

Democracy vs. Christocracy

It is a common misconception that The Presbyterian Church in Canada operates as a democracy. While it is true our polity provides for group debate and reaches decisions by majority votes and consensus, it is not purely a democratic system.

Stephen Hayes, in his booklet "The Presbyterian Church Upside-Down" (Presbyterian Publications, 1979, p. 34), writes:

"The (Presbyterian) system by and large works very well and allows many people a participation in the decision-making process, an important factor in keeping people involved in the life of the Church.

So similar is the system to the concept of representative government that it is sometimes confused with democracy. When this confusion is made, it is to have the system upside-down.

The basic nature of Presbyterian Church government is theocratic (from God) and not democratic (from the people)."

In a similar vein, The Rev. Dr. Tony Plomp, long-time columnist for the Presbyterian Record, wrote the following in an essay about Presbyterian polity.

*"And so, a critical New Testament insight is that the Church is not ruled from below by its members. It is ruled from above by Christ. **It is a "Christocracy", and not primarily a representative democracy.***

This is so important. Many of the questions I get for my column in the Record protest at actions of the church which appear not to be "democratic", which fly in the face of the popular notion that the will of the people is the will of God.

But, as Karl Barth has said, "True church law arises from hearing the voice of Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture."

A session is not primarily a gathering of women and men representing the will of their districts the way we expect politicians to represent their ridings. Of course elders ought to care about individuals in the congregation, but just because Mr. Muir and a few of his friends are vociferously opposed to moving worship from 11 a.m. to 10 a.m. does not necessarily mean the hour of worship should remain unchanged. Elders are elected and ordained to seek the will of Christ and to guide the church according to biblical precepts.

The session is not responsible to the congregation, but to God and is under the authority of the presbytery, synod and General Assembly. Under the guidance of the session, there are times when congregational meetings are held and votes taken as a further way of discerning the will of God. Still, it is the session that leads, serves and governs the congregation in a posture of openness to the triune God.

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