

**Re-imagining the Covenant Community:  
The Church Meeting and Baptist Congregational Life**

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# Summary of Dissertation

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Title of Dissertation: **Re-imagining the Covenant Community: The Church Meeting and Baptist Congregational Life**

## Summary:

The church meeting has long been viewed as the essence of Baptist church life. This dissertation examines whether church meetings truly reflect the covenant community envisaged by the early Baptists from both an historical and a contemporary perspective.

The Baptists' appeal to scripture in relation to their pattern of church governance is problematic since there appears to be more than one model and not enough detail.

Evidence from confessions and church records reveals that the early Baptists developed the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Separatists' concept of the covenant community. Such a community emphasised discipleship and had the authority to appoint its own leaders and maintain discipline through the church meeting. Members were encouraged to use and develop their gifting.

A detailed examination of minutes, commentaries and manuals reveals how church meetings changed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They became far more procedural and thus more susceptible to conflict and abuse. The disappearance of disciplinary matters from meetings, the increasing complexity of church life, the growth of voluntarism, and the requirement for legal regularity all contributed to this change.

An analysis of the current state of church meetings explores the decline in support for them and criticisms that have been made, especially in relation to democracy and business procedures. Alternative methods of governance are assessed, notably consensus and 'ministry-led, accountable leadership' models.

This investigation reveals the key aspects of the covenant community to include loving relationships, the priesthood of all believers, every-member ministry, the encouragement of all gifts including leadership, and the importance of both mission and discipleship. However, church meetings that use democratic methods and business procedure are not conducive to these values. There are other patterns of meeting that are more suitable, thus it is time to re-imagine the covenant community.

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## **Dedication**

To my late father, Ron Egner, who died while I was in the process of researching and writing this dissertation. He would not necessarily have agreed with all my conclusions, although he would have shared many of the sentiments. I know that he was very proud of my academic achievements. I miss him very much and I owe so much to him, not least the loving home in which I grew up and my faith that he profoundly influenced. There are also many hundreds if not thousands who owe their discovery of purpose and faith in their own lives to his behind the scenes work in Youth For Christ, Yeldall Manor, and Novi Most International.

"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain"

# Re-imagining the Covenant Community: The Church Meeting and Baptist Congregational Life

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## Ch 1: Introduction

It seemed to be a fairly straightforward matter compared with the proposed £70,000 deficit budget that would be agreed without a murmur later in the meeting <sup>1</sup>. However, this was not to be the case for the proposal, brought by the ministers and elders, regarding charitable status for the church. After an explanation and summary of the elders' deliberations, time was given for questions and comments from members. The initial silence gradually gave way to increasingly heated debate. An amendment was proposed, and then a counter-amendment. Members became confused. The issue of whether this could be left in the hands of the elders was hotly contested. Some members were upset. Someone commented afterwards that it was as if 'all hell had broken loose'. Ministers and elders felt battered and bruised. One new member commented afterwards that if this is what church meetings were like then she would not be coming to any more.

I have come across several people who will not attend church meetings because of such experiences in the past, and even ministers who feel physically sick prior to meetings. Surely this is not the way that church meetings should be? How can this fit in with idea of the covenant community which was at the heart of the early Baptist vision?

I intend to explore these questions from both an historical and a contemporary perspective. Before proceeding I need to give some explanations regarding my approach to the subject.

I have chosen to concentrate historically on the General and Particular Baptists in England who came together to form the Baptist Union in 1891. I acknowledge that there were other streams of Baptists in this country <sup>2</sup>, and other countries in which Baptists were active. I also recognise that Baptists were not the only stream to espouse a congregational polity <sup>3</sup>. Nor were they the only ones to claim New Testament

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<sup>1</sup> Church Meeting, Rising Brook Baptist Church, Stafford, 9 February 2006

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Kenneth Dix, *Strict and particular: English Strict and Particular Baptists in the Nineteenth Century*, (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2001), 3-4

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, R Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), especially 22-24, 33-34

precedent for their form of governance. This last point is worthwhile exploring as it affects the validity of the Baptists' position.

### Following the New Testament Pattern

The Waldensians of the 12/13<sup>th</sup> Centuries were among those who appealed to scripture in relation to ecclesiology, modelling their congregations on the simplicity of the *ecclesia primitiva*<sup>4</sup>. 14<sup>th</sup> Century reformers Wyclif<sup>5</sup> and Hus<sup>6</sup> claimed New Testament precedent for their reforms. The 16<sup>th</sup> Century Anabaptists, possibly closest to the later Baptists, embraced participation in congregational meetings on the basis of scripture<sup>7</sup> so when making decisions 'the authority of Scripture was to be interpreted ... by the consensus of the local gathering – in which all could speak, and listen critically'<sup>8</sup>.

The Puritans of the 16/17<sup>th</sup> Centuries similarly appealed to Scripture. Thomas Cartwright, a Cambridge professor, urged the Church of England to return to the Acts 2 model of church<sup>9</sup>. This included removing the government of the church from the bishops to the minister and church elders in an area. Puritans were influenced by John Calvin in Geneva who set up 'an eldership functioning citywide'<sup>10</sup> along with a *Consistory* to exercise discipline according to the 'order by which the Lord willed his church to be governed'<sup>11</sup> in the New Testament. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, both Independent and Connexional Brethren considered no other churches were 'nearer the Scriptural pattern' than themselves<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 38

<sup>5</sup> R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, (Bridgend: Bryntirion Press, 1999), 17

<sup>6</sup> Jan Hus, *The Treatise on the Church*, 49 in Carter Lindberg (ed.), *The European Reformations Sourcebook*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 16

<sup>7</sup> See Articles 1 and 2 of Three Early Anabaptist Orders in the Appendices of Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp304-6. Also Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1981), 119

<sup>8</sup> John H. Yoder, / Alan Kreider, 'The Anabaptists' in Tim Dowley (ed.), *The History of Christianity*, (Oxford: Lion, 1990), p403

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 112

<sup>10</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation*, (London: Penguin, 2004), 238

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 195

<sup>12</sup> Roger Shuff, *Searching for the True Church*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 34, 39. See also Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The Story of the Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2006), 84, 89, 97 etc

Thus, a number of different church streams claimed consistency with the New Testament pattern <sup>13</sup>. To some extent, the differences between them can be put down to their interpretation of the *priesthood of all believers*. For the Presbyterians, observes Tudur Jones <sup>14</sup>, the *priesthood of all believers* was expressed through their elected representatives on the presbytery. For Anglicans, the Christian public exercised control over religious policy through parliament, although I believe this explanation overlooks the limited nature of suffrage at that time. For Anabaptists, Baptists and Congregationalists, the *priesthood of all believers* was facilitated through a congregational polity.

This challenges the Baptists' claim to model church, including governance, on *the* New Testament pattern. These different streams cannot all be right ... unless there is more than one pattern in the New Testament.

### **Discerning *the* New Testament Pattern**

Various commentators have cast doubt as to whether there was *one* New Testament pattern that can be discerned and copied. In 1811, Andrew Fuller, first General Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, recognised that the New Testament picture of the church was complex: 'To write upon every minute practice found in the new testament, would be to bewilder ourselves and perplex the subject' <sup>15</sup>. Geoffrey Nuttall, a recent historian, agrees: 'even the most scrupulous attempt to restore the Church of the New Testament in its outer forms must be so highly selective as in effect to be a failure ... no one will succeed in including everything' <sup>16</sup>. In contrast, other commentators claim there is not enough detail. Joseph Angus, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, recognised that there was no instruction in the New Testament 'on the mode of carrying out the details of that system of government, which is nevertheless clearly

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<sup>13</sup> E.H. Broadbent went so far as to claim that there was a continuing thread throughout 'succeeding centuries of churches practising the principles taught and exemplified in the New Testament' [E.H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1945) from the subtitle] but he tended to overlook the detail and to take into account the extent of the differences between the different movements.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *Great Reformation*, 251

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism*, (London: Thomas Williams, 1811), 192

<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints – The Congregational Way 1640-1660*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 2

recognised in the inspired writings’<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, a century later, Robert Walton remarked that: ‘any detailed reconstructions of the ideas held by the primitive Church are based upon imagination rather than on fact’<sup>18</sup> although ‘broad conclusions may be drawn concerning the nature of the primitive church’<sup>19</sup>. Walton thus arrives at the same conclusion as Fuller, although from a different angle:

But were we to attempt to draw up a formula of church government, worship, and discipline, which should include anything more than general outlines, and to establish it upon express new testament authorities, we should attempt what is impracticable.<sup>20</sup>

Wheeler Robinson, an influential twentieth-century Baptist scholar, in his standard work on Baptist identity goes further:

It is no longer possible to ‘prove’ the case for a particular form of polity by a string of Scripture texts ... Indeed we have no right to assume that these forms were ever intended to be authoritative for all time. They are experiments rather than precedents...<sup>21</sup>.

Clearly discerning a pattern for church governance in the New Testament is difficult if not impossible. The furthest we can go is with Walton who claimed that ‘(a)s a system of Church government the gathered church is *probably* nearest to the New Testament’<sup>22</sup>. Regardless of this, each of the streams mentioned above, Baptists included, have asserted that they were following *the* New Testament pattern.

## Sources

With regard to sources, the main and often only evidence of discussions in church meetings are the summaries or minutes that appear in church records. However, these have their limitations. They are not descriptions of *how* meetings were conducted, rather a record of *what* happened, often limited to outcomes only. The amount of detail depends on the practice adopted by that church and on the individual making the record. Thus, for example, the records of the Baptist church in Berkhamsted-Chesham state that it was ‘(a)greed that Bro. Woodward be nominated to serve the church in the

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Angus, *Christian Churches*, (London: Ward & Co, 1863), 67

<sup>18</sup> Robert C. Walton, *The Gathered Community*, (London: Carey Press, 1946), 40

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 52

<sup>20</sup> Fuller, *Strictures*, 195

<sup>21</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists*, (London: Kingsgate Press, 1946), 86.

<sup>22</sup> Walton, *Gathered Community*, 92. My italics

capacity of an elder and that he be proposed to all the members...'<sup>23</sup>, but it does not tell us who nominated him, how that came about, how agreement was shown, what the reaction was to this, and so on. Despite this limitation, there is still much that can be gleaned from the records.

## Conclusion

In this study I intend to explore how the early Baptists envisioned church as a covenant community (ch 2) and why church meetings moved away from the early vision (ch 3). For the latter, I will be examining in detail a number of 19<sup>th</sup> Century church records. Finally, I will analyse current practice and thinking (ch 4) before drawing my own conclusions about the most appropriate style and format of governance for the covenant community (ch 5). I will refer to some of the implications for leadership and membership in the church, although my main focus will be on the church meeting itself.

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<sup>23</sup> Minutes of Church Meeting, Chesham, 16 May 1712: L.G. Champion, (tr.), *The General Baptist Church of Berkhamsted, Chesham and Tring 1712-1781*, (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1985), 4. This General Baptist church worshipped and held church meetings in each of these Chiltern towns.

## Ch 2: The Early Baptist Vision for the Covenant Community

In this chapter I intend to explore the early Baptist vision for the covenant community. I will examine where this vision came from, how significant it was at the time, and highlight some of its key principles. I will use evidence from early Baptist church records to show these principles in action and begin exploring how these covenant communities were actually governed.

### The Context of the Early Baptist Vision

The full impact of the early Baptists' vision can only be fully understood in the context of the religious, social and political background of the times. The 16<sup>th</sup> Century had seen monumental changes for the English Church. By the end of Elizabeth I's reign the English were predominantly Protestant, as opposed to Catholic <sup>1</sup>, and the monarch, rather than the pope, exercised unlimited authority over the church in England <sup>2</sup>.

The English Church, however, retained episcopal governance along with other characteristics of the Roman Church. Decisions, including the appointment of ministers, were made by the monarch, archbishops and bishops, and passed down the line of authority to be imposed on churches and parishes. Puritans protested: 'We in England are so far off from having a Church rightly reformed, according to the prescript of God's word'.<sup>3</sup> For the more radical puritans 'episcopacy was now revealing itself as part of the problem, not the solution: the obvious goal was to replace it with a Presbyterian system like Geneva'.<sup>4</sup> This was too revolutionary for most. 'By appearing to advocate the incorporation of elements of democracy into the running of the Church, it ran counter to

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Doran / Christopher Durston, *Princes, Pastors and People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (London: Routledge, 2003), 3-4. Cf. Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 290

<sup>2</sup> Doran, *Princes*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> From 'An Admonition to the Parliament', 1572, quoted in Haigh, *English Reformations*, 294

<sup>4</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation*, (London: Penguin, 2003), 383

the prevailing power structures, both ecclesiastical and secular' <sup>5</sup>. Elizabeth resolutely resisted such proposals to reform the English Church and they ran out of steam <sup>6</sup>.

However, there were more radical groups who wanted to separate from the established Church and found their own autonomous or 'gathered' churches: they were known as Separatists <sup>7</sup>. Many were imprisoned, but it was the execution of Separatist leaders Henry Barrowe, John Greenwood and John Penry for sedition in 1593 that shows how radical they were deemed to be <sup>8</sup>.

### **Roots of the Early Baptist Vision**

The early Baptists had similarities with the continental Anabaptists. Ernest Payne believed that the championing by Baptists of three key Anabaptist principles - the church as a gathered fellowship, believers' baptism and freedom of conscience – and the fact of the earliest Baptists not being Calvinistic is evidence of Anabaptist influence. <sup>9</sup> Barrie White, however argues that it is 'rather difficult to demonstrate any direct debt' <sup>10</sup> since there is no clear evidence of direct borrowing. He reasons that Baptist and Anabaptist appeals to the New Testament demonstrated a common source that would account for their similarities. He concludes that Baptists developed their ideas from the Separatists.

A Separatist Confession of 1596 urged people to leave the antichristian estate of the established church:

...they are willingly to joyne together in Christian communion and orderly covenant, and by confession of Faith and obedience of Christ, to unite themselves into peculiar congregations ... as members of one body wherof Christ is the only head... <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Doran, *Princes*, 125.

<sup>6</sup> MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 391

<sup>7</sup> Doran, *Princes*, 127

<sup>8</sup> MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 388.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest A. Payne, 'Who were the Baptists?', *Baptist Quarterly XVI*, (1956), 340.

<sup>10</sup> B.R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), xii-xiii. See also Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists 1603-49*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), 6-8,10.

<sup>11</sup> A True Confession of the Faith 1596 Article 33 in William L Lumpkin (ed.), *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 92

That as every Christian Congregation hath powre and commandment to elect and ordeine their own ministerie ... to provide for them, honour them and reverence them...<sup>12</sup>

That Christ hath given this powre to receive in or to cut off anie member, to the wholl body together of every Christian Congregation, and not to anie one member aparte...<sup>13</sup>

The imprisoned Barrowe and Greenwood defined church as a company of believers united in fellowship to Christ and to one another<sup>14</sup>. Penry also advocated covenanted church membership<sup>15</sup>. William Bradford described how the separatist congregation at Gainsborough 'as the Lord's free people, joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, (according to their best endeavours) whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.'<sup>16</sup>

This gathered church concept would have been anathema to most people who were steeped in the parish system. After all, they were welcomed into the Church as Christians at birth through baptism. Covenanting together to *become* a church made no sense to them. Yet, from this background Baptists emerged.

