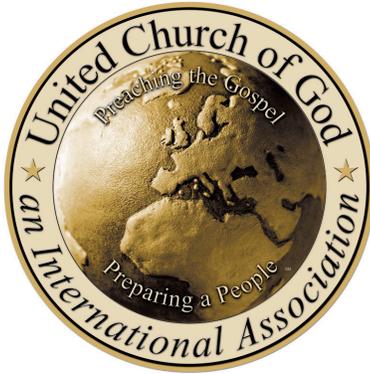


# United Church of God, *an International Association*



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## **Balloting in the Church** *Doctrinal Study Paper*

*From the Council of Elders  
August 2003*

All scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (© 1988 Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee) unless otherwise noted.

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This study paper will focus narrowly on whether voting is appropriate or even acceptable within the context of making collective decisions within the Church. This question arises internally as we are asked to consider candidates for the United Church of God's governing bodies, issues affecting the constitution and bylaws of the Church, and ratifying or rejecting proposed budgets and annual plans. While it is impossible to completely separate the issue of voting within the Church from the larger issues of voting, these nevertheless involve two different arenas—God's Church and the secular governments of this world. The word "ballot" will be used often, though not exclusively, in this paper to help distinguish the practice in the Church.

#### **Brief History of Views and Practices in the Church**

The United Church of God, *an International Association*, benefited from the great work that God carried out for decades through Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong. For many years we operated under the concept that God governed His people by revealing His will to one chosen leader and having that leader explain and institute the appropriate policies and understandings. In fact, God *had* chosen to govern this way at times, especially during the initial years of Israel's national existence when Moses was the governmental leader (although Aaron and the elders played a significant role in the religious life of Israel). This led to the conclusion that there was one "godly" pattern of government.

In practice, however, we frequently sought majority opinions in such areas as Spokesman and Graduate Clubs where it was acceptable to use opinion slips each meeting to ballot for speakers and evaluators. These results were generally upheld by the director of the club, though he reserved the right to overrule the club's opinion if he felt it necessary. Likewise, Mr. Armstrong valued the principles of seeking a multitude of counselors, though he reserved the right to approve or overrule.

It can be helpful to review some of Mr. Armstrong's writings on the subject of seeking God's guidance through a ministerial council. Over the years, this practice has been a valuable asset to the Church.

#### ***The Plain Truth*** (April 1957)

"Whenever there is doubt in the mind of any about some truth, doctrine, or God's way in any problem, *we ministers meet together in council*, asking GOD'S guidance and wisdom, seeking HIS truth!

"God's Word instructs us: '*In multitude of counselors there is safety.*' So we meet and counsel together, seeking God's true understanding from His Word. God is always willing to give it. As long as each man is yielded to God in his heart, there will always be unity. *Yet not one of these men would yield to the conviction of the others if he believed God's Word revealed otherwise.*

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“If any one of us comes up with something NEW, not previously understood and agreed to be the true revelation of God’s Word, he does not speak it publicly, or write it in any article, *UNTIL we ministers can all study independently into it, and counsel together regarding it, and all come to the same mind.*

“[When a question arose and] we went into it prayerfully with ‘multitude of counselors’ the truth became very plain to all. There is a great deal more joy in finding GOD’S way, even when contrary to our own previous beliefs or desires, than having our own way!” (“Heart to Heart Talk with the Editor” by Herbert W. Armstrong, emphasis added throughout).

***The Good News*** (October 1962)

“Acts 15 . . . was a coming to the HEADQUARTERS Church, where *the Apostles sat in COUNCIL*, with AUTHORITY, for decisions inspired by the Holy Spirit, *thru APOSTLES*, God’s chief human offices under Christ” (“Must God’s Ministers Be Ordained by the Hand of Man?” by Herbert W. Armstrong).

***Worldwide News*** (March 6, 1981)

“*I want an Advisory Council of Elders . . .* I have always done that, as you older ministers know. And you know how far back we used to meet together . . . it was the way we functioned as God’s ministers . . .

