

Casting Lots

There was a time when Israel had finished the initial conquest of Canaan, and it was time for the tribes to start settling their portion of the land. By this point some tribes had already taken their territory, but about half of the tribes hadn't received their land yet:

Joshua 18:1-2: “And the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of the congregation there. And the land was subdued before them. And there remained among the children of Israel seven tribes, which had not yet received their inheritance.”

When Joshua heard that some tribes hadn't received their land yet, he wasn't pleased. He commanded the Israelites to go through the land, look it over, and bring a description of it to him. Once he had their information he would allot the land to the remaining tribes:

Joshua 18:3-4: “And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, How long are ye slack to go to possess the land, which the LORD God of your fathers hath given you? Give out from among you three men for each tribe: and I will send them, and they shall rise, and go through the land, and describe it according to the inheritance of them; and they shall come again to me.”

This was easy enough to do, but it raised a problem. Once Joshua received the surveys of the land that Israel had just

conquered, how would the territory be divided up among the tribes? This was a very important job because after the land was given to the tribes it was going to belong to them forever. The Mosaic Law didn't allow tribes to sell their land to others. Once the land belonged to a tribe it would always belong to that tribe. When Joshua allocated the land he was making a choice that couldn't be undone. That's where each tribe would be located for the rest of the nation's existence.

What made the problem even harder is the fact that one piece of land isn't the same as another piece of land. There are differences in terrain, in resources, in relative location to important places, and so forth. Deciding who got what piece of land was a *really big decision*. How could anyone possibly make a decision like that in a way that would be fair to everyone involved?

If we were faced with a problem like that today there are several things we might do. We might form a committee and have them divide the land, but people would claim the results were unfair and that the best land was given to others. We might put it to a vote, but people would try to vote the best places for themselves at the expense of others. No matter what you did, someone would make the case that you messed up their future by giving the better land to someone else. Someone was going to be very unhappy.

The choice that Joshua was going to make would impact millions of people for more than a thousand years. It was going to change the destiny of the nation and how history unfolded. So what did Joshua do? He *cast lots*:

Joshua 18:8: “And the men arose, and went away: and Joshua charged them that went to describe the land, saying, Go and walk through the land, and describe it, and come again to me, that I may here cast lots for you before the LORD in Shiloh.”

In modern terms, he flipped a coin. At this point in history it was actually possible to inquire of the Lord directly using something known as the Urim and the Thummim, but that's not what Joshua did. Instead he used the equivalent of random throws of a pair of dice to decide what territory each tribe received.

Why would Joshua use a coin toss to make such an important decision? The Bible gives us two reasons. The first is that casting lots keeps people from fighting over the result:

Proverbs 18:18: “The lot causeth contentions to cease, and parteth between the mighty.”

If you make a decision that favors one person over another then that could easily lead to a fight. However, if the decision is left up to a coin toss then that changes everything. That's why issues like who goes first in a sporting competition are often decided by flipping a coin – it's generally viewed as a fair way to make that sort of decision. By “casting lots” Joshua could divide the land in a way that didn't show favoritism to anyone and that no one could really argue about.

There's another reason why lots were used. Did you notice that Joshua said he was going to cast lots before the Lord? That's because the Bible teaches that the outcome of casting lots is *not* random:

Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.”

The reason Joshua “cast lots” before the Lord was because he knew that God would use the outcome of the lots to make sure that each tribe received the land they were supposed to have. Joshua understood that the outcome wasn't random chance. God was in control of everything, including the casting of lots. There simply is no such thing as chance.

I realize this attitude may seem a little strange, but it makes sense. The Bible teaches us that God has an overall plan

for history. The Lord has given us prophecies about things that are going to happen in the future, and God will make sure that those prophecies come to pass. God isn't *predicting* what's going to happen in the future; instead He is telling us that certain things are going to come to pass *because it's His will* for them to come to pass.

If God controls the future then He must also control the events that lead up to the future. If He didn't have that sort of power then the future He desires might not come to pass, because some event could come along that might push individuals or nations into a different direction. A small event in the past could cause a big difference a hundred years later. Sometimes world wars are started by events that seem quite small.

