

THE DENOMINATIONAL THEORY OF THE CHURCH

Denominations - Divided We Stand

In Volume 6 of Reformed Polemics we dealt extensively with the matter of confessional subscription or confessional binding. In the latter half of this volume we paid particular attention to the on-going Presbyterian “*strict versus loose subscription*” debate. We concluded this volume with a series of four editorials entitled *Strict Versus Loose Subscription*. In the final editorial we asked this important question: Is the OPC a confessional Church? And we paid particular attention to “the conclusion that suggests itself,” namely, “that no Presbyterian Church can truly be called a confessional church.”

A REVIEW OF SOME CONCLUSIONS

The aforementioned conclusion was articulated in the June 24, 2000 issue of Reformed Polemics. Before we continue our series of editorials on Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism it is advantageous to briefly review what we said in the concluding paragraphs of our June 24th editorial. We said that “it is extremely difficult to evaluate the confessional stand in the OPC. Even today the three-century old Presbyterian subscription debate continues unabated and unresolved. And this debate will continue unresolved and ‘ad infinitum’ because the ambiguous or ‘loose’ language found in the Adopting Act (Synod of Philadelphia, 1729) is not simply the result of an unfortunate linguistic oversight, but the consequence of a cleverly contrived compromise. This ‘American’ compromise is already the fruit or consequence of the ‘fruitless ecclesiastical compromise’ perpetrated at the Westminster Assembly, a compromise that ‘bequeathed a legacy of confusion to Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism that is still not resolved in those secessionist Presbyterian Churches that take seriously at least some of the Assembly’s documents’ (Gary North).

There is in Presbyterianism ‘almost no denomination-wide confessional requirement for voting (communicant, RD) members.’ It is not officially asked of those who make public profession of faith whether they ‘wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions, and taught here in this Christian Church.’ The OPC requires only a thumb-nail sketch of the gospel for communicant membership and not adherence to the Westminster Standards. It is therefore no wonder that ‘the conclusion that suggests *itself*’ is that ‘no Presbyterian Church can truly be called a *confessional church*.’ And since this conclusion suggests *itself*, we suggest nothing different. If a suggestion *is* needed, perhaps it is this: Let’s listen closely to what Presbyterians *themselves* have said about the traditional Reformed practice of confessional membership or confessional binding at the time that the congregation at Blue Bell was forced out of the OPC (1983-84).” (a)

A COUPLE OF CLOSING QUOTES

We concluded our editorial with some rather revealing quotes on what Presbyterians *themselves* have said about the *traditional* Reformed position on the requirements of confessional binding and admission to the Lord’s supper:

1) In the Annual Report of the Committee on Candidates and Credentials to the Presbytery of Philadelphia (May 1, 1983 - April 30, 1984) we read that “the candidates has reservations regarding Mr. Kok’s (Rev. K.A. Kok of Blue Bell, RD) candidacy on the basis of his views on *church membership* and related matters... (Mr. Kok) holds a TRADITIONAL REFORMED POSITION on the requirements for *church membership* and admission to the Lord’s supper. The Committee believes SUCH VIEWS TO BE INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE PRESBYTERIAN VIEW.” (emphasis added)

2) From the Letter to the Pulpit Committee of the OPC in Blue Bell, October 16 1983, by Rev. John J. Mitchell. “There is no such thing as a Reformed church that limits itself to those who can FULLY ACCEPT ALL MAJOR DOCTRINES OF THE REFORMED FAITH; such a body is a *sect*, NOT A CHURCH.” (emphasis added)

We observed that “these closing quotes bring to the fore the necessity to candidly examine the Presbyterian view on church and church government.” And as we undertake this examination we note, first of all, that in the aforementioned quotes the Presbyterian authors of these remarkable statements make it very clear that they consider the traditional Reformed position on the requirement of confessional binding (confessional membership) and admission to the Lord’s supper to be “*incompatible* with the Presbyterian view.” Furthermore, *any* Reformed church that requires of its

communicant members that they “fully accept all major doctrines of the Reformed faith,” is judged to be “a *sect*, not a church.” (Note the use of the indefinite word “major” and the resulting faulty distinction between “major” and “minor” points of doctrine, RD) And as we shall see, these Presbyterian pronouncements made in the context of the secession of the Church at Blue Bell from the OPC are the inevitable outcome of the “fruitless ecclesiastical compromise” (Gary North) perpetrated at the Westminster Assembly.

