

# On the Use of Robert's Rules of Order in Churches\*

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## Introduction

Most of the time, church meetings are run informally, with participants freely discussing and making decisions in an unstructured format. Because of the informality, participants are able to get the business of the meeting done while at the same time enjoying one another's company and encouraging, joking with, and caring for each other. When assemblies are very large, however, informal meetings do not always work. Differing opinions and personalities, emotional and contentious issues, coupled with human sinfulness, can sometimes prevent meetings from being either productive or healthy. To help keep order during a large meeting, many churches have adopted "rules of order," also known as parliamentary procedures.

First introduced in 1876, *Robert's Rules of Order* is one of the most popular parliamentary procedures, and provides a comprehensive set of procedures groups and organizations can use to help their meetings proceed in an orderly and productive way.<sup>1</sup> By explicitly spelling out who may say what, when, *Robert's Rules* helps prevent meetings from descending into anarchy. Yet despite its popularity for church use, or perhaps because of that popularity, the question of *how* a church *should* use *Robert's Rules* is seldom addressed. For while the church is an organization of people, it is not *only* an organization of people. The church is instead the Body of Christ, and those in the church are parts of that body, not merely members of a society.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we might expect the role of *Robert's Rules* in a church context may differ than in other organizations. In this article, I provide my opinion of how churches should use *Robert's Rules*. My goal is to help educate church members and leaders about ways to use *Robert's Rules* that will build up the church, rather than injure her.

From the outset, let me state that I am not a professional parliamentarian.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I am an associate professor of physics at a Christian liberal-arts college in Chicago. But as a member of my school's faculty, the official curricular governing body for my institution, which uses *Robert's*

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*Rules* to manage faculty meetings of over 100 members, and as a member of a key committee of the full faculty, which also uses *Robert's Rules* in its deliberations, I have spent years observing and practicing amateur parliamentary procedure in a Christian setting. Based on that experience, coupled with substantial experience in competitive public speaking and public speaking instruction,<sup>4</sup> my answer, while only my opinion, is a considered one.

## **Pitfalls in Using *Robert's Rules* in Churches**

Most organizations meet to make decisions. Churches also make decisions, and often church meetings revolve around the decisions being made: who will bring snacks for the fellowship meeting, when should service be held on Communion Sunday, how should we support those going on missionary service. But because the church is a body, indeed, the Body of Christ, meetings are more than just places to make decisions. They are occasions for worship, for fellowship, for the deepening of relationship, for encouragement and accountability, and for humble and sacrificial involvement in one another's lives. The very dynamics of the meeting itself must work to build up the members of the Body, to allow and encourage each part to be indispensable to the other, and to increase the worship of God. *Robert's Rules*, by facilitating the orderly progression of a meeting, can help the Body of Christ fulfill its mandate: by enabling every member to share and be listened to, by giving a framework to address points of disagreement in a careful and logical sequence, and by providing order, to give space during discussion and debate for the seeking of God's will.

Unfortunately, the initial experience of a meeting strictly run under *Robert's Rules* can feel anything but relational. Events move at a frenzied pace: members stand up, address the chair, sit down, motions are moved, seconded, discussed, voted on, amendments moved, seconded, discussed, voted on, all in the space of a few minutes, and sometimes even less. The language is formal and devoid of personal warmth; it seems strictly business and oddly mechanical. Old members schooled in parliamentary procedure dominate discussion, while new members struggle even to compose a proper question. Or is it a motion? Or a point of order? And this can be your experience *even if Robert's Rules* are being used respectfully and honorably: all bets are off if some members succumb to the temptation to use *Robert's Rules* to manipulate the meeting.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, no one, especially in a church, wants to be part of such a meeting. The question is why, if *Robert's Rules* are being followed, does a meeting feel that way? Why do members feel excluded? Why does relationship-building seem hindered rather than nurtured? Here are a few possible reasons.

