

Groupthink: A Sinister Snare For Elders And Congregations Alike

Gerald W. Tritle - March 4, 2002

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Reformed Christian media are exposing multiplying accounts of elders who mistreat their congregations by abusing their disciplinary privileges. As an elder, I strongly contend that the abiding health of the church necessitates just and biblically purposeful church discipline (which I am not addressing in this article). Nonetheless, I must agree with these Reformed media that Christ's righteous, little ones are being rebuked, harassed, and even excommunicated falsely for charges ranging from the vague "failure to heed the discipline of the session" and "disturbing the peace, purity, and unity of the church" to the specific, such as "schism" and "apostasy." Elders are inflicting these very serious charges and penalties on the Lord's people for a variety of reasons, none of which are sin, but which, instead, are issues of nonconformity to the norms of so-called "church-life." For example, sheep are punished for preferring to spend more time nurturing their families or engaging in community outreach rather than attending countless, supposedly required, church services and events (beyond Sunday morning worship) or for keeping their children with them in public worship versus allowing them to attend "children's church." I was astounded when a pastor actually requested that I not attend worship service any longer due to the fact that I was "subverting" the programs of his church (one of which was children's church) by my keeping my children with me in public worship. If I had been a member there, I am certain that I would have been in trouble. I know of several other instances wherein elders excommunicated members in good standing for simply trying to transfer their memberships peacefully to other churches. These bizarre events are seconded only by the moral apathy of the congregations who allow such behavior from their elders to continue occurring.

One would rightly wonder how that in churches wherein many elders rule, wherein the very church government (i.e., a plurality of elders) exists for safety's sake, such actions could take place and such preposterous and absurd disciplinary rulings could be issued against Christians who simply may not be "going with the flow," as directed by the elders and as followed by the general congregation. Providentially, I came upon some answers that all too well define why and how these ridiculous disciplinary rulings are taking place. I have concluded that church elders and their respective congregations, who have historically relied upon their plurality of eldership for safety and for just judgments, are falling prey to a phenomenon called groupthink. Groupthink threatens the effectiveness of the very form of government (plurality of elders) to which churches cleave for safety and destroys Christ's people, those whose souls elders are charged to oversee. I am also concluding that sins caused by groupthink are becoming more the norm rather than the exception. I will define groupthink, provide examples of its manifestation, and suggest some safeguards to prevent groupthink from taking root in church eldership.

Groupthink is a mode of thinking that occurs when a homogenous, highly cohesive group (e.g., a church session, ruling board, committee, congregation) is so concerned with maintaining unanimity (i.e., striving for agreement) that they fail to evaluate all of their alternatives and options. Sins of omission and commission occur when elders or parishioners, while isolated as a group and under either stress or pressure, engage in groupthink and see agreement and strong solidarity as the norm. Church elders who are suffering from groupthink on a discipline issue consciously and subconsciously see the motivation to belong to the group and to conform to its rules as paramount. The covert and overt pressure to agree becomes the stealth temptation that leads group members, as well as the group as a whole, into irrational, unethical, and even sinful behavior leading to sinful conclusions and judgments.

Church elders are extremely susceptible to groupthink because they make frequent, critical, group decisions (including disciplinary decisions), regarding the congregations they serve as representatives of the Lord Jesus

Christ. To avoid the errors of groupthink, every elder must submit himself and his proposed rulings to the Word of God. Thankfully, Reformed theology has taught us that elder authority is declarative only as Samuel Miller states in his book entitled, *The Ruling Elder*:

"The authority of Church officers is not original, but subordinate and delegated: that is, as they are His servants, and act under His commission, and in His name, they have power only to declare what the Scriptures reveal as His will, and to pronounce sentence accordingly. If they attempt to establish any other terms of communion than those which His Word warrants; or to undertake to exercise authority in a manner which He has not authorized, they incur guilt, and have no right to exact obedience."

The declarative nature of the elders' rule according to the Word of God notwithstanding, we must all remember that, this side of heaven, even "good" elders and the congregations they serve must guard against groupthink—a mentality that enabled the Scribes and the Pharisees to justify themselves in making the sinful, but seemingly reasonable, group decision to murder the Prince of Life, Jesus Christ.

All elders, sessions, consistories, church boards, and congregations will naively deny that they could ever be victims of groupthink, unaware that no one knowingly enters into this temptation so as to purposely make a bad or sinful judgment. Studies, however, are conclusive that groupthink occurs in all group dynamics. To demonstrate, most churches have elders (ruling and teaching elders) and congregational members who intimidate, who dominate meeting deliberations, who are quiet and cowardly, who acquiesce to questionable authorities, and who are self-deceived. All of these types of elders and parishioners, including good and wise ones, can see themselves as part of an in-group (they envision themselves as a godly group of folks desperately pursuing the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's church), working against an out-group (a parishioner or family that either may be sinning or is simply acting in opposition to the elders' or congregation's goals and programs).

