

THE CHURCH MEETING

In a Baptist church it is not the minister, leaders or deacons who make all the decisions but the whole church, that is, all its members, meeting together. This meeting is called the church meeting. It is usually held monthly or quarterly on a mid-week evening. Baptists believe that this was the New Testament way of discovering what God's will was for his church.

THE NEW TESTAMENT PICTURE

The church was made up of believers who sought to discover their role in Christ's mission to the world. If you were converted you were baptised, if you were baptised you were part of the church, a church member, and if you were part of the church then you were engaged in Christ's mission to the world.

The New Testament sets out some basic ground rules for churches. The basis of our association is our oneness in Christ. Faith and fellowship belong together (Eph 4:1-6; Heb 10:25; Phil 2:1-4; Rom 15:1-3). The church is a body of people who depend on one another (1 Cor 12; 1 Cor 11:17-34; Rom 12; Col 1:18; Eph 1:22, 23). Patterns of decision-making and discipline are illustrated (Acts 6:1-7; Acts 11:29-30; Acts 15; Matt 18:15-20).

OUR BAPTIST STORY

The Reformation of the 16th century saw the rediscovery of the church as a community of believers gathered out from the world, seeking the will of God together.

Anabaptists on the continent and later English Baptists had grasped a new way of being the church of Christ. A Baptist confession in 1677 stated that a Baptist church is the gathered community of those who "willingly consent to walk together... giving themselves up to the Lord and to one another". The present Baptist Union Declaration of Principle says, "Each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer (God's) laws". The church is seen as the assembly of those who truly believe, the gathering of the committed, a community of disciples covenanted to walk together in mutual correction and discipline with Christ as the head.

LOFTY IDEALS

These are lofty ideals and may seem a long way from what we hear or have experienced of church meetings in our local Baptist church.

Here we see the church meeting as the final place of human decision making in seeking God's will for our life together as Christians yet, more realistically, it is often a dozen or so folk gathered in the corner of a cold hall on a mid-week evening, whilst most of the membership are sat around the TV in the comfort of home!

To be a part of the Body of Christ is a high privilege, which carries with it an equally high responsibility of Christian discipleship for the sake of people where we live. Privileges include fellowship, encouragement, prayer, support, love, worship and a strengthening of our faith. Responsibilities include seeking the mind of Christ for his church, giving ourselves in service to him and to each other.

We could use the following definition: The church meeting is the children of the Father; meeting together in the presence of the Spirit; and seeking together the mind of Christ.

So what does this mean for the purpose, form and issues of the church meeting?

PURPOSE

It is not a business meeting

It is a gathering of the local Christian family to seek the purposes of the kingdom and the will of the king (Matt 6:33). It is the arena where the church struggles with the big issues concerning the mission of Christ in the world. It is a place where Christians grow in their faith and maturity, by listening to each other (Eph 4:11-16). There is a peace that God brings in Christ to our decisions (Col 3:15-17). The church meeting is not a democratic assembly that seeks a majority vote on all issues that are brought before it. It is a gathering together of believers in the presence of Christ (Matt 18:19-20) seeking a common mind - a consent about the mind of Christ. If there are votes to be taken the meeting must be aware of the maturity and insight of the voices behind the votes. One vote is not as good as another in the gathering of the church, even though it may have the same numerical value. Consensus means consent, the authority to act, even when, as an individual, I may not agree.

How does it find the mind of Christ?

There are four help lines that a church might call on: scripture, prophecy, spiritual leadership and the wider church. It is the authority of Christ as revealed in scripture that directs the church, and it is scripture that will be the test of other sources of guidance. The experience of the church of Christ down the centuries has been that a prophetic word may well be spoken.

Such a Spirit-given insight may help the meeting to discover the mind of Christ, and as such must be judged and weighed by the whole community of believers. Spiritual leaders are God's gift to the church. Their wisdom, maturity, judgement and Christ-likeness may carry more weight, but the meeting should not abandon its responsibility for seeking the mind of Christ to a small group of leaders. The purpose of Christ for his church may also be discovered by the wider church, for example, the local association of Baptist churches or the national union of Baptist churches or an ecumenical grouping.

The local church may receive guidance from this wider grouping of churches, but it will need to test such guidance before accepting or rejecting it.

We can still get it wrong

Sin will show up in arguments. Power struggles, envy and jealousy will sadly exist. People will want to avoid difficult decisions, such as discipline, and fill agendas with trivial issues that should have been delegated. Others will want to conduct the meeting like a political debate or a secular business meeting.

