

Parliamentary Procedure

What It Is and Why You Should Care

Frederick Kuhl, 5 August 2019

You're a newly elected elder, or a candidate, in a Presbyterian denomination like the OPC or the PCA. You attend your first meeting of Presbytery. You're expecting a brotherly discussion of issues in a supportive atmosphere of mutual encouragement. But during the business session you encounter an arcane system of rules, an almost liturgical call-and-response between brothers on the floor and the moderator. Speakers don't refer to each other by name ("the previous speaker," "the elder from the Alexandria church") though doubtless they've known each other for decades. The one matter you wanted to speak about appears settled before you know what's happened. What does all this have to do with Christ building his church?

Well, you've encountered parliamentary procedure. At first it's pretty foreign, arcane, and alienating. But, as I hope to show, there are good reasons for the procedure. And it's not difficult to learn. In fact, it was as foreign at first to the greybeards you meet at Presbytery as it seems to you. Nobody naturally speaks "parliamentary procedure"—it is a language to be learned.

Why bother learning this language? If you are a Presbyterian you are convinced of the importance of your Presbytery and General Assembly, and not just of your local congregation: you want to contribute to the health and well-being of the Church in all her gatherings. If you're a Presbyterian minister (a Teaching Elder in PCA parlance) you are a member of your Presbytery, and not of the local congregation you serve. The welfare of your Presbytery affects you directly. If you're an elder of any kind you have an obvious duty to the church as a whole. An unhealthy larger church will affect you inevitably.

Over a long period of time a formal procedure has been found necessary (1) to get things done; and (2) to be fair to all concerned. That procedure is known in our culture as *parliamentary procedure*. Its goal is to foster communication, not stifle it. It exists to ensure that all voices are heard, and not just those of dominant personalities. It is a tool you use to bring your gifts to the Church as a whole. If you cannot use that tool you will be quiet, disengaged, and uninterested in the work of the Church's larger gatherings.

Where did parliamentary procedure come from? As its name suggests, it arose firstly in the British Parliament. It came to the U.S. with British colonists. The procedure of the colonial legislatures was adopted by the U.S. Congress, and was codified by Thomas Jefferson in his *Manual of Parliamentary*

*Practice.*¹ As the U.S. grew and private organizations proliferated (a strength of U.S. society) the need was felt for a simplified form of parliamentary procedure suitable for private societies. In 1876 Henry Martyn Robert, an officer of the U.S. Army, published *Robert's Rules of Order*.² The parliamentary procedure of the PCA and OPC (among others) is the descendant of Robert's Rules. Robert's Rules is in general use in the U.S.: in school boards, homeowners' associations, and corporate boards. If you know a little parliamentary procedure you can be a blessing in a great many settings.³

Parliamentary procedure is a system, not an arbitrary collection of rules. The system is easier to understand if you know its intent. Its principles are the protection of several important rights.⁴ These rights are not arbitrary; they reflect the deference and mutual submission all in the Body of Christ are to show one another.⁵ Our God is no respecter of persons, and our Church constitution assigns equal responsibility and privilege to all presbyters; parliamentary procedure aims that all voices should be heard, not merely those of the dominant or influential.

First, it protects the *rights of the majority*. A body like a Presbytery must be able to decide matters, without inordinate delay or second-guessing.

Secondly, it protects the *rights of the minority*. Minority opinions must be heard and considered fairly. This is all the more important in a church setting where, when a matter has been concluded, the brethren have a duty to live together in love.⁶

Finally, it protects the *rights of absent members*. Not all the members of a body can attend all meetings. Parliamentary procedure guards against attempts to use absences unfairly, as an opportunity to take actions that are opposed by a substantial part of the membership.

¹ Henry M. Robert III, Daniel H. Honemann, and Thomas J. Balch, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 11th ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2011), (hereafter *RONR*) xxvi-xxxvii. See for a more thorough history.

² Sherman Isbell speculates, in a private communication, that Gen. Robert was named after the famous Anglican missionary to Persia in the 19th c., Henry Martyn. Gen. Robert was of Huguenot descent and active in his church. See *RONR*, xl.

