
Meritocracy

Meritocracy. This is a word that caught my attention this past week. It is a compound word that has French, Latin, and Greek roots. “Merit” is that which has been earned and therefore deserved, and “cracy” speaks of power or authority and usually refers to those who rule. We are familiar with a democracy which is, literally, “rule by the people.” A meritocracy is “rule by those who have earned or deserve the right to have authority.” In a meritocracy those who rule would be those who have the education, experience or wisdom that enables them to rule well. We would hope that a democracy is also a meritocracy, but, as most people would agree, that is not always the case. Sadly, we often have people in positions of authority who should not be there. It does seem often our governments are more of a plutocracy, a rule by the rich, for it is the ones who have access to money who seem to win the elections.

We might wonder how our world might be different if the leaders of our nations were chosen on the basis of their merits. If, during an election, the people discussed the qualifications of an individual to lead, thinking about their experience, their education, their proven ability to make discerning decisions, would we choose different leaders? Generally, in our democracies, we choose candidates based on their promises to us, meaning that we choose those who will best benefit us rather than those who might be the best leaders. We should not wonder why so many are dissatisfied with their political leaders.

We can discuss meritocracy in the political sphere, but what about in the church? Is our church meritocratic, meaning that it is governed by those who have proven ability to lead? The Bible is clear when it guides us in the selection of leaders within the church. 1 Timothy 3 contains a list of qualifications for those who serve as elders (overseers) and deacons. Unfortunately, use of this chapter has sometimes been limited to arguing against (and for) women in office, but that is not Paul's first intent for what he was saying to Timothy. Rather, as we read this chapter closely, we notice that what Paul is really concerned about is that the church be governed by people who have proven themselves to be spiritually mature and that that maturity is seen in the way they interact with their families and communities. Those who serve as leaders of the church should have a proven track record in the Christian leadership in their families, in the church and in the community at large.

For the main part, this is practiced in all the churches where I have served. When the congregation nominates individuals to serve as elders and deacons, the council reviews those names and evaluates the nominees on basis of their merits. Do they display the spiritual maturity and proven leadership skills necessary to lead a church to be faithful to the Lord? If not, the nominee is not presented to the congregation for consideration. Today we draw lots, but back a few decades ago churches would vote on the nominees, and it was expected that the congregation discern which of the nominees merited their vote. Sadly, those votes often became little more than popularity contests, with the result that some very qualified people never were asked to serve in a leadership position in the church. Churches moved to the lot system more out of necessity than for biblical reasons. (There are many who argue that drawing lots is not mandated in Scripture and therefore is an unacceptable method of choosing leaders, but that is

another subject.) The procedures we follow do include an element of meritocracy, and for that we can be thankful.

But is the church a true meritocracy? It is not. At our elders meeting last week, we were led in a discussion about the calling of elders and deacons, particularly recognizing that it is Jesus Christ who appoints leaders in the church. True, he uses the church to identify and name those who will serve in leadership roles, but it is ultimately Jesus Christ who is the one who calls us to serve. The discussion we had centred around those who serve in the office of elder (it was an elders' meeting, after all), but we could say that all those who serve in any capacity of leadership in the church (deacon, pastor, teacher, counsellor, Bible study leader, etc.) are also called by Jesus Christ to their task. While the church is called to identify those who merit a position of leadership, it is ultimately Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who calls and appoints people to their leadership role.

Thus, instead of seeing the church as a meritocracy (although meritocracy is present), it might be better to understand the church as a Christocracy, for it is Jesus Christ who ultimately reigns. This has at least two implications: first, those who are called to lead do so in the name of Christ and therefore can be confident to lead with authority. And the congregation is obligated to follow those who lead. The second implication, obviously, is that the leaders of the church do not lead with autonomy. Everything that the leaders do must be subject to the will and rule of Christ Jesus. Leaders of all kinds within the church must never forget that, for as soon as they do, they become illegitimate, for they no longer recognize Christ's authority. We might say that the most important merit of the leaders of the church is that they recognize the authority of Jesus Christ in all areas of life, that the church is a Christocracy.

Our democracies are in a bit of a mess nowadays, and maybe they always have been. Democracies are based on the idea that the people govern themselves, and when people govern themselves, we must also wonder if they are making decisions for their own benefit. It is the human inclination to look after ourselves first. The church is not a democracy; it is a Christocracy, where Jesus Christ is the final authority in all things. It is also a meritocracy, but the one qualification that is absolutely necessary is that each leader submits him/herself to the will of Christ. When following Jesus Christ faithfully, it is hard to be selfish, as we often are in a democracy. When leaders submit to the will of Jesus Christ, those who seek to follow Jesus Christ as well will joyfully follow their leaders, and the church will grow in faithfulness and faith.

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