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# The New Testament and Political Democracy<sup>1</sup>

by Judith L. Hill

## Introduction

The subject of this year's Interdisciplinary Colloquium, The Bible and Political Democracy, is not totally suitable for a New Testament (NT) investigation. After all, the world of the NT did not have any experience with political democracy. Rather, the Roman empire dominated, and the emperors never displayed any democratic tendencies. Although local differences existed in terms of the governing of cities, all the events recorded in the NT took place under the imperial Roman government. And most certainly, the emperor was not elected to his office by a democratic vote of all the empire's residents. Rather, he simply declared himself emperor.

In the NT itself, perhaps the closest one might get to democracy is the selection of the so-called "deacons" in Acts 6. The apostles laid out the criteria for choosing the servants (οἱ διακονοῖ), and the people made their selection from among the qualified candidates. But how, exactly, that selection took place is unknown. Was it the choice of an oligarchy? Or was it all the people? Or was it that only the men could express an opinion, and no women had a choice, even though the issue involved widows? Was the voting done by a show of hands, by secret ballot, perhaps by lots? We simply do not know.

Nevertheless, I will attempt to highlight a few aspects of the subject of political democracy that can be linked to the background of the NT. Since the Greek culture forms the backdrop for much of the NT, I will begin with an historical overview of classical Athenian democracy, using the fourth century B.C. as the standard as much as possible. I will then describe the decline of that democratic experiment and mention to what extent the Roman empire of the first century A.D. was involved with democratic practices.

Moving to the NT, I will make a few general comments about the NT and democracy and then a few more comments that touch more generally on good governance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From an address delivered on 2012.01.03 for the annual Interdisciplinary Colloquium at the Bangui Evangelical School of Theology (BEST). In French, the school is Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de Bangui (FATEB) in Bangui, Central African Republic.

<sup>2</sup> The final chapter ("Epilogue") in Robert Duncan Culver, *Towards a Biblical View of Civil Government* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), has an interesting compilation of the author's ideas about how an evangelical should look at civil government. This book covers much more territory than this short seminar will attempt.

## Athenian Democracy in the Fourth Century B.C.

In thinking back to the historical roots of democracy as a political (and philosophical) system, we are automatically forced back to Greece and, more specifically, to Athens, the best attested of the Greek city-states.<sup>3</sup>

The very word “democracy” comes to us through the Greek language, as a combination of δῆμος (people) and κράτος (power).<sup>4</sup> Thus, in a correctly functioning democracy, the real power lies in the hands of the voting populace. Democracy is the rule of the people.<sup>5</sup> And in the case of this presentation, that principle is to be examined in relation to the πόλις, that is, the city-state.

Prior to the coming of a long period of democracy, Athens had known a series of governments, including kings, tyrants, oligarchs, and plutocrats. But when the Athenians had the chance, they opted for democracy as their form of government and stayed with it as long as possible.

I would like to discuss some of the basic elements of democracy in Athens, including its voters and some of its institutions.

### The Voters

The most significant term to understand for Athenian democracy is the basic word δῆμος. The word was employed by Athenians in three related ways. First, reaching the age of 18, an Athenian young man who was a full citizen would register for his obligatory military service (2 years). After his

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<sup>3</sup> The information in this paper concerning Athenian government structures is drawn primarily from two sources, both of which are available on the website [www.stoa.org/projects](http://www.stoa.org/projects). Christopher W. Blackwell, “Athenian Democracy: A Brief Overview”, and “The Development of Athenian Democracy”. These papers were written in conjunction with Harvard University’s Center for Hellenic Studies (USA). Other sources are noted as appropriate.

<sup>4</sup> It has been suggested that “people power,” may have been first used in a derogatory sense, by those aristocrats who did not appreciate the masses (οἱ πολλοί) becoming involved in what had essentially been a plutocracy. Cf. Philip Matyszak, *Ancient Athens on 5 Drachmas a Day* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), p. 69:

*Demos* means ‘the people of the masses,’ and *kratos* means ‘power’ in the most naked sense, so ‘democracy’ is actually a rather negative term with connotations of ‘mob rule.’ A more polite expression would be ‘demarchy’ or ‘rule by the people.’ But many of the contemporary writers on the topic are aristocrats, who take the view that Athenian democracy is akin to the principle of two wolves and a sheep voting on what’s for dinner. They adjust their language accordingly – and the usage will stick.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Lincoln, 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, speaking at the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania cemetery during the Civil War, used these terms: “we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” The key expressions here are all related to “the people,” not to any one person or group, nor to public officials. The government, he underscored, is composed of citizens, is elected by its citizens, and exists to benefit its citizens.

service, he was then pronounced a δῆμος, a full-fledged member of the Athenian society, authorized to vote in the Assembly.

