

A Weakness of Democracy

During the recent presidential election squabble, it became evident that many of the citizens of our great country do not understand our own democratic system, not even the newly elected senator from New York. In the election the majority vote did not prevail, and that brought forth angry cries of protest. The value of an Electoral College system was challenged by some, even the senator from New York. There has been a growing sentiment in our nation that we do not need a representative government, or a Supreme Court for that matter, but that a majority vote of the population should create all laws and decide all issues.

Our founding fathers were much wiser than the untaught of this generation, including the senator. They knew that rule by majority vote would open the floodgate for unjust decisions born of ignorance, emotion, and prejudicial reactions stirred by leaders.

As an example, earlier in our history, I am confident, a majority would have voted against permitting a Jew or Catholic holding office. Today, the majority might vote to expel all Muslims, to fine a person for telling a racist joke, to do away with most taxes, or to confiscate the wealth and property of all millionaires (except for athletes and entertainers, of course). The drastic possibilities are endless.

The founding fathers, realizing the weakness of pure democracy – rule by majority vote – established a democracy limited by a Constitution and its Bill of Rights to protect individuals, institutions, and less populated states. As defined by the Constitution, it would be a government by the people through representatives elected by vote as the Constitution specifies. The Constitution authorizes a system of checks and balances for the good of both the system and the individual.

If all citizens were fully informed and totally unselfish, most any form of government would work well. But therein lies the weakness of any form of government, even true democracy or representative democracy. Elected officials may grasp for power to control, and individuals or tiny minority groups may selfishly limit the privileges of the general population.

More and more, our society is now being controlled by minority rule. We have been impressed by this during the Christmas season which has just passed. An individual or a very few can undermine the culture of a community because they object to its religious origins and overtones. That is selfishness. If I lived in a country where the Buddhist religion is dominant, as an illustration, I would expect many facets of their society to reflect that culture. As a good citizen, I would not seek to destroy the privileges of the vast majority. I would be constrained to

“render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar,” even though it might be oppressive. Even though I may work for peaceful change, it would be blatant selfishness for me to demand the elimination of a culture because it does not fit my desires.

Legally, the Bill of Rights is one of the treasured features of our government. However, morally, a person should have concern for others rather than demanding that they give up everything he disapproves. Liberties must always be exercised with due respect to other people. Law gives privilege but morality is voluntary compliance to principle.

My purpose here is not to teach a course in government. I claim no qualification for that. I am using civil government as an illustration of some things that prevail in the society of believers. The principles upon which the founders of our nation built are those set forth in the Scriptures affecting our relationship in God’s community of believers. They are meant to direct effective leadership and to safeguard the welfare of the association while also protecting the liberty of the group and each individual within it.

Although all are equal in the local community of believers, all do not function in the same capacities. For the benefit of all Corinthian disciples Paul urged, “Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer” (1 Cor. 16:15f). Leadership in service, rather than authority, and willing submission to unselfish leadership are the principles set forth by Paul, yet we can foresee the vulnerability of such an arrangement because of the ignorance and selfishness of individuals.

Lack of regard for these principles by leaders or by those being led may result in stagnation, disunity, or even tyranny. Too often, minority rule is developed by leaders who rule without consent of the majority, or objector rule is imposed when those of negative attitudes prevail.

Paul exhorted disciples “to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work.” Those laborers, in turn, through loving concern are to “encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all” (1 Thes. 5:12f). This mutual respect must be what Paul was calling for when he instructed, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:1).

Those who are strong must not look with contempt on the weak nor trample them under foot. Those who are weak must not condemn the strong and demand to rule the group or other individuals in it by their objections. That is the message of Paul in Romans 14 – a message so commonly ignored. There he explains that

people of differing convictions are honoring the Lord as they serve respecting each other. “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (v. 19). It is a sad commentary that few of our congregations go for five or ten years without a serious unity problem or a real blow-up. And it is always “their fault,” rather than “ours.”

The exhortations in Chapter 14 are concluded with, “We who are strong ought to bear the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him” (15:1). If this were to be put into practice in a congregation, there would be no friction between different persons or segments among them. “Who is ruling the congregation?” would not be a topic of conversation with the group.

Where proper attitudes do not prevail, there can be minority rule of two types. First is the Diotrophes type, though nobody ever admits to being like him. This type may be an individual or a group like “Diotrophes, who likes to put himself first ... he refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church” (3 John 9-10). The “leadership” tactic of this type is that of over-powering, demanding conformity to their desires and judgments. Anyone who refuses to bow to their “authority” is squeezed out or put out. The congregation is “purified” by rejection and division.

The second type of minority rule is “objector rule.” Actually, this type often involves persons of the Diotrophes type. Seldom are these the “weak brothers” that Paul writes about in Romans 14. They are more likely those who claim to be protecting the congregation from any innovative practice or interpretation of wider views. Their devotion is to keeping everything in “the old paths.” They object to anything that differs from the teachings and practices of the church of their earliest remembrance – the old paths..

Either type of minority rule is destructive, but the latter is the most commonly practiced. Objection by a minority tends to keep a system frozen in time. Progress is defeated, simplistic interpretations prevail, and legalistic, ritualistic works become the unchanging pattern. A few unbending people who demand that they not be “offended” stifle and demoralize the whole congregation.

In our democratic form of government, a minority with selfish attitudes which refuses to “live and let live” can become its Achilles heel. In our congregations, minorities with selfish attitudes who refuse to “bear and forbear” can reduce the group to the lowest common denominator of being “the strictest sect of the Pharisees. (February 1, 2001) []