

A More Perfect Union

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Ancient Witnesses: Romans 13:1-2, 6-7 Revelation 13:5-8

Earlier this week I read an article about a declaration by the governor of Texas that would reduce the number of ballot drop boxes to just one per county. These boxes allow voters to drop off their mail-in ballots without having to use the postal system, a very important thing, especially because cuts and efforts to diminish the postal service's capacity by the current administration. In the middle of a pandemic, record numbers of voters will use the mail-in ballots in order to avoid crowds of people and to stay safe from the coronavirus. Slowing down the mail will prevent many ballots from being counted in a timely manner. So reducing instead of increasing the ballot drop off sites seems to be a clear effort to suppress the vote. In addition, they are shutting down hundreds of in-person voting locations, increasing crowds and decreasing safety at this crucial time. Again, suppressing people's ability to vote.

For some perspective, there are two ballot drop boxes in Pullman. What would it be like if there were just one in the entire county? But in Texas, the counties are huge. For example, Harris county includes the entire city of Houston of 4.7 million people. One drop box! And that one county is larger than the entire state of Rhode Island. One drop box. In the middle of a pandemic.

This is just one of many examples of anti-democratic measures that have been instituted in recent years. We have seen shutting down polling locations in many other states, especially in areas with a high concentration of minority voters, causing people to wait in line for over 12 hours in some cases. We have seen thousands of votes invalidated using questionable criteria, such as signature matching. We have seen the increase of voter I.D. laws, disenfranchising many poor and elderly voters we do not have, cannot afford and are unable to get a drivers license or state I.D. We have seen states purge their voting rolls, focusing again on minority voters. When I lived in Ohio, many voters were removed from the rolls if they forgot to vote in a previous election.

All of these efforts, and many more, are part of a concerted effort to keep people from voting, placing obstacles and making it difficult instead of encouraging and enabling voting. It is anti-democratic. And false arguments of voter fraud and used to institute widespread election fraud. The odds of voter fraud is statistically nonexistent, about the same odds of getting hit by an asteroid. It hardly every happens. And yet, calls to address this problem that doesn't exist produce thousands, if not millions, of people who cannot vote.

As a person of faith, I see this as an affront to the purposes of God, who calls for the dignity and respect of all people. As a person of faith, I believe that democracy is essential for fair and just society, and it is our obligation to protect it and to perfect it.

This week, I read another disturbing article about Senator Mike Lee from Utah, who said, “Democracy isn’t the objective” of the United States. He wrote, “The word, ‘democracy’ appears nowhere in the Constitution, perhaps because our form of government is not a democracy. It’s a constitutional republic.” Now, I have heard this specious argument before. But I never thought it would be promoted by a United States senator. Saying, “We are a constitutional republic and not a democracy” is like saying, “I am a Baptist and not a Christian.” Government through representatives is simply one way to manifest democracy. But why would a senator downplay the importance of democracy? And why would those in power work to suppress the vote?

We currently have only 50% of our electorate vote. On a good year, it is closer to 60%. If we love democracy, why aren’t we making it easier? Why aren’t we striving to have 70% vote? 80%? 90%?

Democracy isn’t so much a system as it is a principle. The word derives from the Greek words, *demos*, meaning “people” and *kratos*, meaning “rule.” It is the principle of self rule. As Lincoln put it, “of the people, by the people and for the people.” And it is commonly said that these United States of America are the oldest continuing democracy on earth.

The Preamble of our Constitution starts with these beautiful words: “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union...” The whole purpose is for us to birth a nation where there is justice and fairness. A nation where the powerful do not oppress the powerless. A nation where there is equality and prosperity is shared. A nation where the lowest in society have as much say as the billionaires. A nation where all people are created equal. The whole purpose is to strive toward a more perfect union. It is essential that we are constantly striving toward this idea. The perfect union might be an unattainable goal, but we continue to strive to make it more perfect. We strive for greater democracy, to be truly a nation of, by and for the people.