It's important to realize that if God can control the future and the fate of nations then He must also be able to control things on a much smaller scale as well – such as the outcome of casting lots. If God was unable to control small things like that then how could He possibly make promises about events that are in the distant future? That's why it's not surprising that the Bible tells us the outcome of “casting lots” is of the Lord. It's not that there's something special about the lots themselves; they're not magical devices with supernatural powers. The reason “casting lots” works is because the lot is being cast in a universe that's under God's control. Since He has decided that history is going to turn out in a certain way, He will make sure that nothing happens which could thwart His plan.

This isn't the only time that lots are used in the Bible. In 1 Chronicles 24 and 25, King David set up a system of priests and other people to work in the tabernacle. There were so many people who worked in the tabernacle in those days that they couldn't possibly all serve at once. A system had to be devised to keep the tabernacle running and make sure everyone was in the right place at the right time.

There was a lot to think about because this was a major decision which would impact the worship of God for hundreds of years. So how was this problem solved? By casting of lots:

1 Chronicles 25:8: “And they cast lots, ward against ward, as well the small as the great, the teacher as the scholar.”

How was the promised land divided among the tribes of Israel? By casting lots and trusting that God would work through the lots to accomplish His will. How was the tabernacle service divided among all the priests? By casting lots.

Much later in Israel's history, Nehemiah was working to rebuild Jerusalem and make it habitable again. At that time it was dangerous to live in an unprotected and vulnerable city like Jerusalem – especially when the Jews were surrounded by hostile forces who might attack them at any moment. Even so, *someone* had to live in the city or else the work would never get finished and Jerusalem would never be livable again. But how could anyone make the decision about who should take that risk?

Nehemiah knew just what to do. He cast lots:

Nehemiah 11:1: “And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities.”

The people didn't form a committee to study the matter and decide who should move to Jerusalem. Nor did Nehemiah make the determination himself, based on how well he knew people or who he thought made the most sense to move. No, instead they cast lots and left the decision up to the Lord.

We find this same approach to decision making in the New Testament as well. When Judas betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide, the number of disciples dropped to 11 and a vacancy was opened. That vacancy needed to be filled, so the remaining disciples found two men who were both qualified candidates. Since there were two people and only one job to be

filled, that meant they had to make a difficult decision – but who was the right person for the job? There was no obvious reason to choose one over the other. This was a momentous decision that would have a big impact on the church for the rest of its history. After all, God used the disciples to lay the foundation of the church!

So what did the disciples do? They cast lots:

Acts 1:24-26: “And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

The disciples prayed to the Lord and cast their lots, and upon that basis Matthias became numbered with the apostles. Notice that the disciples didn't treat the lots as if they were some kind of magical items. Instead they prayed to the Lord, cast the lots, and accepted their decision.

It's true that there are many decisions in the Bible that were *not* made by lots. However, we can see why these particular decisions were good candidates for casting lots. Dividing the land was an enormous task that was a very poor fit for a committee. Casting lots was much more fair, was less prone to corruption, and removed an unbearable burden. No one could possibly make a “fair” decision in that situation, but by casting lots it could be handled nicely.

The same thing was true for the division of workers in the tabernacle. Since everyone was qualified, how could anyone decide who should serve first in the year and who should serve last? If a committee tried to decide that it would just lead to hurt feelings and complaints of favoritism. By casting lots the whole thing became much more fair and equitable.

Likewise, the decision of who had to take the risk of living in Jerusalem would be a terrible one for any leader to make. Which of your people do you put in danger? How could you fairly make a decision like that? But by casting lots, the decision was removed from the hands of men and there was no question of bribes or corruption. Everyone understood the basis for the decision and why people got what they did.

It may seem strange that an *apostle* was chosen by casting lots, but there were two excellent candidates and only one vacancy. By casting lots there were no hard feelings. No one had to worry about the fact that they voted for the guy who lost, and there was no question about secret deals or favoritism. A lot of potential strife was removed – and there was no way for the lots to result in a bad outcome because both candidates were qualified.

So what does this have to do with us today? I find it fascinating that so much of what we find in the Bible is completely foreign to the way we run our churches. I've never seen a church make a decision by casting lots, even though that practice is quite common in the Bible. However, I have seen churches make many decisions by voting even though there's no Biblical basis for such a thing! Voting definitely existed in Bible times because the chief priests voted to put Jesus to death. People knew about voting back in the days of the apostles and yet no one ever suggested that's how churches should be governed.

