

Democracy versus Discernment in the Church

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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Like the churches of most every nation, American churches tend to reflect the culture in which they developed. An example of this is the American churches' penchant for democracy. We love democracy! It is in our very DNA as institutions. We believe that certain "truths are self-evident" and that such truths will inevitably arise through the democratic process and win the day. We also resist attempts by anyone to make decisions for us without our input.

The Builder and Silent generations (born between 1915-1945) love democracy for an additional reason: democratic processes enable them to be a functioning, integral part of the institution by participating in decision making. Because these two generations experience God through the life of the institution, participating directly in the decision-making makes them feel closer to God. Likewise, participating in functional committees and boards makes them feel closer to God (at least when such experiences aren't so negative that they cause them to "lose their religion!").

This characteristic of Builders and Silents to experience God through their direct participation in the mechanics of the institutional church seems pretty alien to most Baby Boomers, who have long been untrusting of institutions of all kinds, including the church. It also seems pretty alien to most Generation X'ers, who are preoccupied with their families and who prefer small group experiences for mission and nurture rather than governance. Generation Y'ers have a more positive disposition toward the institutional church than their parents, but they have little patience for the slowly grinding wheels of church-style democracy, which so often ignores their input.

Our belief in democracy is so strong that we tend to assume that God speaks through majority rule. It is an attitude that says, "If we don't know what God wants us to do, then let's vote on it and see!" Many denominational gatherings among Protestants seem to be based on this assumption as issue after issue is debated and voted upon. One often feels that people come seeking to "win the debate" rather than to seek to understand what God actually wants or thinks.

So, we substitute democracy for discernment, as if these two are the same thing. In fact, the majority is often dead wrong. This is easily demonstrable in church history: a majority of white Americans once thought that slavery was justified by certain passages in the Scripture, such as Ephesians 6:5-8 and a majority of Americans once thought that women should be rendered silent and without vote (I Corinthians 14:34). So the theory is that the truth in such matters is self-evident and will be revealed through majority vote, but history reveals that the majority tend to vote according to whatever the prevailing cultural assumptions of the day (and the currently popular interpretations of Scripture) suggest.

Democracy creates "winners" and "losers". This may not be a problem if people feel they "win some and lose some". But if a person feels he or she constantly *loses*, seeds of discontent and alienation are likely to grow.

Democracy and discernment are not the same. Democracy is a way of measuring the "will of the people", which certainly has value. Discernment is a way of seeking to understand the will of God, which is much more complicated, and requires greater humility and the use of the spiritual disciplines. Discernment requires prayer, Bible study, and dialogue with one another within groups that are small enough that the "dialogue" does not become a "debate".

It isn't that God is trying to be coy. I believe God's will is revealed when we seek to understand it. The challenge is in the fact that we mortals have such limited perspectives, who can ever claim to "know the mind of God" completely or infallibly? Thus, even when we have worked very hard at setting aside our own presumptions and are confident we have accurately discerned God's desires in a particular matter, we must be prepared for the possibility that we have missed some aspect of it and will need to change course as we gain deeper understanding. Nonetheless, after we have done the hard work of discernment, there comes the moment when, with Martin Luther we must declare, "If I sin, I sin boldly!"

The Spiritual Strategic Journey process championed by The Columbia Partnership provides a great opportunity for *discernment*, rather than mere *democracy*. Any good visioning process will do the same. Of course, in the end, the whole congregation will need to affirm the direction chosen as true and good no matter what process is used. But working by affirmation or consensusⁱ (rather than voting per se) is likely to help unite the church rather than to divide it.

May God bless you and your congregation as you seek to *discern* what God has in mind for you, rather than simply taking a vote; as you seek to do the hard work of dialogue and the spiritual disciplines rather than debate.

Important Things to Know

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ⁱ "Consensus" does not mean "unanimity". Consensus means that everyone is comfortable and willing to move ahead with a given course of action, even if it is not everyone's *first* choice.