³ Every culture has some equivalent form of parliamentary practice, if it has deliberative assemblies. The Sanhedrin of the Second Temple had its procedures, cf. Richard T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), 1019. Robert's Rules is very much a product of the U.S. But it has a long Anglo-Saxon pedigree, and it bears a close relation to the practice of other English-speaking assemblies. Cf. the "Standing Orders of Assembly" of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing).

⁴ *RONR*, li.

⁵ 1 Peter 3:8: "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." Eph 4:1-3: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (ESV)

⁶ This concern for amity and individual conscience is reflected in the Presbyterian procedures of protest and complaint.

Parliamentary procedure seeks to uphold all these rights at the same time. These rights may conflict; parliamentary procedure affords a way to give all these rights their due. The wise presbyter, and especially a wise moderator, will apply the rules in ways that balance these rights and are seen as fair to all.

The “official” version of Robert’s Rules, typically, is the current edition of *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, or *RONR*, as given in the footnotes. Larger bodies like Presbyteries and General Assemblies have rules for their operation, which in turn reference *RONR*. This is true of the PCA General Assembly’s “Rules of Assembly Operation” and the “Bylaws of Potomac Presbytery,” my own PCA Presbytery. Thus *RONR* has official status in the PCA.

How can you learn the basics of parliamentary procedure? An excellent resource is *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised in Brief*.⁷ The last two words deserve emphasis: this *little* book is a distillation of the official *RONR*. Not only is it shorter, it is task-oriented, answering the “What do I do now?” sort of question. This is a good place to begin.

The next thing to do is to observe your Presbytery in action. Watch how the moderator operates. Ask experienced members why the moderator speaks in certain ways and takes certain actions. As each member speaks in discussion of a matter, ask yourself whether the speech is helpful and effective and why (or why not). You are learning a new language, which always takes time. In the meantime, charitably imputing good intentions behind others’ actions is wise. And you need not be in a hurry to make your “maiden speech” on the floor of Presbytery!

How much parliamentary procedure do you need to learn? That depends on your goal. You ought to aim, at a minimum, at being able to contribute effectively to your Presbytery. For that you need to know how to make basic motions and participate in debate. Parts I to III of *RONR In Brief* will do. If you aspire to moderate meetings—and that is a noble task—you’ll need to learn more. A good place to begin is Parts IV through VI of *RONR In Brief*. Whether you aspire to become a moderator or not, you should also read David Coffin’s “A Guide for the Moderator of Presbytery.”⁸ That Guide will introduce you to more procedure. All presbyters interact with the moderator, so it is important to understand his role.

Now for some specifics about your participation. We consider three topics: the purpose of the Church’s larger meetings; decorum in debate; and questions to ask yourself before you rise to speak.

⁷ Henry M. Robert III, Daniel H. Honemann, and Thomas J. Balch, *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised In Brief*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2011).

⁸ David F. Coffin, Jr., “A Guide for the Moderator of Presbytery,” n. d., http://www.newhopefairfax.org/images/Moderators_Guide_copy.pdf.

The purpose of the Church's larger meetings. The Church has larger meetings for “edification and government” of that portion of the Church.⁹ In that regard there is no essential difference between a Session, a Presbytery, or a General Assembly. Each has the same task, but a different “sphere of action.”¹⁰

The work of edification is carried on in many ways. But a deliberative meeting, one in which questions must be considered and decisions reached, is where parliamentary procedure applies. In such a meeting it is right to expect the Lord Jesus Christ, acting by his Spirit, to help and guide the assembly. He has promised to be present (Matt 18:20). The council that we take as the template for our councils saw itself as guided by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). We do not claim infallibility for such councils, but we seriously expect, as a practical matter, a Spirit-led wisdom to emerge as the brothers discuss and listen to each other.

