

Role of the Standing Committee

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The Episcopal Standing Committee is an organizational, not a theological, phenomenon. It was certainly not instituted by Christ, who is portrayed in the Gospels as showing very little interest in organizational matters, in any case.

However, soon after his departure, the aggregation of very human groups of followers made it sociologically inevitable that organizations would form, and indeed the later New Testament writers make abundant reference to organizational developments such as deacons, elders, bishops, and councils. But no Standing Committee is mentioned, nor is its absence noted by the church during the first 17 centuries of its existence!

The Episcopal Standing Committee seems, in fact, to have been invented as a by-product of the American Revolution. It was apparently designed by some of the same people who produced the Constitution, men who were steeped in the political philosophy of representative democracy and the necessity of balance of power. They had a healthy concern about the dangers of tyranny in government, and they had a parallel wariness about potential ecclesiastical autocracy.

Throughout history the secular government and the power of the church had each been a check against the absolute authority of the other, even though often intermingled and not clearly defined. The Founding Fathers, then, in establishing a new doctrine of separation of church and state, had to devise a new set of balances. They did so very neatly in the governmental arena by crafting the Constitution. Having done so, those who had been members of the Church of England, and were now forming the newly independent Episcopal church, worked the same magic by inventing the Standing Committee.

That is why the Standing Committee has such apparently inexplicable functions as: consent to election of bishops, approval of candidates for ordination, and control of fiscal encumbrance of the diocese. What is clearly intended is that the Standing Committee, elected by the people of the diocese, has responsibility for the continuity and integrity of the organizational church. Thus a balance is created. Bishops have primary responsibility for the continuity and integrity of the

holy things: the Gospel, the Sacraments, and the church as the mystical body of Christ. The people have primary responsibility for the necessary sociological organization, as a shield against the potentially autocratic power of bishops who are no longer answerable to the Crown, nor to the new government.

Thus there is a balance, stability maintained by complementarity. The bishop and the people are resource to, and responsible to, each other. Apparently this inspired structure has served the Episcopal church well, saving it from some of the tribulations of other ecclesiastical organizations. The Roman church has a clerical hierarchy, but lacks effective protection from the tendency of that hierarchy to become self-serving, autocratic and imperial. The diversity of doctrine and practice result in schism, congregationalism, and a tendency to act as if each member can be his own bishop.

The balanced system of responsibilities and authority makes possible the remarkable diversity but cohesiveness of the Episcopal church.

Thus each diocese has a bishop and a Standing Committee. Each diocese also has other committees, commissions, councils, conventions, and other operational units. It is important to recognize that all of them are essentially task forces, except the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee is not a task force, but a monitor. It monitors elections of bishops and candidates for ordination in order to certify that the organizational process is in place and operating as it should. Clearly, it does not and cannot certify the individual qualifications or suitability of the products. Similarly, in monitoring the disposition of diocesan property, the Standing Committee cannot be a business management group, but it must ensure that decisions are not made autocratically.

In sum, the central mandate of the Standing Committee is to maintain organizational continuity and integrity so that bishops can truly be bishops and the ecclesia can truly be itself.