## The Baptized Covenanted Community

John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, pioneers of the General Baptists, had been part of the Gainsborough congregation. Hughe and Anne Bromheade, part of Smyth and Helwys' now exiled congregation in the Netherlands, wrote, 'we seeke the fellowshippe of his faithfull and obedient servants and together wth them to enter Covenant with the lorde'.<sup>17</sup> By now Smyth had come to regard Separatist congregations as 'misguided but true because they were constituted freely by covenant'<sup>18</sup>. However it

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p89 – Article 23

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p89 – Article 24

<sup>14</sup> *A True Description out of the Word of God, of the Visible Church 1589* referenced in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 80

<sup>15</sup> Roger Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2005), 14

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 19

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Hughe and Anne Bromheade (1609) in H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 21

<sup>18</sup> From John Smyth, *The Character of the Beast*, quoted in Curtis W. Freeman etc (eds), *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Baptist People*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), 75.

was not long before he rejected them as false because they were constituted upon infant baptism<sup>19</sup>. Smyth's Short Confession written in 1609 declared: 'That the church of Christ is a company of the faithful; baptized after confession of sin and of faith, endowed with the power of Christ'<sup>20</sup>. Here we can see the Baptist distinctive spelt out for the first time: the Covenant Community comprised *baptized* believers. Helwys emphasised the point in his confession of 1611:

That the church off Christ is a company off faithful people 1 Cor 1.2 Eph 1.1 seperated from the world by the word & Spirit off God. 2 Cor 6.17 being knit unto the Lord, & one unto another, by Baptisme. 1 Cor 12.13. Upon their owne confession of the faith Act 8.37 and sinnes Mat 3.6.<sup>21</sup>

In 1616 Henry Jacob formed a semi-separatist congregation, containing some who though separated from the Church of England wanted to see it reformed. This would later emerge as a Calvinistic Baptist Church referred to as the JLJ church after Jacob and his successors John Lathrop and Henry Jessey. Church records describe the events of its founding:

...Those who minded this present Union & so joyning together joynd both hands each w<sup>th</sup> other Brother and stood in a Ringwise: their intent being declared, H Jacob and each of the Rest made some confession or Profession of their Faith & Repentance, some ware longer some ware briefer. Then they Covenanted together to walk in all God's Ways as he had revealed or should make known to them.<sup>22</sup>

Leon McBeth notes, '(s)ome objected or 'scrupled' at the covenant since this was the traditional Old Testament basis of forming a church, and they wanted to move on to a New Testament basis in believer's baptism'<sup>23</sup>. However this tension was resolved by recognizing baptism as the only way into the covenant community, as Helwys had done in his confession.

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<sup>19</sup> From a later preface to Smyth, *The Character of the Beast* noted in *ibid*, 75

<sup>20</sup> John Smyth, *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles*, (1609) in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 101

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Helwys, *A Declaration of Faith of English People remaining at Amsterdam in Holland*, 1611, Article 10 in *ibid*, 119. Nevertheless, Helwys still 'placed the gathered congregation, rather than baptism, in the first place in church foundation' [Stephen Wright, *Early English Baptists*, 110].

<sup>22</sup> *The Records of an Antient Congregation* (Jessey Records) in H Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, (Nashville: Broadman Press), 1990, 23. The reference to each 'Brother' is indicative of the male orientation of churches, including Baptists, at the time and since. In many it was only the brethren who were able to speak at, and were listed as attending church meetings, for example. Any apparent bias in this dissertation is purely on the grounds of this was how it was, not on whether I approve or not!

<sup>23</sup> H Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 46

Covenant was fundamental to the early Baptists. In the Particular Baptists' 1644 Confession a church is described as 'a company of visible Saints ... being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutuall agreement'<sup>24</sup>. Half of the 1644 articles were taken from the Separatist Confession of 1596. Indeed it was this, along with his assessment that the churchmanship was very similar<sup>25</sup>, that led White to conclude that fundamentally the 1644 Confession authors 'were heirs of the English Separatist tradition both as manifested in Amsterdam in 1596 and in the semi-separatist congregation of Henry Jacob and his successors after 1616'<sup>26</sup>.

### Appeal to the New Testament

'Baptists believe that their churches resemble the churches which were planted by the apostles', observed Charles Williams in 1882<sup>27</sup>. 'The laws by which their community is governed were made more than eighteen centuries ago. Their statute book is the New Testament'<sup>28</sup>. Thomas Grantham, a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Baptist leader, based the whole of his *Christianismus Primitivus* on this appeal to the New Testament. He wanted to return to the 'Antient Christian Religion'<sup>29</sup> by 'setting down the *practical way of God's Worship*, as settled in the *Christian Church* by *Christ* the Lord, and his holy *Apostles*'<sup>30</sup> using copious scriptures and quotations from the Early Church Fathers.

As White points out, early Baptists assumed that the Apostolic Church was organized according to one pattern easily discerned in Scripture. He writes:

Once the true pattern had been reconstructed, it could and must be reconstituted as a matter of urgent obedience to Christ in any place, at any time, by any people who grasped its truth. Not to do so was to fail in a prime requirement of biblical, and therefore of Christian discipleship.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *The London Confession 1644* in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 165

<sup>25</sup> B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 62

<sup>26</sup> B.R. White, 'The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644', *Journal of Theological Studies* 19, (1968), 590.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Williams, *The Principles and Practices of the Baptists*, (London: Baptist Tract and Book Society, 1882), 54

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, 69

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Grantham, *Christianismus Primitivus*, (London, 1678), Book 1 Section 1

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, Book 2 Part 2 ch 1

<sup>31</sup> B. R. White, *English Baptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, 12-13

I have detailed in chapter one the weakness of this position, but that takes nothing away from the sincerity with which it was held.

## Corporate Discipleship

Baptists thus established themselves as covenant communities out of obedience to scripture. Central to this was the believers' mutual encouragement 'to walke in all his wayes, made known or to be made known'<sup>32</sup>. This had been key to the Separatists' congregations with ministers and people 'endeavoring to do the will of God in their calling, & thus to walke in the obedience of faith'<sup>33</sup>. The 1644 Baptist Confession added 12 articles to the sections taken from the 1596 Separatist Confession. These were about the life of believers, showing how essential discipleship and obedience were for each member.

Discipleship was also corporate. Members had a duty to each other: 'the duties of love' as Smyth expresses it<sup>34</sup>. This was so important to Helwys that he insisted on the size of congregations being small enough '(t)hat the members off everie Church or Congregacion ought to knowe one another, that so they may performe all the duties off love one towards another both to soule and bodie'<sup>35</sup>. These relationships had to go beyond the superficial as Purnell insisted at the Broadmead Church: 'Yea, they shall be ashamed to own one another by their fleshly titles, but look upon and love one another as Christians, members of the same body, heires of the same promise, children of the same father...'<sup>36</sup>. This emphasis on relationships came not only from Biblical principles, but also from pragmatic need, as shown by Margaret Spufford's research<sup>37</sup>. She found that being a member of a Baptist Church could alienate people from their natural communities, hence the need for close and effective fellowship.

This commitment to one another was expressed in concrete terms, for example in relation to financial giving. In 1690 the General Baptist church at Ford in the Chilterns:

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<sup>32</sup> William Bradford's paraphrase of Smyth's covenant quoted in McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 34

<sup>33</sup> Article 27 of the *1596 Confession* in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 90

<sup>34</sup> Hayden, *English Baptist History*, 21

<sup>35</sup> Article 16 of *Helwys' Declaration of Faith* in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 121

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Hayden, *English Baptist History*, 84

<sup>37</sup> White, *English Baptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, 44-45

Ordered that ye Deacons appeare at the next Church meeting with the subscriptions & ye names of those yt will not subscribe.<sup>38</sup>

Members who refused to give were admonished, as occurred with Brother Lawley in a collection to assist Sister Dancer:

Which refusal savours of a bad consequence in practice & Example & tends to dissolve the bond of ye Church Vnity & peace & gives occasion to scandal & contempt of ye Church Authority...<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, there was accountability in these covenant relationships between members.

Another key feature was the encouragement of the gifted to use their gifts, particularly preaching. The 1644 Confession declares:

That also such to whom God hath given gifts, being tried in the Church, may and ought by the appointment of the Congregation, to prophesie, according to the proportion of faith, and so teach publickly the Word of God...<sup>40</sup>

A 1620 pamphlet insists: 'every disciple that hath ability is authorized, yea commanded, to preach, convert and baptize as well and as much (if not more) than a pastor'<sup>41</sup>. In 1656 the General Baptist congregation planted by Henry Denne at Fenstanton in the Cambridgeshire fens formally recognized four teachers who would teach within the congregation, but 'who shall not meddle with the office of an elder'<sup>42</sup>. The church in Ilston encouraged the development of preaching gifts by allowing two or three men to exercise 'their gifts in private before the church'<sup>43</sup>. At Berkhamsted-Chesham:

It having been made known to the Church that it was hoped that our Bro Richard Butler of Margrets was blessed with a spiritual gift which being employed might be

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<sup>38</sup> Minutes of Church Meeting, Ford, 5 Nov 1690. W.T. Whitley, (ed.) *The Church Books of Ford or Cuddington and Amersham*, (London: Kingsgate, 1912), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ford 30 Jan 1693. *ibid*, 22

<sup>40</sup> Article XLV of the 1644 *London Confession* in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168. See also Article 58 of *The Faith and Practise of Thirty Congregations*, 1651 in *ibid*, 184; Article V of the *Standard Confession*, 1660, in *ibid*, 226; Chapter XXVI Article 11 in the *Second London Confession* 1677, in *ibid*, 288

<sup>41</sup> From *A description of what God hath predestinated*, 1620, quoted in White, *English Baptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, 23

<sup>42</sup> Minutes of Church Meeting, Fenstanton, 5<sup>th</sup> Day of 7<sup>th</sup> Month. E.B. Underhill, (ed.), *Records of the Churches of Christ gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham 1644-1720*, (London: Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854), 87. As Stephen Wright has pointed out in the early decades the identity of a Baptist church as General or Particular is not so neat as some historians have made out [See Stephen Wright, *Early English Baptists*, especially 11-12, 109-110]. He writes, 'The pattern of Baptist allegiance was still being established in 1660, and for many years later' [Stephen Wright, 'Baptist Alignments and the Restoration of Immersion, 1638-44' in *Baptist Quarterly Vol 40*, (2004), 363.]

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in White, *English Baptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, 78

useful to the Church we do therefore order the said Bro. Butler do preach for approbation at Berkhamsted this day...<sup>44</sup>

Steps were also taken to help believers develop gifts in other areas, for example at Ford:

It is agreed yt bro: Jon Hunt being nominated for A deacon Do act for tryall & yt bro Bate assist him with money & Advise.<sup>45</sup>

A 1654 Confession declares '(t)hat every member ought to exercise his gift for the benefit of others'<sup>46</sup>.

### **Authority in the Covenant Community**

According to the early Baptists, Scripture taught that authority resided in the covenant community rather than in an external hierarchy. This can be seen in two main areas. The first is that of church discipline. Smyth wrote:

Unto whom the covenant is given, unto them the power of binding and loosing is given. The covenant is given to the body of the Church ... therefore the power of binding and loosing is given to them.<sup>47</sup>

Particular Baptists followed the General Baptists in this, as shown in their 1644 London Confession:

Christ has likewise 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.<sup>48</sup>

This contrasted dramatically with the Established Church, where such power lay with the bishops and archbishops.

At Fenstanton, for example, disciplinary matters were the main items of business in church meetings during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. There are many accounts of visits to individuals and couples related to church discipline<sup>49</sup> and long visitation reports<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> Chesham 1 March 1727. Champion, *General Baptist Church*, 64

<sup>45</sup> Ford, 30 Jan 1699-1700. Whitley, *Church Books of Ford*, 33

<sup>46</sup> Article XXV of *The True Gospel-Faith*, 1654 in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 195

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Hayden, *English Baptist History*, 21

<sup>48</sup> Article XLII of the *London Confession*, 1644 in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168

<sup>49</sup> Especially 1652-4. Underhill, *Records*, 16f

<sup>50</sup> For example, by John Denne [*ibid*, 114f]

These mainly related to: non-attendance at church, often due to returning to the parish church or defecting to the Quakers or similar groups; marrying outside of the congregation; unruly or immoral behaviour including arguments, drunkenness, idleness and wife-beating. Church meetings at Ford were called 'Discipline' meetings<sup>51</sup>, and the Chesham records are found in the 'Church Book of disciplinary'!<sup>52</sup>

Those disciplined were normally suspended from communion, but the desire was always for repentance and restoration to the fellowship. For example:

Elizabeth Parrett came here this day and did confess her sin for which she was suspended her communion and the church did renew their love to her as before.<sup>53</sup>

Churches tried to follow the principles set out in Matthew 18. At Berkhamsted-Chesham in 1716, Bro Widmer was advised to follow these principles in dealing with charges brought against him by Sister Hobbs, which he claimed were false. Widmer's attempts at reconciliation failed, so the church meeting suspended Hobbs from communion and ordered her to appear before them. When she did, they were advised to forgive each other and to 'live in love'<sup>54</sup>.

The second area of authority related to the appointment of ministers. Again this had been pre-empted by the Separatists, beginning with Robert Browne<sup>55</sup>. The Bromheades argued that each church should 'by direction of his Holy Spirit to proceed to A godly free and right choice of Ministers and other officers by him ordeyned to the Service of his church'<sup>56</sup>. There is very much the sense of ministers and officers being appointed by Christ to be chosen by his church. Again this came out of their status as a covenanted community:

That being thus joined, every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament, for the feeding governing, serving, and

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<sup>51</sup> Ford 17 March 1697/6. Whitley, *Church Books of Ford*, 27

<sup>52</sup> Champion, *General Baptist Church*, 1

<sup>53</sup> Chesham 18 April 1712. *ibid*, 2

<sup>54</sup> Chesham 6 July 1716. *ibid*, 20-21

<sup>55</sup> McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 27

<sup>56</sup> Letter in McBeth, *Sourcebook*, 21

building up of his Church, and that none other have power to impose them, either these or any other.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, the authority to appoint lay not with external authorities, but within the covenant community.

The concern at Fenstanton was that there should be 'a free election according to the rule of the holy scripture, with the consent of the whole congregation'<sup>58</sup>. Over the years various methods were used including having two groups separately nominate officers, with those chosen by both being 'set before the elders'<sup>59</sup>. On one occasion they even drew lots!<sup>60</sup>. Elections were normally accompanied by fasting and teaching on the subject. By 1678 it was generally recognised by Baptists that leaders 'be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church, and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands'<sup>61</sup>.

This authority was not only to appoint ministers, but also for the congregation to carry out the minister's functions without having a minister. The congregation was the Body of Christ:

And therefore may, and ought, when they come together, to Pray, Prophecie, breake bread, and administer in all the holy ordinances, although as yet they have no Officers, or that their Officers should bee in Prison, sick, or by anie other meanes hindered from the Church.<sup>62</sup>

### Church Meetings: other issues

Church discipline and appointing ministers and deacons were thus the main responsibilities of the church meeting. Obviously the latter did not occur as often as the former. Commenting on the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century records from Berkhamsted-Chesham, Baines observes:

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<sup>57</sup> Article XXXVI of the *London Confession*, 1644, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 166

<sup>58</sup> Fenstanton, 7<sup>th</sup> day of 8<sup>th</sup> month 1655. Underhill, *Records*, 156-7

<sup>59</sup> Fenstanton 5<sup>th</sup> day of 7<sup>th</sup> month 1656. *ibid*, 187-8.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, 190

<sup>61</sup> Article XXXI of the *Orthodox Creed*, 1678 in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 319-320. (In this instance the Creed is referring to Bishops or Messengers, Elders or Pastors, and Deacons). See also Article 21 of Helwys' *Declaration of Faith*, 1611 in *ibid*, 122, and Articles XXII and XXIII in *The True Gospel-Faith*, 1654 in *ibid*, 194.