Second, each local area (sector or village) in greater Athens was also designated by the term ὁ δῆμος. There were 139 of these local governments, divided into three districts: the coastal area, the countryside around the city, and the city itself. All the citizens who were δῆμοι (eligible voters) were also placed by the government into one of ten “tribes” constituted by the city. These tribes were artificial and were not at all aligned with lineage. Their function was to mix together the different parts of the city-state of Athens. Thus each tribe would have an equal number of voters from the different districts, so that parity would reign between the districts and the local δῆμοι.<sup>6</sup>

Third, the Assembly of all the voters was called the ἐκκλησία του δήμου, that is, the Assembly of the people. But, by a sort of shorthand, it was also simply called the Δῆμος, the People. In this paper, it will frequently be noted as “the Assembly.”

Thus the word δῆμος applied to the individual voter, then to his local government area, and finally to the assembled group of all the voters.

It is important to note that in Athenian democracy, the voting privilege was limited. It was not given to women (though they could be citizens and attend the sessions of the Δῆμος). Neither was the vote given to slaves, of whom there were many. Nor could foreigners vote, even if their city was ruled by the Athenians as a colony. Furthermore, to be deemed an Athenian citizen, one had to have both parents who were true Athenians, that is, who had had two Athenian parents, not just one. So the voting privilege was rather severely circumscribed. It has been estimated that the Athenian population in the fourth century B.C. was 250,000 persons. Of these, the number of eligible voters was perhaps 30,000, or a bit less than one in eight persons.

One very important point about these voters is that they voted *directly* for their laws; they did not elect a Senate or a parliament. All the voters voted directly on whatever matter came before them. There were no intermediaries or representatives.

### **The Assembly of the People**

Throughout the course of the year, the Assembly of the People met 40 times, usually every 8 to 10 days, on top of Mount Pnyx. There was no

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<sup>6</sup> These tribes were an artificial construction, having nothing at all to do with lineage. This solution was simply a way to make sure that every voting group had equal representation. The tribes became the new “patronym” (last name) of the person, insuring that no one was identified by the name of an aristocratic family. Each tribe was named after one of the mythical heroes of Greece, and a statue for each eponymous hero was set up in the agora.

building up there, so weather was a factor in the times of the meetings. Climbing the hill presented somewhat of a challenge, especially for the aged. And, on Mount Pnyx, the seating space available for the meeting was suitable for only about 6,000 citizens at a time. Nevertheless, every citizen was free to participate whenever desired. In practical terms, however, those who took part in the Assembly were those who lived closest to the city center, where Mount Pnyx was located. It was unlikely that anyone, except for a special occasion or special concern, would travel any great distance to arrive at the Assembly.

According to the Athenians, democracy ought to include the greatest possible number of citizens, and they wanted to hear different points of view. To encourage fuller participation, they conceived of a way to include the poorer citizens by paying a daily wage to everyone who attended. Thus the poor who decided to participate did not lose that day's salary of one drachma.<sup>7</sup> The democratic ideal thus sought to include all social classes of Athenian male citizens and to make their attendance feasible economically.

Any citizen in good standing could speak at the ἐκκλησιᾶ (Assembly) but, in point of fact, the speakers at the Assembly were generally those who had some rhetorical training or long experience in public speaking. Nevertheless, the opportunity was open to every δῆμος, young or old, rich or poor, from the city, the countryside or the seaside. A citizen would, however, be barred from speaking if he had not respected his responsibilities in the democratic society. Some things that could cause a man to lose this privilege would be: not paying his taxes, showing cowardice in battle, demonstrating a lack of respect for his parents, or having been profligate and losing his inheritance. These guidelines provide us with a picture of some of the core Athenian values in the IV<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. and of how those values were maintained through having been enshrined in their constitution. Democratic government was seen as a means of safeguarding ethical values.

When debate in the Assembly of the People had finished on a particular issue, the matter was put to a vote, and voting was done openly, by a show of hands. Thus the citizens were required to be brave enough to express their opinions in public. Of course, if a man did not wish to make his position known, he simply avoided going to the Assembly and/or voting.

