

Theology of Polity - Christocracy or Democracy

Session Starter Number 7

Prayer:

King of Kings and Lord of Lords, in humble service we bow before your awesome majesty. As your servants we have gathered at this time and in this place to make decisions that, we trust, will honour you and build up the church. Guide us, we pray, by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction:

Section 241 of the Book of Forms notes that upon the induction of a minister, the moderator of presbytery will extend the right hand of fellowship saying,

“In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only King and Head of the Church, and by the authority of the presbytery ... , I induct you to the pastoral charge of this congregation, and admit you to all the rights and privileges thereto pertaining.”

Every time we hear these words we are reminded that all who serve in the church, do so under the kingship of Jesus Christ. He is our sovereign Lord. This is a basic principle underlying why we govern ourselves the way we do in the church. This Session Starter explores the idea that Presbyterian government is a Christocracy rather than a pure democracy.

Scripture:

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 1:20-23

A Brief Commentary:

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary)

This passage contains one of those powerful ironies of our faith. The Christ who was beaten and humiliated on the cross by ordinary soldiers and a jeering mob, is not only raised from death, but is placed above all “rule and authority and power and dominion” forever. God has elevated the scarred and broken Jesus and made him the supreme head over the universal Church.



Reflection:

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 11:00 a.m. to 10:00 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.

Follow-up Questions:

1. Talk about an occasion when the “will of the people” might have been different from the “will of God as discerned by the session?”
2. How do elders respond to the wishes of members of the church when they are contrary to the decisions of the session?