

# Christian Meeting Review

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## How Should a Church Deal with “Problem” Members?

All organizations struggle with how exactly to deal with “problem” members—those who always seem to oppose change no matter how badly it may be needed; those who “debate” by threatening and complaining; and, most frustratingly, those who command just enough votes to impose their will upon the organization.

For churches, this kind of situation only becomes more complicated. Problem members in churches fight not only to “defend” their churches, but, more importantly, to defend the will of God. Furthermore, while contentious and argumentative debate might typify the American political scene, no church wants to share that characterization, making it impossible to respond to problem members in kind. What, then, can churches do?

J. Gerald Harris tackles this question in the June 4, 2009 issue of *The Christian Index*, the newspaper of Georgia Baptists. His suggestions for reforming church meetings are not serious, but his driving questions are. To make his point about the problems of their business meetings, Harris suggests that churches:

1. Forbid non-tithers from speaking/voting at meetings. For those who find this harsh (or legalistic), he suggests that speaking time be determined by the percentage of income the speaker gives to the church.
2. Only allow to speak/vote those who know their Bibles better than *Robert's Rules of Order* and/or the church's bylaws. Harris writes, “I have known deacons who could quote Article III, Section 4, paragraph 6 of the church constitution, but couldn't find the Gospel of John in the Bible.”
3. Require a 75% attendance record at worship services in order to speak/vote.
4. Stop men from asserting control over the church meetings who are merely doing so because they lack authority in their own homes. (Ouch!)
5. Hold the business meetings “in a wrestling arena or hockey rink, because there is nothing spiritual about them and they hardly qualify to be held in a ‘house of prayer.’”

Although Harris admits that he wrote these suggestions facetiously, he concludes by poignantly asking, “What kind of impression would an unsaved person get about your church if his only exposure to it were a business meeting? Furthermore, if the resurrected Christ were to visibly walk into your church business meeting would He feel at home in His Church?”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Harris ends here without offering any serious suggestions on how to deal with these problems. How, then, should the Church of Jesus Christ deal with problems like this?

Actually, Harris's article implies two questions: (1) What *can* a church do to handle problem members? and (2) What *should* a church do to handle problem members? From a parliamentarian's perspective, Harris's suggestions are completely legitimate—larger organizations and stockholder corporations very commonly limit the rights to debate and vote only to those who meet certain conditions (e.g., only those who own a certain percentage of the corporation's stock). Organizations *can* implement these policies, because they have complete freedom to define their own terms of membership, as long as they put those terms in their bylaws.

But obviously, any attempt to enshrine such pointed limitations on participating in church business meetings would be met with heavy opposition. So, while churches *can* limit the participation of their members by these principles, no church should look at this as a feasible option. Harris admits as much himself.

What Harrison does not mention, however, is that these problems *should not* be dealt with through procedural rules because the issues at stake are ecclesiological, not procedural. *Not all problems can be solved by introducing a new rule.* Churches must deal with these problems *as churches*, not as voluntary assemblies who can manipulate rules in order to make their situation more convenient for themselves. The only hope is the gospel, which recognizes *both* that humans are sufficiently depraved to tear churches apart, *and* that Jesus Christ is nevertheless sufficiently powerful to save even the most wretched humans to the uttermost.

In one sense, though, churches hold better ground in dealing with problem members than do common organizations—churches have available to them all the means of grace (the Scriptures, preaching, prayer, the sacraments, church discipline) as they struggle for unity. Dealing with problem members will be neither easy nor quick, but Christ has promised even to send the Holy Spirit in order that his Church might be one in him.

1 Read the article online: <http://www.christianindex.org/5495.article> — accessed June 9, 2009.

### **Parliamentary Perspective: Tabling Motions**

Very often when someone wants a convenient way to get rid of a motion under consideration (whether because of a desire to postpone the motion or because of opposition to what the motion proposes), that person moves to “table” the motion. The goal is to get rid of the motion quickly and easily—by a majority vote with no debate—without going to the trouble of using more complicated motions such as postpone indefinitely (which would kill the motion, but would require full debate in addition to a majority vote) or the previous question (which would close debate—and so would not be debatable—but would require a 2/3 vote).

The problem with this is that the motion to table (properly speaking, the motion to “lay on the table”) is not designed for these purposes. In order to protect the rights of the minority to express their opinions on a given matter, the rules of parliamentary procedure require that debate can be closed only on one of two conditions: (1) with a majority vote, but *only* after full and free debate (see the motion *Postpone Indefinitely*, RONR [10<sup>th</sup> ed.], p. 121-24); or (2) without debate, but *only* by the consent of a 2/3 vote of the assembly (see the *Previous Question*, RONR [10<sup>th</sup> ed.], p. 189-201; also, for certain situations, see *Objection to the Consideration of the Question*, RONR [10<sup>th</sup> ed.], p. 258-61). The only legitimate use for using the motion to lay on the table is when another matter of high urgency arises; after that matter is disposed of, it is assumed that members will then take from the table the business they had previously been considering.

This is one of the biggest issues of justice that the rules of parliamentary procedure attempt to protect. Because we want to protect the minority from attempts to silence them, we require that they be allowed full debate; however, because we also want to protect the rights of the majority to accomplish their goals without undue delay (e.g., a filibuster), we allow the majority to close debate if they can muster a 2/3 vote to do so. Members commonly use the motion to “table” to circumvent these balanced protections, and it is important that your organization not allow them to do so.<sup>2</sup>

### **Questions and Comments Welcome**

Please feel free to send your questions and comments about *Christian Meeting Review*, parliamentary procedure, association/church business meetings. Whether you have a real-life situation in mind or a hypothetical question that you've always wondered about, please send them to [cmr@jacobdgerber.com](mailto:cmr@jacobdgerber.com).

### **About *Christian Meeting Review***

*Christian Meeting Review* is a free monthly publication edited by Jacob D. Gerber, CPP-T that explores the connection between meetings, parliamentary procedure, and theology. Jacob has been recognized by the American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIP) as a Certified Professional Parliamentarian (CPP) and a Designated Teacher of Parliamentary Procedure (-T), and he was the winner of AIP's 2005 President's Award for Parliamentary Writing. Currently, Jacob is finishing his Master's of Divinity degree from Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, AL, where he lives with his wife Allison.

*Christian Meeting Review* is written in the conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ touches all of life—including bringing justice and righteousness to business meetings—and not only an individual's salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on this problem, see *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.), p. 207-09.