



God's Grace & Robert's Rules

A Theological Primer for Vestry Members

Richard Kunz

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Forward Movement
Cincinnati, Ohio

This guide is dedicated to my father, the Rev. W. Richard Kunz, who taught me theology through his life, and to the Rt. Rev. Robert Appleyard, the Rev. William Mills, and the Very Rev. George Werner, who started me on my course.

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Preface

I have been blessed with a long and varied vocation as a priest in The Episcopal Church. I have served on the staff of a cathedral, as vicar of an inner-city mission, rector of a suburban parish, executive director of a mission in Honduras, and currently as rector of an urban parish. I have experienced exciting, creative ministry and times of conflict and challenge. I have had the privilege of seeing God at work through the church in all those situations and have tried to learn from both the successes and failures.

When I graduated from seminary, my head was full of ideas about preaching, theology, pastoral care, and mission. What I had not prepared for was the everyday running of a congregation. I was guilty of viewing vestries, with their focus on budgets, roof leaks, signage, maintenance, and other nitty-gritty items, as disconnected from the real issues of ministry.

I have come to see that service on the vestry is a rich and wonderful avenue for ministry and spiritual growth. Lots of people have ideas about what the church “should” do. Vestry members are the ones tasked with turning theory into practice. They take stock of the resources of the congregation and discern the best match between gifts and needs. They make the church’s mission possible.

The vestry also sets the tone for the rest of the congregation. Bitterness and division among vestry members almost always spills over into the rest of the congregation. A vestry that thinks only of preserving

the status quo will hold the parish back from creative outreach and ministry. A vestry willing to prayerfully do the work of spiritual discernment and to support one another in decisions will be a unifying force for healthy growth and ministry.

There are many rich sources of guidance and enrichment for vestry members. Forward Movement, the publisher of this guide, offers several resources, including *The Restoration Project* and *Good News: A Scriptural Path to Reconciliation*. Episcopal Church Foundation is committed to providing tools to develop and strengthen leaders, especially their Vital Practices and Vital Teams programs. The *Vestry Resource Guide*, developed by ECF and published by Forward Movement, provides a systematic introduction to the role of vestries, with loads of practical advice and teachings. *God's Grace and Robert's Rules* offers a different focus, encouraging vestries to connect practical issues with our ideas about God. I also hope to give vestry members a way to see their service in church leadership as a means of personal spiritual growth, not just as an obligation or task.

Different congregations use different terminology: parish or mission; rector, priest-in-charge, or vicar; vestry or mission council, etc. For ease of language, this book primarily uses rector and parish, but the principles apply regardless of the terminology or the size of the congregation.

I hope this primer will enrich your own vestry involvement and help you live more fully into God's call for your life and for your congregation.

Richard Kunz

Introduction

The opportunity to serve on a vestry is a privilege. It is also usually a growth experience. Sometimes that growth is pleasant and exhilarating. Sometimes it comes with pain and frustration. In both cases, the growth comes from close engagement with the issues that make our congregations “church.” A church is a unique creature, and the characteristics that make it distinctive

have their roots in theology. Although it sounds complicated, theology is simply our way of speaking about God. Who do we think God is? How does God relate to humanity? What are we hoping for when we attend worship? What is it that Christians have learned about God from centuries of trying to follow Jesus? If the church is truly called together by God, then it will reflect God’s nature.

Imagine a board grappling with a new initiative. One member, an accomplished and intelligent business person, believes the idea is a financial disaster, well beyond the management capacity of the church staff and volunteers. Another member, just as intelligent and accomplished, agrees that it looks unlikely but argues that the board simply needs to have faith, and God will provide the resources needed.

Although it sounds complicated, theology is simply our way of speaking about God.

