PHASES IN PROBLEM SOLVING: A BIBLICAL MODEL FOR THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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Should women have equal access to all leadership roles in the church? Should divorced persons be restricted in what ministries they perform in the church? Should homosexuals be granted full membership in the church with all the customary rights and privileges? In form, these and other similar questions are akin to the question of the early church: Should Gentiles be required to be circumcised? Now, as then, church councils are convened to consider these questions. What is truth? is the concern.

But how do Christian communities best address these questions? A good how is critical for a good what. Truth seeking requires a good process. My thesis is that the narrative of the early church council held in Jerusalem on the question of whether circumcision should be required of Gentile Christians (Acts 15) provides a unique model of problem solving worthy of consideration by the contemporary Christian community.

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Alternative Models

*How* raises the question of models. Models, in reference to problem solving, are predictable, patterned sequences of responses that control our behavior. They may be implicit or explicit. We all have them. If we have a predictable sense of how something should be done, we have a model.

I was once startled into recognizing an aspect of my implicit academic model as a guest in a church board struggling with a difficult church conflict. I distributed what I perceived to be a simple, one-page paper containing what I considered to be helpful content. In my teaching I find handouts extremely useful. Here, however, the permanent academics on the board had already been at work. My handout was the last straw. A member obviously not into the paper model of the academics threw up his hands strongly exclaiming that he didn’t want to see another paper.

Transporting models appropriate in one setting into another is risky, though tempting. Familiarity breeds comfort. I have informally observed that in approaching problem solving within the Christian community the professionals prefer their models, the businessmen their’s, the academics their’s, the skilled workers theirs, etc. But within the Christian community these imported models may in fact represent learned or “trained incapacities” (Folger, 1984:65). Learning, indiscriminately applied, is not helpful. Thus, it is important that we examine our models.

Preoccupation with problem solving is a hallmark of twentieth-century American culture. Hence, rational/empirical models of phases in problem solving abound, but two traditions dominate. Most pervasive has been the tradition shaped in the image of John Dewey’s “Reflective Pattern of Thinking.” In his seminal work, *How We Think*, Dewey identifies “a complete act of thought” as consisting of the following “steps in reflection:”

i. a felt difficulty
ii. its location and definition
iii. suggestion of possible solution
iv. development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion
v. further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection; that is, the conclusion of belief or
disbelief (1910:72-78).

Numerous writers in the discussion movement of this century have adapted Dewey's reflective pattern to group decision making. Typical is the current approach proposed by B. Aubrey Fisher and Donald G. Ellis, now offered as one of several alternative approaches:

1. Define and Limit the Problem
2. Analyze the Problem and Gather Information
3. Establish Decision Criteria
4. Discuss Possible Solutions
5. Determine the Best Solution

Beginning at mid-century, empirical research in group dynamics led to the introduction of a new tradition. In their pioneering work describing what problem-solving groups typically do, Bales and Strodbeck identify three phases: an initial orientation stage as groups begin exploring an issue, a second evaluation stage as groups seek to appraise the issue, and a final control phase as groups move to a decision and common action. Again, refinements and alternative schemes have resulted from subsequent empirical research.

These mainstream rational/empirical models have been valuable in helping groups in the workplace and the institutions of a democratic society engage in productive decision making. They have limited value, however, for the Christian community. Models appropriate for the Christian community must be shaped by their central purpose of discovering, not the will of the people, but rather God's will for the people. Revelation now replaces rational/empirical modes of knowing at center stage.

Where then do we look for appropriate models for the Christian community? I propose that we look to the Bible itself. Whereas the Bible is certainly not a traditional text on decision making, its narratives contain implicit models that teach us much about how to proceed to address difficult questions within the Christian community.

Different models of decision making are evident in biblical narratives. God is not bound. Nor is the Christian community bound. Some biblical narratives, for instance, reflect deliberative processes (e.g. Acts 15). In others, an unequivocal word from God settles the matter (e.g. Acts 16:6-9). In still others, an
initial discernment is followed by casting the lot (e.g. Acts 1:15-26). All may be appropriate, even today.

Several years ago I stumbled onto a news report of a church which had decided to choose a new pastor out of their own congregation. They first discerned several who might fill the role. Then, on a table before the congregation, the leaders placed hymnbooks equal to the number discerned, plus one. Each discerned member was to choose one. Hidden in one hymnbook was a note identifying its recipient as the new pastor. The extra one contained a note indicating that God did not approve this process. Should anyone choose that one, the congregation would begin anew. As it happened, that hymnbook in the end was the one remaining on the table. The church had its pastor.