I think the reason that casting lots is so unthinkable today is because the modern church has gotten *very* far from the way the Bible teaches that churches should be run. Today when we talk about “going to church”, they're often talking about going on a Sunday morning to a large, expensive building, where they will sit in a pew beside a lot of other people that they may or may not know. Over the next 60 to 90 minutes they will sing a few songs together, collect an offering, and then listen to a sermon. After the pastor has finished delivering the sermon (during which time no one is allowed to speak) they go home. The church building has a paid staff which does most of the work, and it also has a small

group of deacons or elders who do the rest. The role of many people who attend churches is to show up, give money, and then go home without having done much of anything. Nearly all of the money that's collected is spent on maintaining the church building and paying its full-time staff, because it can take hundreds of thousands of dollars to run a church building, even if only a hundred or so people attend. These churches are often incorporated as nonprofit corporations for tax exemption purposes, and have regular business meetings to review the church finances and vote on whatever needs to be decided.

Do we find this model anywhere in the New Testament? *No, we do not.* When the New Testament speaks of the Corinthian Church it's talking about the group of Christians who lived in Corinth. It was *not* talking about a building, because no New Testament church had a dedicated building where they met to have worship services! In fact, there are *no verses* in the New Testament that command Christians to go around building dedicated church buildings. That simply wasn't how things were done in the days of the apostles.

Instead of making the trip to an expensive church campus, Christians met in small groups in people's homes¹ where they would sing songs², talk to one another, confess their faults to one another³, and pray for one another⁴. Those who had something to say could speak up and say it. If someone had a message to give he could give it⁵, and the sermon could be discussed on the spot as people asked (and answered) questions. The service wasn't always a 60-minute performance with a long monologue at the end; instead it could be a highly interactive event that lasted until people were done⁶. On top of that, these same people met

1 For example, see Philemon 1:2 and Colossians 4:15

2 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 gives a great overview of what churches services were actually like in the days of the apostles. It's remarkable!

3 James 5:16

4 Also James 5:16

5 1 Corinthians 14:29-30

6 Acts 20:7 says that sometimes these services could last all night.

regularly throughout the week to eat meals together⁷. This was a vital part of “doing church”, because when you eat a meal with other people regularly you can get to know them. (Compare eating one or two meals a week with someone to sitting behind a person in church. After a year, which do you think will result in a stronger relationship?)

The early church model had a whole lot of things going for it. If you met in small groups in people's homes then you wouldn't have to worry about paying for an expensive building. If each of the small groups had qualified leaders then a single pastor wouldn't have to somehow find a way to meet the needs of hundreds or thousands of people. Each small group could get to know one another and work together *as a body*. You also wouldn't need full-time staff, which would cut down on overhead! That, in turn, would mean you could dedicate a larger portion of the offerings (which were *not* collected every week in the early church) to missions and helping the poor.

Modern churches often put a lot of work on its paid staff while minimizing interaction by everyone else. It's possible to faithfully attend a church for an entire year and not learn anything substantial about the people who sit behind you. However, if you attend a small house church faithfully for a year and share a meal every week with them, you could get to know them pretty well. If you're in a small and highly interactive setting, it suddenly becomes possible for you to help others and for others to help you.

The same goes for the sermon. When a pastor gets in front of 200 people, gives a monologue for an hour, and then sits down without taking any questions, he has no way of knowing how much of his message got across (if any of it did). No one can interrupt him and ask for clarification, and no one can correct him if he makes a terrible mistake. You can try to catch the pastor after the sermon to talk to him, but not every pastor is receptive to answering a whole bunch of questions, and it would be impractical if everyone did that after every message. However,

7 Acts 2:46

in a small group setting people can easily ask questions, or bring up their own points, or discuss how to apply the message to their lives. The whole situation would change and discipleship would become a lot easier.

The modern church is used to doing things a certain way. It's easy to think that the way we're doing things is the way it's always been done – even though, if we're honest, our way hasn't produced very good results. Church attendance numbers have dropped rapidly over the past few decades, and there doesn't seem to be much in the way of spiritual growth happening. If we stop and take a look at what the Bible says, we might be surprised to learn there isn't much resemblance between our way of doing church and the pattern we see in the Word of God. It's possible that if we try to start acting a bit more Biblically, we might get better results.

In the Bible people cast lots to make some very important decisions. If we've reached a point where doing things the way we see them done in the Bible is unthinkable, and instead we insist on doing things in ways that can't be found anywhere in the Bible, then I think we've lost our way and become mired in our traditions.