To focus for a moment, elders are clearly suffering from groupthink if, while deliberating discipline cases, they:

- 1) overestimate their invulnerability or high moral stance,
- 2) collectively rationalize the decisions they make,
- 3) demonize or stereotype out-groups and their leaders,
- 4) have a culture of uniformity wherein individuals censor themselves and others so that the facade of group unanimity is maintained, and
- 5) contain members who take it upon themselves to protect the group leader (usually the pastor) by keeping information—theirs or that of other group members—from that leader.

Elders, just as the Roman Catholic machine of the 16th century, can, as previously mentioned, overestimate their invulnerability towards sin. They develop an impression that they are beyond error, for they say to themselves, "If we work together, we can't go wrong." The admirals in control of Pearl Harbor in 1941, determined that their naval base and the ships docked there were invulnerable to attack. They uniformly and cohesively maintained this position of fortification against all clear and substantiated warnings communicated to them by the Presidential Administration in Washington. You know the rest of the December 7th story. Similarly, groups rationalize that, if they think as a group, then their decisions will be right, good, and highly moral. Often, groups contemplate precedent decisions and their resulting successes to confirm this vision of inherent morality. Elders can operate in this group mentality, maintaining their inherent morality and protecting their public image. They may also say that, because there is a "multitude of counsel" present, biblical decisions, those which seem good to the Holy Spirit, cannot help but be formulated.

Elders, when under the pressure of a church discipline case, also may rationalize their favored position, which may actually be the idea of one or two very verbal leaders within the group. It becomes normal and convenient (especially if group members are tired or thinking about other issues at the time) to downplay the drawbacks and risks of a given course of action. Groupthink causes legitimate objections to a chosen course of action to be perceived as negative or "lacking faith." Groupmembers (elders or parishioners) begin to

discount warnings that their thinking may be irrational, whether the warnings come from within or outside of the group.

Elders, as was also mentioned, can quickly stereotype out-groups. This aspect of groupthink allows the in-group to paint an unappealing, inaccurate, and self-serving picture of the adversary of the group's position. For example, group members who do not have Master of Divinity degrees, yet who may have a biblical objection to a degreed and "professional clergyman's" course of action, may be quickly demonized or despised in a "respectful" sort of way. While consciously denying it, the in-group is subconsciously demonizing the out-group. Stereotyping out-groups (e.g., ruling elders, homeschoolers, wine-drinkers, proponents of Christian liberty, Theonomists, and Reconstructionists) leads to premature and erroneous group decisions. The Reverend Brian M. Abshire in his *Conquest of the Pod People*, Feb. 21, 02, Chalcedon Webpage, depicts such decisions. He shows "obnoxious" believers to be a sort of out-group that usually and erroneously receive the wrath of elders and congregations in church discipline cases. He states that "...formal discipline is not used against heretics, apostates, church-splitters, backbiters and others who may well be pod people (Abshire's name for unbelieving church members), but only against people who are obnoxious." Abshire reminds us that some of God's children are indeed difficult to love sometimes, having rough edges, failing to relate to others adequately, and sometimes being burdensome. In response to the people who are concerned "only for the peace of the church," pressure, says Abshire, is put on the brethren with "OPD" ([obnoxious personality disorder](#)) to conform to the acceptable in-group.

Many elders in a group situation, as stated already, censor their own and then others' thoughts which oppose the group's ideas. Self-censorship manifests openly under the guise of group loyalty, faithfulness to a Book of Church Order or "the spirit of unity" and becomes group censorship. Weak elders, who fear appearing disloyal to the group or to a Book of Church Order and not wanting to go against the seemingly unified others, cower under the pressure of the stronger group members. Lacking courage and boldness, these weak men gladly conform to the strong and to their favored position. The stronger members, as they gain more strength, pressure other group dissenters into conformity, as well.

This façade of group uniformity is fueled and maintained via mindguards, wherein some elders will shield the group from exposure to ideas, discourage others from expressing ideas, and even suppress information from other sources (e.g., documentation). The silent and understood group norm is agreement, and that norm is powerful. I recall being told by a certain teaching elder that I would be removed from the session unless I stopped referring to certain opinions as being "modern evangelical" versus "Reformed." Neither the Bible nor any Book of Church Order gives any pastor the title of ecclesiastical boss, endowed with power to remove dissenting elders. My shock at this elder's statement was seconded only by my disbelief of the other eight elders who said nothing about this power mogul's actions and words.