“Often we went into a session with divergent ideas. Always after an hour or so, sometimes less, sometimes more, we were all united because we only wanted God’s truth . . . And we always came to a unanimous idea.

“*Sometimes I didn’t agree with the others when we went in and when we came out I did*” (“Congress of Leading Ministers” by Herbert W. Armstrong).

***Co-Worker Letter*** (March 19, 1981)

“Few understand just what IS the Church. There are so many churches in the world. People just take churches for granted. But more than 1,953 years ago, Jesus Christ said, ‘I will build my Church.’ Few know WHY He built it—for what PURPOSE. The purpose, primarily, was dual:

“1) to proclaim to the world the Gospel Message God sent to mankind by Jesus as God’s Messenger (Malachi 3:1) of the coming Kingdom of God,

“2) to call and prepare a chosen people . . .

“I have NEVER SAID I expect to live until Christ comes.

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“ . . . Just in case of my disability for any reason, *to prevent Satan from causing division, I feel God has inspired me to delegate power to the Advisory Council, during any such complete disability, to take full charge of the Work and all its assets and activities*” (by Herbert W. Armstrong).

Though Mr. Armstrong appointed a successor shortly before his death, the quotes above reflect the fact that he was not opposed to the idea of coming together in a “multitude of counselors” while seeking a *collective* outcome. Nevertheless, every form of government has strengths and weaknesses, including the “one man” structure that had become our norm over the decades.

### **Background of the United Church of God**

When the United Church of God began, there was a great desire to include a number of people in the governmental structure of the Church rather than relying on one person. Therefore, one of the first issues that had to be addressed was how the new organization would be organized. The system that emerged spread responsibility among the several instead of the few.

Because this was a different approach to Church government for most, sincere questions about its biblical validity arose. Some, while not wishing to return to the old government with one man in charge, still felt uncomfortable with the new approach. Due to long-held convictions regarding “voting,” many honestly felt, and still feel, uncomfortable when asked to vote on issues or officers.

These concerns led the Council of Elders to conduct a doctrinal study on the subject of Church government. The “bottom line” of that study was the recognition that God has used *various* governmental models throughout history to work with His people. It was noted that the rebellion of Satan took place under a form of government that had been instituted by God Himself. It was also noted that while God allowed other forms of government, mixed results occurred under each form. The paper concluded that God is able to use our current form of government if our hearts are right with Him, and that no form of government will produce the right results if our hearts are not right with Him.

Negative experiences can lead to what is sometimes called a “double approach-avoidance conflict.” In this type of conflict, we are attracted to and repelled by each alternative. If we choose voting as a way to express our opinions and wishes, we are attracted by the idea of denying too much power to one individual or group, but we are equally repelled by the fear that voting can become politicized and divisive. If we reject voting as a way to express our opinions and wishes, we are left with either allowing someone else to make the decisions, or being unable to make decisions at all.

### **Is Voting or Balloting Mentioned in the Bible?**

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If we could find clear examples of voting or balloting in the Scriptures, it would be easy to establish whether this practice was right or wrong. There are examples that seem to indicate some type of “voting,” but even these examples show a mixture of good and bad results. For example, Numbers 14:1-4 shows the Israelites rejecting Moses’ leadership and deciding to select their own leader. This would logically have involved some kind of selection process, perhaps voting. The results were tragic.

On the other hand, the selection of Matthias and Justus in the first step for replacing Judas (Acts 1) could well have involved a ballot after seeking God’s guidance. A little later on (Acts 6), the first deacons are selected and the congregation was involved in the process of selection. In these cases, God blessed the outcome. We will consider these New Testament examples in more detail later in this paper.

### **Meaning of Consensus**

Voting also comprises an important component in the process of spiritual consensus, a process fundamental to the governing philosophy of the United Church of God, *an International Association*. So it is important that we understand the meaning of this vital process. *Consensus* has been defined as “the judgment arrived at by most of those concerned” and “group solidarity in sentiment and belief” (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition). The biblical principle regarding “a multitude of counselors” (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 24:6) provides the scriptural foundation for the process of consensus.

