

It's not always about my personal preferences— or even my personal convictions

Tim Geddert

We were a small congregation with a small decision to make. Nothing big like leadership structures, or membership questions, or ethical guidelines—just a tiny question: Should we begin our evening service at 6:00 or at 7:30?

The situation: The place we had rented for our Sunday morning services would no longer be available on Sunday mornings, but it was available Sunday evenings. We decided to move our Sunday morning activities to the home of one of the church members. There we would have Sunday school for children and an adult Bible study. We would continue to have home fellowship groups that met during the week. And on Sunday evening we would meet in our rented facilities for worship.

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We just needed to decide whether we would meet at 6:00 or at 7:30. A simple decision—or so we thought. But it didn't take long for us to discover that our whole concept of church was at stake. A six o'clock service would mean bringing our children along (the entire church consisted of young families with lively children). A 7:30 service would mean that most of the little ones would be home with babysitters and already tucked into bed. Some of us found the idea of gathering as adults for a peaceful and meaningful worship service appealing. Others protested:

“We're not hiring babysitters. If we have a late service, one of us will have to miss it every Sunday. No way! 6:00 is far better. That way everyone can be there!”

People in the first group responded, “Where are your priorities, if you won't consider a babysitter just once a week? We already have programs for the kids!” And it soon became obvious that a

“fair compromise” (perhaps meeting at 6:45) would make everyone unhappy.

Time was running out, but the more we tried to reach a decision, the harder it got. There was misunderstanding, blaming, and plenty of anger going around.

We set the deadline: Next Sunday, after our morning service, we would have to make a decision. A week went by. On Sunday morning it was already evident in parking lot interactions that this would not be a very blessed Sunday morning. Our hellos lacked their customary friendliness. What I preached about on that Sunday has completely escaped me. I strongly suspect it had escaped the hearers by the time we regathered after the benediction to make our dreaded decision.

Now before I continue, I want to assure you that I am not the sort of person who regularly hears audible directions from the Lord. But once in a while, especially when I am on the verge of making a terrible mistake, I’m quite sure it’s not just my mind but God’s Spirit who says, “Stop right there! Not like that!” I had that experience not once but twice in the process of making this decision.

I was just getting ready to ask the question, “So, who is in favor of starting the service at 6:00?” when it suddenly became crystal clear to me: There is no way we can make this decision today. It would tear the church apart. To my surprise, I found myself saying: “We are going to have to delay this decision for one more week.” Everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief. I continued, “But merely waiting another week is not going to help us. Here is your homework assignment for this week: Make an appointment with *every other person* who has an opinion about this question that is different from yours. And when you get together, listen carefully not only to the other person’s viewpoint but also for why it matters so much to him or her.” The assignment was so unexpected that the church took it seriously. It was pretty complicated.

I called Bob: “Are you at home tonight? I would like to stop by.”

“No,” he responded, “I’m at Phil’s house tonight.”

“How about Tuesday?”

“No, on Tuesday Beth is coming to my house.”

“Do you think you might be done by nine o’clock?”

“With Beth? I doubt it.”

All week long, we were phoning, driving around the city, listening to each other.

Next Sunday the atmosphere, even in the parking lot, was totally different. We celebrated a joyous church service, and we were dying of curiosity about what would happen afterward. And then, just as I was about to ask the congregation who was in favor of starting the service at 6:00, it suddenly became utterly clear to me: that question is completely irrelevant.

For the second time (or so I believe) the Holy Spirit helped us with this decision. If we would have voted on the *personal preferences* of each individual, we would have learned nothing from the exercise we had been practicing all week.

I addressed the congregation: “We are going to take a vote. But listen carefully to the question we are going to answer. Here it is: When you take into account everything that you heard and experienced this week, which of the two proposed starting times do you think would serve our congregation best? What you would personally prefer does not interest me in the slightest.”

We took some time. We prayed. And then we voted. To everyone’s astonishment, it was unanimous! But the biggest miracle wasn’t the unanimous vote. It was the fact that we had learned to listen—really listen—to each other. Each of us had discovered that there is something infinitely more important than

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my preference. There is even something far more important than the preference of the majority. Far more important is what will best serve the church.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial.”¹ Are we willing to set aside our

personal preferences, our wishes and desires—even our ideal concept of the church—to choose what best serves the church? If we are, we will see God work miracles among us, even if they do not always take the form of a unanimous vote.

A few years later I learned that lesson all over again. This time the decision was a personal rather than a congregational one. And I learned that choosing what best serves the church is important not only when it concerns something as apparently trivial as an appropriate starting time for an evening service but also when it concerns important theological and ethical issues.

When I moved to Scotland for doctoral studies, I knew my family and I would need to look for a suitable church. The nearest Mennonite church was 500 miles away in London. Our small village had only a Presbyterian church (Church of Scotland). We decided to attend it. In this church were some wonderful brothers and sisters who warmly welcomed us into their lives and into their home fellowship group. Each Sunday evening a minority of church members—and a growing number of their friends and acquaintances from surrounding villages—crowded into the living room of the manse for a lively and joyous praise evening, which was not on the official church calendar. In the main church, things were different. Typically, about twenty-five people gathered for Sunday morning worship services—except twice a year, when the church celebrated communion and attendance was taken. Then about 300 showed up.

The main church was terribly conflicted. Imagine the situation: The typical Scot is rather reserved, private, and conservative. But their theological convictions are liberal, and as Presbyterians these Scots leaned in the direction of Reformed theology. By contrast, the pastor was a flamboyant American, theologically conservative, charismatic, and Methodist. Between the pastor, the elder board, and the church, they seemed to fight about everything—except two things. Everyone seemed to agree that baptizing infants, if not the only biblical form of baptism, is at least the norm, the truly biblical way. And they seemed to agree that a career in the military is a perfectly acceptable choice for a devout Christian. On these two points, as a pacifist Mennonite practitioner of believers baptism, I was not on the same wavelength as the rest of the church. And I had a difficult decision to make. Did I have the right as an active participant in this church to confront the pastor, the elders, or the church as a whole and announce to them: “Dear people, there are still two topics about which you are not yet conflicted. I would like to introduce these!”

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I came to a conclusion: Sometimes it is perfectly appropriate, perhaps even necessary, to graciously remain silent, no matter how convinced I am. Sometimes the right thing to do is to practice the spiritual gift of keeping my mouth shut. It is not my Christian responsibility to try to convince other people to adopt my perspective on every issue. Indeed, there may well be circumstances where the least appropriate thing I can do is try to convince others to adopt my viewpoint. If doing so is far more likely to disrupt the church than to help it, I shouldn't do it. The crucial question is: What serves the church? Of course, I had every right to look for another church. But to stay and stir up unnecessary conflict was a right I did not have.

We stayed in the church. In the next three years I had many opportunities to contribute—to preach, be involved in pastoral care, encourage the pastor, paint the church building, even serve on the search committee when the pastor left and needed to be replaced. I was able to make a contribution that lasted long after I left the village.

Not only that: I benefited in a multitude of ways. And when I went through the biggest crisis of my life, as my first wife died of cancer, I had a church family that stood by me. And that was possible because God had helped me learn that I sometimes need to practice the gift of keeping my mouth shut. God was teaching me that the really crucial question is always, What serves the church?—and that I must never let myself fall in love with my ideal concept of the church instead of loving the actual people who are the church.

Note

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works*, vol. 5, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 36.

About the author

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