<sup>62</sup> Article of Helwys' *Declaration of Faith*, 1611 in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 120

...the principal business of the monthly church meeting was twofold: the appointment of ministering brethren to serve the local meetings for worship, and the maintenance of church discipline. Even such important matters as the erection and enlargement of meeting-houses are scarcely mentioned, except in notes interpolated later... The admission of members was the responsibility of the Elders rather than the church meeting...<sup>63</sup>

By the middle of the century meetings often comprised only these two matters, and indeed sometimes only the appointing of ministering brethren<sup>64</sup>. Similarly at Ford many of the meetings in the 1710s/1720s appear to have dealt purely with pulpit supply and discipline.<sup>65</sup>

Almost inevitably attention began to be given to areas not so closely related to the core areas from that early vision. Often these were important matters, and there must have been a sense of who would deal with them if not the church meeting. I have already mentioned the matter of pulpit supply. Finance was also dealt with, whether that was defraying expenses incurred or giving an account of expenditure by deacons. For example, at Chesham 'Bro Hudson accompted (i.e. accounted) with the church and hath in hand of the church's money four shillings'<sup>66</sup>. Collections would be agreed whether it was to cover church expenses, such as wood for use at the meeting house,<sup>67</sup> or to meet the needs of a member in need, as in the case of sister Dancer at Ford<sup>68</sup>. Some aspects of church meetings helped in members' discipleship. For example, the Fenstanton members agreed that it would be helpful to explore the arguments of their adversaries, so various leaders made presentations at church meetings<sup>69</sup>. Prayer meetings would be called and topics set<sup>70</sup>. Indeed Raymond Brown notes that 'in the mid-eighteenth century some congregations made imaginative use of Church Meeting ... for fellowship, discussion and prayer'<sup>71</sup>. As Associations developed, church meetings had to choose messengers or representatives to attend, for example at

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<sup>63</sup> Champion, *General Baptist Church*, ix. From the Introduction by Arnold H.J. Baines.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, 132f

<sup>65</sup> Whitley, *Church Books of Ford*, 73f.

<sup>66</sup> Chesham 20 March 1712. Champion, *General Baptist Church*, 1

<sup>67</sup> Chesham 20 Dec 1720. *Ibid*, 56

<sup>68</sup> Ford, 13 Nov 1693. Whitley, *Church Books of Ford*, 19

<sup>69</sup> Fenstanton 1652. Underhill, *Records*, 84

<sup>70</sup> For example at Ford on 7 Aug 1718. Whitley, *Church Books of Ford*, 120

<sup>71</sup> Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1986), 87

Chesham 'that Bro John King and Bro Thos Foster represent the church at the next General Assembly' <sup>72</sup>. Doctrinal matters or even responses to national developments were sometimes debated, such as the discussion at Ford concerning their response to the 1689 Toleration Act when it was '(a)greed that something be done by us in order for the obeyning the exemptions made & granted in the Act' <sup>73</sup>. At the other end of the spectrum, the taste of communion wine was queried at Berkhamsted-Chesham! <sup>74</sup>

As well as this broadening of subject matter, subtle changes can also be seen in how the church meeting operated. In the early days of Warboys, planted from Fenstanton by Denne, the emphasis was on the pattern of church life found in Acts 2 as they 'continued in the apostles' doctrine, and breaking of bread and prayers, assembling often with the church at Fenystanton...' <sup>75</sup>. Church meetings were often held after a Sunday service, sometimes linked to a meal. At Hexham, a Calvinistic Baptist church planted in Northumbria by Thomas Tillam of London:

The church celebrated a day of praise, and had a love-feast, and after it the holy ordinance of our Lord's supper; to which we admitted Richard Denton Trumpet, a member of one of the London churches. <sup>76</sup>

But forty years later at Ford, the emphasis seems to have been more on 'acts and resolutions' at meetings:

...All such Acts & Resolutions as shalbe made & taken by the Assembly or soe many thereof Remaineing together as aforesaid in the absence of such pson or psons so with drawing as aforesaid are lawfull & Binding to all persons whatever present or absent according to the extension & due Limitts of ye Authority of Church meetings or Assemblies for Discipline. <sup>77</sup>

This may indicate greater formality in meetings, but it is difficult to tell precisely how businesslike meetings had become. For example, there are some indications of formal business procedures in the language used for decisions, but this may have reflected language in everyday use.

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<sup>72</sup> Chesham 16 May 1712. Champion, *General Baptist Church*, 1

<sup>73</sup> Ford 24 July 1689. Whitley, *Church Books of Ford*, 4

<sup>74</sup> Chesham 24 March 1731/2. Champion, *General Baptist Church*, 81

<sup>75</sup> Warboys, 1647. Underhill, *Records*, 268-7.

<sup>76</sup> Hexham 23<sup>rd</sup> day of 7<sup>th</sup> month 1652. *ibid*, 290.

<sup>77</sup> Ford 13 Nov 1693. Whitley, *Church Books of Ford*, 18

## Leadership in the Covenant Community

Clearly, Baptist churches as covenant communities were different from the vast majority of churches at that time <sup>78</sup>. They were driven by a distinctive vision and authority lay in each congregation. However, this leaves us with the question: how did this operate in practice? The nature of their covenant relationships implies that both God and the members corporately had a role in this. Members of the church made decisions over certain matters, such as appointing ministers and church discipline. As Hayden points out their final court of appeal was the mind of Christ as revealed through Scripture <sup>79</sup>. This indicates the role of God's word. However what is not quite so clear is what role the ministers and elders had in running the church, and how the meetings for making decisions were run.

The 'Orthodox' Creed of 1678 <sup>80</sup>, for example, declares that 'having discipline and government duly executed, by ministers or pastors of God's appointing, and the church's election, that is a true constituted church' <sup>81</sup>. The 1644 Confession distinguishes the roles of leaders and members:

And as Christ for the keeping of this Church in holy and orderly Communion, placeth some speciall men over the Church, who by their office are to governe, oversee, visit, watch; so likewise for the better keeping thereof in all places, by the members, he hath given authoritie, and laid dutie upon all, to watch over one another. <sup>82</sup>

This would be consistent with allowing leaders to exercise their gift of leadership, while taking seriously the mutual role of members. It is also consistent with the members together making decisions on discipline – their duty for one another's well-being and discipleship – and on appointing leaders – recognizing gifting. According to the Orthodox Creed, leaders were to be appointed 'for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of the power and duty Christ hath enjoined them' <sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>78</sup> With the obvious exception of Congregationalists

<sup>79</sup> Hayden, *English Baptist History*, 32

<sup>80</sup> Drawn up by representatives from churches in the Midlands to refute Hoffmanite Christology [Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 295]

<sup>81</sup> Article XXX of *The Orthodox Creed*, 1678 in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 319

<sup>82</sup> Article XLIV of the *London Confession*, 1644 in *ibid*, 168

<sup>83</sup> Article XXXI of the *Orthodox Creed*, 1678 in *ibid*, 319-320.

There are some references to the roles of members and leaders at Fenstanton. It was the elder Henry Denne who envisioned and challenged the church regarding the need to evangelize<sup>84</sup>. But there was also a need to ensure accountability of leaders, so deacons who examined members on matters of church discipline were:

...to declare it to the congregation, or at least to two or three of them, of which (if it may be) one to be an elder. My reason for this is that if it should be otherwise, the deacons might afterwards be blamed for doing things according to their own mind; but if this rule be followed they cannot be so blamed.

... the deacons should give nothing at any time, or to any person, without the consent, at the least, of two or three of the congregation ...<sup>85</sup>

Members also had a responsibility to fulfil the tasks they had been given. After some members had neglected their business the meeting agreed:

That all persons that are appointed to any business by the congregation, shall give an account thereof in writing, at the next general meeting following.<sup>86</sup>

It is unusual to find either the envisioning role and accountability of leaders or the responsibility of members set out so clearly in church records. Neither is it clear whether other churches had defined these roles with as much thought as demonstrated here.

Similarly, the limitations of the evidence mean that it is not so easy to determine how church meetings were run. For example, how much influence did ministers or elders have compared to members? It is not clear who determined the content of meetings. The items discussed imply that the minister or elders would have brought the matter to the meeting, but as we have seen there is evidence of members raising questions, bringing matters of concern in relation to discipline, and challenging decisions or positions. The latter can be seen at Berkhamsted-Chesham in 1713/14 where two men, Widmer and Foster, were nominated as elders at a church meeting the previous year<sup>87</sup>. In January the meeting agreed to propose both, with two months for anyone in the various congregations to bring objections<sup>88</sup>. In March it was noted that notice had not been given at the Chesham meeting, so another fortnight was allowed<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> Fenstanton 23<sup>rd</sup> day of 8<sup>th</sup> month 1652. Underhill, *Records*, 71

<sup>85</sup> Fenstanton 26<sup>th</sup> day of 7<sup>th</sup> month 1652. *ibid*, 16

<sup>86</sup> Fenstanton 30<sup>th</sup> day 10<sup>th</sup> month 1655. *ibid*, 170

<sup>87</sup> Chesham, date unclear. Champion, *General Baptist Church*, 7

<sup>88</sup> Chesham 22 Jan 1713/14. *ibid*, 10

<sup>89</sup> Chesham, 19 March 1713/14. *ibid*, 10

At that point 20 people objected on the grounds that an elder 'ought to have a good report within and without as saith 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:7 which according to our apprehension we cannot see that [Widmer] is so qualified' <sup>90</sup>. Two meetings later these objections – mainly to do with specific actions – were heard, and although 'we' did not see these reasons as sufficient to stop Widmer from becoming an elder, in order to keep the peace it was agreed to defer for a year <sup>91</sup>. The saga continued with Widmer withdrawing from preaching due to objections, and eventually requesting a move to the Aylesbury congregation.

We do not know with certainty how agreement was reached or shown at church meetings, nor whether or how votes were taken. There are references to a 'majority of voices' <sup>92</sup> or a show of hands <sup>93</sup>, but this is very unusual. There are no indications of voting on most issues, so it would not be unrealistic to suppose that consensus may well have been the method used.

Similarly it is difficult to gauge the nature and atmosphere of the meetings as for example in this record from a Bedford congregation:

After much seeking God by prayer, and sober conference formerly had, the Congregation did at this meeting with joyus consent (signified by Solemn lifting up of their hands) call forth and appoint our bro. John Bunyan to the pastoral office, or eldership. <sup>94</sup>

This conveys the impression of both a formal, or at least solemn, meeting, yet marked by joy. It is difficult to gauge the balance between formality and a genuine connection and interaction between people, for example in the praying as well as in the 'joyus' aspect.

Compare this with a description from 1645 of Edward Barber's congregation in Bishopsgate: hands were laid on everyone before they sat down to supper, the Lord's Supper was celebrated before proceeding with business for that evening, which

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<sup>90</sup> *ibid*

<sup>91</sup> Chesham 20 April 1714. *ibid*, 11-12

<sup>92</sup> Ford 4 June 1690. Whitley, *Church Books of Ford*, 8

<sup>93</sup> *A Book containing a Record of the Acts of a Congregation of Christ in and About Bedford*, 1671 quoted in William H Brackney, (ed), *Baptist Life and Thought 1600-1980*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1983), 51

<sup>94</sup> *ibid*

continued beyond 11pm<sup>95</sup>. This appears to me to be a better reflection of the nature of the covenant community where 'business' was conducted within the context of, and as part of, worship, ministry, and relating to one another in true fellowship.

## Conclusion

The Baptist vision of church was radical. It was a vision for a community bound to God and to each other by covenant, entered through believer's baptism. This *covenant community* had the authority to appoint its own ministers and elders, and to maintain church discipline, by 'binding and loosing' members. It was based, so they believed, on the principles and practice of the New Testament church, and its key characteristics were an emphasis on discipleship, relationships and members using their gifts. The forum for this was the church meeting. Initially, as a community on the edges of society and at risk of persecution, meetings focused on discipline and appointing ministers and elders. As the years passed by we can see other business being handled and church meetings developing, although discipline and appointing leaders remained central to begin with. This raises a number of questions. How can members make decisions and conduct business in such a way that it really does reflect what it means to be a covenant community where mutual support and relationships really are important? If leaders are to be encouraged to exercise their gift of leadership, how does that relate to what is often seen as that most quintessential of Baptist distinctives, the church meeting's role in making decisions? This is still an issue in Baptist Churches today.

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<sup>95</sup> From an account by Tolmie quoted in Hayden, *English Baptist History*, 38

### **Ch 3: The Rise and Fall of the Covenant Community**

By the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Baptist churches were less marginalised. Many of them experienced growth and were now engaging with society at various levels. In this chapter I intend to analyse to what degree they remained faithful to the early Baptist vision for the covenant community. I will do this by analysing the conduct of church meetings and the development of thinking on church governance in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. To gain a picture of what was happening, I have examined the records from a variety of Baptist churches: Eagle Street, Holborn – renamed Kingsgate Street when rebuilt in 1856 – and Maze Pond, Southwark, both Particular Baptist churches in London; Brown Street in the city of Salisbury; Blackburn Road – moved to Cannon Street in 1873 - in the rapidly growing industrial town of Accrington, Lancashire; Ock Street and Marlowes in the market towns of Abingdon, Oxfordshire and Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire respectively; and the Cotswold village chapel in Bourton-on-the-Water.

#### **Church Discipline and the Appointment of Ministers**

By and large, matters relating to church discipline, which had been so important in Baptist church meetings in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, disappeared from church meeting agendas <sup>1</sup>. They had ceased to figure by mid-century at Abingdon, Salisbury, and Maze Pond; and at Bourton-on-the-Water and Kingsgate Street by the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century; and by 1900 at Accrington and Hemel Hempstead.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> Century items relating to membership – applications, requests for dismission (later termed transfers), and deaths – took up far more of church meetings. Church books would often contain the membership roll, and there would be an annual summary of the numbers who came into and who left membership in that year. Reviewing the membership roll became an annual task particularly in the city churches

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<sup>1</sup> For this trend (and others) I have examined the church meeting minutes for 1800, 1825, 1850, 1875 and 1900 for Abingdon, Accrington (1806 and 1827 not 1800 and 1825), Bourton-on-the-Water (1802 not 1800), Marlowes (in addition 1835), Eagle Street/Kingsgate Street, Salisbury (1835 not 1800 and 1825) and Maze Pond Baptist Churches

of London <sup>2</sup>. Often, membership related matters were the only business discussed in a meeting <sup>3</sup>. At Bourton, meetings would be especially arranged to facilitate the process for people becoming members <sup>4</sup>. Prior to 1834, ‘whenever new members were proposed [at Marlowes] – the church was called together between the services on the Sabbath’ <sup>5</sup>. At Kingsgate Street in 1875, meetings were arranged to fit in with the process, with messengers appointed at one meeting then reporting back at the next <sup>6</sup>. Maze Pond developed a slick process: typically an individual was proposed for communion and it was ‘Resolved that she be admitted’ <sup>7</sup>; at the next meeting <sup>8</sup> she appeared before the church and testified, and it was resolved to receive her after baptism; she was received into fellowship ‘at the Table’ on a subsequent Sunday <sup>9</sup>. A similar process was followed for each batch of applicants. As in other matters, Maze Pond was some years, if not decades, ahead of other churches in its administrative arrangements.

The other area of church authority – the appointment of their own minister – was still a matter for church meetings. When churches were searching for a minister the matter would dominate agendas. Approaches to potential pastors were reported, and members deliberated on whom to invite to fill the pulpit, often over a number of weeks, so that they could be considered for the ministerial position. At Bourton in 1875, for example, the Revd Whitaker was invited to preach for three Sundays <sup>10</sup>, following which

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<sup>2</sup> Announced for November meeting [Minutes of Church Meeting, Eagle Street Chapel, Holborn, 1 Sept 1825], but spread over three or four meetings by 1850; also Maze Pond [Minutes of Church Meeting, Maze Pond Baptist Church, Southwark, 25 Feb 1850]

<sup>3</sup> Only item at 5 meetings in 1850 and at 6 meetings in 1875 at Abingdon [Minutes of Church Meetings, Abingdon Baptist Church, Ock Street, 1850 and 1875]; only item at 9 meetings in 1835 at Marlowes [Minutes of Church Meetings, Marlowes Baptist Church, Hemel Hempstead, 1835].

<sup>4</sup> Three meetings were held in April 1802 to process three applicants; only four meetings recorded in 1825, with three in June/July with membership being the main business. The same appears to be true in 1850 and even in 1900 although more business was also included [Minutes of Church Meetings, Bourton-on-the-Water Baptist Church, 1802, 1825, 1850 and 1900].

<sup>5</sup> Minutes, Marlowes: from a note made in 1834. ‘For many years the church had no periodical church meetings – there were few men who were members of the church – and it was found that an attendance could not be secured’.