DENOMINATIONS - DIVIDED WE STAND

In an article entitled *Denominations - Divided We Stand*, Bruce Shelley, Professor at Denver Theological Seminary, tells us a bit about what happened at the Westminster Assembly. He writes that in the mid 1600’s “the first clear philosophy of denominations was being articulated by the Independents (Congregationalists), who represented the minority voice at the Westminster Assembly (1642-49). In contrast to the majority who held to Presbyterian principles and expressed these convictions in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Independents followed congregational principles. Keenly aware of the dangers of ‘dividing the godly Protestant party,’ these ‘Dissenting Brethren of Westminster’ looked for some way to express Christian unity even in disagreement.

The result was a denominational theory of the church that was based on the following principles: First, considering the human inability always to see the truth clearly, differences of opinion about the outward form of the church are inevitable. Second, even though these differences do not involve fundamentals of the faith, they are not matters of indifference. (Note that the “differences of opinion about the outward form of the church” are not considered to “involve fundamentals of faith,” RD) Third, since no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth, the true church of Christ can never be fully represented by any single ecclesiastical structure. (Note the assertion that in the true church of Christ “the truth” cannot be *fully* known, RD) Finally, the mere fact of separation does not of itself constitute schism. It is possible to be divided at many points and still be united in Christ.” (b) Here ends our quote from Professor Bruce Shelley.

When we read Prof. Shelley’s account of how “the first clear philosophy of denominations was being articulated” by the Congregationalists at the Westminster Assembly we are informed that the principles of this “denominational theory of the church,” though drafted in old England, “found their fullest expression in New England.” (America, RD) “Inevitably, immigration patterns and the lack of a state religion led to the flowering of a multiplicity of religious groups - traditional and novel - living side by side in the New World. In such a setting, the denominational theory seemed a plan from heaven.” Prof. Shelley writes that “‘denominationalism’ came to be set against ‘sectarianism,’ which denotes groups claiming the authority of Christ and truth for themselves alone and believing that they alone constituted the true body of Christ. (Note the use of the word “alone,” RD) Against this exclusive connotation, *denomination* became an inclusive term, implying that any Christian group ‘denominated’ by a particular name was but one member of a larger group - the church.” (c)

It is this “denominational theory of the church” that gives rise to the statement found in the Letter to the Pulpit Committee of the OPC in Blue Bell, namely that “there is no such thing as a Reformed church that limits itself to those who can fully accept all major doctrines of the Reformed faith; such a body is a *sect*, not a church,” (Rev. John J. Mitchell). On the basis of the pernicious caricature that we, as Reformed believers, “claim the authority of Christ and truth for ourselves ALONE” we are judged, by Presbyterians in the OPC to be “a *sect*, not a church.” And this judgment should not *really* surprise us, for it is solidly based on the principles of the “denominational theory of the church” as articulated by the “Dissenting Brethren of Westminster.” And as Prof. Bruce Shelley points out: “Though drafted in old England, these principles found their fullest expression in New England.” These principles formed the basis of and gave rise to the so-called “Protestant ‘American’” view on the church.