The verb “to listen” is critical to this. If you come to Presbytery or General Assembly with your mind made up on a matter, and are unwilling to listen to your fellow presbyters, you are wasting everyone’s time and insulting the Spirit. You may arrive to a meeting with a view on a matter. (And you should do your homework!) But you are neither omniscient nor perfect in your knowledge of the Scriptures. It may be that the Lord has something to say to the meeting through an obscure, inarticulate brother. Be ready to change your mind through listening to your fellow presbyters.

Decorum in Debate. The discussion of a specific matter is called debate. Though “debate” and “argue” may suggest winning or losing, the purpose of such debate is not for presbyters to display brilliance, or for a faction to impose its view on the assembly, but for the brothers to seek wisdom together. Parliamentary procedure has codified rules for the conduct of debate that make it easier for all views to be heard and considered in charity. “Decorum” is an old-fashioned word for fitting or suitable behavior. The following is taken from Coffin’s “A Guide for the Moderator;” the material appears there because one of a moderator’s chief duties is to encourage and enforce decorum in debate.¹¹ Coffin writes:

Proper decorum assists the Presbytery in debating an issue in an orderly and cordial manner. The requirement of good order reflects not only the practical necessities of the transaction of business in a many-membered body, but more profoundly reflects the nature of the One [Whom] Presbytery

⁹ Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order*, 3-5, abbreviated below as “PCA BCO.”

¹⁰ PCA BCO, 11-4.

¹¹ David F. Coffin, Jr., “A Guide for the Moderator of Presbytery,” 4-5. This material was adapted from *RONR* §43, 379-84. The rules of decorum are thus part of *RONR*.

professes to serve.¹² So too, that even difficult and deeply felt differences should be addressed in a cordial and brotherly fashion reflects the transcendent, spiritual unity that should be the special mark of an assembly of God's people.¹³ To that end the Moderator must see to it that a speaker:

- a. confines his remarks to the merits of the pending question. In debate a presbyter's statements must have bearing on whether the pending motion should be adopted.
- b. refrains from attacking a presbyter's motives. In general, no statements are allowed that allege censurable activity on the part of anyone. In particular no statements are allowed that characterize another's views or person in an uncharitable fashion. In debate each presbyter must seek to understand and refer to another's comments a fair and charitable sense. When a question is pending, a presbyter can condemn the nature or likely consequences of the proposed measure in strong terms, but he must avoid personalities, and under no circumstances can he attack or question the motives of another member. The measure, not the member, is the subject of debate.
- c. addresses all remarks through the chair. Members of the Presbytery cannot address one another directly, but must address all remarks through the chair. If, while a member is speaking in debate, another member wishes to address a question to him—which the person speaking can permit or not as he chooses, but which is taken out of his time if he does—the member desiring to ask the question should rise and address the chair, proceeding as a *point of information*.
- d. avoids the use of presbyter's names. As much as possible, the use of names of presbyters should be avoided in debate. It is better to describe a presbyter in some other way, as by saying, "the brother who spoke last," or, "the elder from New Hope Presbyterian Church."
- e. refrains from speaking adversely on a prior action not pending. In debate, a presbyter cannot reflect adversely on any prior act of the Presbytery that is not then pending, unless a motion to reconsider, rescind, or amend it is pending, or unless he intends to conclude his remarks by making or giving notice of one of these motions.

¹² 1Cor. 14:33, 40: "for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints ... But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner." The Presbytery must strive to act in decency and order, for the sake of its witness to Christ, the glory of His heavenly Father, and the edification of His people.

¹³ Col. 3:8, 12-14, 4:6: "But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, {and} abusive speech from your mouth ... [A]s those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things {put on} love, which is the perfect bond of unity ... Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person." Such speech is specially the duty of church officers: 1Tim. 4:12: "in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe."

f. refrains from speaking against one's own motion. In debate, the maker of a motion, while he can vote against it, is not allowed to speak against his own motion. He need not speak at all, but if he does he is obliged to take a favorable position. If he changes his mind while the motion he made is pending, he can, in effect, advise the presbytery of this by asking permission to withdraw the motion.

g. reads from reports, quotations, etc., only without objection or with permission. If any presbyter objects, the speaker has no right to read from any paper or book as part of his speech, without permission of the presbytery. Presbyters are usually permitted to read short, pertinent, printed extracts in debate, however, so long as they do not abuse the privilege.

