

Baptist Basics



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The Church Members' Meeting

Although believers' baptism will often be identified as the primary distinctive of Baptists, it is more accurate to say that a distinctive identity comes from a blend of beliefs and practices which together create a kind of Baptist genetic code. Amongst these is the way the church governs itself under the Lordship of Christ.

Baptist churches practise *congregational* government. This means that they are not *episcopal*, (externally governed by bishops) nor are they *Presbyterian* (internally governed by ministers or elders) or *connexional* (governed by a central council or conference). Rather, congregations are self-governing in that the whole congregation is invited to seek the mind and will of God for the good of the church. This is one reason why a church needs a body of identifiable members. It is these people, who have declared their commitment to the local congregation and have demonstrated their Christian discipleship, who are qualified to share in the task of discerning God's will.¹ This is not to say that churches should dispense with ministers within the church or others beyond it, such as regional ministers. All these people exercise necessary and valuable ministries on behalf of the church in keeping with the early church where certain gifted people were set aside for prayer and the ministry of word (Acts 6:3-4). But it does mean that the members gather together in the name of Christ to make the most important decisions, such as receiving new members, caring for property and the calling and appointing of leaders, including ministers. It is the members who will work together to sustain the church in its life and mission. No-one therefore is in a position to impose something upon a church that it has not freely chosen for itself. In this way

Baptists show their rejection of compulsion in matters of faith and insist upon the free nature of religious conviction.

Discerning the mind of Christ

For practical and spiritual reasons, congregational government usually takes place through meetings, specially convened for the purpose and known as 'Church Members' Meetings'. These should be times of worship and prayer, and it is in this context that the members will consider the life and work of the church, through a process of discussion and conversation. Most churches hold members' meetings monthly or quarterly, but they can also be convened for special purposes from time to time. Churches will have a Governing Document (sometimes also called a Constitution) that will guide the church as to how to govern their local work and activities. This document will lay down helpful procedures for calling and organising a Church Members' Meeting. The purpose of these is to ensure that a church conducts itself legally and transparently and that any attempt to misuse its assets or depart from its objectives are prevented. Since 'God is a God not of disorder but of peace', it is important that 'all things be done decently and in order' (1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40). A well ordered church is in a good position to respond to the guidance of the Spirit, both to attempt and to achieve things for God.

Although the form of a Church Members' Meeting appears democratic, it is important to see that the intention is greater than that of allowing majority opinion to rule. Christ is Lord of the church and the head of the body. Our responsibility is to hold fast to him (Colossians 1:18, 2:19). This means that a church is better described as a 'Christocracy', a community in which Christ rules. Put differently, it is a 'guided democracy', led by the Spirit. This is why people come together for Church Members' Meetings and why, when voting is necessary, it normally takes place within the discussion at the meeting. Some churches do make provision for a ballot of members in specific circumstances (often for making appointments), but the normal process of decision making is by consensus within a meeting. Being present to share in the discussion is important. In this way the mind of Christ may be discerned through arriving at a consensus of agreement through the expression of considered opinion. If people approach a meeting with the intention of getting their own way and triumphing over others of a different opinion, they have missed the point. In this sense, working together in a Church Members' Meeting is more demanding than in most other contexts and requires different kinds of skills.

Among these are the ability to listen with care, both to others and to God, and to argue for one's own thoughts assertively but not aggressively. Although meetings always have the option of voting, the more important task is to discern the 'mind of the meeting' in the belief that this ought to reflect the mind of Christ.

The gathered church

The Church Members' Meeting is based on the promise of Christ to be in the midst of those who gather in his name (Matthew 18:20). This is true when churches gather to worship and when they gather in their Church Members' Meeting, where Christ is among them to guide them as they consider the life and work of the church. To gather 'in the name' of Jesus means to come consciously together as those who believe in him and seek to live under his Lordship. It implies being empowered by Christ. Jesus himself said, 'Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven' (Matthew 18:19). This is a remarkable promise and highlights the importance of spiritual agreement among the followers of Jesus. Christ imparts to the congregation an authority to know what is pleasing to God and to act in regard to God's will. But it is important always to remember that this is only the case in so far as a church can truly claim to be acting 'in the name' of Jesus, that is, in communion with his will and Spirit. This is why a Church Members' Meeting that neglects worship and prayer is likely to do its work only in human strength and not in God's.