We believe that God led us to understand this important concept that is vital to what we seek to accomplish as a church. The New Testament is replete with examples of Spirit-led consensus.

### **Scriptural Examples of Consensus**

Before the official founding of the New Testament Church, Jesus outlined a process for resolving conflicts over sins between members (Matthew 18:15-20). Let’s take a closer look at verse 18 to understand Christ’s instructions.

“Assuredly, I say to you, *whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*”

Christ is speaking to the apostles (plural). Jesus was not giving Peter or anyone else unilateral authority to bind and loose decisions. This plurality reflects the need for the apostles to arrive at *collaborative* decisions.

The Greek in Matthew 18:18 is not always clearly translated. The *Basics of Biblical Greek* states, “In some translations Matthew 18:18 sounds like Jesus promised his disciples that whatever they bound on earth would be bound in heaven . . . In other words . . . Heaven (i.e., God) would simply back their decrees. But the matter is not so simple; the actions described in heaven are *future perfect passives*—which could be translated ‘*will have already been bound in*

heaven . . .’ In other words, the heavenly decree confirming the earthly one is based on a *prior* verdict” (William D. Mounce, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

God desires for His ministry to follow His lead to collaborative decisions in accordance with His laws and principles that have already been laid out for us in the Scriptures. God is always many steps ahead of man. Therefore the decision-making of the Church has to match with God’s decisions as revealed in the Bible, not vice versa. The apostles (plural) often had to collaborate and express some form of approval or disapproval while seeking God’s will in a given matter. Balloting is an expression of the Church’s desire to arrive at godly decisions.

One of the first major decisions facing the apostles of Christ involved replacing Judas. They arrived at a consensus regarding the criteria of the individual and narrowed down the field to two. Their title of “apostle” meant “one who is sent with a message” (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* by Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida).

The message that Jesus had commissioned the original apostles to carry to the world was based on their having witnessed His death and resurrection (Luke 24:44-49). It was the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 24:14). Jesus also told the disciples that their destiny involved judging the 12 tribes of Israel during His millennial reign (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). The 11 therefore concluded (probably after discussion and arriving at a consensus) that Judas had to be replaced in order to fill the vacancy (Acts 1:15-17).

They realized that by the very nature of their commission as apostles, the replacement would have to be someone who witnessed Christ’s death and resurrection. They also determined that it had to be someone who had been with the disciples from the beginning of Christ’s ministry.

By considering these and perhaps other criteria, they were able to narrow the field to two candidates. Acts 1:23 says, “And *they* [plural] proposed two,” reflecting agreement among the disciples. Since the final choice was not clearly apparent, and because of the uniqueness of the situation, they determined that they needed to appeal to God to make the choice. They utilized the method that had been part of their religious legacy dating back to the nation of Israel—casting lots (Leviticus 16:8; 1 Samuel 14:42; Proverbs 16:33; Proverbs 18:18).<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to know precisely the process that was followed. Different scholars disagree on what the process of casting lots included. One form of casting lots resembled a majority vote in that names were written on stones or sticks before being tossed in and tallied. The other form of casting lots involved a collaborative participation but it was not a majority vote, e.g. the name that was shaken out of a container was chosen, regardless of how many ballots he received. This form of casting lots may be referred to as “their vote” in that they participated collectively. But it was not a “vote,” as we know it today, according to the majority. Word study sources and commentaries differ on which method of casting lots was used by the

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<sup>1</sup>According to *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, the Greek expression *edokan klerous autois* (“gave lots to them”) is “a Hebrew idiom for ‘casting’ and ‘throwing’ down various kinds of marked objects in order to determine God’s will.”

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apostles. Even sources that endorse one of these methods in Acts 1, also note that they cannot be sure. (See *Adam Clarke's Commentary* on Acts 1:26.)

