CAN ANCIENT AFRICAN STYLES OF MAKING DECISIONS IN THE EARLY CHURCH STILL WORK TODAY?

Mark Ellingsen[1]

Ever been in a contentious church meeting or school meeting? Likely they were meetings where, to paraphrase the lyrics of the old Joe Jones rock classic, "We taw – aw – awawawawk – we talk too much!" Unproductive decision-making processes without civility are one of the curses of church work and even sometimes of life in the academy. Could it be that the early church, inspired by African roots, can provide another model – one that is characteristically African?

I have been thinking and learning about these issues a lot over the last decade, as thanks to the recommendations of former ITC President Michael Battle and the previous Provost Edward Wimberly I served as a Scholar Consultant for a Lilly Endowment-funded Congregational Discernment Project, studying, under the auspices of Quaker scholars, the resources of the historic model for decision-making employed by the Society of Friends. This model (called "discernment" by Quaker scholars and termed "consensus" in the ecumenical world) is all the ecumenical rage these days. It has been embraced by a number of union churches in the Southern Hemisphere, notably by the Uniting Church of Australia. The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches adopted it in 2005 as the Council's official decision-making model.[2]

Essentially this model puts an end to Robert's Rules of Order and voting on issues. In its place, premium is put on discerning the Will of God through consensus. In the Quaker model this transpires through the discipline of silence, which is itself seen as worship. Decision-making takes place after worship. Then the society makes its decisions.

---

[1] Mark Ellingsen is professor of Church History at Interdenominational Theological Center.

[2] Friedrich Degenhardt, "Consensus: a colorful farewell to majority rule" (June 10. 2005), at Grace, "Voting Not to Vote – Toward Consensus in the WCC," *Quaker Religious Thought* (Nov. 2006): 48-54.

Instead of motions and votes made and cast in the meeting, preceded by speaking to the issue in an effort to convince participants of the virtues of one's position, the Quaker heritage would have participants quietly await consensus to emerge.[3] In these circles it is bad (spiritual) etiquette to talk unless you feel convicted by the Holy Spirit to speak the Will of God.[4]

Eventually, usually after significant periods of silence (perhaps hours and days), a talented Clerk (we might regard him or her as one of the Elders of the community) summarizes the consensus of the meeting, though this is put before the meeting only to gain whether the meeting's sense has been captured.

One of my jobs in this project was to discern how the early Church (in the centuries immediately following the Biblical era) made decisions. Project organizers (Quakers) were hoping to make the case that their technique was not peculiar to the Friends' heritage and others they have influenced, but that theirs was a decision-making model that is truly catholic, embedded in the catholic heritage.

The case for that point seems to be viable. Though New Testament Studies is not my specialty, a reading of the first catholic decision-making body of the young Church, the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) lends some credence to the conclusion that something like the Friends' model of discernment/consensus was in operation. No vote was taken to decide in favor of the admission of Gentiles into the Church. But it is reported that the assembly was silent (σιγάω) while Paul and Barnabas spoke (v.12), that James articulated the decision (v.19), but that this was with the consent of the whole Church (v.22).

My research indicated that not surprisingly this style of Apostolic decision-making characterized the early Councils and Synods of the

---

[3] See North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends, *Faith and Practice* (Greensboro, NC, 1985), p. 39.

[4] Lon Fendall, "The Individual Enters Into the Decision-Making Process," in Lon Fendall et al, *Practicing Discernment Together* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2007), p.58.

Church. There we have it: The way to make Christian corporate decisions is to remain silent, to avoid voting, and to await consensus to emerge, as articulated by gifted Elders. But wait: It is not so simple as that.

Dissenting Voices

Just when it seemed that the historical data supported the Biblical and ancient character of the Quaker/new ecumenical style of decision making, some troubling insights emerge. A recent book by Yale Historian Ramsay Macmullen argues that the early Councils of the Church operated with democratic processes not unlike those which characterized most public forums in the Roman Empire.[5] His thesis was essentially developed over a century ago by P. Batiffol and H. Gelzer, both of whom have argued that the early African Synods and the ecumenical Councils were conducted according to the procedures of the Roman Senate.[6] These books clearly challenge the claim that the Quaker model of consensus decision-making is reflected in the early Church.

