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“All in Favor...”: The Disaster of Church Politics

By the time I entered the ministry as a pastor, I had been through a significant amount of education: four years of college, three years of seminary, one year of internship at a church, and a three-year doctoral journey that concluded with a PhD in theology.

When I was placed in my first church, it became clear to me that I really didn't know much about how churches operate and make decisions. It's called *church governance*. It takes various forms in congregations of different denominations. Yet, in almost every church—and denomination—the mechanism is political in nature. In spite of all my education, I hadn't given it a thought!

At that first church I pastored, they called their decision-makers a “church council.” Every year, the congregation elected those who agreed to “run” for the council positions. There were also votes for leaders of the council, designated as “president,” “vice president,” “secretary,” and a few other positions. It never occurred to me at the time: Words like “president” don't appear in the Bible.

Another issue that didn't cross my mind in those days was a practice that, well, just didn't *feel* very spiritual. When members were approached for these “offices,” it was clear: They had to include two candidates for each position. That meant, when the church members *voted*, one person who was willing to serve God and the church would *lose* in front of their church family. As a young pastor—honestly—I never thought about how *unspiritual* that is! Yet, most people agreed: “That's the way we've always done it.” Of course, that doesn't make it spiritual, appropriate, or even beneficial for God's Kingdom work. As a young pastor, I just went along with it, no questions asked.

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What About Other Churches?

As I served those wonderful people as their pastor, I simply went along with the political structure. That congregation had declined severely in the decade before I arrived. The membership was 60 percent less than 10 years prior to my arrival. It wasn't *because* of their political and secular form of decision-making. However, the approach greatly hindered their sincere desire to grow their church and effectively reach people for Jesus. They just didn't know it. In truth, neither did I.

During that time, I received information about a seminary that had attracted teachers who had been effective missionaries in various countries around the world. They were called to teach American pastors *missiology*—the biblical discipline of effective outreach. I wanted to help my church grow, so I inquired how the teaching could help me and my church. Before attending each class, extensive mission-related books were assigned to read. After each two-week session, I was required to write a paper about what I learned and how it would help our church reach people for Jesus. I presented this opportunity to our church council. They allowed me to go, three to four times a year, for three years. I became a trained “missionary” in my own country. And I trained others in our church. Our congregation grew dramatically.

It wasn't long before other churches were calling and asking for my guidance. One of the pastors in a church that I worked with called me a “consultant.” One of the authors of some of the books that were assigned for me to read was a man named Lyle Schaller. He had consulted churches for years. One day, he invited me to be trained in church consulting. It was a great experience!

Over the next several decades, I consulted hundreds of churches from 78 different denominations and movements. Here is what I learned about church government: Almost every church—no matter its affiliation—had a form of decision-making that is more political than spiritual. I wondered, “How could this subtle yet disruptive approach be so common?” I thought, “What is the biblical approach to making decisions?” I began to research: “Is there a better, more spiritual, way to guide a church? Is there any direction in Scripture about discerning God's will for the local congregation?”

Turning Point

In the middle of this journey, my denomination was holding one of its national conventions in a nearby city. I had never been interested in being “elected” to be a delegate. I had already learned enough to identify the political nature of my denomination. However, I learned they had a “gallery” for visitors who were not delegates. So, I decided I would observe how this event operated.

When I went into the large convention hall, I found the visitors' gallery and sat down. I immediately observed strict “parliamentary procedure.” There were numerous debates—I'd even call them “arguments.” Guess what? I became physically sick to my stomach. So, I left and went back into the hallway. There were a number of delegates “playing hooky” from the debate. They were laughing and happy people. It was a stark contrast to the meeting inside the convention hall.

After a while, I went back into the convention. I got sick to my stomach again! The tension just didn't feel like the "spirit of Christ." It was so political! I would summarize this experience personally: "I'm just not cut out for—or didn't have the gifts for—this atmosphere of political debate."

