

Election by Lottery
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee
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POLITICS AND NEW LEADERS

What is the best way to obtain new leaders?
Opinions vary.

In our county, for example, we elect people to be on the school board. In other areas school board members are appointed supposedly on the basis of their background and expertise in order to eliminate the "politics."

But, politics are hard to eliminate. As you might imagine some people are appointed on the basis of their political connections instead of their expertise. When it comes to leadership, there will always be a political struggle for control.

Those of us who are frustrated with "politics" as usual hope that at least such things can be avoided in the church. Surely we in the church should be above political wrangling and power plays.

Unfortunately, I must disappoint you. The church is and always has been a political animal. This is especially true for those of us who are that part of the Christian community that calls itself Presbyterian.

For those of you who may not be Presbyterian, let me explain that decisions in our church are made by elected representatives. Once a year our church elects members of the church to represent us on a board called a Session.

Members of the Session meet each month to make decisions on behalf of the church, and designated members of the Session attend a meeting with other representatives from Central Florida to make decisions affecting the common mission of all the churches in our area. That regional area is called a Presbytery.

And once a year (soon to be once every other year), we send representatives from Presbytery to make decisions for the whole church at what is called the General Assembly.

When I went to our church's General Assembly several years ago, the election for the new moderator (that's the highest elected office in our church) was just like a mini campaign for president right down to the buttons and signs. Groups very similar to the ones that seek to lobby our legislators were at the Assembly in force to lobby my vote on certain issues.

I must admit that I didn't like the politics of that meeting. We say that we should be open to the leading of the Spirit in the church, but I experienced very little openness to the Spirit at that particular meeting. What I did experience were people trying to convince me that their way and only their way was right.

The General Assembly has been meeting again this past week and once again my thoughts turned to leadership in the Christian church. Shouldn't there be a better way to do the church's business than to subject it to the politics of special interest groups? Shouldn't the church be about something more important than an election?

I talked with a person (not in our church) who had taken on the responsibility for the first time in her life of being on a committee in the church. She said that she was shocked that people became so angry and disagreed so strongly with each other on that committee. She thought that the church was supposed to be different!

After a three hour meeting of the church's finance committee she said, "This church is no better than a ... a ... business."

But, like it or not, there is business ... even in the church. Leaders must be appointed or elected. Even if we have it only every other year, there must be a General Assembly. Maybe it's appropriate that during the biggest business meeting of our denomination that our lesson for today is about one of the first business meetings in the early church the election of an apostle by the name of Matthias.

FROM RESURRECTION TO BUSINESS MEETING

You'll note on the top of your bulletin that this is the seventh Sunday of Easter ... the last Sunday in the church season in which we celebrate the most important event of our faith, the resurrection of our Lord.

And the first chapter of the Book of Acts seems a most appropriate way to end this important season of the church year. That first chapter begins in very dramatic fashion. The risen Christ charges the disciples to proclaim the message of the resurrection throughout the world. He tells them,

"But, before you leave Jerusalem, go and wait for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon you." And then Jesus ascends into heaven before their eyes. The disciples continue to gaze upwards until two men in white remind them that they have better things to do than gazing up into the sky.

So, finally, at the urging of these men that we assume to be angels or messengers from God, the disciples go to Jerusalem in obedience to their master.

And what do they do in that upper room in Jerusalem?
Do they wait for the coming of the Spirit before they take action as Jesus requested?
Not at all.

As we said before, they hold a business meeting! That settles it for me.
The early disciples must have been Presbyterian.
They believed that the Holy Spirit worked through a meeting!
They thought that the best thing to do after the ascension of Christ was to organize ... to hold an election and replace Judas.

There are only eleven "official" disciples now ... Judas having committed suicide. Surely, they reason, God wants us to have a full compliment of twelve disciples. (Perhaps to represent the 12 tribes of Israel? Perhaps to get things ready for the restoration of Israel to a position of political power?)

So they do what we do when we search for leaders. They set standards for the job. (Notice I said that "they" and not God set the standards for the job." But, their thought process was logical. They said, "Okay, now this person needs to be someone who has been with us all along ... from the baptism of John to the resurrection."

There were at least two who fit that description ... Joseph and Matthias. But, which one should they choose? Should they put it to a vote?

ELECTION BY LOTTERY

No, Jesus had told them to wait upon the Holy Spirit. So, they decided that the Holy Spirit must work through the lottery through chance! They cast lots which were stones with names or numbers on them.

In other words, the choice was made by the modern day equivalent of flipping a coin. Except, in this case, before they flipped the coin they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen." And the lot fell to Matthias. So, Matthias became an apostle.

And we never hear about Matthias again in the entire New Testament.

Now to be fair, we don't hear anything about many of the other apostles after this either and casting lots to determine God's will was a part of the disciples' tradition as Jews. In the Old Testament God's will was often determined by the casting of lots.

But, like many biblical commentators I've always been a bit skeptical about this election by lottery. To me it always seemed to smack of superstition instead of faith. Yes, it's true that the lot may have fallen to Matthias because he was God's chosen, but is it not equally possible that the lot fell to Matthias because of pure chance?

In my mind I see this election by lottery as an example of how quickly superstition and bureaucracy and self interest can take over in the church.

HAVING IT MY WAY

I think that behind the disciples action is a desire to (as the Burger King commercial puts it) "have it their way."

Earlier in the first chapter of Acts we hear the disciples once again asking Jesus the only question they have really cared about from the very beginning. Just before Jesus ascends into heaven the disciples ask,

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

The disciples had been raised on this dream, a dream of past glory. They remembered when David was king or the splendor of Solomon's temple. In those days people respected and even feared Israel. They longed for those days when they could walk with their head held high.