In our context (the Black church) other challenges should be raised to the viability of the Quaker model. Its stress on silence as an entrée to the Will of God seems at odds with the joyful, celebrative, oral character of Black church institutions. And yet there is something attractive in the Quaker quest for consensus. Its integration of worship and decision-making is certainly in harmony with the holism of African cosmology. The Quaker heritage may also have resonance in view of this tradition's notable involvement in America in the abolitionist cause and in sponsoring Underground Railway stations. But a careful study of the Acts (official transcripts) of the Church's first Councils and Synods also suggests how early Christianity in its official conclaves found a manner of decision-making that seems to blend the elements of traditional African ways of

---

[5] Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven and London:

[6] H. Gelzer, *Ausgewahlte kleine Schriften* (Leipzig, 1907), p.144; P. Batiffol, "Le reglement des previeres conciles africaines," *Bulletin d'ancienne literature et d'archeologie chretiennes* 3 (1913): 3-19. Battifol only sees the Western tradition in this way, while in his view in the East the synod modeled debates as transpired in the schools of the Empire.

corporate decision-making with the best characteristics of the Friends' heritage of discernment through consensus.

Survey of Early Christian Decision-Making

A Letter of Constantine nicely summarizes how the first so-called Ecumenical Council (one recognized by all the denominations), the Council of Nicea, arrived at a decision regarding the celebration of Easter:

> To sum up in a few words: By the *unanimous judgment of all*, [italics mine] it has been decided that the most holy festival of Easter should be everywhere celebrated on one and the same day, and it is not seemly that in so holy a thing there should be any division.[7]

Another report (by Eusebius of Caesarea) indicates that the Council achieved agreement on the Credal formulation in a similar manner:

> In this manner numberless assertions were put forth by each party, and a violent controversy arose at the very commencement. Notwithstanding this, the emperor gave patient audience to all alike, and received every proposition with steadfast attention, and by occasionally assisting the argument of each party in turn he gradually disposed even the most vehement disputants to a reconciliation... The result was that they were not only united as concerning the faith, but at the same time for the celebration of the salutary feast of Easter was agreed on by all.[8]

---

[7] Constantine, *Epistola Consantini ad Ecclesias de Synodo Nicaena* ("Letter of the Emperor To All Those Not Present At the Council [of Nicea]") (325), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol. 14 eds. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (28 vols.; 2nd print. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995-1999), p. 55[hereafter NPNF]: "Atque ut summatim ac breviter dicam, placuite communi omnium judicio, ut sanctissimae Paschae Festivitas uni eodemque die celebratetur."
[8] Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Vita Constantini* ("The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantini") (n.d.), III. XIII-XIV, in NPNF 2/1: 523: "Πλείστων δὴ ταῦθ' ὑφ' ἑκατέρου τάγματος προτεινομένων, πολλῆς τ' ἀμφιλογίας τὰ πρῶτα συνισταμένης, ἀνεξικάκως ἐπηκροᾶτο βασιλεὺς τῶν πάντων, σχολῇ τ' εὐτόνῳ τὰς προτάσεις ὑπεδέχετο, ἐν μέρει τ'

These versions of the Council are ratified by Athanasius who was also present as an aide to the Alexandrian Bishop and wrote:

> On this the Bishops, having negatived the terms they [the Arians] invented, published sound and ecclesiastical faith; and, as all subscribed it, Eusebius [the Arian] and his fellows subscribed it also in those very words...[9]

Much the same decision-making ethos was evidenced in 343 (344) at the Council of Sardica, a conclave of Western Bishops intending to defend Athanasius in his apologetic work on behalf of the Nicene formula. In each Canon introduced by Bishop Hosius of Corduba the Bishops are reported as consenting to the proposal with pleasure.[10] Similar decision-making styles are evidenced in various African synods of the later 4th century like Carthage in 387 or 390,[11] in 397,[12] in 401,[13] (though few of the canons of that synod report the decision-making processes[14]), in 403,[15] and one of the 407 Carthaginian Synod Canons.[16] Consensus of the Bishops also is the means of adopting at least one of the canons in a 418 Synod of Carthage.[17] as well as at a synod held in 402 at Milevis.[18]

ἀντιλαμβανόμενος τῶν παρ' ἑκατέρου τάγματος λεγομένων, ἠρέμα συνήγαγε τοὺς φιλονείκως ἐνισταμένους."