Groupthink is not psychobabble. It is real and has been clearly documented as having contributed to the space shuttle disaster of 1986. Robert Jackall writes in his *Moral Mazes* that in January, 1985, a year before the space shuttle Challenger's tragic seventy-three-second flight, engineer Roger Boisjoly of Morton Thiokol, a contractor to NASA, suspected trouble. Boisjoly and others came up with recommendations to improve the shuttle's O-rings and to adhere to specifications regarding not launching below certain temperatures. The day before the Challenger launch, with forecasters predicting the overnight temperature at eighteen degrees, much lower than the fifty-three-degree minimum recommended by Morton Thiokol, Boisjoly and other O-ring team members held a discussion that resulted in a recommendation not to launch. While at first demonizing Boisjoly, Morton Thiokol's top managers afterwards recommended that NASA not launch the shuttle, given the cold temperatures and the potential O-ring failure. NASA, under the constraints of public and government pressure to launch, minimized Thiokol's concerns of probable O-ring failure and insinuated that Thiokol was not being a "team player." Under NASA pressure, Thiokol reversed its recommendation not to launch the shuttle. The next day, Challenger was launched, the O-rings failed, and the booster rocket exploded, incinerating the shuttle's entire crew. In summary, although Roger Boisjoly worked long and hard in collaboration with many others to reach a safe and ethical decision, he was, in the end, unable to resist pressure from his company's client, NASA. This case shows that ethical answers are not always easy to

recognize, execute, or accept. Apparently, neither NASA officials nor the Morton Thiokol executives understood that they were making an ethically wrong choice, but, instead all pursued a vocal agreement for a launch. It also shows that the process of reaching an ethical decision can involve complex and demanding communication efforts. Ecclesiastically speaking, pressure to conform and to submit to a group's erroneous position can blind and cause to err the best of elders and congregations.

Congregations, like deliberating elders, sometimes pursue corporate agreement at the expense of righteous, biblical behavior. An example of this type of behavior can be found in an analysis of the stabbing death of Kitty Genovese on the streets of Queens, New York, in 1964, which happened while thirty-eight onlookers did nothing to help her. Christine Silk, in her article entitled *Why Did Kitty Genovese Die?* (published on the WWW by the Objectivist Center), explains that people, regardless of their conscious denials, take their action cues from others, especially during emergency or highly emotional events, when deciding what to think or how to behave in a given situation, especially when they are unsure of what to think or do. It should be noted that taking social cues from others often provides a beneficial shortcut to knowledge that guides our actions (as in following a friend's example in purchasing a particular product). But sometimes, taking social cues from others can lead people astray, and with grave consequences. When Genovese's murderer first attacked and stabbed her (in the middle of the night while she was coming home from work), she screamed for help. Lights went on in nearby buildings while many folks peered out of windows to determine what was happening. One man yelled from a window to her assailant, "Leave her alone." That witness then closed his window, thinking that all was cared for when the assailant left his victim. The rest of the thirty-eight onlookers assumed that the situation was managed and proceeded to shut off their lights and go back to bed. When many of these thirty-eight witnesses were later interviewed, they stated that they were thinking that someone else was caring for the situation (e.g., calling the police). In addition, these onlookers justified their inaction by declaring that they saw other lights on and heard a man discoursing with the assailant. In reality, nothing was happening toward the end of helping Genovese. Her attacker came back and stabbed her again. She screamed while again being watched by nearly thirty-eight onlookers peering out of their windows who were assured that someone else was calling the police. Nobody called the police. After the witnesses shut off their lights, the assailant came back and stabbed Genovese a third time. That time, she died. No one who saw this did anything because they all presumed that someone else was acting.

Many unsuspecting parishioners, like Kitty Genovese in the past, have become victims of congregational groupthink. Silk explains that groupthink spawns a pluralistic ignorance in which "each person decides that since nobody is concerned, nothing is wrong." It also produces an effect called "diffusion of responsibility," whereby people assume that, because others are present (e.g., in the congregation or on the church's ruling board), somebody else must be doing something about a particular situation. Thus, no individual (parishioner or elder) feels particularly compelled to take responsible action (e.g., call a congregational meeting, issue a formal complaint against the elders, call a presbytery representative, depose a church officer). The famous last words from the silenced lambs become, "I thought that he or she was taking care of that situation. What a shame that had to happen to such a nice family." They resume their lives while the injured parishioners' lives and reputations are severely damaged and altered.

I witnessed one family being unjustly disciplined in a church while their friends and many other families were stating that they "had seen this type of behavior from the elders in the past and that they were not going to sit by and let this happen again." Would the lambs be courageous? No! They were silenced, became cowardly and self-preserving ("We can't get involved, they'll kick us out, too."), and they allowed a good family to be unbiblically excommunicated. I have seen all of the data on this case. In this case, groupthink caused the elders to make a sinful decision (for which they will be accountable to God), groupthink caused the congregation to displace their responsibility to act (for which they will be held accountable for the sin of omission), and groupthink caused an innocent family to be cast unjustly out of the congregation. They are blessedly recovered from the event and are in a solidly Reformed congregation.

