

Principles and Process for Christian Principle based Decisionmaking

The following are a *starter set* of Principles for making decisions when a church engages in transformation, based on Gerry Arbuckle's book, *Earthing the Gospel*.¹ I have also given a few references from the Bible for each Principle. Each local church, as part of the process of transformation, needs to explore and agree whether these Principles flow from and summarize Jesus' teaching and mission. Once the local church agrees on a set of their own Principles, then they can implement a process for collaborative decision-making applying these principles. This is a primary step in breaking out of the cocoon that most local churches are in, where many decisions are made based on 'we've always done it this way' or ad hoc decisions based on the 'squeaking wheel' process (the person or situation that squeaks loudest gets the attention).

Starter Set of Principles

- **We actively pursue practical ways to serve the poor and the marginalized in society, and advance the cause of liberation and justice. We call this the Preferential Option for the Poor.** The Good News is that all peoples have a share in the grace of divine life. This necessarily implies liberation from anything that stands in the way of that. 3 types of liberation are:
 - Liberation from absolute poverty – freeing people from starvation, lack of shelter
 - Liberation from oppressive cultural, political and economic attitudes and structures that prevent or hinder people from being the agents of their own integral development
 - Liberation from conditions, e.g., ignorance and sin that prevent people from knowing the fullness of Christ's revelation

Bible:

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. . .’ [Matthew 25: 34 -36]

“The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” [Luke 4:18-19]

- **We include everyone in the world as our neighbors.** The world is God's creation. God is present in people, places and events and we are called to work with him to develop what is good and just. We should work with anyone who yearns for truth / justice in any sphere of life, e.g., science, the workplace, etc.

¹ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1990, p. 212ff.

Bible:

“He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who in my neighbor?’ In reply Jesus (told the story of the Good Samaritan) . . .’Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’ The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” [Luke 10: 29-37]

- **All our activities build up the community of believers** We are creating a church, who will foster in one another an effective desire for ongoing conversion; at the same time they will be a sign of prayer / love / reconciliation to those who do not know Jesus. Paul says, give courage to those who are apprehensive, care for the weak and be patient with everyone . . . pray constantly.

Bible:

“Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” [Ephesians 4:15-16]

- **We stress love and powerlessness in all our activities** If the church appears to be among the rich and powerful of the world then its credibility is diminished. Identification with Christ and the poor requires us to draw all sections of society to an awareness of their obligations – based not on charity alone but on justice. We cannot do that if we live as the worldly live, or use power as they do to enhance their own status.

Bible:

“He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” [2 Corinthians 12:9]

- **We always listen to those whom we serve, to understand what they need.** To discover what and how to react to the needs of people we require a heart open to the Spirit in the silence of frequent personal prayer.

Bible:

“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.” [1 John 5:14-15]

“Listen my brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” [James 1:19]

- **We actively discern the mind of Jesus in our decisions** To discover what and how to react to the needs of people we require a heart open to the Spirit in the silence of frequent personal prayer

Bible:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” [Mark 12:30]

- **We work with our fellow Christians, always seeking unity** Sharing resources, working and praying together for justice with all mainline churches

Bible:

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” [Ephesians 4:3-5]

The Process of Principled Decision-making

There are only a few steps to the process. These suggested steps mirror the usual way individuals make significant decisions, but the process is done in a group, which has been duly appointed to make some significant decision in the local church. Of course, the more these Principles become part of the local church’s culture, the more they will be put into practice by its members in their daily choices and activities in the world, which spreads, like a healthy virus, transforming everything in the church and, eventually, the system.

Step 1. The question or choice is clarified, in discussions among the members of the group.

Step 2. Options are defined, including the decision not to do anything

Step 3. The key persons or groups to be affected by the decision are identified and the effects on them are specified, for each option. If at all possible, these affects are verified with the people or groups themselves.

Step 4. The pros and cons of each option are defined, in terms of its affects on the key persons or groups as well as affects on the local church itself and other stakeholders

Step 5. The Principles (the mind of Jesus) are applied to each option. *All the Principles must be applied and satisfied, in the view of the group making the decision. If a particular Principle cannot be satisfied, the option is changed until it is satisfied.*

Step 6. The group decides which option best fits both the mind of Jesus and the pro/con analysis.

Step 7. The group prays for the light to see this decision with the mind of Jesus, to confirm their thinking and application of the Principles.

Because these Principles are transformational, it will be difficult in some decisions to satisfy all of them, particularly the ‘Preferential Option for the Poor.’ Stimulating that conflict -- between the usual ways of thinking and deciding, and how Jesus thinks and decides -- is precisely the point of installing and conscientiously following this decision-making process in a local church. This process is itself a transformational idea, and will gradually become second nature to not only the church but also its individual members, and is one key element of creating a strong alternative culture in the church.