THE PROTESTANT “AMERICAN” VIEW

“The Protestant ‘American’ view on the church is guided by the fundamental belief that the Church of Christ is basically invisible and manifests itself in various denominations or throughout denominations, also in varying degrees of purity... It all boils down to this: all denominations have a right to exist and are significant for the whole, since pluralism and pluriformity are important characteristics of the one invisible Church. No Church may claim purity in doctrine, liturgy, and polity, although the one may be somewhat ‘purer’ than the other. Each makes his own attempt at serving God in the best way possible, and all are assured of their own in the great invisible Church of Christ.” (d)

Earlier we quoted Prof. Bruce Shelly who writes that “the first clear philosophy of denominations was being articulated by the Independents (Congregationalists), who represented the minority voice at the Westminster Assembly (1642-49).” He states that “in contrast to the majority who held to Presbyterian principles and expressed these convictions in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Independents followed congregational principles.” We note that Prof. Shelly makes a distinction between the “congregational principles” of the Independents (Congregationalists) and the “Presbyterian principles” or convictions “as expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith.” Yet, when we examine the terminology found in the Westminster Confession we see that the Independents’ “philosophy of denominations” and the “Presbyterian principles” as expressed in the Westminster Confession have a lot in common.

THE WESTMINSTER CONNECTION

In Article 25 of the Westminster Confession we can read that the Catholic (or universal) Church is *invisible*, consisting of the whole number of the elect, whereas the *visible* Church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion together with their children. The Westminster Confession renders the *invisible* Church as “the whole number of the elect.”

As Reformed confessors we know that if we speak of the Church in terms of the election, we create uncertainty: Where are the elect? We do not know! The secret things are for the Lord our God. Election is God’s sovereign decree, while “gathering” speaks of Christ’s ongoing activity and *revealed* norms to which we are bound. If we speak about the church as “the number of the elect,” we might inadvertently come to speak of the “invisible church,” for who knows where all the elect are? If we speak about the Church - as *our* confession does - as the gathering of believers, we must apply the norms by which the believers are gathered, *visibly* at one place, under one preaching, partaking in one communion. The terminology used in the Westminster Confession of Faith gives rise to misconceptions and accommodates the American denominationalist pattern. Given the Westminster definition of the church, it is also difficult to see how the OPC can avoid the practice of pluralism or pluriformity of the church.

The OPC’s Form of Government seems to confirm this practice of pluralism or pluriformity. There we read: “The visible unity of the Body of Christ, though not altogether destroyed, is greatly obscured by the division of the Christian church into different groups or denominations. In such denominations Christians exercise a fellowship toward each other in doctrine, worship, and order that they do not exercise towards other Christians. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error, and some have gravely departed from the apostolic purity; yet all of these which maintain through sufficient discipline the Word and the sacraments in their fundamental integrity are to be recognized as true manifestations of the church of Jesus Christ.” (FOG, IV.4 p.14.)

Such a passage embodies the notion of pluriformity. Note that the body of Christ is basically an *invisible* thing which manifests itself in several forms, but that all the denominations together form the one Body of Christ. Such a view cannot be squared with either Scripture or the Three Forms of Unity, but such is the basis of church unity with the OPC. It is not surprising, then, that the OPC allows to the Lord’s Supper table all “earnest Christians” even if their confession is incompatible with the confession of the OPC.

SOME CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

1) The “Dissenting Brethren of Westminster” in their contribution to the debate about the church did indeed find “some way to express Christian unity even in disagreement.” It’s called “the *denominational* theory of the church.” (Prof. Bruce Shelley)

2) The process by which this so-called “Christian unity” was attained “even in disagreement” *also* has a name. It’s called “a fruitless ecclesiastical compromise” that “bequeathed a legacy of confusion to Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism.”

(Gary North) The truth was sacrificed for the sake of so-called “Christian unity.”