The most complete narrative of a deliberative process used in the early church is that of Luke's account of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Luke T. Johnson, in his exploration of Decision Making in the Church, expresses surprise that this narrative has not been given significant attention as a paradigm for church decision making (1983:48-49). Scholars have been largely concerned with historical questions raised by the narrative, yet it also provides significant insight into how the Christian community might proceed to address difficult questions. Hence, I propose to identify the phases of problem solving implicitly in this text as a model for the contemporary Christian community.

The Narrative (Acts 15:1-35)

Antioch in Syria was one of the earliest Christian centers in the Gentile world. Here, indeed, the followers of Christ were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Luke's narrative in Acts 15 begins with certain Christian teachers from Judea who arrive in Antioch teaching that unless persons are circumcised according to the Law, they cannot be saved. Paul and Barnabas rigorously oppose this view. As a result of the intense division, the Antioch church decides to send Barnabas and Paul, together with some of the other believers, to Jerusalem to bring the issue to the apostles and elders. When they arrive in Jerusalem, they are welcomed by the church, and make an initial report of what God is doing in the Gentile world. Some of the local Pharisees, however, are quick to raise the issue of
circumcision again. So the apostles and elders gather to consider the question. Key participants in the meeting are indeed the apostles and elders. They are mentioned five times in the narrative. The Apostle Peter and Barnabas and Paul make major contributions that fundamentally influence the direction of the meeting. James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, provides a final interpretation joining reported experience with Scripture and proposes a final resolution. The entire church, finally, joins with the apostles and elders in confirming the proposed direction and sending a letter articulating the resolution with a delegation back to Antioch.

Implicit in this narrative is a sequence of phases in problem solving. Together these phases form a chiasm, a common literary form in the ancient Hebrew world. In the chiastic structure, beginning and ending segments as well as corresponding intervening segments parallel each other as in an A-B-C-B-A sequence. The center is the fulcrum, a point of critical importance.

The chiasm implicit in the narrative, then, may be framed as follows:

A· Community Tension (15:1-2a). Christian teachers from Judea, having come to Antioch, teach that the Gentiles must be circumcised if they are to be saved. Paul and Barnabas vigorously disagree.

B· Initiation (15:2b-5). A delegation, including Paul and Barnabas, are sent to consult with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. The delegation is welcomed in Jerusalem, make an initial report, and the issue is quickly joined as believers from among the Pharisees insist that Gentiles be circumcised.

C· Exploration (15:6-7a). (Interpretation 1) The meeting begins with “much debate.”

D· Narrative (Story)

1. Peter's Story (15:7b-11). Peter breaks into the debate and reminds the meeting of the story of his Joppa vision and experience with Cornelius, Roman centurion, in which it had become clear that God had accepted the Gentiles. He challenges them by reminding them of their own story in which they themselves had been unable to bear the “yoke” that they now wished to place on the Gen-
tiles. He concludes by focusing the Jesus story. Salvation, for both Jew and Gentile, comes only “through the grace of the Lord Jesus.”

2. Barnabas and Paul’s Stories (15:12). The assembly is silent as they listen to these stories of what God has done among the Gentiles through Barnabas and Paul.

C' - Correlation (15:13-18). (Interpretation II) James begins with Peter’s story and shows how the prophets agree.

B' - Resolution (15:19-29). James proposes the conclusion. The apostles and elders, together with the entire church, agree and discern that the Holy Spirit approves. The answer is formulated in a letter.

A' - Community Action (15:30-35). A delegation is sent with Paul and Barnabas to convey the message to the church at Antioch. They are well received in Antioch, and the Antioch church rejoices at the news.

In the chiastic structure of these phases of the Jerusalem Council, narrative is at the fulcrum, the pivotal center of the process.

The Phases Elaborated

The five central deliberative phases are framed by recognized community tension, to begin with, and community action, to end with. Assuming that these are self-explanatory, I will focus attention here on the central five.

The Initiation Phase (What and Who?)

Initiation requires attention to two issues. The first is the identification of the question. Questions may be putative or real, vague or clear. In the case of the Jerusalem Council, the question is both real and clear. Gentile circumcision, in particular, and keeping the Mosaic Law, in general, are at stake.

Identifying the community of authority to address the question is the second issue. Here the response is both theological and practical. Theologically, authority to “bind and loose” was given by Jesus to the church (Matt. 16:13-20, 18:15-20). The Jerusalem Church is exercising that authority. Practi-
cally, without the specific involvement of the particular communities that are concerned, issues cannot be put to rest. After all, the church at Antioch could have processed the issue themselves. But they were not the only community of concern. The problem arose because of visitors from Judea. The question of circumcision and keeping the Mosaic Law was first of all a problem for the Jewish church. Jerusalem, of course, was also the mother church in this situation and the apostles and elders carried special weight in this early church setting, but, practically speaking, without their involvement the issue simply could not be put to rest.

