

Has the church meeting had its day?

Intro

Traditionally, understood the Church Meeting is a prime expression of the congregational church polity inherent in Baptist Ecclesiology. It is, under Christ and in His presence, the place of ultimate authority where each Church has the liberty to discern the mind of Christ for its life and mission.¹ The B.U. Declaration of Principle makes it clear that such liberty is not to be understood in western enlightenment terms of self-determination, but rather the liberty to stand under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the revelation of God in Scripture.

However, the title above does present us with an important question and opportunity to appraise what we think we are trying to do. We might equally ask, 'Is the Church Meeting an adequate expression of our churchmanship?' In holding both questions together I want to re-examine the foundations of our ecclesiology and explore other ways of being a covenanted discerning community.

There is no shortage of views about the blessings and frustrations of 'Church Meetings'. Whilst it may be possible to identify times when God has clearly been at work amongst his people as they have met in Church Meetings, it seems much easier to speak negatively about them and to parody them as irrelevant to the real mission of the church as, at best, boringly efficient in merely accepting the decisions of others and at worse, poorly attended, badly run, occasions for point scoring, division, a hindrance to good leadership, unworthy pedantic debate and abuses of power, characterised by business and political procedures.² This suggests that the Church Meeting is not an adequate and effective expression of congregationalism and that the strong emphasis upon the Church Meeting may result in our being "Church Meeting-ist" rather than genuinely congregationalist. Central is the issue of how the whole church is enabled to seek the mind of Christ, being authentic to its belief in the Scriptures and credible in its practical expression.

¹ As stated in the Baptist Union's Declaration of Principle

² Cf. Malcolm Goodspeed cited in Beasley-Murray, Paul. *Radical Believers: The Baptist way of being the church* (Didcot: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992) 89

Authenticity and Credibility

In seeking to be people of the Word and Spirit we attempt to demonstrate authenticity in our actions. Charles Taylor's consideration of the 'ethic of authenticity'³ is developed into a view that authenticity is found by connecting with that which is deep within us.⁴ In this sense we find our authenticity from that Radical Reformation tradition that is informed by certain views of the Scriptures and expectations of the work of the Spirit as the certain way of 'being' and living. The local church is the dominant focus of our Baptist culture as typified in The *London Confession of 1644*, which states that Christ has 'given power to his whole Church to receive in and cast out, by way of Excommunication, any member; and this power is given to every particular Congregation, and not one particular person, either member or Officer, but the whole.'⁵ Theologically such churches were articulating a radical ecclesiology and the principles articulated in the 1644 London Confession can still be seen in the *Approved Governing Document*⁶ for churches to use when registering with the Charity Commission, with Church Membership remaining controlled by the Church Meeting.⁷

Biblical and theological values

Key Biblical Passages

Of all the passages that may be drawn upon to give insight into our ecclesiology I have identified and given brief comment on 4: Matthew 18 v20, Acts 6, Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Matthew 18 v20

Perhaps one of the most significant passages is the short verse about Christ promising to be present amongst his people as they gather in his name. It is the presence of Christ that makes his people competent to discern his will and make decisions about the common life of the church and its mission. Set in a chapter about grace, forgiveness and relationship the verse reminds us that we gather under his Lordship to prayerfully seek His will. The reality of the presence of Christ amongst

³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1991)25ff

⁴ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* 26

⁵ *The London Confession* in William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959 revised 1969) 168

⁶ A document negotiated between the Baptist Union and the Charity Commission for use when registering a church as a charity. It is not essential that a church use this document, but expedient in that it saves the legal costs of a church drawing up its own document. It seeks to reflect historic Baptist values within the constraints of the law and gives options for churches to choose from such as with open and closed membership.

⁷ B.U.G.B. "C26 Approved Governing Document (04/2008)." (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2008 (accessed 1st February 2011) 4f.

us is a challenge to our attitudes and procedures and calls for us to release those gifts about abilities that he has given to us by the Spirit that together we may live and serve according to his will.

Acts 6 v 1-7

Whilst Acts 6 is commonly used to refer to the appointment of deacons the noun is not used, even though Luke uses the verb “to serve”. However, it is clear that the Apostles laid the problem of inequality of the distribution of alms before the church for them to appoint seven people full of wisdom and the Spirit to be set aside for the exercise of certain responsibilities. There was a genuine communal engagement in the decision-making process with the Apostles taking a lead, but submitting the process to the community. It is also clear that those chosen were not limited in their ministries to distributing food, but Stephen and Philip had other ministries of preaching and evangelism.