Both of these earnest leaders are acting from their understanding of Church. They are both eager for their congregation to be healthy and to act in accordance with God's will. But they are probably both caught up in incomplete theologies and spiritualities that keep them from reaching a creative solution. Unfortunately, this kind of conflict often leads to people being regarded as either caring only about the bottom line or being lost in the clouds. In fact, their conflict is built into the nature of "Church" and cannot be resolved without looking at it in theological context. Christian theology teaches us that there are some things that always need to be held in tension: Jesus was divine and human, we are saints and sinners, our life is earthly and heavenly, we are both individuals and part of an interconnected whole. As we deal with the practical realities of church life, we will find ourselves trying to find the proper balance between those tensions.

Robert's Rules offers guidelines on decorum and on ways to make meetings more efficient and productive. A good organizational structure is an important component of an effective vestry. But the purpose of this book is to offer theological and spiritual context on various issues that confront church leaders. Theology is not just an academic discipline. Spirituality is not inherently impractical. Our creeds and the scriptures grow out of the living experience of the church, and the nature of the church reflects these insights and realities.

This book is written for those who serve on church vestries. My hope is that they will benefit from it in two ways. First, vestry members will gain a deeper understanding of Christian theology as they apply it to concrete situations. Secondly, they will have a much more satisfying experience of serving together and will be better equipped to face the challenges God puts before them during their time of service.

Divine and Human: The Two Natures of the Church

For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; Perfect God and Perfect Man; Who although he be God and Man, yet he is not two, but one Christ. (from the Creed of Saint Athanasius)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

One of the first major theological challenges faced by the early church was trying to come to terms with the nature of Jesus. Who was he, and in what way did he represent God? What did it mean to say he was Lord? Some passages in the New Testament, as in the first chapter of John's Gospel, indicate that Christ existed before creation and is divine. Other passages emphasize the humanity of Christ and can be interpreted to mean that Jesus was like any other human being, filled with God's Spirit in the same way as the prophets.

These two scriptural strands developed into opposing theologies. One side focused on the divinity of Christ. They argued that since Jesus was

God, he could not possibly have been human as well. How could God limit God's self to a single human existence? This thinking led these followers to believe that Jesus only appeared to be human, with the emphasis on appeared. His true nature was fully divine, and he did not share our human nature. Walking down the beach with his disciples, he left no footprints in the sand, as he had no true human body. He was able to look down at the crucifixion from a distance, as what was being crucified was an appearance, not the real Jesus.

Others focused on the humanity of Jesus. They believed that he was born like any other human, chosen by God for a particular mission. Led and empowered by God's Spirit, Jesus fulfilled that mission on behalf of humanity. But followers of this understanding didn't speak of incarnation. God and humanity remained separate categories. Jesus may have been godly, but, they believed, he was not God. If Jesus was simply one human among others, then his mission and ministry were not necessarily unique nor had God actually shared in our suffering or come to be among us.

Eventually in 451 CE at the Council of Chalcedon, after almost three hundred years of intense conflict that would make even the worst of vestry meetings look tame, the Church settled on a simple formula. Jesus was fully God but also fully human. Both sides held a portion of the truth—but only insofar as that portion was balanced in tension with the opposite truth. It is very important to note that the conclusion was not that Jesus was partly human and partly divine, some compromise between the two. If you read the Athanasian Creed, you will see painstaking efforts to make it clear that his divinity and his humanity both stand complete. Jesus is not “either/or” and is not “in between.” He is “both.”

This sounds like an obscure argument, but it is not. And this dual nature has direct relevance to vestries. If the church is now the Body of Christ, his continuing presence in the world, it makes sense that the church also has a dual nature. The church is a human institution. And it is a divine reality. Efforts to make it just one or the other will always result in heresy.

It follows that a certain amount of tension and conflict are built into the nature of the church. There are always two sides that need to be held in tension, or we lose our true nature.

This is why the “practical” board member and the “spiritual” board member need one another. They are not enemies. They both represent important theological realities.