This process of replacing Judas contains the only New Testament example of God's people casting lots (even though the specifics of how this was done have not been preserved). In addition to the fact that this was for a unique situation requiring a God-level decision, it was *before* the Holy Spirit was given. As mentioned above, God wants us to learn to make wise decisions by allowing Him to inspire and lead us by His Holy Spirit. Making wise decisions is a vital prerequisite for our destiny of judging the world (1 Corinthians 6:1-3). We also need to learn to work together with fellow members of the family of God and to protect spiritual unity (Ephesians 4:1-6) and to seek doctrinal unity (Ephesians 4:13). The second part of the definition of consensus cited above ("group solidarity in sentiment and belief") clearly speaks to the context of these goals.

The book of Acts offers notable examples of the process of consensus at work within the apostolic Church. When the need arose for the apostles to delegate the responsibility of caring for widows, they did not make unilateral decisions regarding the selection. Rather, they instructed the congregation to "seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Acts 6:1-3). Who would be more qualified to participate in determining the leaders in a congregation than those who know the people involved?

The fact that the apostles involved the congregation on this occasion illustrates their confidence in the members to look to God in reaching a consensus. This meant that the congregation had to discuss the potential candidates before making their recommendations. The Bible does not tell us what method they used. The silence of the scriptural record on this matter indicates that the method was not that important. But it would have involved some method of indicating their choice, which is what voting means.

Some claim Acts 14:23 as evidence of selection of elders by congregational voting—"So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Indeed the word for "ordained" (*cheirotoneo*) can mean "to choose or elect by raising hands." The literal meaning is "to stretch [*teino*] the hand [*cheir*]." So it can also mean "to handpick."<sup>2</sup> This meaning fits this passage and is easily determined by the context. "They" clearly refers to Paul and Barnabas, the antecedents established in verses 19 through 22. Paul and Barnabas "appointed" ("handpicked") elders in every church, possibly with input from the congregations.<sup>3</sup>

Paul, a former Pharisee, was familiar with the concept of balloting within an ecclesiastical body because of the Sanhedrin. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* states the following regarding the "Sanhedrin":

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* by Jay P. Green, Sr.

<sup>3</sup> See *Expositor's Bible Commentary* on this verse. Also Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IX, p. 1,312.

**Judicial Procedures.** According to the Mishna, the members *sat in a semi-circle that they might be able to see one another*. In front stood the two clerks of the court, one on the right hand and the other on the left, *whose duty it was to record the votes* of those who were in favor of acquittal on the one hand and of those who were in favor of condemnation on the other. There also sat in front of them three rows of disciples of the learned men, each of whom had a special seat . . . **The voting**, each member standing, began with the youngest members of the court, although on some occasions it began with the most distinguished member. For acquittal *a simple majority* was sufficient; for condemnation *a majority of two was required*. If twelve of the twenty-three judges necessary to form a quorum *voted* for acquittal and eleven for conviction the prisoner was discharged; but if twelve were for conviction and eleven for acquittal, then the number of the judges had to be increased by adding two, which was repeated if necessary until either an acquittal was secured or the majority requisite for a conviction was obtained. But, of course, they had to restrict themselves to the maximum number of seventy-one . . .” (Moody Press of Chicago, Illinois, 1988).

In many versions of the Bible, the word “vote” is rendered only in Acts 26:10 (New King James Version, New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New American Bible, 1890 Darby Bible, and 1901 American Standard Bible). Interestingly, the context involved *ecclesiastical* decisions from the chief priests and Paul, perhaps within the Sanhedrin. The apostle Paul recounts the outcome of these decisions below.