Acts 15 v1-35

Although there is something of a translocal process in this chapter there are significant factors to draw up in considering how we live and make decisions within the church. There is a genuine sense of common seeking, with the whole church (v22) owning the outcome. However, there is delegation to a group for deeper consideration (v6) and there are different voices which speak with authority such as the word of testimony (v4 and 7ff), the voice of respected wisdom and experience (v13) and the voice of the Scriptures (v15). There is even the voice of dissent (v5), but the outcome is one attained by the Holy Spirit (v28). There is a clear place for leadership and for the voice of respected leaders, but there is also a communal listening to discern the will of the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12-14

The New Testament term “**Body of Christ**” informs the corporate understanding of the gathered body that is to discern the will of Christ the head. The awareness of the **work of the Spirit** complements Christ being with His people, for the Spirit guides and equips the church as they seek the will of Christ the Head. The recent emphasis upon ‘body-ministry’ need not be confined to prayer-ministry and the exercise of gifts in worship, but extended to the engagement of the whole church seeking the will of Christ with a mutual discernment as words are ‘weighed’, etc.

Covenant 530

Baptist Ecclesiology is underpinned by a number of theological themes but here I concentrate upon **Covenant** which denotes the relationship between God and His people through Christ, and also of the relationship that exists between the people of God. John Smyth saw the nature of the church as a covenant between believers under God, a visible communion of saints where ‘two or three or more saints join together by covenant with God and themselves ... for their mutual edification and God’s glory The true form of the visible church is a vow, promise, oath or covenant betwixt God

and the saints.⁸ This emphasis upon voluntary covenant provides the basis for church membership and is seen in Baptist confessions of faith such as the Second London Confession of 1677 which says that members ‘willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves, to the Lord & to one another by the will of God, in professed subjection to the Ordinances of the Gospel.’⁹ The concept of covenant continues to be expressed in local church constitutions which will include the necessary rules for governing church life, but which also include a statement of faith and a covenant relating to church practice, for example: ‘We covenant together to: walk in God’s ways, according to His laws, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit ...’.¹⁰

Central is the presence of Christ in the local congregation, where believers gather in covenant under his rule to seek to know his mind.’¹¹ The gathering is with the intention of expressing covenant commitment and seeking the will of Christ. Covenant is therefore seen as having two dimensions: vertically between God and the Christian community and horizontally in a covenant relationship between members of that community.¹² The authority of the church is Christ and is discerned by his gathered people. Local churches are responsible to appoint those ‘fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit’ as officers of the church.¹³ Particular Baptist, Andrew Fuller, saw that the early church in Acts exercised ‘government and discipline of each church ... within itself.’¹⁴

Appropriate Practical Expression

The Church Meeting expresses the themes of the Priesthood of all Believers, Body Ministry and the sense of being a covenant community as it expresses the principle of mutual accountability, and those gathered seek to “weigh together”¹⁵ what is before them with Christ in the midst to guide by His Spirit as they seek His will and seek to live under His Lordship. Therefore the Church Meeting is a place of authority under Christ. The Church Meeting has been described as ‘the occasion when individual Christians as a community submit themselves to the Lordship of Christ, the truth of the Scriptural revelation, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that God’s will may be known and carried

⁸ Quoted in Paul S. Fiddes, *Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission* (London: Baptist Union, 1985) 24

⁹ *Confession of Faith put forth by the Elders and Brethren of many congregations of Christians (Baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country* in Lumpkin, *Confessions*, p286

¹⁰ Durham City Baptist Church and Covenant p12. Durham City Baptist Church was formed in 1951.

¹¹ B.U.G.B. Faith and Unity Executive Committee and Council for Christian Unity., *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity : Anglicans and Baptists in Conversation* (London: Church House, 2005) 77

¹² Faith and Unity Executive of the BUGB, "Knowing What We Believe: Theological Authority Amongst Baptists," in *Baptist Union Council November 2009* (Swanwick: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2009)3

¹³ Lumpkin, *Confessions*. 287

¹⁴ Andrew Fuller, ‘Constitution of Apostolic Churches’, Letter X in ‘Strictures on Sandemanianism’, 1810 in ed A.G. Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Revd Andrew Fuller, with a memoir of his life*, II, 1831, p429. cited in J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century, History of the English Baptists* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994) 16

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:29

out.¹⁶ Whilst Congregationalism sometimes wears the clothes of democracy it is not actually an exercise in democracy, but of seeking the mind of Christ. The Church Meeting is both a business meeting and a spiritual activity. Worship, prayer and the reading of Scripture will feature in some way as the members seek God's love, power and wisdom. Ostensibly this should be a means of focussing upon God and not on ourselves.