3) This so-called “Christian unity” is a unity based on the erroneous belief that “no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth.” (Third principle of the “denominational theory”)

Therefore we are told by Rev. John J. Mitchell in his letter to the Pulpit Committee of the OPC in Blue Bell that “there is no such thing as a Reformed church that limits itself to those who can FULLY ACCEPT ALL MAJOR DOCTRINES OF THE REFORMED FAITH; such a body is a *sect*, NOT A CHURCH.” (Emphasis added)

4) Consequently there is in Presbyterianism “almost no denomination-wide confessional requirement for voting (communicant) members.” (Gary North)

5) The OPC may indeed think that the doctrines maintained in its own confessions are *important*, but they are not *essential*. Others who do not keep these confessed doctrines are nevertheless considered to be Christians who can participate in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

6) Hence we can agree with the statement in the Annual Report to the Presbytery of Philadelphia that the “TRADITIONAL REFORMED POSITION on the requirements for *church membership* and admission to the Lord’s supper” is “INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE PRESBYTERIAN VIEW.” (emphasis added)

The “denominational theory of the church” occupies a prominent and dominant place in Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism. It has also made deep inroads in the Reformed churches including the Canadian Reformed Churches. More about that, the Lord willing, in our next installment.

Ron Dykstra

a) Strict Versus Loose Subscription - Is the OPC a Confessional Church?, Ron Dykstra, Reformed Polemics, June 24/00

b), c) *Denominations - Divided We Stand*, Prof. Bruce Shelley, Christianity Today, Sept 7/98

d) *Denominationalism*, Rev. Cl. Stam, Clarion 1978, vol. 27 no 18.

THOU HAST CROWNED THE YEAR WITH THY GOODNESS!

There is no one among us who can say that they have nothing to do with Thanksgiving. Just because someone is not a farmer did not sow, plant, or reap a harvest does not mean that they are left outside of the celebration of thanksgiving for the harvest. Even though we are in an office or factory, on the road or at a construction site - whether we are a bricklayer, carpenter, painter, or a schoolteacher - we all receive our daily bread by means of our daily work.

Our title comes from verse eleven of Psalm 65. With this Psalm David sings the praises of the Lord in a special way. Throughout this Psalm he maintains an exalted note of jubilation, expressing his great joy. He has seen the glorious bounty of the Palestinian summer. Now the rain has come after a period of dryness and he knows that it is the care of the Lord that has brought this about. As a result the people are provided with grain and crops. David, the poet, sees the glorious sight of the waving fields with golden grain. He is soon moved to join in with the jubilation of the hills, covered as they were with those festive garments of meadows and flocks:

“The year is crowned, O Fount of blessing,
With gifts to cheer the land;
Thy goodness fills the earth, expressing
The wonders of Thy Hand.
The hills rejoice; the pastures, teeming;
With flocks that skip and spring,
The golden grain, in valleys gleaming
They shout for joy and sing.”

Even though autumn has arrived and the winds have begun to blow and the leaves are falling from the trees we have not forgotten the joy of those summer days when we drove along the ripening fields filled with corn, grain and produce. We rejoice in the bounty that the Lord God brought us this past summer. We may know that the Lord has also crowned

this year with His bounty, His goodness. The farmer could harvest his grain and store it away in his barns, in those large grain elevators. He has known the joy of harvesting and the song of his worthwhile labour. But that joy and song of labour was also heard and seen elsewhere: at home, at school and on the job site.

With few exceptions, we all know that joyful song of labour because we had work. We know that we had worthwhile work no matter what we did, because it was all in the service of the Lord, using the talents and gifts He has given us. The Lord is concerned how we use the talents he has given us. It does not matter whether it is one, two, or five. But it does matter what our attitude is and was; He does want us to do our work to the best of our ability. For this reason on Thanksgiving Day, but also from day to day, we must and may remember to sing of the joy of labour in the service of our God and Maker, our Lord and Saviour.

In contrast to the millions of labourers in this world and in our nation, our song of labour has an address. Among the songs of the unbelievers, their odes to man, to his scientific achievements and technical know-how, there is also our song, our song of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, an ode dedicated to our God and Father. Amidst the boasting of the natural man, the man who considers himself self-made, self-employed and self-sufficient, there is the song of the spiritual man. King David and all the children of God have learned to boast in the Lord and want to express their utter dependence on Him.

