



Voice of the Church

My esteemed fellow co-editor Dr. C. VanDam recently penned a stimulating editorial on the matter of women's voting (Vol. 60, No. 10). Among the helpful things he brought forward is the statement that *"this is a matter about which a difference of opinion can exist."* I agree. I hold a different opinion myself and to broaden the discussion would like to flesh out an alternative approach.

What does the Bible say?

We all want to base our opinions on the Bible and rightly so. A major part of the difficulty throughout the decades of discussion has been how best to use and understand the Scriptures with respect to this issue. All are agreed that no Bible passage deals explicitly with our precise practice of congregational voting followed by appointment by the consistory with the deacons. Also, no passage lays out a *prescription* for what may be considered a related practice. The Lord has not given specific instructions for this matter. That means we are at best left with a description or some examples which may relate to our situation and help to shed some light on the matter. From whatever descriptions we find we may be able to see certain *principles* which may then be applied to our current practice. We will need to be careful not to jump to conclusions.

Underlying principle

At this point we have to be clear on what is the principle contained in congregational voting as we know it today. We need to compare apples with apples. In order to properly use any biblical example we need to see what about it is comparable to today.

It has often been stated that our Church Order (Art. 3) and the Belgic Confession (Art. 31) speak of office bearers being chosen by the *congregation* or the *church*. From this it is often asserted that since women are members of the congregation, they should be free to participate in the voting as well. But what is often not understood is that this argument proves too much: if truly the *whole* congregation is called upon to do the choosing, then also the children should vote as well as adult non-communicant members! After all, the same Belgic Confession (Art. 34) specifically includes children of believers as members of God's covenant and congregation (see LD 27). Yet no one advocates this. In reality, proponents of female voting wish to restrict it to *male and female* communicant *members*.

Representation

This restriction highlights the underlying principle, namely that those today who vote for office bearers do so *representing* the whole church. In the election, a certain group within the congregation is called upon to speak on behalf of everyone in the church. A *smaller* portion of the church acts as the voice of the *entire* congregation.

This observation should help keep us away from seeing the act of voting as a personal right or giving voice to our personal views. A voter is someone who has been *granted the privilege by the* consistory to *share in representing the whole body*. A voter does not speak for himself personally. Every church member who votes needs to consider not: "Who is my personal favourite choice that will do me (or my family) the most good?" but rather: "Who is best suited at this time to serve the whole congregation for her edification and God's glory?" It would be good for voters to discuss this matter with various members (not just their wives!) and seek their input. The Lord then, by his

Spirit, works in the hearts of the voters so that his choice is brought out through their collective wisdom. That wisdom is rightly seen as the wisdom of the *entire* congregation. For this reason, those who are not given the opportunity to represent the congregation need not feel left out, marginalized, or "disenfranchised." Their voice is heard in the representatives who cast a vote.

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Now the question becomes more specifically: who should or may represent the congregation? Do biblical examples shed any light on who may function as the voice of the church in choosing office bearers? Again, we must be cautious in that at best we find related examples and not all of them are clear as to the gender of the representatives. For example, when leaders were chosen in Deuteronomy 1:1, 13 then all we read about is that Moses addressed the *entire* people and asked them to choose. We aren't told who exactly did the choosing (was it every individual present — man, woman, and child? Men only? Or men and women? Nothing specific is revealed.)

However, later in Deuteronomy 17:15 God commands Israel, once they have settled into Canaan and desire a king, to appoint the king whom God chooses. This is not an exact parallel in that first God chooses the office bearer but yet it requires some representation of the nation to put God's choice into effect. In 2 Samuel 2:4 and 5:3 we read that it was in fact the "men of Judah" and the "elders of Israel" who actually anointed David as king. In this instance it was clearly not the ladies of Israel who were involved in representing the whole and giving voice to the church's appointment.