### **The Council of 500**

As one can imagine, an Assembly of 6,000 or more persons would be rather difficult to manage. Thus, the Athenians established a sort of executive council for the Assembly, and this was called simply "the Council (or, ἡ βουλῆ) of 500," for it had 500 members. That still seems like a large group, but apparently the Athenians were able to make it work effectively. Each of the 10

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<sup>7</sup> The Greek drachma corresponded to the Roman denarius as the amount given for a daily wage.

so-called “tribes” elected 50 members each year; together these individuals made up the 500 necessary members. To be eligible to serve on the βουλή, a man had to be at least 30 years old and to have been screened rigorously by the out-going Council members. They satisfied themselves that the candidate would maintain the established and honorable Athenian traditions, such as caring for the family graves, treating his parents well, paying his taxes, and having completed his military service well. Once the eligible candidates had been identified, the selection was done entirely by lots, to avoid any possible corruption. A man could serve on the Council only twice in his lifetime and never in successive years.

In addition, those who were accepted as members of the Council had to swear to act in accordance with the laws of the land, for the benefit of both individuals and the Assembly as a whole, to discharge faithfully and at the appropriate times the duties they were given, and to be honest in their investigation of the following year’s candidates for office.

Once again, one can take note of the Athenian interest in having solid ethical standards in their government.

The Council functioned on a daily basis and organized the work for the Assembly. The work of the Council of 500 was primarily to review proposals ahead of time and decide whether or not the proposal was a good one to present to the Assembly of the People, that is the Δῆμος. In this way, the Council functioned as a gatekeeper for the flow of information and the enactment of laws.

In order to help the work to go forward, the 500 members were ruled by a President, who was chosen by lot on a daily basis, to avoid any problems of corruption. Since one never knew who the next day’s President of the βουλή would be, it was impossible to influence that person ahead of time. The term limits for the members of the Council of 500 (one day for acting as President; one year for Council membership) also helped to curb any sort of corruption.

### **The Lawgivers**

Athenian laws were engraved on stone and posted in public places. Until a law was available for everyone to read for himself or herself, the law was not considered to be in force. No secret or unpublished laws were allowed.

The process for adding or changing laws was a rather lengthy one but eventually all laws passed through a special group, named “the Lawgivers” (νομοθέται). These were ordinary citizens, about 1,000 of them, recruited to do the necessary work to prepare laws for debate and (if adopted) for publication. The group discussed the various proposals that they received from the citizens or officials and then decided which proposals they would pass on to the next level, that is, to the level of the Council of the 500. The Council would then, in its turn, discuss whether to pass the proposed law or



change of a law on to the Assembly or instead to send it back to the Lawgivers for further preparatory work.

### **The Courts**

The judicial branch of the government was responsible for trying cases. There were two main levels of courts. The first, for cases of arson, physical assault, and homicide, held its meetings on the Areopagus Hill. The judges were retired city executives (οἱ ἄρχοντες), men who had a vigorous reputation for honesty and who took strong oaths of office to act in accordance with the truth. For anyone found guilty by the court, the punishment was death. Nevertheless, if a person anticipated that he or she was to be judged guilty, that person could simply leave Athens quietly and go into voluntary exile before the day when the sentence was to be pronounced. The person's house and belongings would then be sold to the profit of the city.

The second court tried lesser cases and had much larger juries, numbering from 501 to 1,000 members, all of them regular Athenian citizens. As was the case with the Assembly, each participant in a jury was paid a daily wage for his presence.

### **Other Officials**

The Athenians had two sorts of leaders who were elected on a special basis. Each "tribe" elected a General (στρατηγός), who needed to have specialized military knowledge in case of war. The city also elected Treasurers (οἰκονομοί),<sup>8</sup> and their special qualification was that they had to be rich. The reason for that requirement was that, if any embezzlement occurred, the guilty Treasurer was held responsible for repaying the money in full. The Athenians feared that a poor Treasurer would not be able to reimburse the city.

### **Lessons from Athens**

The Athenian form of government, as a direct democracy, is unlike most democracies today, except perhaps for some minor local governments. Nevertheless, Athenian democracy promoted some very good principles. One of those principles (as limited as this may seem in retrospect) was the equality of its (male) citizens under the law. Every young Athenian male with two Athenian parents could register and be considered a δῆμος. Athens did not include women along with men, and slaves did not count as people, much less as citizens. But at least all male citizens could participate. Furthermore, the Athenians made sure that the voting blocs (the "tribes") were representative of all the different regional interests — coastal, urban, and farmland. Finally, they assured equality, or a semblance of it, in the running of the Assembly. One did not need to be wealthy to be allowed to speak, and all the participants were paid a day's wage for being present.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Erastus in Rom. 16.24, the treasurer of Corinth.