[9] Athanasius, *De Decretis* "Defence of the Nicene Definition" (c.346-356), II.3, in ANF 2/4: 152: "Οἱ τοίνυν ἐπίσκοποι, λοιπὸν ἀνελόντες τὰ παρ' αὐτῶν ἐπινοηθέντα ῥήματα, οὕτως ἐξέθεντο κατ' αὐτῶν τὴν ὑγιαίνουσαν καὶ ἐκκλησιαστικὴν πίστιν· πάντων τε ὑπογραψάντων, ὑπέγραψαν καὶ οἱ περὶ Εὐσέβιον τούτοις τοῖς ῥήμασιν, οἷς αἰτιῶνται νῦν οὗτοι."

[10] The Canons of the Council of Sardica (c.343-344), Canon I, in NPNF 2/14: 415ff.

[11] The Canons of the CCXVII Blessed Fathers Who Assembled At Carthage (419), Canons VII, IX (Canons vi and vii of the Synod of Carthage [387/390]), in NPNF 2/14: 446,447.

[12] Ibid., Canons XLVIII, LIII, LVI (Canons j,v, vii of the Synod of Carthage [397]), in NPNF 2/14: 464,467,470.

[13] Ibid., Canon LXV, (Canon ix of the Synod of Carthage [401]), in NPNF 2/14: 475.

[14] Ibid., Canons LXVIff. (Canons of the 401 Synod of Carthage), in NPNF 2/14: 475ff.

[15] Ibid.,Canons XCI- XCIV (the first two are Canons j,ij of the Synod of Carthage [403]), in NPNF 2/14: 487-490

[16] Ibid., Canon CVI (Canon xij of the Synod of Carthage [407]), in NPNF 2/14: 495.

[17] Ibid., Canon XXVII (Canon xix of Synod of Carthage [418]), in NPNF 2/14: 503.

Arriving a consensus as a mode of decision-making is not just a Quaker approach. It is the way decisions are made and implemented in many African societies.[19] Other examples of consensus decision-making by the Church abound. At an earlier Synod of Carthage in 258, all the Bishops spoke individually in support of a Letter written by Cyprian of Carthage insisting on the rejection of the Baptism of heretics. He spoke first, and at the end pronounced their consensus.[20] Pronouncements by the elders after the fashion of African elders seem evidenced in this ecclesiastical decision.[21]

The practice of declaring a consensus after each Bishop speaks to the issue considered is evidenced in the Acts of the 394 Council of Constantinople Under Nectarius of Constantinople and Theophilus of Alexandria.[22] Later we see something like the Nicene model of decision-making operating in the 431 Council of Ephesus:

> And after this letter [Cyril's Letter to Nestorius] was read, Cyril, the Bishop of Alexandria, said, What seems good to this holy and great synod with regard to the letter just read? All the bishops cried

---

[18] Ibid., Canon XC [Canon IV of Synod of Milevis [402], in NPNF 2/14: 485.

[19] Kwasi Wiredu, "Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for a Non-party Polity," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Emanuel Chukwudi Eze (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp.303ff.; George B. N. Ayittey, *Africa Betrayed* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp.40-41; Sandra Du'Sung, *Traditional Leadership and Democratization in Southern Africa: A Comparative Study of Botswana, Namibia, and Southern Africa_* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2000), p.89; K. A. Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p.28, pertaining to the Akans of Ghana; New Country Foundation, "Toward a New Country in East Africa," p.3 (1996-1997), at http://libertariannation.org/a/f42n1.html (accessed Aug.25, 2010), pertaining to many East African villages.

[20] The Seventh Council of Carthage Under Cyprian (258), in ANF 5:565-572; cf. The Synod Held At Carthage Over Which Presided the Great and Holy Martyr Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (257), in NPNF 2/14: 517

[21] Lewis H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *Africa and the World: An introduction To the History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (San Francisco: Chandler Pub, 1972), pp.80,83.

[22] Acts of the Council of Constaninople Under Nectarius of Constantinople and Theophilus of Alexandria (257), in NPNF 2/14: 514.

out together: Whoever does not anathematize Nestorius let him be anathema.[23]

Note the enthusiasm of the Bishops, as they cry out in consensus to what has been read. A report from the Second Session of the Council of Chalcedon held in 451 is relevant:

> When all were seated before the rails of the most holy altar, the most superb and glorious and the great senate said; At a former meeting the question was examined of the condemnation of the most reverend bishop Flavian of blessed memory and Eusebius... What course we should pursue in this matter became clear after your deliberations... that all ambiguity be taken away, *by the agreement and consent of all the holy fathers* [italics mine]... and by their united exposition and doctrine... The most reverend bishops cried: These are the opinions of all of us... The most reverend bishops cried out; This is the orthodox faith; this we all believe...

