

## Theology of Polity - Tyranny and Sin

### Session Starter Number 8

#### **Prayer:**

God of love, we assemble in this place as people who have fallen short of your glory. We only dare to call on you in prayer because you have redeemed us by your grace and the atoning sacrifice of Christ Jesus. With this assurance, we seek wisdom to conduct the business of this court in a spirit of harmony, humility, and with compassion for your people in this congregation, this presbytery, this denomination, and around the world. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

#### **Introduction:**

Section 4 of the Book of Forms is listed as one of the Basic Principles of the General Rules for Church Courts. The language of this section is somewhat dated. This should not be surprising since it comes from the Second Book of Discipline; a polity statement adopted by the 1578 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Nevertheless, these few words point to the theology that undergirds the Presbyterian way of making decisions through groups of people rather than by assigning too much power to individuals.

**4. "To take away all occasion of tyranny," our Lord wills that office-bearers in his Church "should rule with mutual consent of brethren (sic), and equality of power, every one according to his function." (Bk. of Dis. II, 4)**

#### **Scripture:**

*(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)*

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

John 8:3-8

#### **A Brief Commentary:**

*(Invite another elder to read the following commentary)*

The Pharisees hoped to ensnare Jesus. If Jesus allowed the woman to be executed, he would be guilty of contradicting his own doctrine of mercy and pardon. If he acquitted the woman, then he would be guilty of contradicting the law of Moses. For a time Jesus remained silent while writing some unrevealed message in the sand at his feet. When he finally spoke he escaped the snare by neither commenting on the law nor pardoning the woman. In one instant Jesus led the woman to repentance by showing her mercy and exposed the prosecutors to their own guilt. With fresh awareness of their own disobedience before God, one by one, they slipped away.

#### **Reflection:**

Why is it that Presbyterians normally make decisions in groups? Why is it that we are so quick to form committees? Why is it that we govern our church through sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assemblies?

The answer is two-fold and theological. First, Presbyterians believe this method of government reflects a New Testament image of the early church. The second point, which is the focus of this Session Starter, we make decisions and govern ourselves in groups because we take sin

seriously. Even though we believe we are set free from the bondage of sin by Christ's redemptive work on the cross, we know human beings are susceptible to temptation and regularly fall short of the glory of God. Selfishness and sin are so pervasive in this world that it is unavoidable. Even in Christ's Church is not immune. Any one of us can be lured by selfish interests to make decisions that are self-serving or even detrimental to the well-being of others. Like those ready to stone the adulteress to death, not one of us is without sin.

For this reason we embrace a form of decision-making and church government that makes very sure that power is not vested in individuals acting alone. Though committee work can be cumbersome and frustrating, and though committees have been humourously defined as gatherings where the unwilling are led by the incapable to accomplish the unnecessary, we still believe that decisions made in groups are usually better than decisions made by individuals.

Working together in groups allows the collective wisdom and experience to be applied to the project at hand rather than the more narrow perspective of an individual. Working in groups means there are others involved to hold us accountable for what we say and do and therefore self-serving temptations can be minimized or eliminated. Working in groups can keep in check individuals who are power hungry, domineering, controlling or even threatening in the way they participate in a decision-making process. Working in groups is a serious attempt to rule with mutual consent and to take away all occasions of tyranny.

**Follow-up Questions:**

1. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the "committee of one."
2. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of making decisions in groups.
3. Discuss examples of how God speaks to the church through the collective participation of session, presbytery, synod or General Assembly.
4. How could your session or committees be more efficient?