentary procedure? What purpose does it serve?

During the video

Jot down any insights you gain from Dr. Kirkpatrick’s descriptions of the different councils in the PC(USA).

Council	Who’s Involved	Responsibilities	Parallels
Session			
Presbytery			
Synod			
General Assembly			

Discernment *en masse*

Last time we discussed communal discernment – a method by which groups or committees might work together to clarify God’s leading in a given situation. While this strategy has some definite benefits, it also has a few drawbacks – what happens, for example, when we’re trying to discern God’s will as a group of 600 people (like we do every two years at General Assembly)? What happens if our group hasn’t built trust and/or relationships yet? How can we be sure that everybody’s perspective is still heard and valued?

Parliamentary procedure: background

Henry Martyn Robert, a 25(ish)-year-old engineering officer with the US Army in the mid-1860s, was asked to preside over a local church gathering – and he quickly came to realize he had no clue what he was doing. Everybody had their own ideas of how business should be conducted, and as a result nothing got accomplished. He tried to find some tool to help him maintain control, but quickly found that none existed. Robert dove into a study of parliamentary law, and in 1869 wrote a 15-page booklet for himself and his friends, in order to establish some ground rules for how to conduct meetings. Six years later he published his first official manuscript – which he called *Robert’s Rules of Order*. His original run of 4,000 copies sold out in three months. Since then, *Robert’s Rules* has gone through 10 revisions (the 11th edition was published in 2011), and has over five and a half million copies in print.

- Why is it important for everyone in our group to use the same “handbook” when we’re making decisions?
- If you were moderating a big group of people who didn’t know (and might not get along with) one another very well, what kind of ground rules would you want to set?

Foundational principles

Robert founded his *Rules* on a set of principles – and once we wrap our minds around these ideas, the system will make a whole lot more sense.

- *Rights*. The majority of people gathered (determined by agreement on a given issue) has the right to determine the ruling decision; however, the minority has the right to be heard. Likewise, each

individual has the right to participate in the decision-making progress, but that also means that everyone should get the opportunity to speak (if they want to do so) before any one person gets the opportunity a second time.

- *One thing at a time.* Only one idea or issue may be discussed at a time, so that everyone stays on the same page. That isn't to say that this "one thing" can't change; when an interruption comes, this new idea or issue becomes the "one thing" that's being discussed. Once that particular "thing" is figured out, the group can move on to consider some "thing" else.
- *Balance.* Robert based his *Rules* on the assumption that people *will* have conflicting ideas. Because both the majority and minority have rights, though, both sides must be heard. Thus, speeches alternate between affirmative and negative, and both affirmative and negative votes must be taken on all motions.
- *Courtesy.* Robert called them Rules of *Order* for a good reason – the whole parliamentary system was created to keep people from turning disputes into duels. Thus, participants must debate *motions* rather than *members*, and decency and decorum are expected at all times.
- How do these principles line up with the "ground rules" that you proposed in the previous section?
- What do you think should happen if these principles come into conflict?

Robert's Rules: nuts and bolts

The Motion. Think of parliamentary procedure like an exercise class – no matter what you do, you have to keep moving. The "Motion" is the building block of parliamentary procedure; it's what you want to do to (or with) the issue that's in front of you. So, what are the different things that you can do?

- *Introduce Business.* You have a proposal in front of you – you can either move to approve it (do what it says) or disapprove it (don't do what it says).
- *Amend a Motion.* You can make changes, additions, or deletions to whatever's being proposed.
- *Refer a Motion.* You can ask somebody else to think about it and get back to you (keep in mind, though, you have to designate who that "somebody else" is when you do this).
- *End Debate.* When you "Move to Table" a motion, you suspend discussion about the proposal (usually until more information is gathered or a specific time in the future); when you "Move the Previous Question," you are calling for the end of discussion altogether. (In other words you're saying, "Let's stop talking about it and decide on the original thing that was being proposed.")
- *Address the Way Procedures Are Handled.* You can "Suspend the Rules" to temporarily ignore a matter of procedure that's getting in the way; you can "Rise to a Point of Order" to make sure procedures are handled correctly (for example, if more than one question is being considered at the same time); you can "Move to Reconsider" an action that you think was done improperly; you can "Call for a Division of the House" to turn a voice vote into a counted vote. (You can also "Rise to a

Question of Privilege” if something’s keeping you from fully participating in the meeting – like a room that’s too hot, a microphone that doesn’t work, missing materials, etc.)

- *End the Meeting.* You can “Move to Recess” if the group needs a break for a specified period of time; you can “Move to Adjourn” when the meeting’s over.

If you’re a visual person, here’s a chart that might help you to sort out these different motions. On the top half of the chart, the motions are in descending order of preference – in other words, the stuff higher on the list can interrupt what’s below it. (The second half of the chart contains *ad hoc* motions; you only use them when you need them.)