Later the Council proceedings report other enthusiastic affirmations of consensus by all the Bishops to points made by the speakers.[24] There is an

---

[23] Acts of the Council of Ephesus (431), Session I, in ANF 2/14:199: "Πάντες οἱ ἐπίσκοποι ἅμα' ... βοήσαν· Ὁ μὴ ἀναθεματίζων Νεστόριον, ἀνάθεμα ἴσω."

[24] Acts of the Council of Chalcedon (451), Sessions I-II, in NPNF 2/14:248, 249. καὶ καθεσθέντων πάντων πρὸ τῶν καγκέλλων τοῦ ἁγίου θυσιαστηρίου οἱ μεγαλοπρεπέστατοι καὶ ἐνδοξότατοι ἄρχοντες καὶ ἡ ὑπερφυὴς σύγκλητος εἶπον· Τῆι προτεραίαι συνόδωι περὶ τῆς κατὰ Φλαβιανὸν τὸν τῆς εὐλαβοῦς μνήμης καὶ Εὐσέβιον... ἅπερ τοίνυν ἡμῖν ἐφάνη ἐπὶ τούτωι τῶι κεφαλαίωι δεῖν γενέσθαι, τὸ τηνικαῦτα ὑμῖν δῆλα ἐκ τῆς διαλαλιᾶς ἐγένετο· νῦν δὲ τὸ ζητούμενον καὶ κρινόμενον καὶ σπουδαζόμενόν ἐστιν ὥστε τὴν ἀληθῆ πίστιν συγκροτηθῆναι, δι' ἥν μάλιστα καὶ ἡ σύνοδος γέγονεν. ...οἵτινες καὶ διδαχθῆναι τὰ τῆς θρησκείας ἐπιθυμοῦμεν ὀρθῶς καὶ πᾶσαν ἀμφισβήτησιν ἀναιρεθῆναι ἐκ τῆς πάντων τῶν ὁσίων πατέρων ὁμονοίας καὶ συναινέσεως καὶ συμφώνου ἐκθέσεως καὶ διδασκαλίας, σπουδάσατε ἄνευ φόβου ἤ χάριτος ἤ ἀπεχθείας τὴν πίστιν καθαρῶς ἐκθέσθαι, ὥστε καὶ τοὺς δοκοῦντας μὴ ταὐτὰ πᾶσιν πεφρονηκέναι τῆι τῆς ἀληθείας ἐπιγνώσει ἐπαναχθῆναι εἰς τὴν ὁμόνοιαν. ... Οἱ εὐλαβέστατοι ἐπίσκοποι ἐπεβόησαν· Ταῦτα πάντες λέγομεν· ἀρκεῖ τὰ ἐκτεθέντα· ἄλλην ἔκθεσιν οὐκ ἐξὸν γενέσθαι. ... Οἱ εὐλαβέστατοι ἐπίσκοποι ἐβόησαν· Αὕτη ἡ πίστις τῶν ὀφθοδόξων. ταύτηι πάντες πιστεύομεν.

enthusiastic call-response engaged in this dialogue between speaker and audience most reminiscent of African and African-American interactions between speaker and audience.[25]

As recently as the Second Council of Nicea in 787, restoring the validity of the use of icons, we find evidence in its Acts of such an emotional acclamation style of decision making:

> The Holy Synod cried out: So we all believe, we all are so minded, we all give our consent and have signed.[26]

The enthusiasm evidenced in these Conciliar/Synodical decisions is not usually associated with the Quaker-modern ecumenical model. But just as emotional and physical expressions are not foreign to the Quaker heritage (Friends came to be called Quakers precisely because of the bodily shaking associated with their experience of the inner light of God in the discerning process), so the use of silence in reaching decisions is not totally foreign to African cultural ways. For example, kings are to remain silent during the deliberation of the elders in several East African locales. However, in most African settings, in such deliberation debate aiming to achieve consensus is employed as a discernment practice.[27]

We need to ask from where this style of episcopal decision-making derives. Contrary to the critical voices of Ramsay Macmullen and his colleagues, failure to vote was a practice which was culturally abnormal in the Roman Empire, where voting by the assembled body was the norm.[28] Only rarely, if at all, were actions taken by acclamation.[29] In such a

---

[25] 25 Ibid., Session II, in NPNF 2/14:249. Also see Ibid., Sessions II,V, in NPNF 2/14:259,261; Council of Chalcedon, *The Decree With Regard To the Bishop of Ephesus* (451), Session, XII, in NPNF 2/14 266.