<sup>6</sup> Minutes, Kingsgate Street, 7 and 19 April 1875, 10, 26 and 27 May 1875, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Minutes, Maze Pond, 24 March 1800 – for example

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 21 April 1800

<sup>9</sup> 4 May 1800; reported at the meeting on 19 May 1800. *ibid*, 19 May 1800

<sup>10</sup> Minutes, Bourton, 21 Feb 1875

he was called as minister for five years<sup>11</sup>. As we will see later Maze Pond meetings in 1825 were dominated by their attempts to find a new minister. Eleven meetings were held between April and August with the topic being a major item. Sometimes the meeting was called specifically for that reason<sup>12</sup>. In Accrington, the importance of such a decision was underlined by a resolution submitted:

to secure the peace and prosperity of the Church ... That not less than two thirds of the resident members shall constitute a legal Church Meeting with power to elect a Minister to the Pastoral office and that one month's notice to be given to the Church for the consideration of the qualifications of the person who stands as candidate for the Ministry.<sup>13</sup>

## Procedural Developments

One of the most significant developments during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was the way in which church meetings became more business-like in their proceedings. By 1850 most churches were routinely reading and confirming previous minutes at the start of each meeting<sup>14</sup>. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the chairman of a meeting, normally the pastor, was formally recorded in the minutes<sup>15</sup> - the term chairman had not been used until the middle of the century. The proposer and seconder of motions began to be recorded by mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>16</sup>. Maze Pond tended to lead the way, confirming the previous minutes and listing the brethren attending the meeting by 1800, and naming who was in the chair by 1850.

Voting had become more commonplace. At Maze Pond the search for a minister in 1825 demonstrates this<sup>17</sup>. At the April meeting<sup>18</sup> there was a *ballot* on whether to pursue either of two recent supply preachers, with the majority voting for Mr Copley of Watford, so it was resolved at the next meeting to propose a motion inviting him for three months supply. The meeting *voted* in favour of this although not unanimously, so

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 28 March 1875

<sup>12</sup> Minutes, Maze Pond, 7 April – 22 Aug 1825

<sup>13</sup> Minutes of Church Meeting, Blackburn Road Baptist Church, Accrington, 28 Nov 1850

<sup>14</sup> Abingdon, Marlowes and Eagle Street by 1850, Blackburn Road by 1875 [See *Footnote 1*]

<sup>15</sup> Cannon Street (formerly Blackburn Road), Marlowes and Kingsgate Street (formerly Eagle Street) by 1875; Abingdon and Brown Street by 1900 [See *Footnote 1*].

<sup>16</sup> By 1850 at Marlowes and Eagle Street; by 1900 at Abingdon [See *Footnote 1*]

<sup>17</sup> My italics to show this

<sup>18</sup> Minutes, Maze Pond, 18 April 1825

the ballot result was not recorded<sup>19</sup>. Mr Copley declined their invitation, so it was agreed that Mr Baynes of Wellington would supply for 1 month. At the June meeting it was *resolved 'nem: con'* to request Mr Baynes to continue supply for a week or two more<sup>20</sup>. On 10 July, the meeting 'stayed' after the service to hear that Mr Baynes could not stay on, so it was resolved to meet the next day to consider calling him to the pastorate<sup>21</sup>. The *ballot* was unanimous (33 votes) to call Mr Baynes<sup>22</sup>. At a meeting three days later the minutes of the 11<sup>th</sup> were read and confirmed '*by ballot nem: con: 33 ayes 2 neutor*' and they resolved to communicate this to Mr Baynes<sup>23</sup>.

The development of procedural devices is epitomised by as many as nine resolutions relating to the regulation of meetings being passed between 1840 and 1843 at Abingdon<sup>24</sup>. Again, Maze Pond were decades ahead, listing various Memoranda at the front of the Church Book relating mainly to meeting procedures. These had been agreed between 1742 and 1791, and were to be read annually<sup>25</sup>.

The introduction of the 'Annual Church Meeting' during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century provides further evidence of this formalization. These would often include statistical and financial reports<sup>26</sup>, a review of the last year by the Pastor<sup>27</sup>, and reports by the various departments<sup>28</sup>. At Maze Pond in 1900, for example, reports were made by the Secretaries of the Maze Pond Auxiliary to the Baptist Missionary Society, Sunday School, Maze Pond Benevolent and Tract Society, Dorcas and Maternal Society, Ladies Guild, and the Maze Pond Christian Band<sup>29</sup>. Each could take up a page and a half in the minutes, often including accounts.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 24 April 1825

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 27 June 1825

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 10 July 1825

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 11 July 1825

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 14 July 1825

<sup>24</sup> Minutes, Abingdon: extracts from minutes of former church meetings at the start of Church Book A. Resolutions relate to admission of members, elections of deacons, confirmation of resolutions, etc.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes, Maze Pond.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes, Cannon Street Baptist Church, Accrington, 4 Feb 1900

<sup>27</sup> Minutes, Maze Pond, 28 Jan 1875

<sup>28</sup> Minutes, Bourton, 14 Nov 1900; Cannon Street, 4 Feb 1900; Maze Pond, 25 Jan 1900

<sup>29</sup> Minutes, Maze Pond, 25 Jan 1900

## Complexity of Church Organisation

Church life had become more complex during the century with various departments and committees being set up, and this was reflected in church meetings. In 1900 Bourton had a 'Heating Apparatus Committee'<sup>30</sup>. In 1850 Marlowes set up a 'coal society' for the winter evenings<sup>31</sup> and a 'Benefit Society' for the sick<sup>32</sup>. Eagle Street already had a committee for organising the Sunday evening lectures in 1800<sup>33</sup> and another was established to oversee the conversion to gas lighting in 1825<sup>34</sup>. In 1832 Brown Street set up a committee to consider singing<sup>35</sup>. At Maze Pond, the Pastor proposed a committee for the January 1901 mission, comprising the Deacons and representatives of the 'church, choir, congregation, Sunday School, Bible Class, Mothers Meeting, Christian Band, Choral Society, Temperance Society, Tract and Benevolent Society, District, and Secretary'<sup>36</sup>.

This reflected the increase in the amount and diversity of business dealt with at church meetings during the century. Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was not unusual to have no business at a church meeting, or not to meet because there was no business<sup>37</sup>. By 1900 business considered at Brown Street church meetings included pulpit swaps, involvement in inter-church mission, appointing delegates to inter-church and denominational bodies, joint services, supporting village churches, setting up committees in the community, deacons' elections, finances, and prayer meetings. Other items discussed related to the content of services, for example: the use of the new hymnal; whether to sing 'Amen' at the end of hymns; and the problem of finding seating for visitors to services<sup>38</sup>. Similar issues would have been discussed by churches prior

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<sup>30</sup> Minutes, Bourton, 14 Nov 1900

<sup>31</sup> Minutes, Marlowes, 6 July 1850

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 30 Dec 1850

<sup>33</sup> Minutes, Eagle Street, 2 Jan 1800

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 1 Dec 1825

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of Church Meeting, Brown Street Baptist Church, Salisbury, 1 May 1832

<sup>36</sup> Minutes, Maze Pond, 19 Nov 1900

<sup>37</sup> For example, in 1832 at Brown Street on three occasions the church meeting did not take place and twice there was 'no business'. In 1850 there was no business at five meetings, three were used for a devotion and the pastor was absent from two more 'there being no business whatever demanding attention it was not held'. [Minutes, Brown Street, 1832 and 1850]

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 1900

to this: the difference is the volume of business in that one year. This was considerably greater than before and much more varied than the staple diet of membership related items.

This did not necessarily mean that matters closer to the characteristics of the early Baptist vision were forgotten. They were merely swamped. The encouragement of individuals in developing and using their preaching gifts was still practised in the early part of the century at least. Joseph Tarry was invited to preach at three church meetings at Maze Pond in 1800 and then released in ministry in the church and in neighbouring villages <sup>39</sup>. At Marlowes discipleship was encouraged through meetings for meditation and prayer - and topics would continue to be discussed at the church meeting. For example in April 1875 'the subject of 'the Baptism of the Holy Ghost' was considered. Bro C I Cole introduced it with an earnest address' <sup>40</sup>. Fellowship was also encouraged mainly through the Teas that were held prior to Annual Church Meetings. These were often regarded as 'cheering', 'very pleasant' <sup>41</sup> and 'hearty' <sup>42</sup> affairs.

### **The Battleground of Church Meetings**

At the same time as this increase in complexity and businesslike procedure there also appears to have been a rise in conflict, opposition, aggressive use of procedures and sometimes general disgruntlement. This was evident in Abingdon where measures were taken to stop this through a resolution that 'no proposition or subject shall be brought before any church meeting [*interpolation*: for discussion without a months] in writing unless by the consent of the Chairman' <sup>43</sup>.

A rather telling episode occurred at Brown Street Chapel in 1875. The reappointment of the Church Committee after its term had expired was moved by Mr Tucker and seconded by Mr Atkins. However Mr Wheeler moved an amendment that it should not be appointed. 'A discussion ensued & after it Mr Tucker's motion was carried

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<sup>39</sup> Minutes, Maze Pond, 20 Jan, 17 Feb, 24 March, 21 April 1800. Similarly at Eagle Street it was agreed that one Brother preach four times before the church with a view to approving 'the exercise of his gifts for the ministry' [*Minutes*, Eagle Street, 29 Sept 1825]

<sup>40</sup> Minutes, Marlowes, 1 April 1875

<sup>41</sup> Minutes, Bourton, 30 Nov 1875

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 14 Nov 1900

<sup>43</sup> Minutes, Abingdon, 4 May and 1 June 1875. Presumably the word 'notice' has been omitted.

by a large majority', and the election took place <sup>44</sup>. But that was not the end of it. The following month, (o)n the Pastor putting the minutes for the approval of the Church an attempt was made by Messrs Wheeler and R. Moore to prevent their passing, which was defeated by 16 to 8' <sup>45</sup>. At the end of the meeting Mr Moore gave notice of a motion to declare the last meeting null and void; however, '(t)he pastor gave notice that it would first be moved leave to introduce that question not be given'. At the June meeting it appeared that the matter might be at an end when '(t)he Amendment to notice of motion was moved & seconded when the motion itself was withdrawn' <sup>46</sup>. However, the Secretary of the Committee gave notice of a motion:

That this Committee are of opinion that the course of conduct so long taken by Robt Moore at our Church Meeting tends to destroy the peace & to interfere with the prosperity of the Church. The Committee therefore recommend the Church to request Mr R Moore either to alter his course of conduct, or withdraw from the fellowship of the church at Brown St. <sup>47</sup>

Mr Moore then gave notice of a motion demanding the Pastor resign, and Mr Wheeler gave notice of a motion requesting Mr Tucker resign his membership.

The controversy was escalating, and a meeting was held at which the Committee's motion was put, but in an amended form.

Mr Moore then addressed the meeting in a speech of three quarters of an hour when as parties were leaving the meeting in consequence of the lateness of the hour it was voted by the church that this discussion should then cease. ... The amendment & Resolut<sup>n</sup> were then put & the counting being thrice taken the numbers were for the amendment 57 for the resolut<sup>n</sup>. 31. On the amendment being put as a substantive Resolut<sup>n</sup> an amendment (so called) was moved by Mr Jas Moore, which was held not in order, & the Resolut<sup>n</sup> concern Mr R Moore's withdrawal was declared carried. <sup>48</sup>

The Committee then gave notice of motion to withdraw from Mr Jas Moore and Mr Wheeler. A further meeting was held the following week <sup>49</sup>. The pastor vacated the chair for the motion regarding his position <sup>50</sup>, however Jas Moore withdrew the motion and

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<sup>44</sup> Minutes, Brown Street, 3 March 1875

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, 1 April 1875

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, 2 June 1875

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, 16 June 1875

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, 23 June 1875

<sup>50</sup> It is difficult to tell whether this was the motion first raised on 2 June or whether it was the abortive amendment from the previous week

the pastor resumed the chair. Mr Wheeler also withdrew his motion concerning Mr Tucker. It was then proposed to withdraw from Mr Jas Moore, but he resigned his membership before that could happen. It was then moved to withdraw from Mr Wheeler, but he 'rose & read a document which had not proceeded far before the Pastor feeling it personally abusive left the chair & retired from the meeting ... The chair was resumed by Mr Atkins. Mr Wheeler proceeding amidst occasional interruptions & terminating with reading a document giving in the resignation of 22 members'. The resignations were accepted 'nem: con'.

This may be an extreme example but it shows what could happen within the more procedural meetings now being conducted, and how they lend themselves to a more adversarial approach. A similar, though not quite so dramatic, episode relating to the building of a new school room took place at Marlowes in 1850 involving motions of confidence, counter-proposals and amendments<sup>51</sup>. It was not always like this, and it was perfectly possible for Church Committees to work well with the church meeting. In Accrington we find an example of the Committee being tasked with submitting names for pulpit supply to the church meeting<sup>52</sup>. We can also find several examples of the church meeting agreeing with the Committee's recommendation on other matters<sup>53</sup>. There was even one instance of various alterations to the church building being agreed at a church meeting<sup>54</sup>, only for this resolution to be rescinded and the decision left to the Church and School Committees<sup>55</sup>.

We can also find examples of ministers pushing at the boundaries of their authority. At Maze Pond it was not unknown for the minister to progress membership applications and then ask permission retrospectively from the church meeting<sup>56</sup>. Perhaps more seriously, the minister at Abingdon took the initiative in a deacons' election. 'In order to facilitate the election, by preventing, as far as possible, the wasteful scatterings of votes, the pastor proceeded to nominate three brethren, an affirmative

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<sup>51</sup> Minutes, Marlowes, 1 Feb, 1 & 7 March, 5 April 1850

<sup>52</sup> Minutes, Blackburn Road, 31 Oct 1850

<sup>53</sup> On the sale of property [Minutes, Cannon Street, 24 Feb 1875]; on communion wine [21 July 1875]; and all three items at one particular meeting [26 June 1900].

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, 21 July 1875

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, 24 Nov 1875.

<sup>56</sup> See for example Minutes, Maze Pond, 19 April 1875 and 17 Dec 1900.

vote of members present having given him the authority to do so' <sup>57</sup>. We do not know if he was trying to be helpful or manipulative. The sparse minutes give the impression that it was helpful, but that may just be the perspective of the minute-taker. Nor do we know if anyone there regarded it as manipulative but kept quiet. Two accepted their election, and one declined to take up the position <sup>58</sup>, Thus, if it was manipulative it was not very well planned!

One thing that can sometimes be identified is a tension between the leadership and membership. Much of this has to do with power, on the one hand, and trust, on the other. There is an element of reluctance to allow those who are gifted or anointed in leadership to 'get on with it'. It seems that everyone wants to have their say. The opposition of the church meeting at Bourton to setting up a Church Committee in 1802 may have had something to do with this <sup>59</sup>. Indeed the desire by members to 'have their say' and their reluctance to give this up may go back to the first Baptist congregation, which included at least two or three former clergy <sup>60</sup>. As Coggins pointed out the numbers of clergy in Separatist congregations 'no doubt helps to account for the strength of the congregational ideal among them' <sup>61</sup>. They were educated and articulate. Congregational polity lent itself to their being able to express their opinions within the church, and this heritage encouraged others to feel that this was their right.

### **Developments in Baptist Thinking**

Thinking behind governance and church meetings developed over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as can be seen from the writings of three Baptist ministers during that period. To some extent, these both reflected and shaped what was taking place.

In 1797, John Fawcett, influential in the north of England not least in training ministers, described a gospel church as 'a voluntary society, formed by mutual agreement' and its true nature 'consists in all the members standing in the same relation to the glorious head' <sup>62</sup>. Thus, 'every particular church, constituted according to the

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<sup>57</sup> Minutes, Abingdon, 16 May 1900

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, 30 May 1900

<sup>59</sup> Minutes, Bourton, 31 Dec 1802

<sup>60</sup> James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation*, (Ontario: Herald Press, 1991), 35

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, 31

<sup>62</sup> J. Fawcett, *The Constitution and Order of a Gospel Church Considered*, (Halifax, 1797), 12

order of the gospel, hath full power and authority within itself, for the exercising of discipline, rule and government' <sup>63</sup>. This is in line with the early Baptist vision. He continues, 'all the brethren have an equal right to speak their sentiments... It is very desirable that the members of the community be of one mind in all their transactions' <sup>64</sup>. Where agreement could not be reached to this degree, it should 'be decided then by putting it to the vote, the minor part should peaceably submit to the major, as far as they possibly can, without violation of their own consciences' <sup>65</sup>. This reflects what Fawcett saw as the major duty of members to love one another <sup>66</sup>.