This union has been flawed and not perfect since the beginning, if we’re honest. The nation was built on the labor of slaves brought against their will from Africa. In the Constitution, they were counted as 3/5 of a person, but only for the representation of the white property owning interests. In actuality, they were counted as property and not as persons at all. This wasn’t changed in our Constitution until the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments after the Civil War. The union became more perfect, but still with a way to go.

Women weren’t an equal part of the union, either. It wasn’t until the 19th Amendment that women were able to vote. The union became more perfect, but still with a way to go.

It seems that every time we have made progress at perfecting our union, there have been reactions and backlashes. After voting rights were granted to African Americans, there emerged a whole series of laws to prevent them from voting such as poll taxes or so-called literacy tests. So these recent efforts to disenfranchise voters and suppress the vote come as no surprise, do they? Perfecting the union is a never ending endeavor.

The establishment of the Senate, ostensibly to give equal representation for each state, in effect was created more to protect the interest of the aristocracy. And just as the founders were skewed against Black and against women, it was also skewed in favor of land owning aristocracy, it seems to me. And over 200 years later, the modern world has required more of a federal system, leaving the idea of states rights less and less relevant. Perfecting our union, correcting what has become a gross imbalance, requires that we address this, it seems to me. California has 40 million people, and yet they have only two senators. Wyoming has about a half million people and two senators, making their vote count 80 times more than California's voters. We need to continue to perfect our union toward greater equality and democracy.

We also, it seems to me, move away from an antiquated Electoral College to a national popular vote. This movement has been gaining momentum in recent years.

During the Reformation of the Christian church of the 16th century, there was a slogan in Latin: *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*. It is translated, "the church having been reformed is always reforming." It comes from the idea that the church, too, continually strives for a more perfect union, a more perfect embodiment of God's will here on earth. And we have seen the church endeavor to do this.

There was a time when the church justified the inhuman institution of slavery, simply accepting it as a given in our world. But thank God, the church repented of this and eventually came to realize that slavery is an unjust, ungodly practice that cannot be justified. The church reformed itself.

There was a time when the church justified the second class status of women, viewing women as chattel, as less than man, having derivative status. But thank God, the church repented of this and eventually came to realize that this was an unjust, ungodly practice that cannot be justified. The church reformed itself.

There was a time when the church justified a view that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered people were defective, inferior and inherently sinful. But thank God, many of the churches have repented of this and eventually came to realize that this was an unjust, ungodly practice that cannot be justified. The church, for a large part, reformed itself.

And like the church which should be reforming itself, our nation should be reforming itself and striving for a more perfect union. This is our obligation and responsibility.

Years ago, I had an ethics professor at a small Christian college. Richard Mouw when on the become the President of Fuller Seminary. He is considered a conservative evangelical with a strong sense of social justice. And he used to say that as Christians we need to balance Romans 13 with Revelation 13.

Romans 13 talks about how the government is an agent of God, and that we need to pay taxes, subject ourselves to its authority and submit ourselves to it.

Revelation 13 talks about how the government is an agent of the evil one, destroying and devouring the people. It requires us to oppose it and speak against it.

The thing is, both Romans 13 and Revelation 13 were talking about the same Roman government! And it is up to us to discern when the nation is acting as an agent of God and when it is acting as an agent of oppression.

Because it's always a mixture. The union is far from perfect. And it is up to us and each generation to make it more perfect. To make it more of an agent of goodness. To make it more just and fair. To make it more democratic, serving all the people and not just some.

For some years, the UK based company, Economist Intelligence Unit, has been putting out a democracy index. Recently, the United States has fallen into the category of "flawed democracy." There are growing issues of suppression, participation and representation in governance. The recent Supreme Court decision of Citizen's United which declared that corporations are people when it comes to political speech is but on sign of this.

It was those great historians, Will and Ariel Durant, who in their massive study on human civilization, concluded that great empires are not conquered by outside enemies. It's not because they don't spend enough money on their military. Great empires crumble from within. And when we get complacent, when we stop striving for a more perfect union, we lose ground and eventually crumble and decay.

And so, may we not rest. May we continue to strive against the power and the wealth of the few. May we be neither the loveless critic nor the uncritical lover. May we, the people, continue to establish a more perfect union.