Another important point to highlight is that Athens, in establishing the rule of law for their society, always made a written copy of the law available to the public. No law could be enforced unless and until it was publicly posted.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Athens demonstrated that one function of government was to uphold high standards. The laws that governed who could be accepted in the *Δῆμος* were ones that included ethical standards and obedience to the laws of the city. The various requirements for holding office were put in place in such a way as to give little opportunity for corruption through untoward influence or through the embezzlement of funds.

Finally, the Athenian democracy divided its functions. The separation of powers and the checks and balances that were written into their constitution meant that no single individual could become too important, even in a limited area, and no one could take over the entire government. It was truly to be a government of the people, to the full extent of the *Δῆμος*.

Although democracy in Athens in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. had limits that are today unacceptable, the Athenian constitution provided a solid foundation on which later democracies could build.

### **The End of Athenian Democracy**

Athenian democracy ended with the conquest of the city by Philip II of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great. Although Alexander had been tutored by Aristotle, an Athenian who had instilled in his pupil a love for all things Greek, Alexander's love did not extend to adopting democratic institutions. Alexander was first and foremost a king, an insatiable king who went on to conquer an empire for himself. At first, Philip and then Alexander spoke euphemistically in terms of a confederation of Greek states, but it soon became clear that all the authority rested with Alexander himself. At the despot's death in 323 B.C., his generals began to take reprisals against Athenians who had not been enthusiastic about joining the Hellenic Federation. Silence was imposed through fear, and Athenian democracy came to an end. When Athenian freedom of speech was threatened, the Assembly could no longer openly debate the issues and make their own decisions.

### **Roman Government in the First Century A.D.**

In the first century A.D., we find a different form of government in place. Rome had, for some years, been a republic. But Octavian, who wanted to be known as Caesar Augustus,<sup>10</sup> took over power in 27 B.C., calling himself

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, thinking of his own day, goes further. He states that laws, besides being written and available, should be easily understood by the populace. Archie P. Jones, *Christian Principles in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights*, Part II (Marlborough, NH: Plymouth Rock Foundation, 1994), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> It was as "Octavian" (also known as "Octavius") that he was involved in war and bloodshed. To blot that negative impression from the minds of the people, the emperor

“emperor.” No one in the empire could question his decisions. Although the emperors frequently made a pretense of consulting the Senate, no one really believed that the emperor would follow the Senate’s counsel if it did not agree with his own ideas.

The Roman Senate was a body of men who were elected to represent the people (indirect democracy). Only the very richest of the rich could be elected as Senators. The Senators were primarily concerned with things that were important to the aristocracy of the country, that is, to themselves and their own social class. They demonstrated very little interest in the needs of the common people, that is, of more than 99% of the population.<sup>11</sup>

Elections for the Senate were held only in the city of Rome itself. Roman citizens in far-flung regions of the empire had no chance to vote unless they returned to Rome. Citizenship by the time of the first century A.D. was a somewhat complex affair. It could be attained by birth to a Roman citizen<sup>12</sup> or be offered as reward or recompense for service (military or other) rendered<sup>13</sup> or occasionally could be (illegally) purchased.<sup>14</sup> Given the total population residing within the limits of the empire, the percentage of citizens was quite low. And even more miniscule was the number of those citizens who could actually participate in Senatorial debates, regardless of the somewhat meaningless nature of those debates.

Thus, although Rome (and some of the provincial cities) had a veneer of democracy, in fact, there was no viable democracy in the first century A.D.<sup>15</sup>

### **The New Testament and Political Democracy**

Thus we come to the NT evidence. As we have just established, no one in the NT experienced democracy for the simple reason that it did not exist. Furthermore, the NT seems not to indicate any interest in democracy.<sup>16</sup>

decided to be addressed not by his own name (Octavian) but by his title (Caesar Augustus). “Caesar” was at that point simply a family name (from Julius Caesar), and Augustus had connotations of “revered” or “majestic.” His title as “emperor” derives from the Latin term “*imperator*.” In Greek, the term used for his position is “βασιλευς.”