Acts 26:10: “This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, ***I cast my vote against them.***”

The Greek word for “vote” (*pseefon*) in the verse above is discussed in *Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament*:

“I gave my vote against them *kateenengka* (NT:2702) *pseefon* (NT:5586). ‘***I cast down my pebble***’ (a black one). The ancient Greeks used white pebbles for acquittal (**Rev 2:17**), black ones for condemnation as here (the only two uses of the word in the New Testament). Paul’s phrase (not found elsewhere) is more vivid than the usual [*katapseefizoo*] for voting. ***They literally cast the pebbles into the urn.*** Compare *sumpseefizoo* (NT:4860) in Acts 19:19 and *sungkatapseefizo* (NT:4785) in Acts 1:26” (1997 by BibleSoft).

### **Acts 15 Jerusalem Conference**

The Jerusalem Conference, recorded in Acts 15, offers a powerful precedent for the process of consensus. This meeting was convoked to deal with a problem caused by a disagreement over requirements for gentile converts. Luke records the fact that the congregation at Antioch determined to send Paul to Jerusalem to deal with the matter (Acts 14:27-15:3). This implied a consensus of the congregation, although it does not tell us how they finalized the decision.

It is interesting to note that Paul did not go to Jerusalem to seek a unilateral ruling from Peter. Rather, the congregation “determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them [members of the congregation] should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question” (Acts 15:2).

The way the ministerial conference was conducted is a classic example of how to achieve spiritual consensus. Opportunity was given to Paul and others to speak to the entire assembly (Acts 15:4). The entire body of apostles and elders present assembled to consider the matter (Acts 15:6), with the possible implication that others had been present in an open plenary session to hear the preliminary reports.

A vehement discussion ensued (Acts 15:7). The Brown, Driver and Briggs lexicon explains the meaning of the Greek word *suzetesis* as used in this verse as “a discussion in the course of which disputants persistently advocate/sponsor a particular point of view.” Friberg’s lexicon defines it as “forceful expressions of differences of opinion *heated discussion, debate, dispute.*” In the vernacular, we would say that they “put all the cards on the table.”

After everyone had been given an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings on the subject, God led the group to a consensus. James, the pastor of the host church in Jerusalem, summarized the testimony of those who spoke and stated the consensus of the group (Acts 15:13-21). This resulted in the apostles and elders drafting a resolution to send out to the churches stating their conclusions (Acts 15:22-29). The fact that “it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church” is an inspiring testimony to the unifying aspect of Spirit-led consensus.

This example also illustrates the fact that consensus consists of more than counting ballots. Counting ballots of and by itself can only determine a majority or plurality, which is a mathematical statistic. Consensus is a meeting of the minds. It involves an opportunity for all parties to express their thoughts and feelings in a group discussion, openly and candidly with proper emotion and without fear of rejection or reprisal. Above all, it requires a humble, open-minded approach of spiritually mature individuals who are seeking God’s will, free from self-will or emotional investment in their own ideas. Hence, we see the term “Spirit-led” or “spiritual” consensus.

### **Importance of Learning to Make Wise, Well-Informed Decisions**

Is personal decision-making a part of God’s plan for each individual? One of the very earliest responsibilities given to Adam was the naming of the various animal types. Scripture clearly shows that the decisions were left to Adam, and God honored his decisions. Adam did not turn to God and ask what he should name each animal. He exercised the knowledge God had given him and created the appropriate names.

Throughout biblical history we see numerous examples of decision-making responsibility being placed upon humans. While we rarely see examples of individuals seeking a miraculous

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sign to determine God's will, we see many examples where humans were to judge "for God," and God backed the decisions made. Deuteronomy 17 speaks of the responsibility of judges in each of the cities to hear the difficult cases and render decisions about them. He further imposes a death penalty upon those who would presumptuously refuse to submit to those judgments.

If judgment in these cases involved nothing more than casting lots to determine God's decisions, then His instruction to the judges in Deuteronomy 1:16-17 would make little sense: "Then I commanded your judges at that time, saying, 'Hear the cases between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man's presence, *for the judgment is God's*. The case that is too hard for you, bring to me, and I will hear it.'" The statement "the judgment is God's" is consistent with the principle stated in Matthew 18, that God desires for the ministry to follow His lead to the proper decision.