Writing four decades later Charles Stovel, a prolific author and very influential in the denomination, agrees that a church is a voluntary society <sup>67</sup>, and that its members are equal before God, with an equal share in the benefits of being part of the church <sup>68</sup>. But he observes that 'the business of each church is more complex... A voluntary Christian Church has thus come to be a little cluster of benevolent societies' <sup>69</sup>. He gives as an example a church supporting its pastor, incidental expenses, alms of the church, Sabbath School, Bible Classes, a Tract Society and an auxiliary Missionary Society in aid of the Foreign Mission, home Mission, Irish Society, and Fund for Relief of Poor Churches <sup>70</sup>. Stovel claims that the difficulties of directing a church can be attributed to our fallen nature, but 'every painful difficulty may soon be conquered by a careful regard to frankness, and order in the management of business' <sup>71</sup>. He then sets out a system of organising the church with deacons each overseeing and keeping the accounts for a specific area or department, working with a committee comprising four or five brethren. Brief reports should be made each quarter to the church meeting <sup>72</sup>. Stovel included a form showing a format for meetings and minutes [See fig 1].

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, 25

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, 51

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, 52

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, 53

<sup>67</sup> Rev C. Stovel, *Hints on the Regulation of Christian Churches*, (London: Jackson and Walford, 1835), 1

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, 29-32

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, 164

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*, 165

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*, 165-6

No. IV.  
*Specimen of Minute Book, with its Entries.*

Church Meeting, September 24, 1834.  
Present—Brethren Tomkins, March, Thomas, Giles, Dando, Ellard, Watson, Dorkin, &c. &c.  
The Pastor Presiding.

201.	Minutes of the last Meeting read and confirmed.
202.	The Pastor having reported that James Nailor wished to be united to the Church, Resolved, that Brethren Thomas and Giles be requested to visit him.
203.	Resolved, on the Report of Messengers to John Jarman, that his experience be laid before the Church. (Min. 196.)
204.	Resolved, on hearing the experience and profession of John Jarman, that he be admitted to the Church.
205.	The Pastor reporting that the Members had been arranged into Eight Districts, according to their Residence, Resolved, that the following Brethren be requested to visit them :— No. 1. Brethren Dando and Ellard. No. 2. Brethren Watson and Dorkin. No. 3. Brethren Johnson and Freeman. &c. &c. &c.
206.	The Pastor reported that the Sacrament of Baptism was administered on Lord's Day, Aug. 28, 1834. To Jane Seymour, (Min. 189.) To James Finch, (Min. 191.) And Joseph Thornton, (Min. 194.)
207.	The Pastor reported that Jane Seymour, James Finch, and Joseph Thornton, were admitted to the Lord's Supper, Sept. 7, 1834. (Min. 206.)
208.	Reports received, from Districts, No. 7, By Brethren Curtice and Wilkin. No. 3, By Brethren Johnson and Freeman. (Min. 205.)
209.	Reports received from the Committees, 1. Of the Sabbath School. Admitted in the last quarter, Boys 26 ; Girls 20,—46. On the Books 240 ; in attendance 224. 2. Of the Tract Society. New Families visited in the last quarter, 15. Now in Visitation, 201. Visitors employed, 13. &c. &c. &c.

Figure 1: Stovel's suggested meeting and minutes format [Stovel, Hints, 180-1]

An annual church meeting should be held with reports for the whole year from each department, a review of membership, auditors report, and Association report <sup>73</sup>. He also proposed organising pastoral visiting so that the area covered by the church would be

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*, 168

divided into districts, with visitors appointed for each. Reports would be made advising the pastor of any need for pastoral follow-up<sup>74</sup>. He wrote,

Some individuals, to whom the principles of business are novel, may think the order of discipline now purposed too laborious for conducting a Christian church. This is quite a mistake.<sup>75</sup>

Rather this system would result in greater efficiency and effectiveness, since 'when the business proceeded without any record of the church's resolutions, half the affairs were forgotten, or neglected'<sup>76</sup>. Stovel may well have been influenced by the practices of Maze Pond during his membership there<sup>77</sup> while he trained for the ministry at Stepney Academy.

Three decades later, Joseph Angus, Principal of Regent's Park College, also agrees that churches are voluntary associations of men as equals<sup>78</sup>. He sees the Pastor as a key figure invested with authority and empowered to execute the law, to arrange for everything to be done decently and in order, and to censure the disorderly and those who create division. 'In short, the pastors of the church had all the authority of the church'<sup>79</sup>. Like Stovel<sup>80</sup> he recognises that there are secular as well as spiritual matters that need attention:

The church is essentially a spiritual fellowship, formed for spiritual purposes, and business not spiritual may be left in the hands of any that are appointed for that work. Sometimes it will be better to put all secular concerns into the hand of prudent business men, leaving the church to attend only to things that are connected with the preservation of her purity. Sometimes it may be better to have everything settled by the church herself...<sup>81</sup>

But Angus is also aware of the dangers of the voluntary system:

Christian churches are in danger from minute and fierce divisions. This is the bane of all governments that are partly democratical.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid*, 169-70

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*, 171

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, 172

<sup>77</sup> In membership 1823-1826 [Minutes, Maze Pond, 30 Oct / 2 Nov 1823 and 10 Sept 1826]

<sup>78</sup> Angus, *Christian Churches*, 17 & 8

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*, 45

<sup>80</sup> Stovel, *Hints*, 34f.

<sup>81</sup> Angus, *Christian Churches*, 67

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*, 76

For Angus, the key is to act under the Lordship of Christ who transforms anarchy, tyranny, and strife into ‘the noblest form of social life’<sup>83</sup>. In an earlier work he had recognised the dangers of ‘the tyranny of deacons, of the democratic tendencies of churches, and of the consequent discouragements and degradation of the ministry’<sup>84</sup>, However, he claimed this was not the fault of the voluntary system, rather:

They are often to be attributed to a forgetfulness on the part of pastors, deacons, and members, of the only rule of procedure allowed under the gospel – the rule of love. The power of affection is the only power with which Christ has invested the church.<sup>85</sup>

He recognised that a voluntary society in the form of the covenant community required love and submission to Christ in order to make it work. However, the growing complexity of church life meant that people like Stovel were encouraging a more businesslike approach to church meetings and organisation. They recognised the dangers of the Voluntary System, but the procedural method of conducting meetings seems to provide a ready arena for conflict and abuse.

At the end of this period, J R Wood and Samuel Chick were requested by the Baptist Union to write a manual for ministers and deacons on the order and administration of a Baptist church<sup>86</sup>. This provides a snapshot of good practice at the close of the century. The book goes into procedural rules in some detail. For example, it sets out who can speak; when and how they can speak<sup>87</sup>; when an amendment can be moved, and the rules relating to what can and cannot be done in relation to the original motion and any further amendments<sup>88</sup>; the different methods of voting<sup>89</sup>; and the role of the pastor and deacons (as ‘the Cabinet is to the Government or a Chairman and Board of Directors to a Public Company’)<sup>90</sup>. The writers assert:

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid*

<sup>84</sup> Angus, Joseph, *The Voluntary System*, (London: Jackson and Walford, 1839), 196

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, 197

<sup>86</sup> Wood, J.R. / Chick, Samuel, *A Manual of the Order and Administration of a Baptist Church*, (London: James Clarke, ND). Although the publication is not dated it was published while J H Shakespeare was General Secretary, ie between 1898 and 1924.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*, 36

<sup>88</sup> *ibid*, 36-7

<sup>89</sup> *ibid*, 37

<sup>90</sup> *ibid*, 38

Few rules are necessary, and all rules are easy where love reigns. The Church is a Brotherhood; and sins against love are sins against the Brotherhood; where such sins are found the ideal of a Christian Church is destroyed.<sup>91</sup>

However, the detail and formality of the rules laid out in the book militate against this ideal!

### Reasons behind the Shift

There are a number of reasons for these changes during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Firstly, as we have already observed, there was the reduction in church discipline matters being discussed at church meetings. J.B. Whitely observed that, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, church books contained only the most general description of disciplinary cases. He attributes this to a sense of decorum<sup>92</sup>. It is reasonable to deduce that this may also have contributed to their disappearance from meeting agendas – after all, it was more acceptable to discuss people joining and leaving the church than the scandal of someone’s conduct. Similarly, it was easier to report on visiting the sick<sup>93</sup> than deal with discipline. Another factor in the decline may have been the kind of people involved in Baptist churches. Dowley suggests that the reason for discipline playing such a significant role in the life of churches in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century was due to their members being mainly men of little education and thus inadequate in coping with the ‘smooth organisation of social groups’<sup>94</sup>. While I would not entirely agree with this, since there were other reasons for the prominence of discipline, it may be that as education levels improved, and as it became less unacceptable for people of other classes to be Dissenters, so their capacity to create ‘smooth organisation’ improved<sup>95</sup>. Whiteley also concluded that, by the end of the century, minutes were to ‘show much less concern with disciplining the membership as these responsibilities increasingly fell to be discharged by deacons and minister rather than the membership at large, and

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<sup>91</sup> *ibid*, 39

<sup>92</sup> J.B. Whiteley, ‘Church Discipline in the Loughwood Records’, *Baptist Quarterly XXXI*, (1986), 294

<sup>93</sup> As, for example, the reports from ‘Sick Visitors’ in Minutes, Marlowes, April-Dec 1850. Eagle Street celebrated the jubilee of the Compassionate (or Sick Visiting) Society in 1850 [Minutes, Eagle Street, 3 Jan 1850]

<sup>94</sup> T. Dowley, ‘Baptists and Discipline in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century’, *Baptist Quarterly XXIV*, (1971), 164

<sup>95</sup> John Briggs writes that ‘larger city churches undoubtedly attracted an increasingly professional group of members though I think many still drew most of their members from the aspiring working classes, but these would be the kind of people who joined mutual improvement societies’. From an email dated 10 September 2006

without minutes documenting their actions’<sup>96</sup>. There may also have been an element of protecting the individuals’ right to privacy.

Interestingly, Wood and Chick do set out a process for dealing with church discipline. This implies that discipline was recognised as necessary and that the church meeting had a role to play, although this was after the pastor and deacons had interviewed the ‘offender’ on one or more occasions<sup>97</sup>. They wrote, ‘Discipline is one of the most august, as it is one of the least welcome of the functions of the Church’<sup>98</sup>. Perhaps it had disappeared from church meetings because it was the least welcome function. Payne observed:

The Church Meeting ceased to be a church court in any real sense and became a business meeting. In the Victorian age much time was spent on matters of property, equipment and organisation.<sup>99</sup>

This leads on to a second reason for the changes: churches were getting larger and as already noted, ‘the business of each church is more complex’<sup>100</sup>. Growth in numbers meant more business had to be conducted. Not only were churches having to deal with more property and equipment, but also relationships with other churches and organisations. The resulting number of committees multiplied the administration and organization. John Briggs argues that this is due to a more deliberate mission focus in churches, and as mission moved up the agenda ‘the form of church life became much more complex, the local church employing a rich diversity of agencies in its witness within its own community’<sup>101</sup>. For Ward ‘the Sunday School open to all rather than the covenanted meeting of baptized saints was the sign of the times’<sup>102</sup>. Thus, Briggs highlights a tension between on the one hand ‘the saints in covenant both with God and with one another, and, on the other, the church mandated as some great missionary

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<sup>96</sup> Whiteley, ‘Church Discipline’, *BQ XXXI*, (1986), 294

<sup>97</sup> Wood, *Manual*, 43

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*, 44

<sup>99</sup> Ernest A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers*, (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1954), 105

<sup>100</sup> Stovel, *Hints*, 164

<sup>101</sup> J.H.Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 18

<sup>102</sup> W.R. Ward, ‘The Baptists and the Transformation of the Church 1780-1830’, *Baptist Quarterly XXV*, quoted in William H. Brackney, / Paul S. Fiddes, (eds.), *Pilgrim Pathways*, (FS B.R. White, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), p70

society, set energetically to the all important task of extending the kingdom' <sup>103</sup>.

However, this cannot fully explain the changes. Baptist churches were aware of the Great Commission from the outset!

A third factor may help to explain this: the rise of *voluntaryism* in society and in the church. Voluntary societies had become a feature of secular society, paralleling an enthusiasm for *laissez-faire* in society at large, particularly freedom from government interference. Voluntary societies were often religious. Lovegrove claims that 'the sudden proliferation of religious societies and associations within a sector of the Christian community not previously known for its emphasis upon co-operative activity: evangelical Calvinist Dissent' was 'one of the remarkable phenomena of the late 1790s' <sup>104</sup>. 'Baptists', notes Brackney, 'started nothing less than twenty societies in the thirty years following the establishment of an overseas organization' <sup>105</sup>. Lovegrove attributes this primarily to 'a renewed interest in evangelism' <sup>106</sup>, and also to education:

Typical was the lay initiative in the village of Great Horwood which commenced with a Sunday School for 100 children 'many of them almost at maturity'. Within two years the original enterprise had grown into a range of related activities including a week-night school for older children, a sewing school for girls and a village reading society. <sup>107</sup>

By the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Baptist writers were very keen to describe churches as voluntary societies, as seen in the writings of Fawcett, Stovel and Angus. However, Briggs observes that, despite the recognition that the Lordship of Christ was crucial to the covenant community, the voluntarist view of church essentially reflected society and played down the 'crucial fact of divine institution' <sup>108</sup>.

Similarly, Nigel Wright argues that the 'charismatic-organic community determined by the leading of Scripture' is replaced by 'an organisational-institutional

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<sup>103</sup> Briggs, *English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, 14

<sup>104</sup> Deryck Lovegrove, 'Idealism and Association in Early Nineteenth Century Dissent' in W.J. Sheils / Diana Wood (eds.), *Voluntary Religion*, (Studies in Church History 23; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 304

<sup>105</sup> W.H. Brackney, 'Christian Voluntarism in Britain and North America', (Greenwood Press, 1995), 27 quoted in John Briggs, 'Voluntary Religion: A Comparative Study', *Baptist Quarterly XXXVI*, (1995), 158. Presumably this refers to the Baptist Missionary Society.

<sup>106</sup> Lovegrove 'Idealism and Association' in Sheils, *Voluntary Religion*, 304

<sup>107</sup> *ibid*, 309

<sup>108</sup> Briggs, *English Baptists of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 21

syndicate determined by the legal criteria of society' during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century <sup>109</sup>. Thus, a fourth factor is that Baptist churches were becoming a more acceptable part of society and needed to ensure legal regularity to retain that place. Churches began to discuss and establish trust deeds and constitutions. Wright suggests that the mentality of members changes into that of shareholders out to protect their interests with the following consequences:

A suspicious and paranoid mentality views any new initiative as an attempt to defraud the shareholders of their traditional rights. A legal, barrack-room lawyer's knowledge of the constitution and procedural customs enables blocking tactics and delaying actions to be deployed. <sup>110</sup>

Wright concludes, 'This is a long way from the kingdom of God' <sup>111</sup>. 'The original desire to spiritualize the nation', observes Grant, 'had tended to secularize the Church' <sup>112</sup>.

## Conclusion

Baptist churches had changed dramatically by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Church life and organisation was far more complex. The agenda of church meetings reflected this, and the conduct of meetings had become far more procedural. The intention was to help meetings run more efficiently and effectively. The use of these methods by voluntary societies and the need to obtain legal regularity influenced this. However, it made church meetings more liable to conflict and to abuse by leaders and members alike.