The church is a fully human institution, living in this world. That human, institutional reality is an essential part of its nature. God could have chosen to operate in a purely “spiritual” way, but instead, God chose to include human beings in salvation history. God chose to be present in the world through human beings bonded together in love by the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

So, instead of isolated individuals walking around having their own mystical experiences, we have a human community gathering for worship, teaching, ministry, and mission. And whenever two or more decide to get together, you have the beginnings of an organization. They need to decide when and where to meet. How long will the meeting

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last? What will they discuss? Will they sit on chairs? Meet outside? Will they want coffee? Because a church involves lots of people meeting regularly over time, these questions need answers. The vestry and clergy play an important role in addressing these questions and more, from logistics to facilities to finances.

These are not necessary evils but an expression of the humanity of Christ that is affirmed by the creeds. One teaching of the Incarnation is that God chose to be present in the world as a human being. The amazing good news of the Incarnation is that God shows us that human life can be a fit vehicle for God's full presence. Jesus, being human, had to take care of necessities like the ones above. He got hungry and cold, thirsty and tired. He could only be in one place at a time. He had to organize his life. If Jesus had ignored his health, become sickly or weak, or been wishy-washy in his organization, if he had failed to follow through on things he intended and promised, allowed his followers to distract him from his mission, fallen into the traps his enemies laid for him, or been delinquent in paying his bills, he would not have been faithful to the saving work God had called him to do. His presence in the world, and his identification with us in our humanity, was a precious part of his saving work.

Of course, Jesus did not spend his life just thinking about these things. He quotes scripture that says, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). He says, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). He calls us to be born from above by God's Spirit. He teaches us that we are God's children and that matters of love and justice are ultimately more important than things that pass away. Jesus devotes his energy to the mission and ministry given to him, and he demonstrates the generosity

of God's love through healings, by delivering people from evil, and by teaching about the kingdom. These actions reflect Jesus' divinity. He is not content simply to be comfortable and take care of his own needs.

The church is a human organization. We are called to be as fully and healthily human as possible. We are called to institutional health. A church that is not properly cared for, behind in its bills, invisible to its community, or torn by destructive conflict is not a proper reflection of the full humanity of Christ.

But to simply be a healthy organization is not an end in itself. The church, like Christ, is also called to be divine. We are called to be full of God's Spirit. We are to share in the ministry of Christ in the world. We are meant to preach good news, to be a place where God can be experienced, and to value that which is unseen. We are called to live in faith.

As with Jesus, the tension between divine and human is not meant to be settled by a compromise. "Okay, our church will be a little less wealthy and materialistic, but also a little less spiritual." The church is meant to be healthy organizationally and also healthy spiritually. We are called to grow into the fullness that God has for us.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is that God has taken on human form. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. The church, as the Body of Christ, also has that dual reality. The decisions a vestry makes must honor both.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

Do you most often think of Jesus as human or divine? How might your view affect the way you approach living as a Christian?

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Jesus is the only one who is perfect in his humanity and his divinity. When you look at your church, where do you see a healthy human institution? What are the signs of spiritual health?

In what areas is there room for growth or healing?

In your vestry meetings, is there a balance between institutional and spiritual? If not, in which direction does it tip?

THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE ON A VESTRY IS A PRIVILEGE. It is also usually a growth experience. Author and Episcopal priest Richard Kunz offers rich reflections on these opportunities for growth and the theology of leadership. Although it sounds complicated, theology is simply our way of speaking about God. Who do we think God is? How does God relate to us? What are we hoping for when we attend worship? What is God calling us to become as leaders?

Our beliefs, traditions, and spiritual practices grow out of the living experience of the church. While Robert's Rules and other practical guides for meetings and administration are valuable, God's grace is what transforms vestry members from managers to pilgrims on a faith journey. With short reflections and questions for individuals and groups, this book offers an approach to leadership that builds healthier churches—and at the same time, makes service on a vestry a path to spiritual enrichment and growth.

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