The New Testament likewise indicates the need for Christians to make righteous judgments (John 7:24). The Bible teaches not only that Christians must make decisions, it also says that we are accountable to God for the kinds of decisions we make. The apostle Paul expresses his desire to the Corinthians that they learn to make proper judgments in 1 Corinthians 6:2. "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters?" Clearly, we are to learn to make judgments. And those judgments are to be based upon our application of the Scriptures, or principles from Scripture, to situations.

### **The Biblical Process of Making Decisions**

Nowhere in Scripture do we find God encouraging His people to make their daily decisions by relying upon casting lots. Instead, we are instructed to make wise decisions based upon the spiritual principles God reveals in His Word (Ephesians 5:17). We pray about our decisions and ask for God's wisdom and insight, but we do not expect God to show us in some supernatural way which house, car, suit or entrée to buy (although God can certainly do this!).

What happens when two converted Christians, each striving to be guided by the Holy Spirit, arrive at conflicting opinions? Romans 14:1-13 acknowledges the validity of variations in application of biblical principles based on different levels of faith and understanding, and admonishes members not to judge or criticize each other for these matters of conscience. The chapter concludes with the point that what every member believes and practices based on that belief is a private, personal matter between him or her and God. "Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:22-23).

Because we all see reality through our own mental and emotional lenses, there will be occasional disagreements between us, and those disagreements must be resolved if the Churches of God are to have peace (1 Corinthians 14:33). Since having differing opinions is not only permissible, but inevitable, why would it be somehow sinful to respectfully express those opinions in the appropriate forum?

In some cases, members may act upon the decision they feel is correct, as Paul and Barnabas did in the matter of John Mark (Acts 15:37-40). This example is especially interesting in that it occurred soon after the resolution of the greatest conflict the fledgling Church had ever encountered. In the debate over the role of circumcision for gentiles, honest differences had been vigorously debated, and they arrived at a consensus. Later in this paper, we will consider what this example teaches us about making decisions on matters that pertain to the congregation as a whole, or to the entire organization. But first, let us consider the subject of voting from a biblical perspective.

### **Is Balloting in the Church a Sin?**

Is there anything about balloting or voting that is inherently evil? A ballot or vote is simply a formal expression of opinion. Voting is defined as, “A formal expression of opinion or choice either positive or negative made by an individual or body of individuals” (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*). To ballot is synonymous with to vote. According to *Webster’s New Riverside University Dictionary II*, “The earliest meaning of ballot in English is ‘a small ball used to register a vote.’”

The word “voting” provokes an immediate negative emotional response in the heart of some, partly because it is associated with the ugliness of “politics” and partly because it suggests that utilizing voting within the Church is tantamount to democracy. However, our PCD letter regarding balloting on issues of Church governance points out—“There is a significant difference between voting and what is commonly called ‘*politics*’—the unpleasant and ungodly wrangling over issues, along with vying for personal advancement.” This often involves campaigning, which includes making promises to get elected. The fact that carnal politics often accompanies voting does not make voting in church meetings inherently wrong. Of course, “politics” can be involved even if there is no voting. Carnal behavior is not limited to elections and campaigning. Obviously the apostles were not wrong for collaborating and arriving at a consensus on Church matters.

### **Relationship of Voting to Consensus**

So what does all of this have to do with reaching consensus? The final step in the process of consensus is to verify the decision or choice of each participant in the discussion. This requires some method of polling or tabulating the results. It can be done verbally, by show of hands, by writing or by any number of other methods. Again, the method is not important. Arriving at consensus is what is most important.

Balloting or voting is simply a way for individuals to express their opinion about a matter. Is that acceptable to God? All of God’s great servants—Moses, David, the prophets—all had times when they disagreed with God, and many times they expressed their frustration. God did not condemn any of them, even when they deserved it. In some cases, God even seems to alter His plans because of the concerns of His servants. Once again, it appears that if the heart is

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right, one can even present a dissenting opinion to God. And, once again, obeying God's instructions with a heart that is not right is not enough.