First, members may unconsciously assume that if your meeting is orderly, it will also be relationally healthy. This probably derives from our cultural valuing of efficiency and competence. Thus, a mystique surrounds *Robert's Rules* that somehow, if you just follow its procedure, your meeting will run like a well-oiled machine *and* propagate peace in your congregation. But *Robert's Rules* cannot produce relational wholeness because its primary purpose is to enable meetings to arrive at decisions, not the building up of a body.<sup>6</sup> Granted, *Robert's Rules* does well in helping groups (including churches) made up of fallen individuals to make decisions as efficiently and competently as fallen individuals have a right to expect. But they do not guarantee your brother or sister will be built up, encouraged, or respected, and following them does not ensure your brother or sister will not be offended, discouraged, or hurt by your words. Relational health requires that we take the time to truly listen, to share calmly and patiently, and to allow a conversation to move at a natural pace, not one dictated by an artificial sense of urgency. Indeed, all the more important

purposes of a church meeting—worshipping God, building up the Body of Christ, advancing the Kingdom of God—can be at odds with the dynamics of a meeting governed by *Robert's Rules*. Many times, following *Robert's Rules* hurts instead of heals.

Second, sometimes people assume that *Robert's Rules*, by themselves, make meetings fair, and thus that any action that is legal according to *Robert's Rules* is acceptable. This assumption is false. *Robert's Rules* does not free us from having to constantly check and double-check that our words are as they should be. “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.” (James 3:9–10) We must still make sure that what we say has the right motives, is said at the right time and place, and is phrased in the right way; it is not enough to surround our words in the scaffolding of *Robert's Rules*.<sup>7</sup> (For that matter, it isn’t enough to just have the right motives or the right context either; we need to attend to all three in our words.) In short, *Robert's Rules* does not absolve us from letting love be our guide.

Indeed, the problems that arise from the use of *Robert's Rules* and other parliamentary procedures prompted the authors of a quick reference guide on parliamentary procedure to make the following pointed statement:<sup>8</sup>

Remember: Parliamentary Procedure rules were established in order to make meetings fair and equitable, while controlling time and relevance so that the work of an organization could be accomplished with a minimum of discord and a maximum of productivity. When Parliamentary Procedure is used in this manner it can be the most useful tool imaginable. However, when Parliamentary Procedure rules are either too strictly enforced, or enforced to advance the agenda of only one side in a debate, they can be the most destructive tool imaginable. It is therefore recommended that the rules of Parliamentary Procedure always be accompanied by two basic attributes:

1. A strict adherence to fairness.
2. Simple, basic, common sense.

[Underlines in original. The quotation is entirely in bold type in the original.]

As Christians who have been forgiven much and are acutely aware how far even our best of intentions and actions fall short of being truly loving, this warning should be particularly resonant.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, *Robert's Rules* suffers from the problem of being simultaneously “foreign” as well as “familiar.” *Robert's Rules* is, for almost all people, a foreign language. It has its own special syntax, meanings, and rhythms. Speech patterns using *Robert's Rules* are not the same as normal speech. But because both the rules and all debate and discussion occurs in English, participants in a meeting governed by *Robert's Rules* very easily assume they should understand what is being said, and interpret the discussion the same way they would a regular conversation. This can very easily lead to severe and harmful misunderstandings.

The first difference one might notice is how proceedings using *Robert's Rules* move so much faster than would in normal conversation. Especially when the topic is a potentially divisive issue, in normal conversation we would spend a substantial amount of time prefacing and carefully preparing our comments to help prevent misinterpretation or hurt. We might use the “sandwich method,” interspersing critical comments in between positive comments. None of this happens in a meeting using *Robert's Rules*. Indeed, the rapidity of discussion itself can cause offense, and be misinterpreted as disrespect from the speaker.

Another difference is how *Robert's Rules* removes some of the verbal and non-verbal cues that help us hear not just the words the other person is saying, but also their motivations, feelings, etc. The highly structured nature of *Robert's Rules* is sometimes to blame; when you're limited to motions and points, there is not much room for body language. But certain rules in *Robert's Rules* further limit the secondary clues that produce rich dialogue. For instance, when you speak during a debate, you are supposed to address the chair, not other members of the meeting. This helps defuse and depersonalize a debate,<sup>9</sup> but to those unused to such behavior, it can seem like an affront.