The tension that Briggs identifies between being a covenant community and being a missionary society highlights a key factor. It is comparatively simple to be a covenant community with the emphasis on relationship with one another and with God, but vision and strategy are required to fulfil the commission to evangelise. This may well involve a variety of activities and approaches necessitating decisions and organization. This poses the question: is the only way of doing this by using a business-model of church meeting? I will explore this in the next chapter.

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<sup>109</sup> Nigel G. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991), 107-8

<sup>110</sup> *ibid*, 109

<sup>111</sup> *ibid*

<sup>112</sup> J.W. Grant quoted in Briggs, *English Baptists of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 22

## Ch 4: The Covenant Community Today

In this chapter, I examine the current state of the church meeting. I will explore criticisms that are levelled against it, and the issues that these raise. I will also examine some alternative approaches to governing the covenant.

### The Current Pattern of Church Meetings

In his manual on church administration, adopted by the Baptist Union in 1992<sup>1</sup>, Fred Bacon sets out the content, conduct, and pattern of Baptist church meetings. This not only establishes an ideal, but reflected what was perceived as inherited good practice in the churches at the time.

Bacon details the matters that, in his opinion, must be decided by the church meeting, and not delegated to other bodies even within the church<sup>2</sup>. The church meeting should legislate for when church meetings are held, when they are called, their agenda, proper notice, size of a quorum, procedures, size of majorities required, and the approval of minutes. The meeting should also set conditions for eligibility for membership, admissions and removals from the membership list, and the responsibilities of members. The meeting is also responsible for determining the size, responsibilities, qualifications, terms of appointment and procedures for appointing the diaconate (and presumably eldership where appropriate), along with appointing and discharging deacons. Church meetings can revise or rescind deacons' decisions. They also have responsibility for establishing, changing or stopping committees or activities of the church, regulating worship (Bacon sees this in terms of major aspects rather than the detail of worship), approving external relations, agreeing financial policies and dealing with matters relating to premises. The church constitution and rules are also subject to the church meeting. This appears to be a far cry from the original Baptist vision. However, some would argue that it is merely a natural extension, taking into account developments in church life and society in general.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Bacon, *Church Administration*, (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 8-9

The outline agenda suggested by Bacon<sup>3</sup> would be very familiar to most Baptist churches:

1. Opening worship
2. Welcome and apologies
3. Minutes
4. Matters arising
5. Membership
6. Finance
7. Church programme/calendar
8. Items of business
9. Correspondence – late items or merely for report
10. Date of next meeting
11. Any Other Business
12. Pastoral Matters

Bacon argues that church meetings should follow the ‘customary rules and procedures of debate’<sup>4</sup>. It is part of the church secretary’s duties to ‘watch that the rules of debate and of the organisation are being observed’<sup>5</sup>. He even urges more churches to devise their own *standing orders* to govern procedure<sup>6</sup>. Bacon sets out some basic rules regarding meetings – the agenda, confirmation of minutes, matters arising, etc. In relation to speaking, members should only do so when invited by the chair of the meeting. They should only address the chair even if asking another member a question, for example, ‘Mr/Madam chairman, may I ask if Mr ... ?’<sup>7</sup>. In relation to a particular motion, members can only speak once (apart from the proposer who has a right to reply). ‘When the motion has been moved and seconded it becomes the property of the meeting and cannot be withdrawn or altered without the consent of the meeting’<sup>8</sup>. Bacon goes into some detail when dealing with amendments, for example, ‘(m)ore than one amendment should not be under discussion at the same time – except an amendment to an amendment’<sup>9</sup>. He sets out various forms of voting and procedures for

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 122

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 109

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 108

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 109

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 111

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 112

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 113

these <sup>10</sup>, how a member can close a debate,<sup>11</sup> and how and why a member can raise a *Point of Order* <sup>12</sup>. After going into some detail, Bacon remarks:

The Church Meeting is usually large enough and the business important enough for the rules of debate to be applied in some detail. But not so strictly that the chairman appears officious, too technical and remote, nor that helpful discussion is inhibited, nor that people are afraid to laugh! <sup>13</sup>

However he then counters this apparent relaxation of approach by adding that it is 'better to err on the side of exact application of the rules' <sup>14</sup>.

Given the evidence noted in chapter two, early Baptists would be surprised as to how far removed this is from their vision for the covenant community. This is underlined by the fact that in the whole of Bacon's book there is no mention of church discipline, so crucial for the early Baptists <sup>15</sup>.

The model that we find in Bacon is a development of what emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with striking similarities to Wood and Chick's manual. There are many Baptists who see this as the essence of Baptist churchmanship. However there is strong evidence that it is losing support, evidence seen in the criticisms of the system and in the decline in attendance of church meetings. An underlying current is that the way church meetings are currently conducted does not reflect the true essence of church.

### **Attitudes towards Church Meetings**

R.W.Dale, the nineteenth-century Congregationalist, wrote, 'To be at church meeting is for me one of the chief means of grace' <sup>16</sup>. Bacon comments, 'Here worship should be rich, prayer real, education in Christian living clear, spiritually nurtured, fellowship warm' <sup>17</sup>, but as Fiddes observed, 'More realistically, it is often a dozen bodies gathered in the corner of a cold hall in a mid-week evening, while most of the

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 114-5.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 115-6

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 118

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, esp 61-72

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992), 72

<sup>17</sup> Fred Bacon, *Making the Most of the Church Meeting*, (London: Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1984), 5

membership is gathered around the television in a warm house' <sup>18</sup>. Both Wheeler Robinson and Ernest Payne commented on the decline in attendance of church meetings half a century ago <sup>19</sup>, as did the Congregationalist Daniel Jenkins, who also noted that church meetings were held less frequently and sometimes not at all <sup>20</sup>. Contemporary observers, such as John Balchin, note that attendance today is often as low as a quarter of the membership in a church <sup>21</sup>. Roger Sutton asks the question why, despite the growth in Altrincham Baptist Church, did only 26 out of the 400 or more members attend a summer church meeting; and why were so few under 40 <sup>22</sup>.

Such decline correlates with the increasing criticism of church meetings. Ian Randall notes such criticisms throughout the twentieth-century: in 1903, Charles Williams described them as unspiritual <sup>23</sup>; in 1925, F.C. Spurr suggested that arguments in church meetings were a factor in people leaving Baptist churches <sup>24</sup>; in 1933, H.H. Rowley commented on the dead formality and lack of inspiration <sup>25</sup>; in 1982, Bernard Green recognised the many frustrations with church meetings, not least the dull routine.<sup>26</sup> Stephen Ibbotson suggests that possibly the majority of people see church meetings 'as something frustrating, alienating to some temperaments, more to be endured than enjoyed, certainly not a place we expect Christ to be' <sup>27</sup>. Stephen Gaukroger notes that '(i)rrelevance, acrimony, tedium and downright carnality have characterized this gathering which is at the heart of our Baptist life' <sup>28</sup>. Dr White claims that 'the "boredom quotient" is about 95%!'<sup>29</sup>. Even Bacon, a champion of the church meeting, comments from his 1984 survey of churches that 'a high opinion of the Church

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Fiddes, *A Leading Question*, (London: Baptist Publications, ND), 49-50

<sup>19</sup> Robinson, *Life and Faith*, 20; Payne, *Fellowship of Believers*, 105

<sup>20</sup> D.T. Jenkins, *Church Meeting and Democracy*, (London: Independent Press, 1944), 12

<sup>21</sup> John Balchin, 'New Testament Practice or Sacred Cow?' in *TALK The Mainstream Magazine Vol 3 Issue 1*, (2003), 4

<sup>22</sup> Roger Sutton, 'Midsummer Meeting' in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 13

<sup>23</sup> Ian Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*, (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005), 60

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 129

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 202

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 424-5

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Ibbotson, 'Sexing-up Church Meetings and Membership' in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 3

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Gaukroger, 'Renewing the Church Meeting' in *Mainstream 26*, (1987), p5

<sup>29</sup> Barrie White, 'The Practice of Association' in Slater, David (ed.), *A Perspective on Baptist Identity*, (Mainstream, 1987), p25

Meeting is not particularly prominent among most of our church members', and that it 'can be the nadir of church life'<sup>30</sup>. This is a sad indictment of what should be the highest expression of the life of the covenant community.

### Democratic or Theocratic?

There is no doubt that in some places the church meeting has degenerated into a mere business meeting at which the will of the people (democracy) rather than the will of God (theocracy) has constantly triumphed.<sup>31</sup>

Thus writes Paul Beasley-Murray, another champion of the church meeting. He notes that caricatures of the church meeting are easy to knock down, but the real thing still has validity. However in this quotation he highlights one of the fundamental issues: democracy.

There is almost complete agreement among Baptists (and Congregationalists) that church meetings are primarily concerned with discovering the mind of Christ for that church<sup>32</sup>. The Baptist Union's Declaration of Principle states:

That our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh is the sole and absolute authority in all matters relating to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.<sup>33</sup>

The issue is: how essential are democratic means to this process? Bacon argues that democratic procedures are 'an essential integral feature of congregational government'.<sup>34</sup> The cultural context plays a significant part so it is not surprising that where freedom and equality are valued many view democracy as the *essence* of the church meeting. However some recognise that it is merely an outward form, as in the Baptist Union's 1948 statement on the doctrine of the church:

The church meeting, though outwardly a democratic way of ordering the affairs of the church, has deeper significance. It is the occasion when, as individuals and as a

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<sup>30</sup> Bacon, *Making the Most*, p29

<sup>31</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray, *Dynamic Leadership*, (Eastbourne: MARC, 1990), p106

<sup>32</sup> For example: Bacon, *Church Administration*, 105; Fiddes, *Leading Question*, 50; Stanley J. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985), 57; Richard L. Kidd, (ed.), *Something to Declare*, (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996), 32; N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 102

<sup>33</sup> *Declaration of Principle* (revised 1938) quoted in Kidd, *Something to Declare*, 10

<sup>34</sup> Bacon, *Making the Most*, 4

community, we submit ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and stand under the judgments of God that we know what is the mind of Christ.<sup>35</sup>

Bacon appears to back off from his forthright statement above when he describes democratic procedures as 'simply the means of enabling God's will to be discovered'<sup>36</sup>. 'In other words', he writes elsewhere, 'decisions are made by the members by majority vote, making thereby the assumption that it is the majority who discern the will of God'.<sup>37</sup> He adds, 'We have to admit, though, this may not always be the case'<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, as Jenkins asserts:

We have no right to assume that Christ will necessarily speak through the voice of his people because they decide to have a meeting about a particular matter and call it a Church Meeting, throwing open the discussion to all present and settling it by a free vote. All that will probably happen in such a gathering is that the selfish wills of men will clash, and either that a compromise will be reached or that the will of one group will overrule that of others.<sup>39</sup>

Democracy is not sacrosanct. As Wright maintains,

It must be questioned whether the human procedures of formal decision-making are appropriate to this unique form of church life. The paraphernalia of voting and constitutional method can create an atmosphere which is quite at variance with seeking the mind of the Lord, for which prayer and worship are more fitting.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, I would argue that for each church to have 'liberty... to interpret and administer' God's laws, does not necessitate a democratic process. As Richard Kidd points out the authority is 'Christ, Scripture and Church Meeting, in that order'<sup>41</sup>. A democratic process may afford a useful tool, but it is not essential. Moreover the emphasis is on there being no external authority, besides Christ and Scripture, to make decisions for that church. Within these parameters, there are other ways of determining God's will besides the democratic process.

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<sup>35</sup> *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church*, a statement approved by the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, March 1948, quoted in Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity*, (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1993), 90

<sup>36</sup> Bacon, *Making the Most*, 3

<sup>37</sup> Bacon, *Church Administration*, 105

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> Jenkins, *Church Meeting*, 26

<sup>40</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 103

<sup>41</sup> Kidd, *Something to Declare*, 35

## Priesthood of all Believers

Another argument used by supporters of the democratic process is the principle of the *priesthood of all believers*<sup>42</sup>. This doctrine asserts that every believer has access to God. For Grenz, this means that '(e)ach member is to be actively functioning in a priestly way in the corporate body according to that person's gifts'<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, '(d)ecisions concerning the affairs of the church are to be matters for the concern of all, not just a few'.<sup>44</sup> Grenz assumes that this means democratic congregationalism is necessary. He decries it when this is 'diluted or abandoned outright' in Baptist circles, whether this is when the clergy or a select few rule, or when decisions are reached by means of 'politicking', or when members simply abdicate their responsibility<sup>45</sup>. However, I would point out that just because all believers have equal access to God, and can all hear from God, this does not necessarily mean that a democratic arena is the only, or even the best, place in which this can operate. For one thing, not everyone feels able or comfortable to contribute in such a meeting. Indeed, many feel very intimidated, especially where there is such a formal procedural approach. Secondly, God speaks in many different ways – through scripture, through prophetic words, through one another in discussion. All of these can be a part of church meetings. Indeed, Beasley-Murray sees church meetings as a charismatic expression of community when gifts may be used rather than rights expressed.<sup>46</sup> However, the nature of procedural church meetings does not lend itself to this. How easy is it for a timid person to say that they believe they have a word from the Lord when debate is raging over counter-proposals and amendments?

Priesthood of all believers implies equality, another key element in democracy. The Baptist Union maintained that:

...all are held to be of equal standing in Christ, though there is a diversity of gifts and a difference of functions. This responsibility and this equality are focused in the church meeting...<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Daniel Jenkins, *Congregationalism: A Restatement*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 48

<sup>43</sup> Grenz, *Baptist Congregation*, 57

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

<sup>46</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, 53-4

<sup>47</sup> *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church* in Shurden, *Baptist Identity*, 90

However, as White observed, 'One vote is not as good as another in Church Meeting'.<sup>48</sup> What he means here is that some contributions and opinions carry more weight than others, due to the greater maturity or spirituality of the contributor. The danger occurs when what everyone says - backsliders and new converts included - can be regarded as equally important. As Wright notes, the Baptist concept of membership gives 'considerable power and influence to members who are not members in the true sense'.<sup>49</sup> Jenkins considered that it was intolerable to have those who do not regularly hear the preaching of the word or sharing communion taking part in church meetings<sup>50</sup>. Wright argues that if church meetings become 'an occasion for discernment rather than for democracy then it becomes clear that not each voice carries equal weight'<sup>51</sup>. However we must not overlook the fact that, as Beasley-Murray asserts, sometimes God by-passes the wise<sup>52</sup>. This requires real discernment to recognise God speaking through the *foolish* to shame the *wise*!

### **The Trappings of Democracy**

It is not only the concept of democracy but also the tools such as business procedures and particularly voting that come in for criticism. Some would argue that we do not find business procedures in the Bible – there are no mentions of committees, ballots, votes, elections, majority rule or democracy<sup>53</sup>. Others regard such procedures as useful tools. 'It may employ some techniques of a business meeting', writes Fiddes, 'so that affairs should run smoothly and people be enabled to participate easily: but its nature is not that of a business meeting...' <sup>54</sup>. However, by using these tools it is much easier for the church meeting to descend into a business meeting. The habit of some churches in calling it the 'church *business* meeting' contributes to this. Jenkins asserted that 'the church meeting differs on important points of procedures from most forms of

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<sup>48</sup> From B.R. White, *Authority: A Baptist View*, quoted in Fiddes, *Leading Question*, 51

<sup>49</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 99-100

<sup>50</sup> Jenkins, *Church Meeting*, 31

<sup>51</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 103

<sup>52</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, 67

<sup>53</sup> John Bridger, 'Tradition down the plughole?' in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 21

<sup>54</sup> Fiddes, *Leading Question*, 50

secular democracy',<sup>55</sup> since its purpose was to discern the will of God. Yet in some church meetings it is hard to see the difference. The dilemma is seen clearly in Bacon:

These procedures are but servants of a Church Meeting. They should be observed to the extent that they help in the discerning of the mind of Christ and only so far. Keeping rigidly to every detail of them can, in some circumstances, do more harm than good.<sup>56</sup>

So procedures are subservient, but in the next breath he says that they are indispensable:

But they are not to be despised and certainly not rejected, for they have proved, through experience, to be a valuable means of ensuring that everything is done 'decently and in order'; *indeed our practice of congregational church government depends on their use.*<sup>57</sup>

Likewise, Grenz states that 'any system must be tempered by the desire for broad consensus rather than strict majority rule'<sup>58</sup>, but then he advocates the use of *Robert's Rules of Orders*, a 704 page book of procedures 'for parliamentarian and club presidents alike'!<sup>59</sup>

Now we turn to the vote. Although Mennonites are not pure congregationalists<sup>60</sup>, their polity respects and takes seriously the congregation<sup>61</sup>. In a survey, Mennonite pastors and members were asked whether a vote should be used to call or recall pastors. Two thirds of the pastors questioned said no, while two thirds of the members said yes<sup>62</sup>. Those who responded in the affirmative reasoned that there was no better way of coming to a decision and it gave everyone a voice. Those who opposed voting argued that it short-circuited discussion and discernment, and it could conceal underlying reasons or hidden agendas<sup>63</sup>. This encapsulates some of the main arguments within Baptist circles too.