Church meetings are the high-risk zones of our Baptist church life. They are places where we must learn to disagree in Christ, and be prepared to consent to His will expressed through the meeting of his people, even when we are opposed to the decision. It may be that we need sometimes to hear the words that Cromwell addressed to the Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1650. He pleaded that they should ask themselves whether all that they had done was infallibly agreeable to the Word of God. "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

FORM

Baptists believe in the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:4-5, 9-10) and the ministry of all believers (1 Cor 12:13-31). It is an exciting picture when we think of the church meeting where every member has a part to play. It is also clearly demanding, as much will be expected. Each one must prayerfully commit themselves to seeking the mind of Christ, and sacrifice self-interest in the process.

Shape

Should we adopt the agenda format of the world of business, or is there a better way?

We should start as we mean to go on, meeting in the presence of Christ. Our focus is on him, and so the natural place to start is with worship: praise and thanksgiving that moves into confession and reconciliation between the members present, and then petition that lays our lives open to the purposes of God. Worship will include the needs of the fellowship of the church, and the concern of the church for the locality in which it is set (Gal 6:1-10). It may be better to maintain an attitude of worship throughout the whole meeting, with prayers after particular items are discussed, or hymns and songs of praise after items of report.

Content

This should include: ministry, mission, pastoral concern and community care. Fabric, finance and administrative matters can normally be entrusted to sub-groups who only need to bring major issues of concern to the church meeting. The church will need time to discuss and debate the big issues, and often the meeting will be helped by smaller groups preparing a discussion document which raises the main points for consideration. Church meetings should be asking, "What should we be doing next, Lord?"

Frequency

Different churches have different frequency of meeting: monthly, bi-monthly, quarterly, or even half-yearly. The less frequently the church meets the more likelihood there is of that meeting degenerating into a business meeting. A regular monthly meeting will keep the whole fellowship in contact with the mission of the church; better communication will increase interest and involvement; and more time will allow the big issues to be addressed. It cannot be overstressed that meetings that are organised merely to keep the wheels turning, and which are evidently run by those who have lost hope and vision, are a waste of time.

ISSUES

The church needs to recognise that it is a discerning community of faith, with responsibility to make important decisions. This privilege carries with it great responsibilities. The church meeting is not there to 'rubber stamp' the wishes of minister, elders or deacons, but rather has a serious spiritual role in accountability.

The calling of a minister

It is the church meeting that makes decisions over the calling of a minister, and the calling and appointment of elders and deacons. These leaders in the church are accountable to the church meeting for all their actions. The church meeting has the responsibility before God to discern when someone is called to such an office, and when that calling has ceased.

Church organisations

These are responsible to the church meeting; their leaders should be church members, whose appointment should be ratified by the whole church. It is important that periodic reports of the activities of various groups within the church should come to the church meeting so that prayer is informed and their leaders encouraged.

Mission and ministry

The church meeting is accountable for the mission and ministry of the church, to accept responsibility when things go wrong as well as basking in the glory when activities are successful.

Discipline

The church meeting has an often difficult and embarrassing, but no less vital, role of discipline of church members (Matt 18:15-20). The church needs to take discipleship seriously and consider matters of behaviour that are inappropriate such as: failure to be in fellowship, a lack of forgiveness and refusal to be reconciled, gossip, a critical spirit and pattern of conduct outside the church that will bring the name of Christ into disrepute. These are in addition to sexual misconduct, which is the one area that churches do tend to address.

Finances

The church meeting will also have to take responsibility for all the finances of the church. This will involve the setting of budgets, making sure that the church does not get into debt, and adhering to the guidelines set by the Government regarding accounts and the Inland Revenue in regard to payments made to employees and the reclaiming of tax paid on covenants. The church meeting will also guide the church in giving of donations to other organisations, especially seeing that budgeted contributions are made to Baptist Home Mission and the Baptist Missionary Society.

Any other business

This should be reserved for items of information or for emergencies needing immediate attention. This is not the place to initiate discussion on areas of church life. The church members should be encouraged to have such items placed on the agenda, well in advance of the meeting.

CONCLUSION

There is no guarantee that the church meeting will get it right. We seek, with all our human weaknesses, prejudices and preconceptions, the mind of Christ, assured of his promises to be present (Matt 18:20), and to build his church, which nothing will overcome (Matt 16:18).

Only through the church meeting does the church come under the judgement of God and submit to the guidance of the Spirit. Through prayer and discussion we need to move to a consensus in discerning the will of God – it is a continuation of prayer and worship.

As such maybe we should return to the pattern of our Baptist forefathers, who held their church meeting after a Sunday service of worship.

We must recover the church meeting, entering into the exciting yet risky business of finding and doing the mind of Christ. We can only call ourselves church members if we are committed to this relationship that is the mark of the gathered covenant community.

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