

Some Thoughts on Consensus Leadership and Decision-making Pastor Steve Cole

DESCRIPTION:

Consensus leadership refers to the process in a local church by which the elders make decisions by seeking the mind of the Lord, not by "voting their own mind." The mind of the Lord will be revealed by an uncoerced unanimity among the elders, reached after thorough, biblically-based discussion and prayer. In some decisions, individual elders may not be in full agreement, but they may not have such strong disagreement as to prevent the group from taking action. But if an elder disagrees strongly or has a strong hesitation, either on biblical grounds or based on an inner sense that a decision is not from the Lord, then the rest of the elders should recognize his disagreement or hesitation as a check from the Lord and should withhold action. Then they must work through the matter with further discussion, prayer, and seeking of God's will through His Word.

The key is corporate sensitivity to the Lord as He reveals His will to fellow elders. The Lord promises, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you. Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, otherwise they will not come near to you." (Ps. 32:8-9.)

Our human tendency is to be too quick to act and not to labor in prayer and waiting upon the Lord. The vote system enables and encourages a body of leaders to bypass the arduous process of prayer and submission to the Lord and to one another. While the consensus system is much more cumbersome and time consuming, it provides the Lord the check that He wants on our human wisdom and self-will. It forces self-willed brothers to face their stubbornness and to submit to others. It requires difficult matters to be submitted to the corporate wisdom of all of the elders. If the 12 spies had operated on this basis, perhaps they would have reconsidered the viewpoint of Joshua and Caleb. The minority had God's viewpoint; the majority had a wrong perspective. As far as I know, this is the only biblical example of decision-making by vote, and it did not result in the group knowing the mind of the Lord.

A split within the leadership will be magnified throughout the ranks of the church, as members choose sides. However, a unanimous decision by a group of spiritually mature men, reached after open discussion based on God's Word and prayer, while not infallible, will carry a lot of weight and will not be challenged lightly. It will promote unity in the church (see 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3; Phil. 1:27; 2:2; 4:2-3).

ASSUMPTIONS:

1. Christ is the Head of His church and He administers His church through a plurality of spiritually mature men who depend upon the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.
2. The elders are spiritually mature, sensitive men who approximate the qualifications specified in 1 Timothy 3 & Titus 1. Especially, a man must not be self-willed (Titus 1:7), or he could thwart the entire process by always insisting on his own way. This is a potential weakness of the consensus system.
3. God has one will for His church. The Holy Spirit who indwells each elder in the one body will not lead His church in two directions at the same time (see possible exceptions below).
4. We are interdependent, not independent, in the body of Christ. Together we have God's wisdom, but we must learn to submit to one another and to learn from one another. (See Acts 15:1-29 for the principle in action in the early church.)

POSSIBLE BIBLICAL EXCEPTIONS:

Concerning the principle that God has one will for a local church and that He will not lead His church in two directions at the same time: Does the split between Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15:36-41) invalidate this principle? Paul and Barnabas did not seem to submit to one another and reach a point of consensus before taking action. Rather, Paul chose Silas and went his way, while Barnabas chose Mark and went his way. Although the text is silent on the matter, neither man seems to have submitted the situation to the elders in Antioch for their decision.

It seems to me that they should have done so. Perhaps the elders would have agreed that Paul and Barnabas should part ways amicably, being called to different types of ministry at this point. The church seems to have sided with Paul, since he and Silas were “committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord” before they departed (Acts 15:40), but there is no such word concerning Barnabas and Mark, who pretty much pass off the biblical record at this point. On the other hand, years later Paul affirmed the ministry both of Barnabas and of Mark (1 Cor. 9:6; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11), which may show that he admitted the wisdom of Barnabas’ approach in being patient with Mark after his failure on the first journey. In my opinion, the sharpness of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas could have been softened if they had both submitted their quarrel to the elders, who had then sought the mind of the Lord.

Although there is disagreement among commentators on the following point, I believe that Acts 21 is another negative example where Paul should have submitted himself to what the Lord was revealing to others in the church, but he insisted on his own view. Acts 21:4 indicates that the believers kept telling Paul “through the Spirit” not to set foot in Jerusalem. This corporate testimony was further reinforced by the prophecy of the godly Agabus, Luke, and the church at Caesarea (probably including Philip’s prophetess daughters, v. 9), but Paul resisted their counsel (vv. 8-14). While God sovereignly superintended the situation, in that He used Paul’s imprisonment finally to get him to Rome, thus working things together for good, who can say what fruitful ministry Paul could have had if he had not been imprisoned in Caesarea for those two years? I argue that he should have submitted to the unanimous testimony of the brothers (who, the text specifically states, were speaking through the Spirit).

APPLICATION IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS:

What do we do, practically speaking, if we reach an impasse, where one elder (or a minority of elders) feels very strongly in one direction, but the rest of the elders (the majority) disagree, and a decision must be made? Is there ever a time when we can move ahead in spite of the objections of one man (or a minority), or does any single dissenter (or minority) have complete veto power (a major criticism of consensus decision-making)?

Frankly, I’m not sure the Scriptures give us absolute guidelines for such situations. Normally, consensus can be reached by waiting on the Lord and discussing matters openly, from a biblical perspective. So we’re talking here about the rare exception. What do we do?

Any time we override a godly man’s strong, biblically-based (in his mind), prayerfully determined opinion, we really have to seek the Lord and examine our hearts with extra care. Prayer and fasting would not be inappropriate at such times. The fact that such a one disagrees ought to be a red flag that tells us that we are navigating dangerous waters. Caution is in order.

It may be that God is calling the man to a different work (as with Paul and Barnabas), so that we must agree to disagree. It may be that he is right, and time will prove him right; but we have to learn the hard way, and he has to patiently go along with us until such time as his viewpoint is vindicated. During such time, he must be careful not to rally church support for his point of view, and then to say, “I told you so,” when his view is proved correct. Of course, his view may be proved wrong, in which case he must humbly acknowledge his error, and the others must be careful not to put him down. No system of decision-making is foolproof because we all are fallen men who are in process. We must be gracious and forgiving to one another as we work together. In no case should we, as elders, force one of our members to go along publicly with an action that violates his conscience before the Lord.

Of course, if more than one dissenter is against the majority view, it raises the level of caution and the likelihood that we do not have the Lord’s mind on a matter (unless men are playing politics by building factions). In such cases, I would almost always rather default to not proceeding with a course of action than to risk erring by overriding the minority opinion. The only case where I would feel comfortable overriding the minority would be if there were some convincing evidence that they were deceived, biased, acting against Scripture, or self-willed. In such cases, there may be a need for disciplining the elder(s) in question and removing him (them) from office.

This system of corporate decision-making rests heavily on the assumption that each elder is a spiritually mature man of God, who knows the Word of God. A self-willed man like Diotrephes (3 John 9-10) will create major problems. If there is such a man among the elders (even if it is one of the pastoral staff), the other men must have the spiritual courage to confront him (Gal. 6:1) and, if necessary, remove him from office. Church politics, back-room maneuvering, gossip, and power plays are all built on the flesh. Godly consensus leadership takes place when men submit their wills to Christ as Head of His church, when they rely on the Holy Spirit through the Word, and when they are "devoted to one another in brotherly love" and seek to "give preference to one another in honor" (Rom. 12:10). "Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation" (Rom. 12:16). As we follow these biblical principles, Christ will be glorified in our midst as the rightful Lord of His church.