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<sup>55</sup> Jenkins, *Congregationalism*, 98

<sup>56</sup> Bacon, *Making the Most*, 24

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* My italics for emphasis

<sup>58</sup> Grenz, *Baptist Congregation*, 58

<sup>59</sup> General Henry M. Robert, *Robert's Rules of Order*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed, (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2000)

<sup>60</sup> Ross T Bender, 'Polity' in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia V*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1990), 714

<sup>61</sup> Everett J. Thomas (ed.), *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership*, (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life, 1996), 75

<sup>62</sup> Leland Harder, *The Pastor-People Partnership*, (Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1983), 128

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 129

Those who support voting argue that it is a convenient way of gauging the feeling in a meeting. Maring and Hudson argue that each person ‘must be given full opportunity to speak’<sup>64</sup>, but as Bacon points out, ‘the most vociferous do not necessarily speak for others and the majority can be a silent one and even though invited, many of these are too shy or modest to voice their feelings’<sup>65</sup>. Hence voting is the one way of ‘hearing’ from everyone. Thus, Bacon recommends: ‘If in doubt, have a vote’<sup>66</sup>.

Conversely, Wright describes voting as a ‘blunt and inadequate instrument’<sup>67</sup>, Jenkins as a ‘rough expedient’<sup>68</sup> never to be used ‘except as a regrettable and almost desperate necessity’<sup>69</sup> and Ibbotson as a ‘lazy way ... that easily avoids the harder process of respectful dialogue and consensus’<sup>70</sup>. Wright supports his assertion by noting that voting is reminiscent of adversarial politics and it focuses on the choices or preferences of individual voters. It requires little or no spiritual effort, and it favours the obstructive or disaffected member who ‘may be totally wrong in spiritual terms but be able to wreak havoc in constitutional terms because the presumption of constitutional procedures is always towards inertia and inaction’<sup>71</sup>. These are strong arguments. The importance of discerning God’s will and of creating true community must surely outweigh the convenience of voting and systems that produce adversaries.

## **The Business of Church Meetings**

Most observers would acknowledge that church meetings should be more than just business. Many are keen that other elements are given prominence in such meetings. Since the meeting is an expression of community then time should be given over not just to fellowship matters<sup>72</sup> but to developing relationships. Since it is also about seeking God’s will, prayer should play a part. Indeed, using prayer as a way of listening to God would also be valuable, so occasionally setting aside the agenda may

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<sup>64</sup> Norman H. Maring, / Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual on Polity and Practice*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), 61

<sup>65</sup> Bacon, *Making the Most*, 26

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*

<sup>67</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 124

<sup>68</sup> Jenkins, *Congregationalism*, 99

<sup>69</sup> Jenkins, *Church Meeting*, 34

<sup>70</sup> Stephen Ibbotson, ‘Beware the Construct’ in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 23

<sup>71</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 124-5

<sup>72</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, 69

be desirable. Worship is appropriate in such a gathering <sup>73</sup> as it emphasises our covenant relationship with God. Indeed, most church meetings begin with an act of worship, although some people deliberately arrive late to avoid it! Church meetings are also a place for growth and for personal resolutions of obedience <sup>74</sup>. Beasley-Murray also advocates that there is a focus on mission <sup>75</sup>.

When it comes to business, there is also widespread agreement that the subject matter should be of significance rather than the trivia of what colour to paint the ladies' toilets. As White observes, 'There are too many niggling items on the agenda and not one or two significant ones' <sup>76</sup>. According to Hayden, 'It has appeared that 'who brews the tea?' is more important than discovering the mind of Christ for his people' <sup>77</sup>. The danger is that 'calling all the people together to make every little decision would make its activity seize up' according to Bacon <sup>78</sup>, hence church meetings need to delegate. He finds that most churches entrust their diaconate 'with decisions on routine matters and recommendations to the church on major policies', although in a few they are restricted to simply implement church meeting decisions <sup>79</sup>. This is the nub of the matter: trust. To what degree is the church meeting willing to trust others, such as deacons, not just with trivial matters, but in more significant areas? Beasley-Murray argues: 'The church meeting has appointed deacons from its midst, and in doing so has entrusted them with authority'.<sup>80</sup> This should be 'in areas that are their agreed brief and which are consistent with the faith and the agreed policies of the church' writes Wright. 'It will also recognise that there are areas which are not clear cut and require particular discretion' <sup>81</sup>. Jenkins goes further: 'the church meeting should frankly recognize the limits of its own

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid*

<sup>74</sup> Bacon, *Making the Most*, 13

<sup>75</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, 69

<sup>76</sup> White, 'Association' in Slater, *Perspective*, 26

<sup>77</sup> Roger Hayden, 'Baptists, Covenants and Confessions' in Fiddes, Paul S., etc. *Bound to Love*, (London: Baptist Publications, 1985), 34

<sup>78</sup> Bacon, *Church Administration*, 7

<sup>79</sup> Bacon, *Making the Most*, 11

<sup>80</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Dynamic Leadership*, 125

<sup>81</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 105

competence’<sup>82</sup>. This brings us to the sometimes thorny issue of leadership in relation to the church meeting.

### **Leadership: Authority and Accountability**

Beasley-Murray succinctly summarises the issues with regard to leadership in Baptist churches:

On the one hand, leaders are to lead the flock of God and as such are accountable to the Lord himself. Yet, on the other hand, leaders are accountable to the church, which has recognised their calling and set them apart for service ... ultimate authority rests in the meeting together of the church’s members ... How then do we resolve this tension?<sup>83</sup>

Wright suggests that the cynical assumption is that the church meeting is about preventing the abuse of power<sup>84</sup>. This might appear to be the case when Hayden writes: ‘To abandon the Church Meeting is to forfeit Christian responsibility and privilege; and to hand over power, which is not answerable to Christ in the midst of his people, to an individual’<sup>85</sup>. It is the kind of fear that we find in Jenkins’ criticism of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘pulpit personalities’ transforming church meetings into ‘a circle of devotees gathered round a “personality”’, who became ‘more and more a professional demagogue’<sup>86</sup>. It is also evident in writings from the 1980s concerned about Baptist churches leaving the Union for Restoration church streams<sup>87</sup>.

Those who have this fear are often the same as those who demand that leaders must ‘act in what is finally an advisory capacity to the whole congregation’<sup>88</sup>. The emphasis is on the pastor as a servant of the congregation. But Gerald Cowen points out the danger of the pastor being so busy serving the congregation that ‘little time is spent in the main business of growing disciples in the church – prayer and the ministry of the word’<sup>89</sup>. Even when pastors are perceived as no more than servants to the church, they are still recognised as needing to bring the word of God through ‘the

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<sup>82</sup> Jenkins, *Congregationalism*, 99

<sup>83</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Dynamic Leadership*, 109-110

<sup>84</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 125

<sup>85</sup> Hayden ‘Covenants’ in Fiddes, *Bound to Love*, 34

<sup>86</sup> Jenkins, *Church Meeting*, 36

<sup>87</sup> See Randall, *English Baptists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 434-9

<sup>88</sup> Mark Dever quoted in Peter Toon etc, *Who Runs the Church?*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 141

<sup>89</sup> Gerald P. Cowen, *Who rules the Church?*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), p99

teaching of Scripture and the experience of the Church throughout the ages and the practice of other churches... to ensure that its mind is sufficiently open to all that the Spirit might say' <sup>90</sup>.

However, Beasley-Murray asserts: 'A church...which refuses to allow its leaders to lead is rejecting God's gift to it of the pastoral ministry' <sup>91</sup>. As Samuel Waldron puts it, 'the church is by its common suffrage gratefully receiving a gift given by its King!' <sup>92</sup>. This is the danger of putting the emphasis on the Pastor as the servant of the church meeting: it can obscure the spiritual gift of leadership. Balchin argues that he cannot see any mention of church meetings as we have come to know them in the New Testament. 'There is, however a great deal about gifted leadership, and about the members' responsibility to both respect it and follow the lead and example of those God has placed over them' <sup>93</sup>.

So where does the authority lie? Ultimately it is found in God, and not, as Beasley-Murray writes above, in the church meeting. What does this mean for the church? Nigel Wright provides a clue from scripture:

The biblical picture is one where authority sometimes resides with the congregation (Acts 6:3); sometimes with the elders (Heb 13:17); sometimes with a perceptive individual (Paul against Peter – Gal 2:11ff); sometimes with a prophet (Acts 11:28); sometimes with the immediacy of God's word to a gathering (Acts 13:1-3); and sometimes with the considered mind of leaders and people in harmony with what appears to be the mind of the Spirit (Acts 15:28). <sup>94</sup>

This points us in the direction of a balanced picture, where there is mutual accountability that honours the gifting of leaders and the priesthood of believers. It suggests that church meetings as most Baptists know them tend to tip the balance away from the gift of leadership, as well as leaving it open to the abuse of democratic procedures. Likewise leadership without accountability leaves itself open to the abuse of autocracy and despotism. Surely there must be a better way of governing the covenant community.

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<sup>90</sup> Jenkins, *Congregationalism*, 97. Also Jenkins, *Church Meeting*, 29

<sup>91</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, 65

<sup>92</sup> Samuel E. Waldron, in Toon, *Who runs the Church?*, 219

<sup>93</sup> Balchin 'New Testament Practice' in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 4

<sup>94</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 109

## Alternative Approaches

Alastair Campbell protests against the Church Meeting being made ‘the test of loyalty and the badge of honour’ and treated as the ‘*sine qua non* of being a Baptist’<sup>95</sup>. He argues that the church meeting that we have inherited cannot be proved from scripture and is not required by the Declaration of Principle. Moreover the scriptural principle of every member ministry can be expressed in many different ways, and Church Meetings can assume many different forms. Furthermore, as I have shown in earlier chapters, ‘(t)he quasi-parliamentary model being urged upon us now is quite different from the Church Meeting of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century’<sup>96</sup>. As Wright puts it:

I would argue that it is possible to have an institutional church meeting, and yet completely betray the principle of the gathered church. Conversely it is entirely possible to be true to the principle of the gathered church without ever holding a formal church meeting of the traditional type.<sup>97</sup>

We must avoid the temptation to think that we have to continue with something because that is the way it has always been done. As Tidball recognizes, ‘The reality is that Baptists have constantly changed their practice and have adapted it to the different cultural contexts in which they have found themselves’<sup>98</sup>. He notes that currently ‘there is a breakdown in commitment to the way institutions have traditionally organised themselves’. This is evident in the shift from individuals being members of sports clubs with an elected committee, to people using a gym by paying for a service provided by others<sup>99</sup>. This approach is not dissimilar from Andrew Fuller, who, in 1811, argued that reason rather than scriptural precedent should guide the form that things take. He claimed that the ‘forms and orders of the new testament church...are founded on the reason of things’<sup>100</sup>, in other words determined by circumstances. Thus, provided we follow the general precepts of the apostles, the actual form can be dictated by current needs<sup>101</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> Alastair Campbell, ‘The Grounds of Association’ in Slater, *Perspective*, 35

<sup>96</sup> *ibid*

<sup>97</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 105

<sup>98</sup> Derek Tidball, ‘Church Meetings and Membership – Holy Grail or Wholly Fail?’ in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 20

<sup>99</sup> *ibid*, 18

<sup>100</sup> Fuller, *Strictures*, 197

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*, 198-9

People have explored and tried a whole range of alternatives, from keeping things as they are to abandoning the use of church meetings altogether. Even those who want to maintain the status quo have proposed steps to make the church meeting work better. Beasley-Murray makes suggestions relating to setting the agenda, creating the right atmosphere and steering the meeting <sup>102</sup>. Bacon suggests ways of streamlining meetings by allocating time for items, reducing verbosity, excluding unnecessary details, chairing firmly and setting rules for Any Other Business <sup>103</sup>, along with recommendations for, among other things, more effective preparation <sup>104</sup>. Stephen Gaukroger makes similar suggestions <sup>105</sup>, but goes further in recognising the importance of creating a good atmosphere. He encourages members to pray before the meeting, think before they speak, listen to others in the meeting, and to come expecting a good meeting <sup>106</sup>. If members have concerns or ideas, they should share them with leaders outside of the meeting rather than raise them unexpectedly in the meeting <sup>107</sup>. He also suggests avoiding the worship-business divide by having worship throughout the meeting, using creative ideas to keep the meeting fresh, and sharing 'the good things God is doing in the church and for you personally' <sup>108</sup>.

These are fairly minor tweaks, although some of them could make a real difference. Some would go further. Rob Warner suggests a minimum constitutional requirement so that members only vote on appointing and removing leaders, accepting and removing members, approving the budget and any purchase, sale or redevelopment of church buildings <sup>109</sup>. Craig Millward, in a smaller church, has introduced a covenanted membership where individuals have to renew their membership each year, and church family meetings are open to all who worship at the church. Trivial matters have been removed from the agenda, and there is a desire to move away from voting altogether <sup>110</sup>. John Bridger advocates replacing many, if not all,

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<sup>102</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Dynamic Leadership*, 110-1

<sup>103</sup> Bacon, *Making the Most*, 16-18

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*, 19-20

<sup>105</sup> Gaukroger, 'Renewing' *Mainstream* 26, (1987), 5-6

<sup>106</sup> *ibid*, 6

<sup>107</sup> *ibid*

<sup>108</sup> *ibid*, 7

<sup>109</sup> Rob Warner, 'Belonging to the Church – the Four Dimensions of Membership' in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 14

<sup>110</sup> Craig Millward, 'An Annual Affair' in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 16

of the business aspects with four elements: worship, fellowship, faith-building, and vision <sup>111</sup>.

Nigel Wright is an advocate of replacing voting with consensus in church meetings. In fact some of those who support the current pattern of church meetings recognise that consensus is preferable to majority voting <sup>112</sup>. Wright argues that consensus recognises that it is hard to make decisions. In order to implement consensus it needs to be taught <sup>113</sup>, and voting needs to be avoided as far as possible (recognising that there are legal requirements for voting on certain issues) <sup>114</sup>. The structure and content of the meeting needs to be reformed, focusing on prayer, worship and learning, and thus blurring the distinction with other meetings of the church <sup>115</sup>. Finally, communication within the meeting needs to develop so that honesty and vulnerability replaces 'the competitive need to win or to have our own way' <sup>116</sup>.

Wright and Jenkins both advocate drawing on the tradition of the Quakers at least as a basis <sup>117</sup>. The Quaker consensus method is based 'upon a strict and honest effort to find truth', rather than to 'beat the opponent' in a debate <sup>118</sup>. Their Book of Discipline notes that attempts to score debating points are 'unhelpful and alien to the spirit of worship which should govern the rightly ordered meeting' <sup>119</sup>. In the meeting, '(s)ilent worship precedes and follows business and there are no formal rules of procedure' <sup>120</sup>. When an item of business is presented those who have opinions speak to it. 'When the consideration reaches a stage which indicates that a reasonable degree of unity has been attained, the clerk announces what he believes to be the sense of the meeting. If the meeting agrees with his wording ... this becomes the judgment of the

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<sup>111</sup> Bridger 'Tradition' in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 21.