[26] The Decree of the Holy, Great, Ecumenical Synod, The Second of Nice (787), in NPNF 2/14: 550: "Ἡ ἁγία σύνοδος ἐξεβόησεν· πάντες οὕτω πιστεύομεν, πάντες τὸ αὐτὰ φρονοῦομεν, πάντες συναινέσαντες..."

[27] New Country Foundation, p. 3; Ayittey, 40-41, 45.

[28] Richard J. A. Talbert, *The Senate of Imperial Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 279-285

[29] Ibid., 298-300.

cultural milieu it seems unlikely that secretaries of these ecclesiastical conclaves would be inclined to exaggerate unity, that in fact the reports of consensus at these meetings are accurate since not to record some dissension in this Roman context would be very un-Roman and make Christian faith look bad.

The early Church was clearly counter-cultural (not doing things Rome's or Greece's way) in its decision-making style. Is that a message for the Church today to heed?

The venerability of this consensus model of decision-making is evidenced in historic Roman Catholic practice. Until Pope Paul VI ruled against the practice in 1995 it was common for the Catholic College of Cardinals unanimously to proclaim the new Pope by "acclamation." The concepts of the *consensus fidelium* of the Eastern Church and the Ordinary Magisterium of the Catholic Church (the idea that consensus as a whole, like the East teaches, but consensus of the Bishops over time establishes infallible teaching) also bespeak the ancient character of the consensus mode of decision-making.[30] In other words, you can tell that the Church is doing the right thing if the teaching or practice it espouses lasts over time and in every context. Make your decisions in harmony with the Ancestors (with the faithful who went before you).

Lessons from the Early Church

What can we learn from the early Church (its Councils and Synods) about the way it made decisions? Something akin to pre-Christian, African tribal styles of decision-making seems to have prevailed in most of the episcopal conclaves of the first centuries of the Church's life. But to make this claim is to note something of more than historical interest. My bias (the bias of my own Lutheran heritage and of Methodists and Presbyterians who venerate tradition) is that practices of the Church that stand the test of time deserve our attention. The Quakers and the ecumenical establishment seem to be moving in good directions. Collectively the early Church, African ancestors, and all these other traditions advise us to "shut up and listen" a little more at our meetings.

---

[30] Vincent of Lerins, *A Commentary* (c. 434), II.6; Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), 25

The Quakers may have a point: Start with worship; understand the decision-making process as a continuation of worship. Be quiet (most of the time) and only speak when you feel convinced it's what God wants you to say, not when you're just "personally outraged." Maybe we ought to consider junking Robert's Rules of Order and voting. (Contrary to what some scholars say, the data we have considered seems to indicate that the first Christians didn't cast votes when making decisions.) Perhaps like the Bishops, like the African ancestors, we could trust the elders to raise issues, enthusiastically interact with the suggestions with our Amens, applause, or dance, when the Spirit truly moves us, or remain silent when we are not so moved (objecting verbally and engaging in debate only when the Spirit compels, only making points in debate which aim to achieve consensus in the community, and in turn continuing the debate until consensus is achieved). Then trust the elders to discern from community reactions whether the proposal is in fact gaining consensus. Of course attention to community reactions to the elders' assessment is also part of that process.

It is worth asking whether this early church, traditional African style of decision-making would work at ITC and our other modern institutions of the Church. The Bishops of the early Church, many of the African ancestors, testify that by God's grace it will. Such a consensus-mode of decision-making, in which the elder's discernment is ratified or rejected by the community's spontaneous expression, has served the Christian community in helping the Church discern the truths of the Trinity, of Christ's Two Natures, and God's Word of unconditional forgiveness. Based on these results, why not try this time-tested (African) model of decision-making seems worth trying to implement today.

ATLAS erials