What and who, then, are the principal issues in this initiation phase of problem solving.

The Exploration Phase

This phase is quickly summarized in the text as "much debate" or "much discussion." The Greek noun here used, suzetesis, ranges in meaning in the ancient world from "a joint seeking" (Young) or "common investigation" to "dispute" or "quarrel" (Kittel, 7:747-748). Current translators predominantly use either "debate" (e.g. Revised Standard Version, Revised English Bible, New American Standard) or "discussion" (e.g. New International Version, Jerusalem Bible) in this context.

Though this phase is quickly summarized in the text, we must be careful not to dismiss it as without function. This phase is important, even if not surprising. Indeed, we can guess that this typical beginning contains elements of what contemporary discussion/group dynamics theorists call "ventilation" (Barnlund and Haiman, 1960: 86), "orientation" (Bales and Strodtbeck), or "appraisal of the issues" (Janis and Mann, 1977:172). From a rhetorical perspective it entails articulating the stasis (critical points of disagreement) of the issue. From a conflict management perspective it is akin to creating a human conflict spectrum. In such a spectrum members of a group imagine a line running from one end of the room to the other with the ends reflecting opposite extremes of the issue. Each then proceeds to stand at a point on the line that best reflects the person's position on the issue. A visual picture of the diversity within the group is thus created. Having physically positioned themselves standing together, may now articulate and clarify their reasons and feelings for the
others, thus creating mutual understanding and "joint seeking." But whatever the method, beginning by naming our present reality is important.

Truth seeking, in the case of the Jerusalem Council, began by naming, defending and refuting the interpretative options. How does one understand the Scriptures - the Law and the prophets? How does one interpret the Christ event? These are critical questions. What is our beginning stance?

*Through New Lens - A Digression on Seeing*

I frequently travel from my valley home to a small retreat facility that I manage in the mountains. Yet occasionally I am surprised to see along the way a "new" house perched on top of a nearby hill. Its appearance, however, clearly indicates that it has long been there. Indeed, a fellow traveler may confirm its long presence, though I may playfully debate whether that is so or not. Surely I could not have missed it the hundreds of times I have traveled this way. But the truth is, I have missed it.

Reading the Bible is sometimes like that. I may have read a passage a thousand times, but suddenly I am surprised by a word or a phrase that strikes me for the first time. The territory is old, but the perception is new. It is a gift.

Seeing what before has not been seen may indeed come as a gift. But it may also come as the result of a deliberate search. Driving down Rosemead Lane, I notice the television repair shop at the corner of First and Rosemead when, for the first time, I am looking for a place to take my broken set. My need or question directs my eyes.

So also it is with the Bible. The Bible, Phyllis Trible observes, is like a pilgrim wandering through history to which each age brings its particular questions (1). The questions already significantly shape what is seen. They direct our eyes in the search. So it should not surprise us if we see new things in the Bible when we ask new questions. It is not the Bible that has changed. We have changed. The television repair shop was at First and Rosemead long before I saw it. My frequent passing, in itself, wasn't enough to make me see it.

Seeing new things, then, may come by way of a deliberate search or a gift. Michael Novak has called these the "ascent of the mountain" and the "flight of the dove" (59). The first reflects the disciplined and orderly search for truth analogous to ascending the mountain. The second reflects the unex-
pected and surprising breakthroughs of God’s Spirit analogous to the mysterious appearance of the dove. Both are part of human experience and both reveal God’s will.

Now, the exploration phase of problem solving entails a deliberate search akin to ascending the mountain. The question already provides a new lens through which to view Scripture and the tradition. Both old and new are linked. New lens initially create strain on the eyes. We are not always sure what we are seeing. Indeed, we may resist putting on the new lens at all. Initial naming and articulating of what we think we see is a necessary beginning to our communal search.

The Narrative Phase (the fulcrum)

Whereas the prior exploratory phase is typical and predictable, the narrative (story) phase is surprising. It constitutes an important and critical departure from the usual rational/empirical sequences of discussion/group dynamics theorists. This phase stands at the critical center of the chiasm. It is the fulcrum on which the process is balanced. It elicits silence and attentive listening. It fundamentally shapes the discourse and response that follow.