<sup>112</sup> For example Maring, *Baptist Manual*, 61, also Paige Patterson in Toon *Who Runs the Church?*, 140. Cf. Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*, 68

<sup>113</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 126

<sup>114</sup> *ibid*, 127

<sup>115</sup> *ibid*, 128-130

<sup>116</sup> *ibid*, 130

<sup>117</sup> *ibid*, p125 and Jenkins, *Church Meeting*, p33. Cf. Bacon, *Making the Most*, p26

<sup>118</sup> Francis E. Pollard etc, *Democracy and the Quaker Method*, (London: Barrisdale Press, 1949), p27

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, p45

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*, p42

meeting and is so preserved in the minutes' <sup>121</sup>. If anyone disagrees, the clerk takes their view into account and revises the minute to see if the meeting now agrees. This process continues until 'eventually agreement is reached or the discussion is adjourned for further consideration or the subject is dropped, perhaps for a time only' <sup>122</sup>.

Some advocate even more radical changes. Roger Sutton, for example, in response to the very low attendance at church meetings in his large Baptist church suggested that members elect a council of 50 people to decide on major issues and provide accountability for the church leadership. One, or at most two, normal church meetings a year would be required to approve the accounts and appoint officers <sup>123</sup>.

Baptist churches in Western Australia and New Zealand <sup>124</sup> have dramatically remodelled their governance based on John Kaiser's 'Accountable Leadership' strategy. This model is based on the assumption that the church exists primarily for people on the outside of church but also for the people in the church <sup>125</sup>. It is designed to counteract the weaknesses of a congregational polity in relation to accomplishing mission. These include divisive politics, abuse by controllers, compromised vision, and a tendency for churches 'to leave ministry to the pastor and leadership to the members' <sup>126</sup>. At the heart of Kaiser's approach is a clear delineation between the role of the congregation and the role of the minister. The minister's role is to bring vision and provide leadership. The congregation's role is ministry. The minister appoints 'staff', paid and unpaid, to manage each area of ministry, but it is the members, equipped and coordinated by the staff, who deliver that ministry. The minister is accountable to the Board (or elders or deacons) who set boundaries and principles to provide freedom for the minister to lead. <sup>127</sup> Kaiser comments, 'Accountable Leadership makes room for the congregation to have the final say on who is entrusted with leadership and whether to affirm their most far-reaching decisions. However, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on the members

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<sup>121</sup> Howard Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953), pp106-7

<sup>122</sup> Pollard, *Quaker Method*, p43

<sup>123</sup> Sutton, 'Midsummer Meeting' in *TALK Vol 3 Issue 1*, 13

<sup>124</sup> The New Zealand model has been adapted for use at churches in the UK including Rising Brook Baptist Church, Stafford and Edward Road Baptist Church, Balsall Heath

<sup>125</sup> John Edmund Kaiser, *Winning on Purpose*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 25-7

<sup>126</sup> *ibid*, 35-6

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*, 106-7

being ministers rather than voters.’<sup>128</sup> Control is replaced by trust. The pastor entrusts ministries to the members, rather than controlling ministries to see that they are done in a certain way. The members entrust leadership of the church to the pastor, rather than seeking to ensure the pastor does things their way. This is because ‘bearing much fruit is more important than doing things a certain way’<sup>129</sup>.

The Baptists of Western Australia have adapted this model and renamed it ‘Ministry led, Accountable, Church Governance’<sup>130</sup>. However it is the New Zealand Baptist churches that have taken the model and given it a strong Baptist emphasis. In Kaiser’s model the governance role, that of agreeing boundaries and providing accountability for the minister, belongs solely to the Board. In the New Zealand adaptation, ‘(t)here is a governance role for the whole church (church members meeting), of agreeing to the ‘boundaries’ eg doctrine, vision, leadership, finance, property’. There is also ‘a governance role for a group of leaders of upholding the boundaries and outcomes agreed by the whole church, development, support and protection of the mission and vision, setting policy and providing spiritual oversight’<sup>131</sup>. The members, through the church meeting, have a role in appointing elders and the senior pastor, affirming the vision, approving the budget, and making major directional, staffing and property decisions. The pastor sets the vision and selects ministry leaders, including paid staff. Each year, the ministry leaders draw up a plan for their area of ministry, which is combined into a whole church plan by the pastor for presentation to the elders and then to the church meeting. The pastor coaches the ministry leaders and evaluates their progress throughout the year. At the end of the year, each ministry leader produces a written evaluation, which is reviewed by the elders before the planning process starts again. One observer comments:

When I saw what it really means for a congregation to have a ‘ministry-led church’ it was an encouragement to me, because I had assumed ‘ministry-led’ to almost equate with ‘autocratic leadership’. It doesn’t even come close to that. It gives a fresh understanding of ‘congregational responsibility’ as a Baptist

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<sup>128</sup> *ibid*, 159

<sup>129</sup> *ibid*, 88

<sup>130</sup> From Baptists of Western Australia documents: *Ministry Led Accountable Leadership Structure and Ministry led, Accountable, Church Governance* (Philip Bryant)

<sup>131</sup> Baptist Churches of New Zealand document: *Ministry-led Church: A Principle-based Leadership Model* (Trevor Donnell)

principle – demonstrated by a greater understanding of permission-giving and wise accountability.<sup>132</sup>

This model is a creative approach to tackling some of the issues of contemporary church life, particularly for large churches. It gives greater emphasis to other Baptist principles, such as *every member ministry*, rather than to total democracy. The New Zealand model retains democratic procedures for key elements. Indeed, in theory it is still possible to see another Brown Street episode, as detailed in chapter three, taking place, since members are involved in electing the minister and the equivalent of the church committee. However, the change in culture that this model stimulates would help prevent that, as members focus on their own role in ministry. The key is to change the focus from ‘having my say’ to a desire to fulfil the mission of the church by being ‘involved in the ministry of the church’.

## Conclusion

Church meetings are the tangible expression of the covenant community. By and large, meetings still follow a pattern established during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and, as we have shown in the previous chapter, do not reflect the early Baptist vision. Increasingly, the current style and conduct of meetings is being criticised. Most often this is implied criticism demonstrated by the marked decline in attendance. Sometimes it is explicit in comments made, and in alternative approaches being advocated or used. It appears that the covenant community is in serious trouble hence the attempts to recapture the spirit of those Baptist pioneers and of the apostolic Church by reimagining the church meeting. These attempts range from making superficial changes in procedure, to more radical schemes that reduce or remove the dependence on democratic procedure. Part of this process involves recognising that democracy is *not* the essence of Baptist church meetings.

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<sup>132</sup> A letter to pastors by Ian Brown dated September 2000. Quoted in *ibid*

## Ch 5: Conclusion – Re-imagining the Covenant Community

The fundamental question in this investigation is whether the church meeting has been and still is an appropriate expression of the covenant community.

For Baptists, the covenant community, entered by personal faith demonstrated through believers' baptism, is a group of people expressing their commitment to God and to each other. The covenant is two dimensional. In a sense it is made three dimensional by the way it is lived out, as opposed to it remaining as merely words on paper signed by someone coming into membership, or read out annually, but with minimal effect on the day to day lives of individuals and on the life of the church. True covenant community should be characterized by real relationships, trust, mutual accountability, and contributing to communal life by using our gifts.

I have shown how the early Baptist vision for the covenant community included the church members coming together to express their commitment to one another and to God with the express purpose of 'loosing and binding' and of appointing their own leaders. Discipline was the main focus of the meeting, since it was recognised that for the covenant community to work its members must strive for spiritual maturity and holy living.

I have demonstrated how, particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the church meeting developed into an institution that used democratic methods and business procedures. This tended to change the atmosphere to one where competitiveness, manipulation, and formality gave it the potential to be a battleground. Members came to feel that they had the right to 'have their say', and for some it did not matter what effect this had on others. Regardless of whether they had any knowledge of the subject matter, or any involvement, regardless of spiritual maturity or the state of their relationship with God or with other members: this was their democratic right; they were a member! It meant that in some churches everything that required a decision had to come to the church meeting.

Obviously there are varying degrees, but this remained the situation in many Baptist churches, possibly the majority, up to and including the present day. For some leaders and members this was not a problem. It was an efficient way of conducting the

business of the church and making decisions. They were comfortable with, if not revelling in, the procedural politics, although some would rather not have the upset that sometimes resulted. For others, this put them off ever attending a church meeting again – including some ministers who vowed never to attend once they had retired! Others found this style of meeting and the concept of membership anachronistic. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the kinds of criticism explored in chapter 4, nor the alternative approaches advocated.

Having explored the subject, I conclude that the church meeting that we have inherited is not an appropriate expression of the covenant community. My reflections on the following will explain why I have reached this conclusion.

The *priesthood of all believers* has special significance for Baptists. It is often used as justification for the democratic approach to church meetings. However, the idea that everyone has the right to have a say on everything, since everyone has equal access to God, is fundamentally flawed. It fails to recognise that God has given different gifts to different people. Nor does it recognise that God speaks in many different ways – through prophecy, through scripture, etc – and that a democratic gathering of God's people is not the only arena in which his voice can be heard. In such a gathering it is quite conceivable that the prophetic voice could be in a minority of one, as Old Testament accounts of God's people rejecting the prophet's message demonstrate. In the New Testament the emphasis shifts to the prophetic community, in particular weighing the prophetic word. I would contend that a democratic atmosphere is not the best environment for this, since the emphasis is on expressing your own opinion or vote rather than on listening. Indeed, the consensus approach may well lend itself to such discernment.

The *priesthood of all believers* is complemented by *every member ministry*. Christians not only have the privilege of access to God, but also a corresponding responsibility to use their God-given gifts in ministry. Believers are all part of the Body of Christ, and all have a valuable role to play. The early Baptists recognised this, and for some gifts in particular they made deliberate efforts to help individuals develop those gifts. This is particularly true of preachers and pastors. There are implications for both leaders and for members.

Firstly, leaders should be encouraged to use their gifts. This means letting the leaders lead. The problem with this is that some people automatically equate leaders leading with autocratic leadership. They prefer to think in terms of servant leadership, interpreting servant as one who follows every whim of the church members. However, in the church a good servant leader is obedient to God, and does what is best for the church. I believe that at the root of the issue is a lack of trust and mutual accountability, which are both essential to effective community life. Accountability should not mean having to refer every decision back to a church meeting, nor should it mean the minister always watching over her shoulder in case what she has done displeases a member or a deacon. Thus, it is vital to find a way of exercising effective accountability built on trust. Crucial to this is the need to define boundaries for the leader to work within, and then giving them free reign to work toward a vision while operating within those boundaries. Kaiser's Accountable Leadership model provides such a framework.

Secondly, members need to be encouraged to use their gifts in effective ministry. Paul wrote that it is the leaders' task 'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'<sup>1</sup>. Indeed there is much to be said for seeing membership in terms of ministry. It contributes to the community and is indicative of the covenant commitment in action. It takes Paul's analogy of the body seriously<sup>2</sup>. It makes membership more meaningful. As opposed to being able to turn up at a meeting and influence matters in which you have little or no experience or involvement, it means being able to influence, make decisions and make a difference in an area of ministry through personal involvement and commitment. This approach deals with one of the issues raised by Wright: that of members who are not true members<sup>3</sup>. In other words their name is on the membership list but they do not fulfil the role of a member. It means that the concept of membership needs to be re-examined. This is particularly relevant in a society where belonging, as opposed to institutional membership, is so important. The different models of covenantal membership that are being explored as alternative approaches may well hold the key here.

One of the dangers of any community is that it is so easy to become inward looking, even in a covenant community. Yet the Christian covenant is with a missionary

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:11-12, New International Version, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> N. Wright, *Challenge to Change*, 99

God, who came into the world to save. The early Baptists recognised this, not least with their appointment of messengers such as Henry Denne, Thomas Tillam and Thomas Grantham 'to gather disciples by preaching and by baptism, and plant them in churches'.<sup>4</sup> Certain Baptist churches in the 19<sup>th</sup> century engaged with society, but over the years they ran out of steam. Mission has to be put higher up the agenda, whatever style of governance is used. This is a core feature of the Accountable Leadership model. Moreover a church needs to be agile to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves for mission. A democratic style does not lend itself to this, not least because it tends toward being conservative and slow in decision making<sup>5</sup>.

I have already noted the disappearance of discipline from the agenda of church meetings during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Large church meetings may not be the best place to go into the detail of moral failings, whereas early Baptist churches were relatively small. However, church discipline was important. It recognised that holy living and maintaining purity in the community made it far easier to discern the will of God. Nowadays we tend to see the term 'discipline' in a negative light. It would be better to see it more positively in terms of *discipleship*. A democratic style church meeting is not the best place for discipleship. The atmosphere that can develop is often not conducive to spiritual growth. It is vital for the well-being of the church that discipline, that is to say discipleship, is returned to centre stage. It is a crucial feature of the covenant community. Real commitment to God and to one another requires discipline. Mutual accountability is key to this, and may best be achieved in the forum of small groups, much as Wesley achieved through his *classes* and *bands*<sup>6</sup>. The cooperative nature of consensus would certainly be more conducive to this than the competitiveness of voting. The accountability in Kaiser's model also provides a pattern that could be helpful throughout the church.

This emphasis on discipleship and accountability, along with allowing leaders to lead, fits well with the 1644 London Confession article on the role of officers and members highlighted earlier<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> White, *English Baptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, 30

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 98

<sup>6</sup> See Howard A Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Revival*, (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1980)

<sup>7</sup> See content referenced at footnote 82 in chapter 2

Another key to covenant community life is relationship. Without meaningful relationships we are left with an institution. With meaningful relationships we have community. A democratic style church meeting is less conducive to developing relationships. The potential for manipulative politicking does not engender trust. The formal procedure of addressing comments through the chair tends to depersonalise. Perhaps this was recognised by preceding annual church meetings with a fellowship tea. A consensus approach, on the other hand, means working hard at overcoming differences, just as relationships require hard work.

This brings us to the final aspect: the size of the church. Helwys legislated for churches to be small enough for everyone to know everyone else, not just as an acquaintance, but so that members can help shape one another's lives<sup>8</sup>. There is much to be said for this. It makes relationships more central. Informality is more natural. Consensus is easier to attain. However it would be unwise to forbid large churches. Large churches can do things that small churches cannot do. They have greater potential for making more impact on society, and the capacity for a wider variety of activities. Current trends imply that larger churches are more likely to grow<sup>9</sup>. I suggest that we need both large and small churches. If this is the case, then large churches need to make adjustments. For example, relationships need to be facilitated, whether this is through small fellowship groups or task groups or a combination of the two. Consensus is more difficult to work, although not impossible. However, a system such as the Ministry-Led approach, may be more appropriate to larger churches, and more effective at engaging members in ministry rather than merely as onlookers in the pew.

I am not saying that a church with a style of governance that relies on a democratic, procedural approach cannot take on board all these aspects. It is possible, but the odds are stacked against it. I am simply pointing out that such a style is not conducive to these vital aspects of the covenant community. Nor do I believe that the Declaration of Principle requires such an approach – it simply says that a church should not be dictated to by an outside body. However it would be foolish to ignore wise advice from groups or individuals with whom the church has good relations and mutual respect. Wise advice is very different from dictates.

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<sup>8</sup> Article 16 of *Helwys' Declaration of Faith* in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 121

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Brierley, *Pulling out of the Nose Dive: A contemporary picture of churchgoing*, (London: Christian Research, 2006), esp 163 & 209

The democratic, procedural style of church government was not envisaged by the early Baptists, nor is it appropriate in today's climate. There are more appropriate forms of governance that are more conducive to Baptist church life with an emphasis on discipleship and relationships, mission as well as community, and every-member ministry as well as the priesthood of all believers. There is no 'one size fits all', and there may be a number of solutions that will work in various circumstances. For example, I suggest that a consensus approach is very appropriate for a small church, but a large church would benefit from the emphases brought by the 'Ministry-Led, Accountable Leadership' model; both place importance on the involvement of members, albeit in different ways. One thing is certain: if Baptist churches are to bring hope to society from their increasingly marginalised position, either by the quality of their communal life or by effective mission, it is time to re-imagine the covenant community.

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