

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."



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Does Acts 14:23 Indicate a Vote?

--By Terry Carter

Those who want to justify the selection of leaders in the Church by means of a popular vote, sometimes point to **Acts 14:23** for support.

"So when they had **appointed** elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." **Acts 14:23 NKJV**

They argue that the Greek word for "appointed" NKJV or "ordained" KJV has the idea of 'stretching forth the hand'. Therefore, they argue that it is an indication that those elders were chosen by a congregational vote. I would like to discuss whether this conclusion is justified on the basis of this word.

First of all, it is worth asking, who was doing the appointing or ordaining here? Who is referred to by "they" in this verse? There is no doubt that "they" in verse 23 refers to Paul and Barnabas, who are named in verses 19-20. In fact, the word "they" appears 12 times in verses 21-28 and it refers to Paul and Barnabas every time. Clearly, this section of Scripture is focusing on what Paul and Barnabas did, not on what the churches did.

"19 Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned **Paul** and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. 20 However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day **he departed with Barnabas** to Derbe." **Acts 14:19-20 NKJV**

This is significant because verse 23 is not talking about the actions of the churches. It is talking about the actions of Paul and Barnabas. Thus, even if the word means to vote, it was not the Church that was voting, it was Barnabas and Paul.

But does it make sense for Paul and Barnabas to vote on the elders that they were commending to the Lord? It doesn't seem sensible to me since there were only two of them. When two people vote, there are really only two

possible outcomes. Either the vote is unanimous or it is a tie. If it is unanimous, there is not much point to voting in the first place. If it is a tie, how do you break the tie? It simply does not make sense for two people to vote. Thus, the context is against the idea that these elders were appointed by a popular congregational vote.

But before we decide on this issue, we need to look at the Greek word involved. What does it actually mean in this context? It is true that the word has the idea of 'stretching forth the hand'. But we must ask if that is the idea it conveys in this context.

The Greek word here is "*cheirotoneo*". It only appears twice in the New Testament – **Acts 14:23** and **2 Corinthians 8:19** where it is translated "chosen".

"18 And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches, 19 and not only that, but who was also **chosen** by the churches to travel with us with this gift, which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself and to show your ready mind," **2 Corinthians 8:18-19 NKJV**

This verse is talking about a brother who travelled with Titus. Verse 18 says he was praised throughout all the churches. Verse 19 adds that he was chosen by the churches to travel with Paul with the gift.

Does anybody believe that this unnamed brother was chosen by the churches to travel with Paul by a popular vote? Would anybody suggest that this is the way we should decide who travels together in the church today?

I've never heard anybody advocate such an idea. The idea is simply that it was not Paul who chose this man, but the churches themselves. How that choice was made is simply not stated in this passage.

Although the Greek word "*cheirotoneo*" does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament, the compound of this word, "*procheirotoneo*" does appear once in **Acts 10:41** where it is translated "chosen".

"Not to all the people, but to witnesses **chosen** before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead." **Acts 10:41 NKJV**

Clearly it is God who did the choosing here. Obviously there was no voting involved here. God simply chose Himself those who would be witnesses of the resurrection.

Neither the Greek word "*cheirotoneo*" nor its compound "*procheiratoneo*" have the idea of a popular vote in the other passages of the New Testament where they appear.

Further, we have already seen that the context of **Acts 14:23** argues against the idea of a popular vote in being indicated by this Greek word.

But what do the lexicons say? Let's listen carefully to some of them.

CHEIROTONEO, "primarily used of voting in the Athenian legislative assembly and meaning "to stretch forth the hands" (*cheir*, "the hand," *teino*, "to stretch"), **is not to be taken in its literal sense; it could not be so taken in its compound *procheirotoneo*, "to choose before," since it is said of God, Acts 10:41. *Cheirotoneo* is said of "the appointment" of elders by apostolic missionaries in the various churches which they revisited, Acts 14:23, RV, "had appointed," i.e., by the recognition of those who had been manifesting themselves as gifted of God to discharge the functions of elders (see No. 2). It is also said of those who were "appointed" (not by voting, but with general approbation) by the churches in Greece to accompany the Apostle in conveying their gifts to the poor saints in Judea - 2 Corinthians 8:19. See CHOOSE, ORDAIN." Vines Expository Dictionary appoint, number 11.**

"With the loss of the notion of extending the hand, to elect, appoint, create...Acts 14:23" Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon.

Notice that Thayer specifically says that in **Acts 14:23**, it does not have the notion of extending the hand. He also cites secular writings as examples of this use of the word without the idea of voting. This includes Philo and Josephus who were contemporaries of the New Testament writers.

Listen closely to what the respected Greek scholar A. T. Robertson has to say about it.

"Cheirotoneō (from cheirotonos, extending the hand, cheir, hand, and teinō, to stretch) is an old verb that originally meant to vote by show of the hands, finally to appoint with the approval of an assembly that chooses as in 2 Corinthians 8:19, and then to appoint without regard to choice as in Josephus (Ant. XIII. 2, 2) of the appointment of Jonathan as high priest by Alexander. So in Acts 10:41 the compound procheiratoneō is used of witnesses appointed by God." Robertson's Word Pictures on Acts 14:23.

"The first aorist passive participle *cheirotoneōtheis* is from *cheirotoneō*, old verb to stretch out the hands (*cheir teinō*)

and so to vote in public...Only here in N.T. save **Acts 14:23** where it means to appoint without notion of raising the hands. In **Acts 10:41** we have *procheirotoneō*." **Robertson's Word Pictures on 2 Corinthians 8:19.**

So Vine, Thayer, and Robertson are all in agreement that the word does not carry the idea of stretching forth the hand or raising the hand in **Acts 14:23**.

Most translators apparently agree as they generally translate the word as "ordained", "appointed", or "chose". I did find two that included the idea of a show of hands or voting in their translations.

"And in every Church, after prayer and fasting, **they selected Elders by show of hands**, and commended them to the Lord on whom their faith rested." **Acts 14:23 WNT**

"And having **appointed to them by vote** elders in every assembly, having prayed with fastings, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." **Acts 14:23 YLT**

It is not surprising that Young's Literal Translation renders it this way as its focus is on being a literal translation. But a literal translation can sometimes be misleading. We use many words and phrases every day in a way that is contrary to their literal or original meaning.

This actually illustrates that a literal translation can be misleading. It also illustrates how the etymology of a word can be misleading. The original idea of a word can be lost over time as it is pressed into new service or generalized. We ought to be careful about jumping to conclusions about a word's use in a specific context simply because of its literal meaning or origins.

Alexander Strauch put it well in a footnote in his book *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Church Leadership*.

"The point is, cheirotoneo can mean to elect or appoint. The context, not the etymology, determines its meaning. The context [Acts 14:23] is perfectly clear that appoint is the only possible meaning here." Page 82, footnote 4.

I did, however, find several translations that indicated that Paul and Barnabas chose, appointed, or ordained elders "for them". That is, they chose the elders for the churches. The ASV, RSV, NIV, MNT, MKJV, TCNT, WEB, and the Living Oracles all render it so.

The Modern King James translation is especially interesting here. It seems to me that they have captured the idea perfectly. Paul and Barnabas hand-picked elders for them in every church.

"And **having hand-picked elders for them** in every church, and had prayed with fastings, they commended

them to the Lord into whom they believed.” **Acts 14:23**
MKJV

So does **Acts 14:23** indicate a popular vote? The context is against it.

The use of the Greek word and its compound in other New Testament verses is against it. Standard lexicons are against it. Well respected Greek scholars are against it. The translators are against it.

I think that ought to settle the question.