Frequently Used Ordered Motions							
Motion	What You Say	OK to Interrupt?	Need a Second?	Debatable?	Amendable?	Vote Needed?	Able to Be Reconsidered?
End the meeting	“I move that we adjourn.”	No	Yes	No	No	Majority	No
Call for a break	“I move that we recess for...”	No	Yes	No	Yes	Majority	No
Suspend consideration	“I move to table the motion.”	Yes	No	No	No	No vote	No (usually)
End debate	“I move the previous question.”	No	Yes	No	No	2/3	No
Postpone discussion	“I move to postpone discussion until...”	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	Yes
Refer to a committee	“I move to refer the matter to committee.”	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	Yes
Amend a motion	“I move to amend the motion by...”	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority (if needed)	Yes
Introduce business	“I move that...”	No	Yes (Unless from a committee)	Yes	Yes	Majority	Yes
Frequently Used Non-Ordered Motions							
Protest breach of rules/ conduct	“I rise to a point of order.”	Yes	No	No	No	No vote	No
Vote on a ruling from the chair	“I appeal the chair’s decision.”	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Majority	Yes
Temporarily suspend rules	“I move to suspend the rules so that...”	No	Yes	No	No	2/3	No
Avoid consideration of an improper matter	“I object to the consideration of this motion.”	Yes	No	No	No	2/3	--
Verify a voice vote by count	“I call for a division of the house.”	Yes	No	No	No	No vote	No
Request information	“Point of information.”	Yes	No	No	No	No vote	No
Reexamine a tabled matter	“I move to take from the table	No	Yes	No	No	Majority	No
Reconsider a hasty action	“I move to reconsider the vote on...”	Yes	Yes	--	No	Majority	No

Voting. In order to give everybody involved equal decision-making power, each motion must be voted upon. Now, what you’re voting to do may not always be the same thing – you could vote to approve, disapprove, table, refer, etc., but the

Regardless of what the particular motion is, in order for it to stick *it has to be approved*. You’re always working toward a “yes” in parliamentary procedure – so you can’t just vote “no” on a motion to approve; you have to take the extra step and vote “yes” on a motion to *disapprove*. Otherwise, you haven’t actually *done*

matter's only settled when some *action* is taken on it. In other words, all that *movement* you're doing has to get you to some sort of destination.

- You'll notice in the previous table that some of the votes require a simple majority (50% plus one), while some require a supermajority (2/3). Why is that, you ask? Because you as a group should be in general agreement if you're planning on doing anything that requires bending or breaking the "game rules" that you've established (i.e., Robert's Rules). This isn't Calvinball¹ – "decently and in order" only works if everybody's on the same page.
- There are two main ways to vote: by voice (a general "aye/yes" or "nay/no") or by counted vote (raising hands, standing up, ballots, electronic voting, etc.). Any participant is allowed to call for a counted vote – a "division of the house" – at any time, and for any reason.

Try it out

At this point, you may be feeling a little overwhelmed. But it's ok – nobody masters Robert's Rules from the get-go. Plus, parliamentary procedure doesn't really make sense until you experience how it can work out the knots of tangled discussions. So let's take what we've learned and do some untangling. It's the second Monday of the month, and the members of the Southwestminster Presbyterian Church's session have convened. The outreach committee has a proposal for consideration, and a number of session and pastoral staff members want to participate in the discussion. The only problem is they're all out of order (both literally and figuratively). Now that you're familiar with Robert's Rules, help them have a logical and productive discussion.

- Arlo would like to know when this special offering will take place.
- Frank is curious as to why these two specific languages were chosen.
- Grace, the associate pastor, has contact information for the American Bible Society and knows that they offer really good deals on lots of different Bible translations.
- Gwyn is the chair of the outreach committee. On behalf of the committee, she is proposing that a special offering be taken to purchase Spanish- and Russian-language Bibles to be distributed at the local food pantry.
- Jesse, the senior pastor, is interested in hearing how the committee plans to let the congregation know about this special offering.
- Julio, the chair of the mission committee, knows of extra money in the mission budget that might possibly be used for this project.
- Laurie, who volunteers at the food pantry and is also on the outreach committee, has talked with some of the folks who come through the distribution lines and has learned that many of them don't have access to Bibles in their heart languages.
- Lydia is having a rough time hearing the discussion over the rattle of the heating unit.

¹ The game of Calvinball was introduced by Bill Watterson in his Calvin & Hobbes comic strip – in it, Calvin and his "pet" tiger Hobbes add any rule they want at any time they want while they're playing the game.

- Marcus just received a text message from the babysitter that his son is sick, and he needs to step out and make a phone call.
- Mary, the chair of the stewardship committee, is concerned about the timing of this drive – the annual stewardship campaign is coming in a few weeks, and wonders if too many requests all at once might be counterproductive.

As a group, make sense of all these ideas, opinions, perspectives, and suggestions. Consider the following questions:

- In what order does this discussion need to happen? Are there specific things that need to be dealt with before/after others?
- How might this proposal be amended to make it more precise? What would the process look like to amend it?
- Why might this issue need to be “tabled?” If so, when might be an appropriate time to take it up again?
- What is the hoped-for outcome of this discussion? What are the procedural steps necessary to make that happen?

Personal reflection

After the session, complete the following statements.

- Clear communication (whether formal or informal) during decision-making is important because:
- I feel (more/less) confident about parliamentary procedure now, because: