

Why Do Politicians Love Complex Solutions?

By: Larry Greenfield

Posted: Wednesday, July 15, 2009

I challenge anybody to provide a simple, definitive and declarative interpretation of the opening statement in Ephesians.

From verses 3 to 14, so much is going on here that translators can't even agree where to put the commas. And talk about convoluted ideas!

- "Spiritual blessings in the heavenly places," for starters (Ephesians 1:3). What could that mean?
- "Chose us in him before the foundation of the world," (Ephesians 1:4). Surrrrrrre!
- "...to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved," (Ephesians 1:6). There had to be a more straightforward way of making this point!

Well, I could go on. But a declaration from J. Armitage Robinson in 1904 pretty much makes my point:

"The 12 verses which follow [the opening salutation] baffle our analysis. They are a kaleidoscope of dazzling lights and shifting colours: at first we fail to find a trace of order or method. They are like the preliminary flight of the eagle, rising and wheeling around, as though for a while uncertain what direction in his boundless freedom he shall take."

My former Old Testament teacher at the University of Chicago Divinity School, Jay Wilcoxon, adds to this early 20th-century quote: "The difficulty is compounded by the fact that what are six complex sentences in the NRSV translation is a single sentence in Greek, as modern editors punctuate it."

A good contemporary analogy might be trying to make sense of the legislative processes of our local, state and national governmental units. Try to make sense of the reforms being proposed for those legislative processes. They've either outlived their usefulness or the old processes have become so manipulated that they deny a democratic form of civic polity, rather than be an expression of it.

The so-called reform plans are, I suspect, as confusing as the opening verses of Ephesians, in this political case because every attempt is being made to retain as many as possible of the unjustifiable privileges and benefits of those in power – even while utilizing the rhetoric of reform to hide them.

My own state of Illinois is a good example: the state legislature rejected a set of simple, straightforward, definitive recommendations from a blue-ribbon panel on government

ethics and campaign finance reform. Instead, they created a complicated hodgepodge of what seems to be deliberately ambiguous new rules that serve primarily to ensure the re-election of incumbents and to make it possible for party leaders to transfer large amounts of campaign funds and unlimited "in-kind" donations to their candidates.

The consequence? Those elected will become even more responsive and accountable to their party leaders than to their own constituents.

At the most opportune time for thorough and far-reaching reform, given the scandals that have plagued the state in recent months, our legislators have been rhetorically bold but, in reality, tepid and self-serving.

A confusing complexity clouds the simple and clear demands of democracy.

My own way of making sense of the opening clauses of Ephesians is to ask, "What are the practical consequences of all the complicated and confusing rhetoric?" Yes, there is plenty in the passage about our divine election and predestined adoption. Yes, there is plenty about redemption from our sins and the revelation that gives us a clue about God's mysterious will.

But in the end, as far as I can tell, the whole point is that followers of Jesus are to be "holy and blameless" in every part of our being (Ephesians 1:4). And just to make it abundantly clear, the writer tells the reader that being "holy and blameless" is defined not by the usual definitions of those terms, but by the single standard of "love." The consequence of our divine election, of our understanding of the divine mysteries and of our divine salvation is that we are to love in every part of our being.

A question like that – about the clear practical consequences of proposals for political reform – needs to be asked of our leaders. Amid all the complexity and confusion, we need a clear answer to the question that goes something like this: "In this democracy of ours, do these proposals help or hinder the rule of 'we the people'?"