If we apply the knowledge of the groupthink experts to churches, we can see that elders and congregations who are engaged in groupthink tend to make faulty decisions because they:

- 1) fail to adequately determine their objectives and alternatives,
- 2) fail to adequately assess the risks associated with the group's decision,
- 3) fail to cycle through discarded alternatives to re-examine their worth after a majority of the group has discarded the alternative,
- 4) fail to seek advice outside of their system (i.e., their local church or supportive-to-the-in-group presbytery members),
- 5) select and use only information that supports their position and conclusions, and
- 6) do not make contingency plans in case their decision and resulting actions fail.

The following are some recommended strategies for minimizing the risk of sinful decisions that groupthink can cause:

1. Parishioners must strictly employ the criteria in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and Exodus 18:21 when choosing their rulers.
2. Parishioners must always remember that their elders are men who have been called from among their numbers. Reformed theology has wonderfully taught us that the vocational calling of an elder is no more holy unto God than is that of the truck driver. Parishioners, therefore, must watch over the actions of their elders and be prepared to challenge them respectfully and forcefully when they are sinning.
3. Parishioners should never allow organizational bureaucracy or twisted interpretations of Matthew 18:15-17 (taught many times from the pulpit to neutralize decisive congregational action against uncontrolled church authorities) to stop them from correcting wrongs. Congregational action against over-lording elders is neither "schism" nor "divisiveness," and is never a sin.
4. Parishioners should never assume that others care about and are trying to stop bad church discipline decisions from being made. Act! Remember Genovese.
5. Parishioners or elders who become the unjust prey of tyrannical elders should be vocal about their need for help. Do not assume that other parishioners or elders can come to their own conclusions about what is happening.
6. Elder meetings should always be meetings open to congregational members. When doors must be closed due to discipline cases, congregations should be allowed to choose a representative, perhaps from a sister church, to sit in on deliberations to watch over them for biblical soundness.
7. Elders and congregations should avoid isolation of the group. Isolation leads to an unhealthy and cultic environment. Strive to prevent isolation caused by viewing only limited data and by considering only a few alternative actions. And, remember! In the body of Jesus Christ, the Reformed corner of the church is not the in-group called to demonize the rest of the church (the so-called out-group). Members' cross-pollinating fellowship with other churches and denominations is healthy, preventing isolation, and should be encouraged (Acts 10:35).
8. Every elder should be allowed to critically evaluate courses of action without being judged or stereotyped as an out-group. Elders should call a meeting after a decision consensus is reached in which all group members are expected to critically review the decision before final approval is given. Individualism (diversity) at this point should be encouraged.
9. In churches where there are ruling elder/teaching elder distinctions, teaching elders should not be looked at as the leaders. In addition, the term moderator (on a session of elders) does not equal that of "leader," unless one dangerously construes the term that way. Teaching elders should avoid being directive (over-lording) and should even encourage dissent. Ruling elders must avoid passivity (being cowardly and indecisive) to a "superior" teaching elder.
10. Always consider an outside, respected, and impartial party to witness complex and critical deliberations and to review group conclusions before any final actions. An outsider may provide more options to consider and inherent risks to avoid.

Because of groupthink's clandestine qualities, it can be a sinister snare for elders and congregations alike. To attain their collective goal of glorifying God in their judgments, all Christians, whether in rulership or not, must call upon the Lord for the individual courage to confront, to reason, and to make decisions that represent the will of God as revealed in His Word. This is a part of loving God with all of our minds. This is

a part of reconstructing the visible church for God's glory. We should be especially wary to avoid the sins of groupthink in our judgments, for with what judgment we execute, our Lord has said in Luke 6:36-38 that it shall be executed against us to the same measure.

Notes

1. The groupthink specifics I articulate in this article were gleaned while attending an Air Force "Decision Making & Critical Thinking" lecture that presented summaries from the following works:

- * Janis, Irving, 1982, Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decision.
- * Janis I and Mann L, 1979, Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice and Commitment, The Free Press Houghton Mifflin.
- * Janis, Irving , 1972, Victims of Groupthink: Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes (2nd edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Gerald Tritle, his wife, Jennifer, and their three children reside in Springfield, Ohio where he pastors Springfield Reformed Presbyterian Church. He holds an M.Div. And an MBA and is a Business Proposal Manager with an high tech firm in Dayton, Ohio. He can be contacted at Tritle2000AD@aol.com.

