

## ***In A Spirit United***

**I Corinthians 12:12-31**

Every four years at the Presidential inauguration, I am notably impressed by how, for a moment in time, it appears our country is united, cooperative, and in good spirit. I was thinking about this last Monday while watching all the festivities in Washington. The atmosphere was ironic, to say the least, since the last few years have been painfully partisan and divisive in this country, with even the post-election period being little more than a reprise of the campaigns.

Yet, Inauguration Day arrives and the country suddenly has this “Kumbayah” moment, where the Capitol Building and Washington Mall are filled to capacity with citizens from every state gathering as Democrats, Republicans, and Independents—folks of all colors, races, languages, religions, and ethnicities—America in a snapshot of support regardless of who they voted for. With all the pageantry and pomp, the banquets and inaugural balls, Washington celebrated like it was a big family reunion occurring at a wedding or a funeral (depending, of course, on how one viewed the election results)! You know it was rare blissful moment in our nation’s capital if the biggest controversy coming out of the Inauguration was Beyoncé lip-syncing the National Anthem!

How is it that we’re able to do this—to have members of Congress sit down for a meal and laugh with the President like old friends—to have this incredible mix of citizens line a parade route celebrating their freedom and democracy—and yet this wellspring of goodwill and harmonious spirit can’t be sustained for longer than 24-48 hours?

Much of it has to do with our political system, but not in the way we immediately assume. Yes, we are all weary of the rancor and the constant struggle for both parties to work together, to be sure. That certainly has to be moderated, particularly for anything to be accomplished. But our generation isn't unique in its complaints about partisan politics. Democracy has always been noisy, messy and ornery; as Oscar Wilde wryly noted, "Democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people." If Americans aspired solely for political harmony, we would have opted a long time ago for a monarchy or some other form of centralized government that rules over the people and suppresses dissent. But that's not in our DNA, is it, despite attempts to move in that direction at various times. Americans, as a whole, are committed to democracy, even when it's been difficult and conflictive—a perilous experiment in governance that didn't even gain the confidence of the Founders: Thomas Jefferson called it "mob rule," and John Adams sarcastically warned:

*Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.<sup>1</sup>*

Yet, two hundred years later we're stubbornly persistent at it; we wouldn't truly be a democracy unless what we dislike about it wasn't an inherent characteristic of what we like about it—namely, the freedom to express one's opinions!

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<sup>1</sup> From a letter John Adams wrote to John Taylor on 15 April 1814. See, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, Volume 6, 1851,

The truth is, most of us wouldn't want it any other way. We are committed to the idea of individual expression and the ideals of social equality on many levels of life, even if we fall short of it in society. Most organizations to which we belong are democratic structures of some sort; people get elected to office, or they vote on business by consensus or majority rule, or they presume that differing opinions reflect a vigorous debate among equals. Even though in practice it might not seem that way at times, by and large few of us would want to have anything other than a democratic form of governance.

Not coincidentally, when the principles of constitutional democracy began to emerge in Western societies during the Enlightenment is when they began to have a significant role in the development of the Christian church, particularly here in the U.S. When you examine church history, democracy in church structures is a fairly late development; prior to the last three hundred years or so, churches were organized as prelacies or presbyteries—*prelacies* being the rule by bishops in a hierarchical, even monarchical, manner (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Episcopalianism, Lutheranism, Methodism, etc.); *presbyteries* being the rule of the church by presiding elders (Presbyterianism, Reformed, etc.).

It's only been since the latter stages of the Reformation (and especially in American experience) that a more democratic, congregational form of polity has emerged and flourished, where authority in the church lies with every member, with individual believers covenanting together to form a church. That, of course, is found in Baptist polity, as well as in Congregationalism, and other branches of the free-church tradition. The democratic ideal is

reflected in important decisions being made by the congregation as a whole, as well as in the equality between members, offices, boards and committees.

One of the reasons you and I are a part of this free-church tradition is because we are comfortable with a polity that reflects a common responsibility for conducting the business of the church in its teaching and its practice. It allows us to affirm even more effectively two of our most important Baptist tenets: freedom of conscience for the individual (soul liberty) and the priesthood of all believers—the belief that every person of faith has equal standing in the eyes of God and each possesses similar spiritual authority and responsibility in service to others in the ministry of the church. Not surprisingly, those two tenets mirror the primary values in American democracy: individual expression and social equality.

The problem is, just like in society, democracy in the church looks a whole lot better on paper than in practice. Too often individual members don't invest themselves into the life of the church, leaving decision-making and participation in the ministry to a relative few. That can handicap us significantly as a church, just like a democracy suffers when people don't vote or interact with their elected officials. For one thing, when people become disengaged from what's going on in the life of the church, interest starts to wane, attendance at worship becomes less important, personal relationships with other church members begin to change, and often a person's sense of God's involvement in their private life diminishes.

In addition, just like in public life, when fewer and fewer participate in the operations and organization of the church and its

ministries, those who are involved have undue influence on what occurs. That may be convenient and efficient in certain matters, but overall it creates an unfortunate status distinction—some have more power and authority than others and may exercise it in ways that are off-putting, or self-serving, or on the other hand, the designated individual gets overburdened and frustrated with always having to be responsible for keeping things going.