To be sure, there are times when our opinions may be irrelevant. To insist on voicing our opinions in every area and expecting those opinions to be given respectful consideration is self-willed and presumptuous. Some decisions may be none of our business. And our opinion, if we even have one, may properly be disregarded. However, when our input and opinion is sought, as in the issues set before the members of the GCE, it should not be considered being self-willed or presumptuous to share those opinions. In fact, to refuse or decline to share our opinions, when we have asked God to guide us in making the proper decisions, is to withhold from our fellow members the insight God may have given to us.

Voting should not be considered as a way for a person or group of people to force their will on others, but a way to share what they believe God has led them to understand. Voting and involvement in political elections of the world is outside the purview of this paper.

Is there a time when we can legitimately decline to ballot on matters within the Church? Perhaps the following incident can illustrate this point.

Shortly after the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, a minister had the opportunity to talk with a young member who had a degree in nuclear physics and worked for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. After exchanging a few pleasantries, the member asked him, "What do you think? Should we use nuclear power to generate electricity?" The minister responded, "Well, that's a very complex subject, and I don't think I have enough knowledge on the subject to have a valid opinion." At first the member was shocked, but then he said, "I don't mean anything disrespectful, but you're right, you don't have the technical knowledge to have a valid opinion. But you're the first person I ever asked that question to who answered that way. Everybody has an opinion even when they really don't know what they're talking about."

Voting in the Church is a serious responsibility because it is a way of declaring our thoughts on the matter under consideration, with the goal of achieving spiritual consensus and protecting and preserving spiritual unity within the Church. The Bible says a lot about the integrity of our word. We should not be "double-minded" or indecisive (James 1:8). We should "do our homework" to become well-informed on issues that we are asked to give input on before we finalize our decision on the matter in order to fulfill the biblical admonition to "judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). Our "yes" must mean "yes" and our "no" must mean "no" (Matthew 5:37).

Of course, there are times when, for whatever reason, we may not have enough knowledge or understanding of the issue to render a well-informed decision. In such cases a person may legitimately say, "I have no opinion in this matter," or "I do not feel qualified to ballot on this issue," or "I have a conflict of interest in this matter." Then it would be perfectly legitimate not to cast a ballot.

### **Statement of UCG Position on Voting or Balloting in the Church**

We will conclude this paper with the official statement that is sent to anyone who inquires about the teaching of United Church of God regarding voting within the Church.

**Question: Is it appropriate for Christians to ballot on issues of Church governance?**

You asked if voting in church meetings is acceptable according to the Bible. Voting is the expressing of one's opinion in decision-making. It's used interchangeably with the word "balloting."

According to the *Dictionary of Word Origins*, ballot comes from Italian and French words meaning "ball," as well as a Greek word for "throw." In balloting, different colored balls were rolled or thrown to take a secret or confidential poll. *Holman's Bible Dictionary* indicates that the Hebrew word for "lot" meant "a small stone," so there may be some correlation between a ballot and the ancient Hebrew use of lots—although the details are unknowable.

Ballot has become synonymous with voting in modern usage. Voting is a more sophisticated version of the ancient rolling of a ball or a stone, or the tossing of a stick to indicate one's opinion, but it accomplishes the same purpose. Voting can be done by voice, raising one's hand, or, to ensure privacy and to avoid being influenced by others, by paper ballot. The selection of a replacement for Judas involved some form of expressing opinions (Acts 1:23) and casting lots (Acts 1:26). The Bible doesn't reveal the details of how they accomplished this, but it was clearly some form of balloting, "they proposed two," before casting lots.

There is a significant difference between voting and what is commonly called "*politics*"—the unpleasant and ungodly wrangling over issues, along with vying for personal advancement. *Clearly, Christians must distance themselves from all negative and carnal "politics" of this nature* (1 Timothy 6:4-5; 1 Peter 2:11-12).

We employ voting or balloting as a method of expression at all levels within the UCGIA in an orderly and godly manner.