The Apostle Peter, who apparently has been listening in silence to the debate, begins this phase by alluding to his vision in the coastal town of Joppa in which something like a large sheet had descended from heaven filled with unclean animals, reptiles and birds. A voice had commanded him to kill and eat. Peter had refused, and the voice had responded: “What God has cleansed, you must not call common” (Acts 10:15). This vision led immediately to his encounter with the Roman centurion, Cornelius, in Caesarea and his revolutionary recognition “that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). In the Council Peter simply alludes to this story, for all in the Council surely already know it from his previous telling in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-18). Beyond Peter’s allusion to his own story, he refers to the Jews’ story of being unable to bear the “yoke” themselves that they now wish to place on the Gentiles. And he concludes by referring to the Jesus story. All will ultimately be “saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus,” whether Jew or Gentile.

Silence and listening, significant qualities of reflection and thought, now characterize the assembly as Barnabas and Paul
spin out story after story of the “signs and wonders” that God has been performing through them among the Gentiles.

Why then these narratives? First, because of the very nature of God. God speaks and acts. These are the essence of story. Stories, hence, are primary data in Christian faith. Amos Wilder has put it well: “The very nature of God as Judaism and Christianity understand it comes to expression in a story as it does in dialogue and drama” (Wilder, 1971:63).

The stories told in the Jerusalem Council are special sign ("signs and wonders") stories that signal God’s approval for new ways of thought and conduct. In rhetorical language, they constitute evidence. In Novak’s formulation, portray the “flight of the dove.” They disclose God breaking into human experience in surprising ways. They reveal God’s will.

These “signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God” James Loder prefers to call “transforming moments” in human experience. They are part of “the ongoing transformation of human life under divine initiative” (1981:12). In communal decision making, the narrative phase allows for the stories of these signs to be told. Communities, as well as individuals, may experience “transforming as God is revealed through the lived and told stories of the people.”

Stories also serve to unfreeze our positions, our habitual ways of perceiving God and the world. As the Spirit Dove surprises us with “signs and wonders,” we are jarred into considering new possibilities. Peter’s vision in Joppa was clearly of this nature. He was surprised, and his view of God and the Gentiles was forever altered. His perception of God’s intention for the people was shaped anew. So too the stories of Barnabas and Paul were confirmations of new modes of seeing. So too are current stories that reveal God at work in human lives, both individually and within community. Luke T. Johnson has written, “The Scripture will be heard to say the same thing over and over again eternally, unless our hearing is renewed by the story being told us now by the Spirit. Without the narrative of the experience of God, discernment cannot begin, and decisions are theologically counterfeit” (1983:93).

Without the intervention of stories that portray God at work in the world, we face a greater probability that our perceptions may in fact be frozen into habitual patterns that may not be truly biblical. Habit may be more comfortable, but as Gamaliel feared when the Sanhedrin was sitting in judg-
ment of Peter and the Apostles (Acts 5), we could in the end find ourselves actually opposing God.

Narratives, then, are powerful in unfreezing our static, habitual perceptions of God’s will for the people. They have the potential, not of altering Scripture, but of mediating and confirming more truthful understandings of Scripture.

Finally, stories give voice to the powerless. Debate is the art of the elite. Who can match the apostles and elders in debate over biblical interpretations? Stories, however, are another matter. God has made story our common language. For God is no respecter of persons, but chooses to break into the lived story of persons of all stations of life, including most certainly the outsider.

God is the primary actor in the story of Peter and the stories of Barnabas and Paul in the Jerusalem Council. But the Gentiles — Cornelius, the Roman centurion of Peter’s story, and the numerous Gentiles who figure in the stories of Barnabas and Paul — who are powerless in the Jewish community, are also actors. These are their stories too. But their stories become compelling because they are empowered by God. Indeed, their stories and God’s story have become one. Empowered by God, the powerless cannot be turned away without denying God’s story itself. The asymmetrical power relationship between Jew and Gentile has been transformed by God into symmetry. In Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek...” (Gal. 3:28).

In time, it is often through story, as in the Jerusalem Council, that the powerless first enter the company of the powerful. Narrative precedes presence. Stories pave the way. If the powerful are able to hear the stories and the stories meet appropriate tests of authenticity, physical presence may follow.

Refusing to allow the stories to be told or suppressing the stories is what the powerful do when they want to maintain control. For stories threaten the monopoly of the powerful. The Jerusalem Council, to its credit, modeled silence and listening in this phase of its meeting, and so were ultimately able to transcend the limitations of the initial discussion/debate.

Narrative, then, is the pivotal central phase in this chiastic model of problem solving. Stories reveal God’s will, assist in unfreezing habitual modes of seeing, and give voice to the
powerless. They fundamentally shape what follows as the Council now moves to resolution.