Appropriate engagement

The practice of Church Meeting varies according to the size and culture of the local church. The smaller the church the greater the likelihood that members will want to be more engaged in more detailed and practical decisions. The challenge at this level is to raise their sights and to exercise discernments at a more strategic level and gain a bigger picture of what God might be doing. The larger the church the greater the inclination for a leadership to present direction and strategy that has been prayerfully considered by the leadership who expect enthusiastic support. The challenge for these churches is to discover ways to meaningfully engage those present in a process of thorough reflection about direction and strategy and yet know that occasionally engaging with practical details can facilitate an easier engagement. However, a clear mismatch occurs when leaders or church members bring expectations of a Church Meeting from a different church size and culture. The nature of the Church Meeting must be appropriate to the church.

Beyond the Church Meeting

However, the question remains as to whether the Church Meeting really adequately expresses what it means to be a covenanted community committed to living out the principles found in the above scriptures and engaging in meaningful discernment rather than being merely 'church meeting-ist'. Can a church find ways of engaging the whole church, including non-members who are 'committed' fellow disciples, in the discerning process? Thankfully, many churches have moved away from the secretive nature of Church Meeting Agendas with nothing being shared beyond that meeting. The growth of small groups and other informal gatherings present clear opportunities for engaging with issues, and social media also opens up new opportunities to seek to hear what God would say to one another. This calls for the hard work of a creative approach that releases people into new opportunities that facilitates a dynamic conversation characterised by prayer, but safeguards abuses, etc. If we can develop some good models we will help to refresh and reform the Church Meeting into a place where decisions that have been thoroughly and prayerfully explored are crystallised and where new conversations begin.

¹⁶ Quoted in Fiddes et al., *Bound to love* 34

Positive Leadership

Congregational emphasis upon the role of all in seeking the mind of Christ means we must consider the appropriate place of leadership. As the church is God's Church, all leadership is held on trust. Walter Wright has written about the "leadership of all" and has stated, that "if by *Leader* we mean a person who enters into relationship with another person to influence their behaviour, values or attitudes, then I would suggest that all Christians should be leaders."¹⁷ Consideration of leadership must reflect a theology of Christian Community. The corporate nature of the church is affirmed by the biblical names and phrases that refer to the church, such as: People of God, Body, Family, etc. The Trinitarian nature of God reveals a perfect community of love in which there is both precedence and submission which is exercised at different times by the different and united persons of the Trinity. "Pastor" and other terms used for leadership express a sense of care within a community whilst 1 Peter 5:1-5 indicates that leadership is exercised under the authority of God. Similarly those who wish to be considered great are called to be the servant of all and yet to have only one master. Congregational leadership is to be offered in the light of these theological parameters. It is important that when Baptists talk of the church as "the people of God", that the words "of God" are not forgotten and those who exercise a leadership role in the church remember that it is God's Church and any charge they have is held on trust.

The trust of leadership is to enable the people of God to engage in the mission of God. It requires a combination of visionary thought, strategic awareness, a collaborative spirit, a desire to hear God through the Spirit at work amongst his people, humility and the capacity to consider they themselves may be mistaken. Paul was clear that one of his aims was to present people mature in Christ.¹⁸ In the covenant relationship of the church our aim should be to enable people to engage together in the use of their gifts and insights to discern the mind of Christ with each person playing their part. In helping the church to become a positively discerning community focussed on the mission of God, the challenge is not to diminish the Church Meeting but rather to enhance and enrich our congregationalism.

John Claydon, January 2015

¹⁷ Wright, Walter C. *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Leadership and Service* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2000) 2

¹⁸ Colossians 1 :28 and Ephesians 4 :13ff

Bibliography

- B.U.G.B., *The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*, 1994),
- B.U.G.B., *Transforming Superintendency: The Report of the General Superintendency Review Group* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1996).
- B.U.G.B. "C26 Approved Governing Document (04/2008)." Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2008 (accessed 1st February 2011).
- B.U.G.B., *The Baptist Union of Great Britain 2010 Directory* (Didcot: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2010).
- B.U.G.B. Faith and Unity Executive Committee, and Council for Christian Unity., *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity : Anglicans and Baptists in Conversation* (London: Church House, 2005).
- Briggs, J. H. Y., *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century, History of the English Baptists* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994).
- BUGB, Faith and Unity Executive of the. "Knowing What We Believe: Theological Authority Amongst Baptists." In *Baptist Union Council November 2009*. Swanwick: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2009.
- Fiddes, Paul S., *Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission* (London: Baptist Union, 1985).
- Fiddes, Paul S., *Tracks and Traces : Baptist Identity in Church and Theology, Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).
- Gouldbourn, Haymes Cross and, *On Being the Church*, Vol. 21, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2010).
- Harmon, Steven R., *Towards Baptist Catholicity : Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision, Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).
- Lumpkin, William Latane, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959 revised 1969).
- Reniham, James M, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705* (Eugene, OR: Paternoster, 2008).
- Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1991).