The Psalmist knows and explains that our song of joy about labour must be addressed to God. But he also knows about attitude towards his work and he feels compelled to confess his guilt. Just read the beginning of this Psalm: we were overwhelmed, he said, by our sins, by our transgressions. Then he makes a confession about his natural inclination to sing a song of praise to himself. By equaling his success in life with the blessing of the Lord, by giving himself the honour instead of observing the undeserved favour of the Lord he has sinned before his God. Recognizing that he has not always expected and received his success from the hand of the Lord he feels compelled to confess his transgression. He has failed to give his daily song of life and labour a right and proper address.

Now the same applies to us. Our song of labour can become filled with false notes because we do not send it up to God on a daily basis, at home, at school, and at work. All too often we learn, study and work for ourselves making plans and decisions without any reference to the honour and praise of God. So often we forget that we are in His employ. Our song of labour must be uttered daily and it must have a proper address: the Name of God. Then we may conclude the season of bounty, of full-time labour with, "Thou, O Lord, hast crowned our labours, our harvest, our produce, and production, with Thy goodness."

How could we have been so self-sufficient, so self-assured? That's also what David asked. But he is led to understand that there is not only guilt but also forgiveness. If we go to the Lord, then there is not only unrighteousness with us, but also that forgiveness for us, then there is atonement, reconciliation and peace with God. That's why a man who has lived for himself, who has sung in honour of himself, is directed to the Lord. Thanks to the grace of God through Jesus Christ a smug, self-satisfied labourer may learn to know the great joy of salvation, of complete liberation from sin and guilt.

Here we have the message of the gospel. Our Saviour Jesus Christ has taken our guilt upon Himself. He has died on the cross because of that selfish song of man, because man did not give his song of labour a proper address. With His sacrifice on the cross He has atoned for man's guilt, for our guilt, so that we could live in this world of God as His children. Now, as His children we may live our earthly lives, also our lives of labour, in the service of our Lord and King, Jesus Christ. For He has come into the world to die so that we would have life and a living in this world.

Do you believe in that atoning power of the blood of Christ? Do you believe that you received your daily bread through that blood, and that it was thanks to Him, the Saviour of the world, that this past year has been a year of the Lord, a year of abundance, a year full of His goodness? Do you believe that it was thanks only to God's promise to Noah, that spring followed winter, and summer followed spring? Do you believe that the past summer of crops and labour, of produce and production, thus another year crowned with bounty, was the goodness of the Lord?

When we can give a positive answer to these questions we can join anew in the singing of the song of God's favour manifested in nature. Then we can sing of His grace in Christ because we remember again the wonder of His care and keeping. Then we rejoice again in that surprising wonder of receiving the goodness of the Lord. Then we have every reason to give thanks, to celebrate Thanksgiving Day.

In Psalm 65 it is clear that the poet has seen anxious moments due to lack of rain. Moments when the upcoming harvests were about to turn into disasters but when suddenly there was rain. Then, when the streams filled to overflowing, he felt ashamed because of his distrust, because of his worries. How impatient, how dissatisfied he had been. He had not trusted in the Lord.

David's heart is filled with emotion. He has seen again the wonder of God's grace in his life and in the life of his people. In the same way our emotion of love and thankfulness must bring us to the joyful song, "Thou, O Lord, has crowned the year with Thy goodness", yes, so much beyond our expectation, and so totally undeserved.

Undeserved! For are we not often ungrateful? Are we not often impatient, expecting our Lord to respond immediately? When God does not immediately come to our aid in adverse situations we quickly become upset and even rebellious. It seems there is not a good word anyone can offer in such circumstances. That's how impatient and shortsighted we are. Indeed, the Lord lets us wait, sometimes for a very long time, but He gives us what we need in His time. He is faithful!