However, that was not the end of my journey. The experience directed me deeper into Scripture. I thought, "There must be a spiritual, Christ-honoring way for Christians to make serious decisions in churches. There must be a way that is biblical." My journey to that better way began that day. However, it would take 20 years of Bible study and consulting with churches to discover the biblical approach.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Hunter, Kent R., with Tracee J. Swank. *Church Politics: Pain-Free Decision-Making*. Church Doctor Publishing, 2023.

Lane, Tom. *Foundations of Healthy Church Government: With Study Guide*. Southlake, TX: Gateway Press, 2017.

Toon, Peter, and Steven B. Cowan. *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004.

The Biblical Approach to Decision-Making

To be clear, Robert's Rules of Order are not in the Bible. "Majority rule" is nowhere evident in the New Testament. Votes and elections do not occur in the New Testament—except for once. With Judas gone, Peter addressed a group of "about one hundred and twenty people" (Acts 1:15-26). The Scripture reports that there were two candidates: Joseph, called Barsabbas—surnamed Justus—and Matthias. Their "qualification" was that they were part of the larger group that followed Jesus from the time of His baptism by John (the Baptist) until the resurrection. Scripture says they prayed and then "cast lots." Matthias "won." *And you never hear from him again!* It is as if Scripture is saying, "Don't do that vote thing again!" In fact, Jesus Himself chose the "12th man," Paul the Apostle, who is the source of much of the New Testament.

After 20 years of my study of Scripture and having consulted numerous churches of various backgrounds and affiliations, it has become clear that the best, most spiritual way to operate a church—or groups of churches—is what could be called an "apostolic theocracy."

Those words may sound overwhelming, so let me unpack them, beginning with the second word, "theocracy." The concept is best described as "we believers want what God wants." In the Lord's Prayer, we say we want the Lord's will to be accomplished in our personal lives and in our churches. Basically, it's a commitment: "We want what God wants." We pray, "Your (Thy) will be done."

The origin for what God wants is not in Robert's Rules of Order, the bylaws of a church or denomination, or a majority of votes. The clear signal for decision-making is Scripture as the source and prayer as the mechanism to establish direction. If you are tempted to think—even privately—"that will never work," there are now numerous congregations that have effectively made the change. They would tell you, "We are 'liberated' from politics and division."

The word "apostolic" reflects the "nuts-and-bolts" posture of ministry consistently reflected by the spiritual leaders in the New Testament. These leaders were "called" by God—invited by the work of the Holy Spirit. You might call them people who had their own "Damascus road experience"—like Paul. Every church has those who have grown in spiritual discernment. They are students of the Scripture—and have been for a long time. They would intuitively bring their Bibles—and use them—in the decision-making process. They would be comfortable to stop and pray for unanimous consensus. And they would never consider a "majority vote."

Impossible? Unrealistic?

As we have worked with all kinds of churches in the process of biblical decision-making, the end result is *spiritually liberating*. At the beginning of the process, we ask all staff and leaders to take an anonymous survey. The questions reflect the wide range of issues related to church decision-making. When we show the summary of results, staff and leaders are astonished to discover that, when faced with multiple-choice answers, most get it right! The dramatic response? “Why do we do the politics?”

Church leaders are called to make serious decisions about the Lord’s work. Those decisions shape the mission of your congregation—and whole denominations or fellowships of congregations. That impacts the effectiveness of the Christian movement. Make no mistake, the decisions you make for your church do matter on a spiritual level. It has always been that way.

In the early Christian movement, recorded in the New Testament, the expansion of the faith grew rapidly. It broke out among many people groups. It wasn’t long before Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus. There were some believers who felt that Gentile men who became followers of Jesus must become circumcised. This was no small issue for the Christian movement. The leaders of Christianity had to make a huge decision that would impact the growth of the faith. In Acts 15, the leaders came to a decision that would impact God’s Kingdom work for the future. How did they respond? No votes. No bylaws. No Robert’s Rules of Order. No “all in favor.” The way they decided impacts every church, every Christian, until Jesus returns. Acts 15:28: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us....”

How would you make decisions if Jesus was your pastor?