Perhaps the most "foreign" and misinterpreted aspect of *Robert's Rules* is the specialized terminology. Here, in particular, our comfortability with English can lead us astray. Consider the concept of the "motion," which lies at the heart of *Robert's Rules*. When we think of what it means to make a motion, pictures of famous orators in the U.S. Senate making speeches on the major policy questions of our day often fill our minds; maybe we think of Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. In thinking about motions, many people will think of "big things": laws, resolutions of censure or praise, Constitutional amendments, etc. Making a motion, thus, feels like a "big deal," and newcomers to *Robert's Rules* often feel unwilling to make motions unless the motion is of great import and is so fully formed as to be ready to be codified into law.

In *Robert's Rules*, however, this is not what a motion is; rather, a motion is *any* proposal by a member.<sup>10</sup> Motions can be grand or extremely mundane, controversial or utterly inoffensive. Additionally, under *Robert's Rules*, motions are *expected* often to be works in process. They are the means by which you have discussions. Without a motion, any motion, discussions cannot occur under *Robert's Rules*. For example, pretend you want to make a decision about when to hold the church picnic. Under *Robert's Rules*, strictly speaking, you cannot say "let's discuss when to hold the church picnic," and then have everyone throw out different dates. Instead, a member has to make a formal motion, such as, "I move that the church picnic be on Memorial Day," and then discussion occurs on that motion. *Robert's Rules* also does not assume that motions need to be full-formed and unchangeable. In other words, when a motion is introduced under *Robert's Rules*, the members are not limited only to voting the motion up or down. The motion can also be amended, modified, referred to a committee for further study, postponed temporarily or indefinitely, etc.

The difference between how *Robert's Rules* understands motions and how most people think of motions can result in hurtful misunderstandings. For instance, if one thinks motions are a "big deal," and one hears someone make a motion regarding a controversial topic, it is easy to respond with fear or anger, because one feels as if the person making the motion is trying to "pass a law" or otherwise coerce the assembly. But this may not be the case; the person making the motion may have done so just to enable discussion to begin, since *Robert's Rules* requires a motion in order for that to occur. What started as an innocent effort to engage in dialogue becomes misinterpreted as an attempt to exercise power. Relationships are thus strained and people hurt.

Long-time users of *Robert's Rules* avoid a number of these pitfalls because they understand the rules prescribed by *Robert's Rules* are artificial. Through repeated use, they have become able to view *Robert's Rules* governed meetings as something like a game, and words spoken following those rules as separate from heartfelt words that occur normally in informal discourse. They don't take the brusqueness and coldness of the proceedings personally. For most churches, however, it is unreasonable to expect members to interact with *Robert's Rules* governed meetings in this way. It can take years of regular practice to become truly comfortable with *Robert's Rules* to the point where one no longer takes the coldness personally. Churches are also constantly adding new

members, who probably have little experience with navigating *Robert's Rules*. Finally, the goal of a church should not be to reach the point where artificiality in meetings is ignored, but to help meetings become places where relationship is nurtured. The Body of Christ is a body of real people in real relationships engaging in real conversation about real issues. Meetings are not games.

## **Principles for Using *Robert's Rules* in a Healthy Way**

So, in light of these pitfalls with the use of *Robert's Rules*, how can we go about using *Robert's Rules* while properly caring for the well-being of our brothers and sisters, both in the meeting as well as outside? Here I offer some principles to help churches avoid the pitfalls of *Robert's Rules* with regards to relationships between members.

First, slow things down. Try to prevent a false sense of urgency, which can produce feelings of panic in people. When members feel panicked, that the proceedings are moving so quickly that they feel out of control, the temptation increases to use parliamentary procedure manipulatively, for instance to shut down debate. Everyone plays a role in slowing the pace of the meeting. People can talk slower. The chair can provide lengthier than normal transitions from speaker to speaker, encourage everyone to be patient with one another, and reassure everyone that no decisions will be made until everyone has been heard. The chair can allow for some deviation from the rules to help increase the amount of discussion; for instance, the chair can permit a member to ask “can we just talk about this” instead of requiring a formal motion. Humor works well too. The assembly, for its part, can choose to support the chair in these measures by not being overly fastidious regarding the rules; cut one another some slack. Don't call a point of order every time there has been a rules infraction. Don't appeal every decision of the chair.