They were God's chosen.
How could God not give them the victory?
They had waited so long. Wouldn't now be a good time to restore the kingdom?

See how persistent the desires of a person's heart can be?
It can cloud the clear revelation of God and even cause us to be against God's will.

Over and over again Jesus told the disciples that this was not the point of his kingdom. His kingdom was not of this world. Jesus talked about spiritual transformation instead of political transformation. But, here they are once again like children in a candy store asking,

"Now can we have it? Now can we do it our way?"

Jesus answered them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority."

This not knowing the times or seasons has always been a difficult thing for the disciples of Christ to accept. Our basic need for security and control tempts us to rebel against this foundational concept. We want control. We think that we know what needs to be done to bring in the kingdom here and now if only Jesus would listen to us!

DECISIONS NOT FINAL

In order to be an effective witness, we must break that cycle. We must trust the times and seasons of our life to the sovereign Lord. Our ideas about the kingdom must always be provisional and open to correction because the kingdom we proclaim is not our own.

Our elections and our business meetings are but temporary measures until God by the coming of His Spirit allows us to see the truth more clearly. Our dreams for the kingdom are always too small. Only when we are open to being filled with the power of God's Spirit can we begin to bear witness to a kingdom that goes beyond our little world.

The kingdom of God says Jesus would be more than just Israel. The disciples would proclaim the message of the kingdom in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

An authentic witness must be expansive.
The good news is not just for me and my family and friends.
The good news is not just for people like me or my country.
The gospel is for the world.

But, in order to obtain a greater vision of God's kingdom we have to learn how to wait on God. Our dreams ... no matter how bold ... are always too small and limited. The only cure for a small dream is the eye opening, vision expanding power of God's Spirit.

Like those first disciples, we need to learn how to wait where God tells us to wait. Instead of relying upon business meetings and elections, we need to learn to rely upon God's will and God's empowering Spirit.

We need to learn that it is dangerous and disobedient to think that we have the answers and the power. We do not. The kingdom can be many things, but I have learned over the years that it is almost always different from what I think it to be.

How we do it is not important. Whether we elect our leaders by vote, appointment or casting lots, we need to remember the provisional nature of any office in the church. We are only a figurehead. It is Jesus Christ who is the head of the church and any office, belief or desire we may have is subject to the correction of His Word and Spirit.

GOD'S WILL ACCOMPLISHED DESPITE IT ALL

But, through it all and quite often despite it all God's will is done through the imperfect people and processes we call the church. The Spirit does come and things do change. People who are bound up by their own small dream are given a greater vision and obstacles that seem insurmountable are sometimes quickly swept away.

Back in the 1950's theologian, Emil Brunner wrote a book entitled "The Misunderstanding of the Church." In that book, he said that the church we have today is really a mistake. The true church was supposed to be a "pure" fellowship without law, sacraments, and institutional apparatus.

After some long church meeting or in the middle of some messy church squabble, I would be sorely tempted to agree with Brunner. Yes, I believe in the church, but surely this particular church is not the church that I believe in!

This church is just a little too human for my tastes. Surely the real church is somewhere else. Surely there is a real church somewhere which has no need for officer elections or business meetings or financial planning or conflict management! Surely there is a church somewhere without doctrinal error or liberals or conservatives depending upon your perspective!

We wish.

Jesus told us to love one another as he first loved us.

But, he failed to mention that some of our brothers and sisters wear some very hard hob nailed boots and have the unfortunate tendency to step ... no stomp ... on our toes quite a lot. Maybe we do need a church that is more "spiritual." Maybe we do need a church that is less like a business and more like that "pure fellowship" which theologian Brunner envisioned.

But, God has chosen to reveal himself through the all too human and flawed persons whom we find in the church ... this church, here and now.

Whatever you have in the world, you will have in the church. From the very beginning, the Christian community was an ambiguous community. Followers of Jesus were not always faithful. >From the very beginning, betrayal was found within the family of God.

But, this very frail, very human community is not the object of our faith. It is the arena in which faith is found. It is the place in which we find that God's grace stretches down to embrace apostates and apostles alike ... which is good news indeed ... because I believe that within each of us there is apostasy and apostleship.

And so like Simon Peter, we can boldly call for the business of the church to continue. Let us hold our imperfect elections ... by lottery if necessary!. Let us begin to do God's will as best we can ... here and now ... because that is where God meets us here and now in the imperfect faces of our Christian brothers and sisters.

NOT OUR CADILLAC

During his Tenth Anniversary Show, Garrison Keillor told a story about an experience he had when he was a teen.

He was walking down the sidewalk one day when he saw this unbelievably beautiful woman coming toward him. Her beauty was overwhelming. And he wanted ever so much to impress this beautiful creature. What could he do?

He spied a large, white Cadillac parked next to the sidewalk. Strolling over to the Cadillac, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a dime, put it in the parking meter, and leaned confidently against the Cadillac, smiling at the approaching woman.

To his delight, she returned his smile. She moved toward him, spoke to him, saying "Thank you," as she got into the Cadillac and drove off.

Take that as a parable. The church is not our Cadillac. The church we believe in is God's church, and God will preserve her despite our apostasy and foolish pride. Do not fear. Do not run when the time of testing comes.

Surprise! God has decided to work through us. God has decided to bestow his Spirit upon us and this fellowship as a sign of his coming kingdom. We too have been elected. The lot has fallen upon us as well as Matthias. Amen.