<sup>11</sup> Before the time of Octavian, a second institution existed, to which the slightly less rich could be elected. During the imperial period this assembly no longer had a place in the formal structure of the empire.

<sup>12</sup> Such was the case with the apostle Paul (Acts 22.28).

<sup>13</sup> Soldiers who had a career of 20-25 years in the army automatically received citizenship at the time of their retirement from active service.

<sup>14</sup> One can note here the example of the centurion in Acts 22.28.

<sup>15</sup> Jerusalem did not even have a shadow of democracy. Its overlord was the legate based in Antioch (Syria) and appointed by Rome. He operated through the Roman governor of Palestine and, to some extent, in cooperation with the Jewish Sanhedrin.

<sup>16</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), p. 3: “The New Testament cannot be used directly as a source for solving

In this section, my aim is to point out some NT elements that have some bearing on the matter at hand. Even if there is nothing that directly addresses the question of forms of government,<sup>17</sup> certain principles can be gleaned. The Bible, after all, is the Christian's sourcebook for ethical guidelines needed for daily living. I will begin by presenting four general observations.

#### Four Observations

The fact that the Roman empire was not a democracy leads to the (rather obvious) observation that Christianity took root in a non-democratic environment and indeed flourished there. Christianity has had no intrinsic need to go hand-in-hand with political democracy.<sup>18</sup> It is true that democracy, as practiced today in many areas of the world, may give greater freedom for Christian endeavors, but through the centuries Christianity has put down roots in pagan, imperial Rome, as well as in pagan, technocratic Western nations, and in Communist China, Muslim Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> The power of Christ and his Word to transform lives is not limited by any type of government. Indeed, one remembers that Tertullian, the Early Church Father, recalling all that the early Church experienced in a difficult period under the Roman Empire, said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

My second observation is that everywhere, from cover to cover, the Bible reminds us of the truth that God alone is supreme. He alone is sovereign (cf. 1 Tim. 6.15-16). Any earthly government exists only because God has allowed it

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all our contemporary problems. There are some problems – that of the relation of Christianity to culture, for instance – which can only be solved by indirect deduction from what the New Testament says." Culver, *Towards a Biblical View of Civil Government*, p. 281, underscores the same point: "... one will learn very little, indeed, of social or political theory and only a little of economic theory from the Bible."

<sup>17</sup> "... if by democracy we mean 'government of the people by the people and for the people,' in the form of majority rule by the ballot, then the Bible knows nothing of it." Millar Burrows, "Democracy in the Hebrew-Christian Tradition: Old and New Testaments," in Lyman Bryson and Louis Finklestein (eds.), *Science, Philosophy and Religion: Second Symposium* (NY: Conference Science, Philosophy and Religion in the Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, 1942), p. 399. Quoted in "The Bible, Judaism and Christianity and the Origins of Democracy: Part 2," weblog published July 6, 2008, by a blogger using the pseudonym : "beastrabban."

<http://beastrabban.wordpress.com/2008/07/06/the-bible-judaism-and-christianity-and-the-origins-of-democracy-part-2/>

<sup>18</sup> "Democracy is separate from Christianity, but linked to it through the fundamental concern of justice and humanity that are common to both, so that Christianity, although it has supported tyrants, is also, and continues to be a vital source of support for democracy itself." These comments appear in "The Bible, Judaism and Christianity and the Origins of Democracy", weblog: "beastrabban", <http://beastrabban.wordpress.com>

<sup>19</sup> "... the Bible endorses neither monarchy nor democratic republic, though it repeatedly proclaims, in a variety of ways, that magistrates of civil government have their power given them by God Himself." Culver, p. 282.

to exist. The Roman emperor, though he had control of a large land mass and population, was still far inferior to God himself and ruled only because God allowed him to do so (cf. Jn. 19.11).

The third observation is that every Christian lives simultaneously in two worlds: the here-and-now and the world to come.<sup>20</sup> The “already” is marked by human governments, but the Christian’s true citizenship is in heaven. Although we are not yet living in heaven, the realities of the future life penetrate the Christian’s daily existence. He or she is not limited to the visible world and its governments – whether local, national, or international. Human government is limited and temporary, whereas heavenly citizenship is eternal. Although the institution of government in the present world can provide stability rather than chaos or anarchy (cf. 1 Tim. 2.1-4; Rom. 13.1-5), the role of any human government is necessarily limited.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the Christian’s loyalty – if put to the test – must go first and foremost to God himself rather than to an earthly government. Such was the reaction, for example, of Peter and John, who said in effect: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 4.18-20).