Second, members can get into the habit of trying to have as many difficult conversations outside of a large church meeting as possible. Outside of a meeting governed by *Robert's Rules*, you can talk slowly, with great care, and with an eye to relationship building. So take advantage of those opportunities. If a meeting will address a contentious issue dealing with a specific individual, talk to that person one-on-one, before the meeting; avoid gossip however you can. If a meeting will address a contentious policy issue, talk to key members of the assembly, especially those that you disagree with, outside of and before the meeting. In doing so, you decrease the possibility of personal offense being taken when controversial issues are discussed in the large group setting. While Scripture does not give a specific command saying “have conversations outside the meeting to defuse misunderstanding,” such a principle reflects the spirit of the injunctions dealing with reconciliation with your brother or sister.<sup>11</sup>

Third, when discussing anything possibly controversial, use *Robert's Rules* in such a way that helps defuse anxiety others may feel about being “steamrolled” through an exercise of power. If you want to just discuss something, introduce motions that are humble rather than pointed, and that avoid the assembly from having to take a position of endorsement or censure. For instance, instead of making a motion “the assembly wishes to censure Mr. Z for action Y,” one can first move “that a committee study the implications of action Y.” Later on, one may have to make a more pointed motion, but by not starting out with such a motion, the meeting will hopefully progress with less fear.

Finally, all members can work to use the rules in such a way to increase conversation rather than decrease conversation. There are many ways to shut down debate prematurely using *Robert's*

*Rules*, such as by tabling (i.e., postponing temporarily) a motion before the minority has been permitted to speak their peace.<sup>12</sup> Adjourning prematurely, under *Robert's Rules*, does not actually stop debate because at the next scheduled meeting, unfinished business comes up automatically.<sup>13</sup> It can, however, have the indirect effect of stopping debate, if it's difficult to have another meeting, or if the next scheduled meeting occurs at such a time as to make discussing the motion meaningless. In fact, the spirit of *Robert's Rules* is to help the minority to be heard, which is why a two-thirds majority is needed in order to close debate on a motion.<sup>14</sup>

To some, this principle sounds like giving veto power to the “squeaky wheel.” Is it never appropriate to end debate? Might there not be some situations where inappropriate motions are made that we might not want even to bring to a vote? My answer would be that because the church is a Body, we should err on giving more room for people to speak rather than less. We need to hear from each other. After all, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don't need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don't need you!’” (I Cor. 12:21). In the few circumstances where a member has made a motion that would cause harm to the church if voted on, you can still allow debate while preventing a vote on the original motion, by making a motion to postpone indefinitely. Unlike a motion to table or adjourn, which do not permit debate, a motion to postpone indefinitely does.<sup>15</sup> Alternately, one can make a motion to refer the inappropriate motion to a committee. There really is no need for using *Robert's Rules* to restrict debate. Instead, by using *Robert's Rules* procedures with the end of increasing discussion rather than curtailing it, we can go a long way in building a sense of mutual respect.

## **Specific Examples of Applying the Principles for Using *Robert's Rules* in a Healthy Way**

In the preceding sections, I have given a few examples of how using *Robert's Rules* can help and hurt the church community. In this section, I give specific examples of applying the principles I described above. There is some repetition with earlier points, but the specificity in this section might make things clearer.

**Bringing up difficult topics for discussion:** The initial motion should be modest and humble instead of pointed. For instance, instead of a motion to critique a person or practice, one can make a motion to set up a committee to investigate creating a new procedure. Once the motion is made, debate on the topic can occur, but because the motion is modest, the debate will hopefully proceed with less rancor. Alternately, the chair can relax *Robert's Rules* and just ask for open discussion on the topic, independent of a formal motion.

