

Christian Meeting Review

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How Democracy Fails

Christians must never imagine that democracy—whether a democracy that elects politicians to a public government or a democracy that uses *Robert's Rules of Order* in a private association or church—represents God's ideal for how humans ought to make decisions. Democracy, though it has many virtues, cannot live up to the high billing that many people (both Christians and non-Christians alike) give it. As Christians, we must show special care to dissociate our faith from democracy to an appropriate degree—it does no good to the reputation of our Lord Jesus Christ if we yoke his holy Kingdom too closely to our fallen democracies.

I feel this tension personally since, as a parliamentarian, I enthusiastically encourage all kinds of organizations, associations, and churches to implement more fully democratic structures for governing themselves; however, my Christian theology necessarily tempers that enthusiasm, pushing me toward a more pessimistic outlook on the actual effectiveness of the very democracy that I promote. In this month's issue of *CMR*, I will address three major problems with democracy. First, democracy *cannot* create freedom, even though it offers choices. Second, democracy *cannot* prevent tyranny, even though it might thwart certain tyrants. Finally, democracy *cannot* ascertain God's will, even though God is sovereign over democracies.

The mere fact that a democracy offers choices to its electorate is something of a red herring. On the one hand, we could not suggest that all types of group decision-making grant to the average member an amount of influence equal to democracy. Of course, the opposite is true—most governments concentrate power in the hands of a very few people who alone may propose, debate, and adopt policy, to the exclusion of all others. In a real sense, democracy does accommodate greater freedom than other systems.

On the other hand, we make a fundamental theological mistake when we equate the *opportunity to choose* with the *ability to choose the good*, whatever the good might be in a particular situation. All the decision-making in the world will not teach us how to make the *right* decisions. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed genuine free will—they were completely capable of choosing *either good or evil*. When they chose evil, they and all their descendants (including you and me) lost any further ability to choose the perfectly good.¹ Unless God himself graciously gives us eyes to recognize the perfectly good and hearts to choose it, we will invariably choose what our selfish, fallen, sinful hearts desire. So, even when we have the opportunity to make decisions (as we do in a democracy), only the grace of God can give us the freedom to choose rightly.

Further, democracy's failure to create real freedom actually breeds a new kind of tyranny. In America, we suffer from a tyranny of the *majority*, even if we do not recognize it as such. Polls, blogs, Facebook profiles, Twitter updates, and internet discussion forums—the “wisdom” of the masses—captivate our collective attention and propel public opinion more than anything else. In a way, America has become an *overly* democratized nation. We not only give the individual a voice, but we hyper-privilege that individual's voice, paying close attention to the thoughts and feelings of people who know virtually nothing about a given topic. Where our ancestors used to seek out the advice of the wise, we enslave ourselves to the whims of the popular. Although democracy might protect us from some tyrants, we the people have voted ourselves into that role.

The dangers of democracy become all the more dangerous, however, when Christians treat the democratic process as though it were the Urim and Thummim of the New Covenant. No system of making decisions (democratic or otherwise) can take the place of prayer in the life of the Church. Although the democratic process may be a help in some ways, churches and Christian organizations have an obligation to seek God's will from God himself. Remember that no vote could ever have exposed the deception of the Gibeonites—the problem was that the Israelites “did not ask counsel from the LORD” (Joshua 9:14).

Now therefore, O democracies, be wise—kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way.

Next month: How Democracy Succeeds

¹ By “perfectly good,” I mean that which completely fulfills the greatest commandment by loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. (Mark 12:29-31)

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Parliamentary Perspective: Nominating Committee

Robert Rules of Order counsels churches and other organizations to craft their bylaws so that they exclude the President from membership on the Nominating Committee, even if the President is *ex-officio* member of all other committees.² The goal in such a suggestion is to prevent cronyism, where the faction in power prevents other factions from gaining any power at all by limiting the next slate of candidates to those who are “acceptable.” If one group of people can control the Nominating Committee, they will have undue influence over the future of the organization.

Christians, however, might be tempted to think that the members and officers of their own church or organization would be above this concern. Allow me, however, to remind you of the corrupting influence of power. Politicians and rich people are not the only ones who try to hoard power—even children on the playground act unjustly toward those who are not in their own circle of friends. One of Satan's most effective lies is to convince us that we are no longer vulnerable in a particular area. Because of this, we must be cautious never to allow optimistic, benefit-of-the-doubt thinking to cloud our judgment from taking precautions necessary to the environment.

Original Sin corrupts every one of us, and we would be wise to amend our bylaws accordingly.

Questions and Comments Welcome

Please feel free to send your questions and comments about *Christian Meeting Review*, parliamentary procedure, association/church business meetings. Whether you have a real-life situation in mind or a hypothetical question that you've always wondered about, please send them to cmr@jacobdgerber.com.

About *Christian Meeting Review*

Christian Meeting Review is a free monthly publication edited by Jacob D. Gerber, CPP-T that explores the connection between meetings, parliamentary procedure, and theology. Jacob has been recognized by the American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIP) as a Certified Professional Parliamentarian (CPP) and a Designated Teacher of Parliamentary Procedure (-T), and he was the winner of AIP's 2005 President's Award for Parliamentary Writing. Currently, Jacob is finishing his Master's of Divinity degree from Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, AL, where he lives with his wife Allison.

Christian Meeting Review is written in the conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ touches all of life—including bringing justice and righteousness to business meetings—and not only an individual's salvation.

2 For more information, see *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (10th ed.), p. 419 and 561.