Related to that observation about eternal citizenship is a final general observation: Heaven will not be democratic. There, all heavenly citizens will be under the supreme authority of God and will trust him explicitly and implicitly for every good thing, for all of eternity. Whereas democracy has been useful in many centuries and many regions of the world, it is not a concept that will endure beyond this life. Our lives in heaven will have nothing to do with elections and politics. We will gladly live under the model of the benevolent king or emperor (βασιλευς). Only, in heaven, there will be no sin to sidetrack good plans and intentions, as so often happens to rulers and politicians here below.<sup>22</sup> God cannot sin, and in heaven we as believers will be liberated not only from the penalty of sin but also from its very presence and power.

### **Equality Before the Creator**

Although the NT does not speak directly of democracy,<sup>23</sup> some of the NT principles are ones that can inform democracy and strengthen it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), highlights the influence of this dualism in the relationship of the Christian to the State. Cf. Ia “Conclusion,” p. 86-92.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, p. 3, points out the principle that, whereas God has ordained civil government, the government itself is not divine.

<sup>22</sup> Cullman, p. 4-5, states that, because of the Christian’s view of heaven as his/her true πολιτευμα, “the State appears as something ‘provisional.’ For this reason we do not find anywhere in the New Testament a renunciation of the State as a matter of principle; but neither do we find an uncritical acceptance – as if the State itself were something final, definitive.”

<sup>23</sup> Although many congregational-based churches today tend to take Paul’s list of qualifications for elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1) as indicative that these

The first principle is that of human equality before God. This equality comes in two dimensions. First of all, it indicates that men and women both are God's creation (cf. Mk. 10.6, echoing Gen. 1.27; 5.2). Applied to democracy, that principle should give voting rights to both sexes.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in an open democracy (which is currently practiced in some, but not all, democracies), every citizen should be able to vote.

The second dimension of this human equality before God is underlined in the NT in Rom. 3.23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Every citizen is also a sinner and can be tempted toward evil actions. Because of that reality, the possibility of sin, in any form, is always present. When committed by persons in positions of authority, these sins are betrayals of the public trust. The consequence of this sad reality is that democratic governments must, of necessity, establish safeguards such as term limits, separation of powers, and checks and balances. These laws limit the possibility of a person causing great damage to the government. Neither a person nor even an oligarchy would be able to take over the government for their own ends and power, enticing as they might find that temptation.<sup>26</sup>

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positions should then be elected on a congregation-wide basis, it is not clear from Scripture that that was the practice in the first century A.D.

<sup>24</sup> In the 1940s, Alfred Outler, a Christian ethicist, wrote, "I do not see how a democratic order can be achieved or remain uncorrupted without a religious undergirding..." Alfred Outler, "The Patristic Christian Ethos and Democracy," in Bryson and Finkelstein (eds.), *Science, Philosophy and Religion*, p. 470, cited by a blogger "beastrabban," in his July 6, 2008, weblog entitled: "Judaism, Christianity, and the Origins of Democracy: Part I." The document, with other comments from Outler, can be viewed at <http://beastrabban.wordpress.com/2008/07/06/judaism-christianity-and-the-origins-of-democracy-part-1/>

<sup>25</sup> The apostle Paul extrapolates this idea further to note that neither should there be artificial barriers of social class, race, or educational level (Gal. 3.28; Col. 3.11).

<sup>26</sup> In the following quotation, Tokunboh Adeyemo has expressed similar ideas. The quotation comes from his article, "Religion and Government in Africa", in Delanyo Adadevoh (ed.), *Religion and Government in Africa: A Christian Response* (Miami: ILF Publications, 2009), p. 54-55.

*Normally, a State is a civil authority or government that exercises delegated power to enforce laws to restrain the wicked, protect the weak and promote uprightness, equity, justice and welfare of the society. The word "normally" is used in the definition, as there are abnormal cases of military dictatorships or tyrants presiding over the affairs of a State.*

*"Civil" here means discipline, which implies an approved, participatory process of governing such as in a democratic government. "Delegated" implies that the power and authority to govern has been delegated by the people being represented in a legislative assembly. However, God, to whom every leader or ruler is accountable, ultimately delegates all power and authority.*

*Therefore, civil authority is God's merciful provision for fallen human society. Due to the fallen nature of man, there is always the temptation in exercising this authority, to*

## Six Principles for Good Governance

The following New Testament principles concern government in general but can also be applied to the democratic system. I do not plan to develop them but simply will briefly note that many of the good points for governance can be traced back to biblical principles.