The authority of Christians is based upon belief in the priesthood of all believers, that is to say that through Christ all believers have the freedom to draw near to God and to receive from God. Christ mediates this to us because he is our great high priest (Hebrews 2:17, 8:1). But Christ is prophet, priest and king so it also makes sense to speak of both the prophethood and kingship of all believers. As they have access to God, so all believers are able to speak for God, as prophets do. And sharing in the kingship of Christ means they are able to take responsibility for their own lives and the lives of the congregation. This is why Baptists have wanted to encourage freedom of conscience, in the belief that believers continue to become spiritually minded and have 'the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:14-16). They are not therefore slavishly dependent on being told what to do by some higher authority, either political or religious, but are able to make reasonable and righteous decisions for themselves (Romans 12:1-2). They are also able to do this because

the congregations to which they belong have affirmed trust in them and empowered them to think in mature ways. Freedom of conscience is fostered therefore in discerning communities of faith.

Good practice

It follows from what has been said, that Church Members' Meetings should be conducted with a conscious awareness of the presence of Christ, with opportunity for worship and prayer and with the overall intention of being guided by God. Meetings should be conducted in an orderly and transparent way, avoiding all forms of manipulation and with opportunity for all members of the church to share whatever they have to say. Members should listen respectfully to each other and should avoid stating their own point of view aggressively, although there is nothing wrong with passion. The aim of speaking should be to help all the church members be aware of the issues and to understand together how the work of the church could be advanced. They should also always be concerned to make 'every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3). It is the duty of all church members to watch over one another in love as a covenant community and to give all due respect to those who are 'watching over your souls' (Hebrews 13:17).

The Church Members' Meeting should be considering the reception and welcome of new members, matters of church discipline, calling of ministers, appointment of leaders, and decisions about property. There should also be discussion and sharing of ideas concerning the church's overall life and mission. While it is in law, the responsibility of charity trustees (usually the deacons, ministers and elders within a Baptist church) to deal with legal and financial matters, it would be normal for the church members to receive information and accounts and other important practical issues. Sometimes Church Members' Meetings are asked to make comments on public affairs and respond to denominational enquiries. Running a church well can be an excellent demonstration of how a diverse group of people can work together, so that the way the church operates becomes part of the church's witness.

Misunderstandings and distortions

It is helpful to understand what the congregational governance of the church

does not mean, alongside what it does.

- Church Members' Meetings do not always get things right. Since we are all limited, seeking the mind of Christ does not guarantee infallibility. We only ever operate within the light that we have, and that means we can be wrong. Due humility and realism is required.
- The competence of local churches does not mean they are omniscient. All churches have their limitations, just as human beings do. There comes a point when all churches need advice, resources and assistance from outside themselves. It is wise to seek these things when we need them since God has made provision in the wider church.
- The freedom of the local congregation does not mean it is entitled to cut itself off from other churches. Two words are often used in this context: independence and autonomy. To talk about the 'independence' of the local church does not mean it has no need of other churches. Together, we form the whole body of Christ. Therefore, to say this, is actually sinful. 'The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you"' (1 Corinthians 12:20). In reality, all churches, like all human beings, are interdependent. We should manage our own affairs as much as we can, but to do so properly we need each other's help. Community empowers personal responsibility. Likewise, to speak of 'autonomy' refers to self-government but should never be used to mean that churches are a law unto themselves. They are accountable to God, to each other as members, to the churches at large and to the faith that has been entrusted to them (Jude 3).
- Churches should give to their appointed offices, whether ministers, elders or deacons all proper respect and should listen to their guidance with all due attention. Similarly with regional ministers from outside the local church, their advice, counsel and warnings should be given all respect. Neither church officers nor regional ministers have authority to command a church to act against its considered judgement but the experience and advice they bring are of immense importance and should be honoured.

The potential and the challenge of the Church Members' Meeting

The fact is that in Church Members' Meetings, Baptists can be at their worst or at their best. They are at their worst when they allow meetings to become places of divisive argument, or when they are used by some people to get their own way, to exercise power or to resist legitimate change. They are at their best when people realise that all of us together are wiser than any of us on our own. When God's people gather together in spiritual agreement to seek God's will, to build up the church and to serve God's kingdom they are capable of great achievements. Church Members' Meetings are probably the most stringent test of our spirituality and our ability to 'discern all things' because we have 'the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:15-16).

All of this gives us a great deal to aspire to. What is needed, is for church members to take seriously the priesthood, prophethood and kingship of all believers and to share in and recognise their responsibility to contribute to the overall health of the church. This requires their full participation and contribution to this vital part of church life. Most important of all is the constant awareness that the church does not belong to its earthly members but belongs to Christ, to whom all authority in heaven and earth has been given (Matthew 28:18).

¹ See Baptist Basic – Church Membership

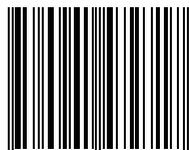
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