Then, if the level of participation wanes and a smaller group prevails, a real loss are all the gifts, talents, interests, perspectives, insights, expertise, experiences, and energy of those who have opted out to the detriment of the church and to God’s intentions through the ministry. We all have something to bring to the table—all of us have something that we can contribute to the ministry of the church—and if everyone isn’t actively giving their input, the health and effectiveness of the church is diminished significantly. We fall short of our potential because the ones who are doing all the work don’t have the energy or time to do anything new and different. Democracy isn’t just important in decision-making; it also makes a difference in apportioning responsibilities and in expanding and developing meaningful ministries for the present and future.

All of this has bearing on how we function as a local church. A few years ago we transformed our governance structure from one with several boards and committees—often operating independently of each other—to a unified Church Council with representation from all areas of church life. It was done in part to democratize the level of influence in church matters. Property issues were no longer of greater concern than education or spiritual life, as they were all

equally addressed by the Council together. For the most part that has worked out. The Council has done its task well over the past several years in balancing the interests in the church and maintaining administrative oversight.

But the part of the governance model that hasn't come into fruition fully is the concept of ministry teams carrying out many of the ministries of the church. Conceptually, we hoped that with the freedom to come and go and participate on any ministry team without formal protocols that this would open the possibility for greater participation from both those who are within and outside of the church. We were hopeful that all kinds of creative new ministries would be formed by simply bringing those with similar interests together and unleashing their creativity. It was no longer a board's or committee's role to do that. That, of course, has occurred to some degree, but not to the level that we hoped. There's still a lot of untapped creativity and energy in this place that can make a difference in all of our lives and in the wider community.

Now the model we drew from was inspired largely from the Apostle Paul's description of what he envisioned for the Corinthian church—a congregation that was charismatically organized, but in a democratic spirit. What I mean is, Paul's vision of the church wasn't hierarchical or even administered by a small, select group of leaders. It was based on each person exercising their gifts and talents for the benefit of the whole and everyone being spiritually and socially equal. It was a fascinating concept that probably makes more sense to us today than at any other time in church history: allow people the freedom to exercise their gifts and the Spirit of God would create a

congenial mix for an effective ministry. The presence of God was realized by the degree that people were involved in some form of ministry. That meant there was no place for passive avoidance or non-compliance, or for power grabs and political games, simply because Paul was absolutely confident that the Spirit of God was the inspiration behind any activity of the church. If he were to speak to us today, he'd say a greater experience of God's presence isn't by having a better preacher, or teacher, or choir, it is through everyone exercising their God-given abilities and ministering to others. Prophets, preachers, and teachers were not any more significant to the spiritual vitality or to the overall functioning of the church than those behind the scenes or those gifts exercised within a group, one among many.

Paul illustrated his vision by the way the human body functions: the head or mouth or eyes are clearly the most prominent aspects, but they are not any more a part of the body than other organs and limbs. The eye isn't the entire body, nor is the head, or the foot, and so on. As everyone knows, to be fully operational and functioning as a person, every aspect of the body needs to be working well. His point was, all of the church—every person who is present—must be actively using their gifts and doing their part to help sustain the body of Christ in that setting.

Honestly, over the years I have found that to be an effective illustration of how the church functions and operates. In the free-church tradition, everyone is equal in status and responsibility for doing their part. Paul had remarkable trust in all of this coming together with people exercising their gifts appropriately and in a

unified and cooperative spirit—attributing the unity to the presence and Spirit of God—even though in practice it appears it rarely worked out as well he hoped. Most of his churches struggled with leadership and organizational issues. Even in Corinth, certain people had greater influence, mainly because of the celebrated nature of their gifts in contrast to others. The ideal and the reality never seemed to match up.

Maybe that happens naturally, that people will always appreciate certain things more than others. But I still hold to this concept of encouraging everyone to participate with equal status and influence, even though possessing different gifts. It's both a charismatic and democratic way to function in the free-church tradition, which appeals to me more than any other model.

In the end, the most important aspect of our church life is to have the freedom to be who we are, but find ways to strengthen our community and ensure that each person's ideas and opinions are listened to and considered. Democracy in a church works best when we all participate and unify around the most important reasons for why we are a church, i.e., to identify with, learn from, and apply the teachings of Jesus in every level of life and particularly through the ministries we share. Through that mutual commitment to Jesus, we find a spirit of community that unifies us in ways that prospers from our differences, from our strengths and growing edges, and from our mutual joys and sorrows—just like democracy is meant to do in the public square and in public institutions.

Yes, it's easier and less messy at times to only let certain people possess power and make all the decisions for the rest of us, but when



we're all invested in the purpose and outcome of our work, there's a greater sense of satisfaction and goodwill and charity, and a collective commitment to the common good that is hard to match in any other way. That is what the church is meant to be and what we are when, at our best, we live under the spiritual influence of Jesus and in a spirit united.

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