Thanks to God's goodness in Christ there has not been one year since our fall in sin without that surprising wonder of harvest and labour, of produce and production, without those precious gifts of the Lord. Of course, we do not underestimate the dark sides to our present life. There are anxious cares when sicknesses and diseases fall upon us. Our daily work, too, is filled with obstructions. It is often heavy going. We can indeed sink into despair, become totally despondent and even be tempted to listen to a rebellious heart. We had it so good and now there is that terrible blow. We were so happy and now there is that sudden injury, a serious accident, or even bereavement of a loved one. Yes, how many of God's children do not go their way in silent grief? Is there also reason for thanksgiving then?

When a man is healthy and able to work, when things are good at home with wife and family, then it is easy to sing of the praises of the Lord, to sing of a year crowned with His bounty and goodness. But if it has gone differently, when he is faced with adversity, when he is faced with sickness, disease, unemployment, yes, even poverty, then . . . then what?

Well, then too, we must still be directed by the words of Psalm 65. Also then we must walk the path of faith. For faith will overcome all things. We will become patient in adversity, remembering the blessings of grace our Father continues to bestow in His unending faithfulness. He does so as our heavenly Father Who has shown us such immeasurable compassion in His Son, Jesus Christ. Through Him He daily grants us the wonders of His grace, and tells us every day: My grace is sufficient for you, it will cover all your needs, exactly. And that's how He brings us a message of comfort and power and courage. We will be comforted in the faith that He has always supplied and thus will also do so now. Then we can be thankful anew, singing the song that only believers can take on their lips. We will sing the praises of the Lord. We will worship our Creator, Father and Saviour.

For whoever you are, wherever you work, whatever your circumstances, the Lord has come to crown your life with His goodness. Just as He crowns the year with produce and production, with crops and labour, in the same way He will crown your life in Jesus Christ.

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ON CASTING THE LOT

Introduction

In the election of office bearers, in the event of a tie vote, some consistories specify that the lot is to be cast to determine who is to be appointed. Generally, a special prayer asking God to show us His choice precedes the casting of the lot. Thus, for example, a popular commentary on the Church Order justifies this practice by asserting:

"...it is the proper course to tell the Lord that we could not come to a conclusion and to ask Him now to point out directly the one who is to be appointed." [1]

It might be thought to be a great honour for the chosen man to be directly appointed by God - and a deep humiliation for him who was not selected. But does God, through the lot, really indicate directly who is to be appointed?

Implications

Consider some of the implications if this were actually the case. First, if God's direct guidance is so readily available, why should we bother voting at all? why not let God directly choose all the officers, as someone has already suggested [2]? Indeed, for that matter, why not let the lot determine all controversial issues? This would save us much work, particularly at Classis and synod, and would guarantee that we reach the right decisions. It would decisively settle even the most contentious disputes, for who can dispute an unambiguous "thus saith the Lord"?

Further, since in a tie vote both men are presumably deemed equally suitable, the actual choice is really of no great significance. In that sense the question is an easy one. But why, then, is it that we ask for God's direct guidance only for the simplest, non-controversial questions? Does this imply reluctance on our part to request divine help? Or does it perhaps suggest that, at heart, we are not entirely convinced that God actually does speak directly through the lot?

Chance and Divine Choice

In defense of the lot one might appeal to Proverbs 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD". This may seem to imply that the outcome of the lot is to be equated with God's special choice.

Yet we must be careful. Even in Bible times, not every casting of the lot could be considered as a divine oracle. As Douma [3] notes, in the Bible it was to be done by direct command of the Lord, or "before the Lord". Prayer often preceded it. There are instances where the lot was used by unbelievers, such as in dividing the garments of Jesus (Matt.27: 35; Ps.22: 18), and in setting the execution time for the Jews (Esther 3:7). In such cases there is nothing to indicate that God approved of the outcome, although God did allow a heathen usage of the lot to indicate Jonah's guilt (Jonah 1:7). Not the casting of lots itself, but the context in which it occurred, gave it a sacred character.