**Concern that a vote will be taken without key members present:** Move to postpone indefinitely or *after debate* to table the motion (which postpones the motion temporarily). Both motions, when done in this way, will permit debate to occur at the current meeting, thus showing respect to the members who have attended, and at the same time prevent the motion from coming to a vote to permit additional debate at the next meeting, thus showing respect to members who were not able to attend.

**An issue that will be embarrassing or harmful to the church if voted on:** Prior to the meeting, the chair and/or other leaders should meet with the individual to help him/her understand the

negative ramifications of voting on the motion. If the member still wishes to make the motion, as an act of respect to the member, they should be permitted to do so. But the assembly has the right to prevent a vote on the motion, through a motion to postpone indefinitely. This postponement motion, however, does *not* close debate, and thus the minority will still be shown the respect of being permitted to speak in open discussion.

**Dealing with someone who has a lot of amendments:** The chair and other leaders should meet with the member outside of a large assembly to address ahead of time as many of the concerns of the amendments as possible.

Our goal should always be to let love be our guide. “And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4:21) Because of the primacy of love’s demands on us, we must use *Robert’s Rules* in such a way as to show respect, trust, and care to one another.

## Conclusion

*Robert’s Rules* can be a real blessing to a community, helping it make its meetings productive and worthwhile. In many ways, however, meetings run under *Robert’s Rules* work at odds with the church’s calling as the Body of Christ. By slowing things down, having conversations offline, starting with small and humble motions to begin discussions, and allowing all members to speak, we can work against the pitfalls associated with using *Robert’s Rules* while keeping the benefits. In such a way, even large church meetings can strengthen and build relationships rather than increase discord, to God’s glory. “‘A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’” (John 13:34–35)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Henry M. Robert III, William J. Evans, Daniel H. Honemann, and Thomas J. Balch (2004), *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised, In Brief*, Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, ISBN 0-306-81354-8, p. 6. The official *Robert’s Rules* website (<http://www.robertsrules.com/>) provides additional resources regarding the rules.

<sup>2</sup>See I Cor. 12, Eph. 4.

<sup>3</sup>See The National Association of Parliamentarians website (<http://parliamentarians.org/>) for more information about professional parliamentarians.

<sup>4</sup>I taught public speaking in the Technical Communications Program of the School of Engineering at Stanford University, and as a high school student tied for 15th place in domestic topic extemporaneous speaking at the U.S. National Forensic League National Tournament.

<sup>5</sup>Sadly, this temptation also occurs in the church. See James Workman’s blog *Robert’s Rules for Church Struggles* (<http://rulesboy.wordpress.com/>) for examples of such tactics.

<sup>6</sup>Robert III et al. (2004, p. 19).

<sup>7</sup>Thanks to philosopher Peter Kreeft for this concise formulation of the requirements for ethical behavior.

<sup>8</sup>Andre D. Brisson and Christian Ortiz (2001), *World’s #1 Quick Reference Guide, Parliamentary Procedure, Based on the Principles of Robert’s Rules of Order*, BarCharts, Inc., ISBN 157222638-2, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>Robert III et al. (2004, p. 31).

<sup>10</sup>Robert III et al. (2004, p. 19).

<sup>11</sup>See Matt. 18:15–17, Matt. 5:23–24. Gal. 6:1 also reminds us to be gentle when restoring a brother or sister who has sinned.

<sup>12</sup>See James Workman (2006), *Motion to Table as Cheap Trick*, <http://rulesboy.wordpress.com/2006/07/29/motion-to-table-as-cheap-trick/> (accessed December 9, 2009). Because tabling only requires a simple majority of the members to pass, while closing debate (or moving the previous question) requires a two-thirds majority, this abuse of this procedure is particularly tempting. Robert III et al. (2004, p. 119) notes that “this is a common violation of fair procedure.”

<sup>13</sup>Robert III et al. (2004, p. 15).

<sup>14</sup>Workman (2006).

<sup>15</sup>Robert III et al. (2004, p. 119).