h. are seated during an interruption by the chair. If at any time the Moderator rises to make a ruling, give information, or otherwise speak within his privilege, any presbyter who is speaking should be seated (or should step back slightly if he is standing at a microphone some distance from a seat) until the Moderator has finished. At that time the member can resume his speech, unless he is denied the right as a disciplinary measure.

i. refrains from disturbing the Presbytery. In general, during debate, during remarks by the Moderator to the Presbytery, and during voting, no member should be permitted to disturb the Presbytery by whispering, walking across the floor, or in any other way. In particular, there must be no negative comments nor other disturbing gestures or sounds during the speech of another presbyter. The key words here are *disturb the Presbytery*. This rule does not mean, therefore, that members can never whisper, or walk from one place to another in the hall during the deliberations of the Presbytery. The Moderator should watch that such activity does not disturb the meeting or hamper the transaction of business.

The requirement that you address the moderator, rather than other presbyters, and that you not refer to others by their names, may seem foreign, pompous, or old-fashioned. The goal of this requirement is to focus on the matter at hand, rather than on personalities. These rules have been found over many years to be helpful in preventing anger and hurt feelings. Perhaps the most important rule is that against attacking others' motives. In our church context this rule expresses the charity and forbearance we are to show to one another.

Note that it is the moderator's duty to enforce decorum according to these rules. The moderator should remind a speaker to address him rather than other presbyters. The moderator should warn a speaker who appears to be attacking another's motives. If a speaker persists in violating rules of decorum,

the moderator should declare the speech “out of order,” thus bringing it to a halt. The moderator has authority, subject to appeal, to prevent repeated violations.

When things seem to be going wrong. We live “between the times,” and “the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error.” There may be moments in any gathering of the Church things seem to be taking a bad turn. There are things you can do.

- Pray: for yourself, for wisdom, charity, and self-control; for your brethren in the Lord in the same way.
- If your moderator seems confused or uncertain, it’s probably *not* helpful (I can tell you from experience!) to offer him advice from the floor. It may be that an experienced presbyter can offer a helpful suggestion; but if your moderator is uncertain, he can only respond to one person at a time.
- If your moderator makes what you believe to be a really unfair decision, you can rise and say, “I appeal from the decision of the chair.”¹⁴ That will require the body as a whole to consider how the moderator has ruled. This is your right, but not one that should be exercised often!
- If a brother is speaking improperly, attacking another’s motives or straying badly or at length from the subject at hand, it is the moderator’s duty to curtail such speech. A wise moderator will hold such reins loosely and will not be in a hurry to declare someone out of order, at least without warning. But if the moderator is really inattentive, you can raise a “point of order” to ask the moderator to step in. Once again, this is a right not to be exercised often.¹⁵

Finally, *some questions to ask yourself before you rise to speak.* These apply the rules of decorum, and what we’ve said about the nature of meetings.

- Have you done your homework? Are you sure of your facts and the relevant portions of the Church constitution?
- Is what you have to say germane to the matter under debate?

¹⁴ *RONR In Brief*, 90-93.

¹⁵ *RONR In Brief*, 90.

- Has your point been made already? Don't repeat what others have said. Beware the love of the sound of your voice.
- Can you speak temperately? Are you in control of your emotions? "Whoever is slow to anger is better than he who takes a city" (Prov 16:32). You must help others control themselves as well: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov 14:35).

You began reading this paper convinced of the importance of the larger gatherings of your Church. I hope you have become convinced of the benefit of parliamentary procedure for those gatherings, that those gatherings may edify the Church. Your reading assignment is parts I to III of *RONR In Brief* and Coffin's "A Guide for the Moderator of Presbytery." Your practical assignment is to attend meetings of your Presbytery, observing carefully and thoughtfully. May the Lord bless you as you seek to serve his Church.

*Frederick Kuhl was ordained as a Ruling Elder in the PCA in 1984.
He has served in three congregations. He has also served as moderator of his Presbytery.*