The Proverbs text, on the other hand, according to Douma, stresses that nothing is outside God's influence. We use words such as "chance" and "random" to denote our human ignorance of the future result. To our omniscient and omnipotent God, however, nothing is really "random"; everything happens in accordance with His will and plan.

Nevertheless, God's knowledge and predetermination of the outcome of the lot in itself confers divine approval upon neither our usage of the lot nor our interpretation of its outcome. Hence it is presumptuous for us to claim the outcome of casting the lot to be a direct divine choice unless we can be assured that it has divine sanction.

Biblical Precedence

Thus we ask - does the Bible give any support for our current usage of the lot?

In the Old Testament, God certainly did at times reveal His will through the lot. For example, God explicitly commanded that the lot be used in choosing the scapegoat (Lev.16: 8-10), dividing the land (Num.26: 55), finding the guilty Achan (Josh.7: 14-18), and choosing Saul as king (I Sam.10: 21-21). For other matters God gave Israel also the Urim and Thummim, which seems to have been a form of casting lots (see I Sam.14: 41), so that, before a priest, the judgment of the Lord could be enquired (Num.27: 21).

In our day, however, we have no explicit commands from God that we are to use the lot, whether in a tie vote or otherwise. Nor are the Urim and Thummim any longer available to us. Hence the application of these Old Testament practices to our day is unwarranted.

Moreover, with the Urim and Thummim it was possible for God not to respond (for example, I Sam.28: 6 "and the LORD answered him not by Urim"). In our usage of the lot we not only compel God to answer, but limit His possible responses to a few very specific options, set by us, all of which may be unacceptable to Him who knows all hearts.

What does the New Testament teach us in this matter? Reference is sometimes made to the procedure used to choose the successor of Judas:

"And they appointed two, Joseph...and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, Thou Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen... And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell on Matthias." (Acts 1:15-26)

To what extent is this event normative for us?

Note, first, that there is no mention of a tie vote here, only the nomination of two men who satisfied the criterion of having accompanied Jesus throughout his entire ministry (Acts 1:21-22). Also, some commentators are of the opinion that this was actually a majority vote rather than a casting of lots [4]. Further, there is no indication that this procedure had divine approval or that it prescribes how we, in our day, should choose church officers.

Since Jesus had personally chosen the twelve apostles, it may well have been thought fitting that also the replacement for Judas be divinely selected. That the replacement for Judas was a special case is further reinforced by the fact that, later, the seven deacons (Acts 6) are clearly chosen by the brethren, rather than by casting lots. Moreover, let us not forget that in New Testament times, unlike our own age, God was directly active in a special way.

Conclusions

In summary, I believe it erroneous to think that God, through the casting of the lot, directly indicates His choice from among the alternatives we present. There is no biblical evidence to support the notion that, in our present circumstances, God chooses church officers through the lot, particularly not in a tie vote.

Having said that, the above considerations leave open the option to break a tie vote via some impartial, unbiased mechanism that offers both men equal "chances". This could be by age, alphabetical order, flipping a coin, or picking a name out of a hat. As such, it could form part of the normal voting procedure and would require no special prayer for God's direct intervention. (This does, however, raise the further question, which we shall not address here, of whether the call to office through the congregation requires a clear majority, in which case a 50% tie vote would be insufficient).

Therefore, I see no objection to using the lot as a means to make an unbiased, random (only from a human point of view, of course) selection between two equally acceptable options - as long as it is clearly perceived as such, and not mistaken for a divine oracle.

References:

1. "With Common Consent", W.W.J. van Oene (Winnipeg: Premier Pub, 1990), p.347.
2. A. Sikkema, "Women shouldn't vote but neither should men!" Information (Oct.8, 1994).
3. J. Douma, "The Ten Commandments" (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996, translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman).
4. Acts of Synod 1980, p.209.