Other kinds of representation

Still in the Old Testament, we find others sorts of representation taking place. While not exact parallels to those charged with selecting leaders, these examples give us a sense of who were commonly set aside to represent the church, albeit in different circumstances. In Numbers 1 we find that twelve helpers were selected to assist Moses in conducting a census, twelve *men*. In verse 44 they are described as "*the twelve leaders of Israel, each one representing his family.*" Similarly, twelve men were chosen, one from each tribe, to spy out the land of Canaan (Num 13). Later, a different twelve males were assigned to select stones from the Jordan river upon Israel's crossing, each representing his tribe (Josh 3:12). The New Testament has a similar example of males representing the assembly of God's people when Paul describes the men travelling with Titus to Corinth as "*representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ*" (2 Cor 8:23). I could find no unambiguous example where sisters were put forward to represent the church and speak for the whole.

New Testament choosers

This also applies to the choosing of office bearers in the early church, the closest parallel to our modern form of voting for office bearers. It is sometimes stated that sisters were involved in choosing office bearers in Acts 1:15-16 and Acts 6:2-3 and that this is apparent from the context. But is it really? (You'll need your Bibles to follow this next bit as we need to dig into the specifics). Indeed, sisters are indisputably present in Acts 1:14 and can safely be assumed to be included in the reference to the gathering together of "*all the disciples*" in 6:2. In fairness we should also assume that the children of believers were present in the latter gathering as well, from tot to teen — after all, it was "*all the disciples.*" But who did the choosing? Did every single person give an indication of his or her preference? Did also the teenagers "vote" or only those believers of a certain age? Few if any think the children would have participated. It seems fair to conclude that some *representation* of the congregation did the choosing on behalf of the whole, but who did the representing? Acts 6 does not say in so many words.

In Acts 6 the "brothers" are asked to make a selection of seven men to serve at tables (v. 3). It is often stated that we should not take this common address of the church as restricted to the male members. Now, in itself the Greek "brothers" is basically a masculine term (like our English "guys") and yet it is true that it may include sisters on certain occasions (e.g. Acts 1:14 where Mary is

included among the "brothers" of v. 15). But it's also true that it may be used to speak of males alone (1 Tim 5:1). In many instances it is not certain whether the group addressed is mixed or male-only. The context will have to decide what is more likely but in Acts 6 it remains ambiguous and unclear whether the apostles are addressing only the brothers among the disciples or all members together.

"Men, brothers"

Is it possible that the apostles are asking the men among the believers to represent the whole church and make the selection of office-bearers? It is *possible* in Acts 6. But it seems to me even *likely* to be the case in Acts 1 where it is often missed that Peter in verse 16 addresses the gathering of the church with a double-masculine phrase, literally, "Men, brothers" (See KJV and NKJV). The first word, "men," is almost exclusively used in Greek to indicate male gender. This phrase appears in Acts at least thirteen other times and in each of those cases it seems clear that the group addressed is entirely male (e.g. Acts 7:2; 15:7 — see (N)KJV for the literal translation). If Peter means to include the sisters in Acts 1:16 then he is strangely using a very unnecessary double-masculine. Why not simply address the group with the more flexible term, "brothers"? In light of this, I consider it much more probable that Peter is addressing the male members of the church, singling them out with the intention to ask them (as representatives of the church) to choose new office bearers (v. 22).

From example to practice

When a closer look is taken at the biblical data on who speaks for the congregation, then the clearest and closest examples point in the direction of adult males (i.e. "men") serving as the voice of the church. In the Bible, females are never clearly given this task. I repeat that this data is descriptive, not necessarily prescriptive, but it certainly suggests that churches today who assign the privilege of voting to male communicant members are well in line with biblical example. Certainly, no church or individual should be made to feel inferior or "behind the times" because they wish to follow the nearest biblical precedent and retain the practice we've had for over 400 years in the Dutch/Canadian Reformed churches.

For me, it carries a lot of weight that for over 400 years and many generations the practice has been for the male communicant members to represent the entire congregation in voting for office bearers. I've never heard that this practice has harmed the churches. To the contrary, through it God has blessed the churches with the regular provision of office bearers. If such a long-standing, beneficial practice that follows in the line of biblical examples is to be changed, should we not have excellent reasons for doing so? Both biblical prescription as well as description is lacking for the change. So why not stay the course?

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