The Correlation Phase - The Principle of Congruency

Narratives motivate another look at Scripture. In the earlier exploratory phase of "much debate," the interpretative possibilities are named and their legitimacy tested. A human conflict spectrum, as I have observed, is figuratively formed in which positions are disclosed and defended. How to understand the Scriptures is the pre-eminent question.

In the interpretative sequence that now follows the narratives, Scripture, which remains the normative test of truth, again becomes important. Experience and Scripture must now be correlated. The central question is that of congruency. Are the central narratives, which appear to be evidencing God at work in the world, congruent with the historical revelation contained in the Scriptures? In the Jerusalem Council, James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, clearly articulates this congruency. He specifically draws on the Apostle Peter's story and proceeds to show how the story is congruent with the prophets. In so doing, he quotes directly from Amos (9:11-12), Jeremiah (12:15), and Isaiah (45:21).

While Scripture remains normative, the intervening narratives have mediated new understandings. Indeed, among the various interpretative possibilities, all of which may be articulated and defended in debate, the narratives have cast the deciding vote. They have become signs, not only of God presently at work in the world, but also of God's preferred interpretation of the historical written Word.

Now narratives may not always cast the deciding vote. They too may be false. They may be beyond the reach of Scripture to embrace. Hence, they too must be tested (I John 4). Ultimately, they must be congruent with Scripture to establish truth.

The Resolution Phase

In this phase three steps are involved. First, a solution is proposed. James, significantly, returns to Scripture for the solution. He proposes freedom for the Gentiles on the central issue of circumcision, but proposes that they abide by the ancient restrictions of the Law for strangers in the land. Carl R. Holladay observes, "James's proposal thus commends itself
because it is scriptural in the strictest sense — it binds on Gentiles what God through Scripture had bound, and that alone, and it succeeds in waiving circumcision as a requirement for Gentiles" (1988:1099). Secondly, the solution is confirmed by the entire assembly. Thirdly, the solution is put into writing in the form of a letter. Resolution is thus achieved through a proposal, confirmation of the assembly, and a clearly formed document.

Finally, as the sequence began with community tension, it now ends with community action. A delegation is formed to send the news to the church at Antioch, where it is received with joy.

Conclusion

The Jerusalem Council, then, provides a biblical model for problem solving within the Christian community. By way of review, the model in its full chiastic form contains the following phases:

1. Community Tension
2. Initiation
3. Exploration - (Interpretation I)
4. Narrative - "signs and wonders"
5. Correlation - Congruency (Interpretation II)
6. Resolution
7. Community Action

While working on this paper, the Mennonite Brethren Herald (April 20, 1990) of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren and The Christian Leader (April 24, 1990) of the United States Mennonite Brethren, coincidentally, during the same week, carried feature articles on "Women in Ministry." The Christian Leader features a dialogue between two friendly protagonists, Fran Hiebert (Fuller Theological Seminary) and brother-in-law, Elmer Martens (Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary). These two primarily focus on what the Bible teaches. Agreements and disagreements in biblical interpretation are noted. The Mennonite Brethren Herald, on the other hand, features the stories of seven women in ministry. These stories reveal God at work in their lives. As in the case of these two periodicals, discussion/debate and narrative, though both present, usually are experienced independently of each other in the contemporary church. The uniqueness of the Jerusalem
Council is that both are brought together in a single sequence of phases in which they directly inform each other in a concrete, decision-making context. Indeed, stories of God at work in the present world are not incidental to the process, nor consigned to the fringes of the process, as they often are today, but are at the very center. In the model, Scripture provides the envelope enclosing the stories. The stories must fit the envelope. However, the relationship between the stories and Scripture is not static, but dynamic. Both inform each other.

Consider, then, a contemporary Christian community gathered to seek God’s will on the matter of women in ministry (or a similar question). Community tension has been felt (phase 1), the decision-making process has been initiated by clearly identifying the question and the community that will address it (phase 2), and an initial exploration of biblical interpretations has occurred (phase 3). Now imagine the community pausing in silence to listen to the stories of God at work in women (told by both women and men) and to discern signs of God’s intention for women in these stories (phase 4). Another look at Scripture, which remains normative, follows, but now with new lenses framed by the stories. Are the apparent signs of the stories congruent with Scripture? Can the two be correlated? These are the questions (phase 5). The resolution depends, of course, on the disposition of the previous phase. But in this phase a conclusion is proposed and the confirmation of the community is sought (phase 6). Community action implementing the conclusion completes the process (phase 7).

This is the model implicit in the Jerusalem Council. It is a model in which the community actively joins hands with God’s Spirit in discerning God’s intention for the people. It is an enabling process, which, in the end, may lead contemporary Christian communities to say as confidently as the Jerusalem Council, “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…” (Acts 15:28).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