1. God wants governments to exist, rather than having anarchy or chaos. Both Paul (Rom. 13.1-4) and Peter (1 Pet. 2.13-14) explain that governments are instituted, ultimately, not by human effort but by God's sovereign design for human beings here on earth.

2. The fundamental attitude of a Christian is to honor and obey the government and to pray for its leaders (1 Tim. 2.1-2). As we will see, this attitude may have limits, but it is the assumed posture. As Jesus demonstrated and taught,<sup>27</sup> and as Paul taught, obedience includes supporting the government through the taxes it imposes (Mt. 17.24-27; Rom. 13.7).

3. Disobedience to government regulations can be legitimate when the government attempts to impose something contrary to God's laws.<sup>28</sup> Biblical principles transcend earthly strictures (Acts 4.18-20). In a democratic society, it must be noted, there are generally means for addressing these problems and having laws repealed.

4. Civil disobedience must be limited to the specific act that pits the Christian against a government regulation and then be followed by submission to the right of the government to punish those whom it considers wrongdoers. The examples of Jesus, of Peter and John, and of Paul, each of whom experienced arrest, show that they did not attempt to destroy the government or its authority. They did not cause destruction or loss of life or seek anarchic solutions.<sup>29</sup> They submitted to the punishment that was normal for someone

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*abuse power. The three-tier system of government consisting of the Legislature (politicians), Judiciary (learned interpreters), and Executive (implementers) evolved to maintain checks and balances in government.*

<sup>27</sup> According to Cullmann's analysis, Jesus "does not regard the State as in any sense a *final*, divine institution; on the other hand, we see that he accepts the State and radically renounces every attempt to overthrow it." Cullman, *The State in the NT*, p. 18. The examples Cullmann adduces are Jesus' responses in the temptation narrative of Luke 4 and the issue of paying taxes in Mark 12.

<sup>28</sup> Cullmann, *The State in the NT*, p. 37, lived through the era of Nazi Germany and on into the era of the Russian Communist threat, has strong boundary lines for what is and is not proper for a government: "... the State is nothing final. On the other hand, it has the right to demand what is necessary for its existence - but no more. Every totalitarian claim of the State is thereby disallowed.... if ever the State demands what belongs to God, if ever it hinders you in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, then resist it."

<sup>29</sup> Cullmann, basing his thinking on Rom. 13.7, states that, whereas Christians must resist the demands of a totalitarian State for worship (such as was true in the time of

who had broken a law, even when the government's estimation of their law-breaking was faulty.

5. A good government seeks the common good, the welfare of all the people under its care, and equal justice for all its citizens. Good leaders, whether in government or elsewhere, exhibit the attitude of serving others rather than one of self-aggrandizement (Luke 22.25-26). Service to others is included in the idea of seeking the common good.

6. Governments are called to punish evildoers and promote goodness (Rom. 13.3-4; 1 Pet. 2.13-14). Both the positive and the negative responsibilities should be stressed.

These few principles (and one could, of course, enumerate several others) describing the Christian's relationship to government authority provide a basic idea of what the NT has to say and the principles that would undergird any good and healthy government, democratic or other.

### Conclusion

Democracy comes in all shapes and sizes and has been the aspiration of many people over the centuries. Democracy is not ideal as a system, for no earthly system can attain perfection. But here below, in our current era, democracy, when and where it conforms to principles that the Bible affirms – even when it does not pretend to have the Bible as its source – can be very attractive. Political democracy gives the most freedom to the greatest number of individuals, while still holding each one accountable before the laws of the land, whether as private citizens or as public officials.

Yet, only when believers arrive in heaven will they experience the perfect government: the Kingdom where God alone reigns, a Kingdom from which all sin has been banished forever. We look expectantly for this sovereign and universal reign by the all-powerful King of Kings.

The Bible provides basic principles for good governance, many of which are reflected in political democracy. Nevertheless, the NT does not choose to emphasize one form of earthly government as an ideal. Only when we reach our eternal home in heaven will we experience the ideal government – a kingdom ruled by God alone and totally exempt from any and every kind of sin – the home of those redeemed through Jesus' sacrificial death, his resurrection, and his final ascension to glory.



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