

Authority in a Local Baptist Church

Introduction

Baptists recognise “two sources of authority – Christ and the Scriptures, ...in that order.” Rejecting the need for a priestly class to act as intermediaries, they believe that every Christian has direct access to God through the Spirit, and it is as they come together that they discern “the mind of Christ.”¹ Recently, however, some Baptist ministers have perceived the Church Meeting as an obstacle to fulfilling their vision for the church’s mission, that is in need of reform.² This is balanced by a sense that increasingly it is Church Leaders who make the decisions, resulting in a lack of engagement from the congregation.

I argue that, while the current expression of the Church Meeting may be in need of reform, the principle of the “gathered church” as the ultimate ecclesial authority remains an important Baptist distinctive. Leaders and their congregations are mutually accountable, and we should be wary of undermining this charismatic balance.

After briefly describing the authority structure in a medium-sized suburban Baptist church in South Manchester, I shall consider how it functions, with a particular focus on the relationship between the Church Meeting and Leadership Team. How is authority shared between them and what issues arise? I will conclude by asking how this practice relates to stated ecclesiology of the denomination.

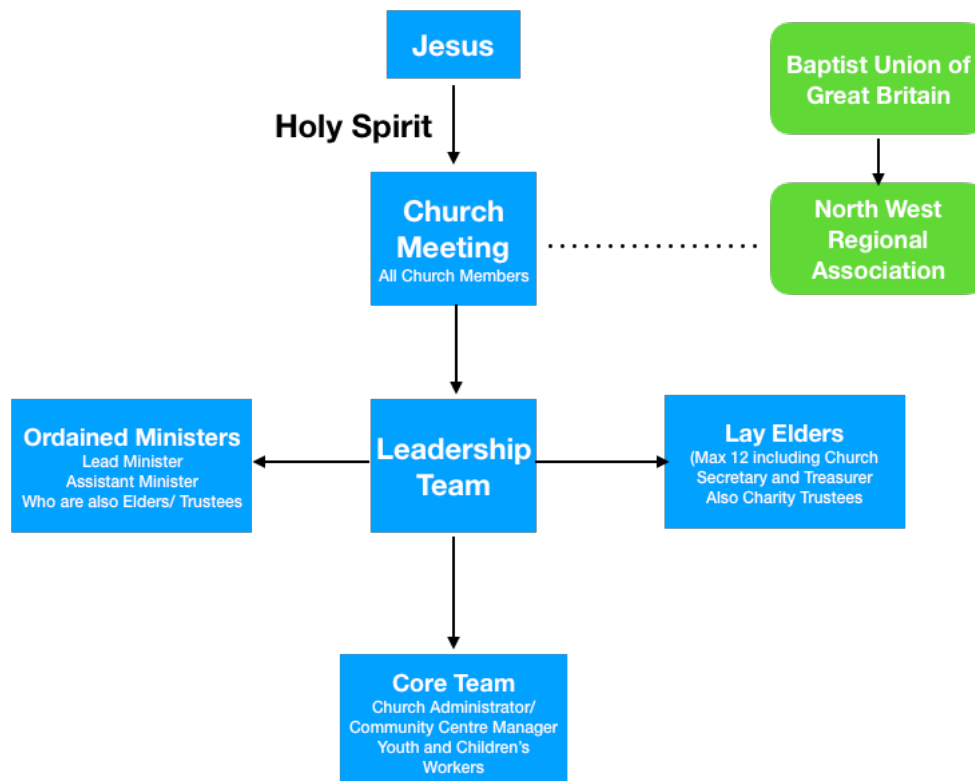
¹ Paul Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*, ed. Richard Kidd (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996), 19, <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366068/Something_to_Declare.aspx> (30 October 2018).

² See Ernie Whalley, “Church Meeting: Time to Be Scrapped or Time for a Radical Change?,” *Baptists Together*, February 2014, <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/391710/February_2014_Church.aspx> (30 October 2018).

Describe the authority structure in the congregation

Structure

Because they are independent from outside control, there can be great diversity in how individual Baptist Churches are structured. My own church is no exception and over time a relatively complex organisation has evolved. This can best be illustrated using an organisational chart.



In principle the final authority lies with the Church Meeting. However, responsibility for specific areas of the church's life and mission are allocated within this structure, and the Ministers/ Elders head the various functions and sub-teams. All roles are gender neutral and this is reflected in the composition of the Leadership Team although, to date, the Lead Minister has always been male.³ A small minority of

³ See Nigel G. Wright, *Leadership in the Local Church*, Baptist Basics 8 (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2016), 6–7, <http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/464308/Baptist_Basics_8.aspx> (1 January 2017).

British Baptist churches, however, would take a complementarian view of leadership.⁴

Governance

The church is regulated by the constitution adopted in 2009. This arose out of the requirements of continued charity status. However, it was seen as an opportunity to introduce changes that have had a significant impact on how authority is exercised within the church and the interaction of the Leadership Team with the Church Meeting. This document, developed from Baptist Union of Great Britain (hereafter BUGB) guidelines, uses terminology that satisfies legal requirements and defines the church as a “charitable unincorporated association.”⁵ The Ministers, Elders, Secretary and Treasurer collectively constitute the “Charity Trustees.”⁶ Together they form the Leadership Team, supported by the Core Team who are employees of the church.

How does it function?

The Baptist Union

The organisation chart showed a tentative relationship between the Church Meeting and the Regional Association/ BUGB. Association with other Baptist churches is recognised to be of value since it enables the pooling of experience, resources and a high-level engagement with ecumenical or government entities, but this is largely of interest to Ministers and Baptist “enthusiasts.”⁷ The reality, for most church members, is that the local congregation is independent of any external authority.

⁴ Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 116–118.

⁵ *Constitution for Altrincham Baptist Church* (Altrincham: Altrincham Baptist Church, 2009), 1, clause 1.

⁶ *Altrincham Baptist Church Constitution*, 6, clause 15.5.

⁷ Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne, and Anthony R. Cross, *On Being the Church: Revisioning Baptist Identity*, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* 21 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 196.

The Local Church

Congregational government is not uniquely Baptist but is fundamental to understanding how authority operates within a Baptist church. There is a “primacy” of the local church over every other regional, national or parachurch authority. Their rulings are advisory, and such “associations” are voluntary.⁸ As Fiddes notes, “We are ‘inter-dependents’, not ‘independents’; and we locate authority in community, not in hierarchy.”⁹ However, while every congregation is independent of outside control, this does not mean it is “autonomous.” Christ is the “head” of the body that is the church and he is “present” when they come together (Col 1:18; Eph 1:22; Matt 18:20).¹⁰ The local church, therefore, is the community in which Christ is most visible to the world.¹¹

The Church Meeting

The purpose of the Church Meeting is to discern what God is saying to the church and act upon it. It also fulfils certain legal requirements, particularly in relation to property. The requirement for membership is a measure of “commitment” and qualification for this task.¹² When first introduced, prior to universal suffrage, voting in a church meeting (which included women) was an intentionally radical and subversive act.¹³ However, the Church Meeting is also described as the “church business meeting”, and therein lies a problem.¹⁴ The language of “proposals, amendments, votes,” is alien to the ethos of worship and prayer.¹⁵ I would also question whether the Meeting is representative of the wider congregation? Those

⁸ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 96–97.

⁹ Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare*, 10.

¹⁰ Haymes, Gouldbourne, and Cross, *On Being the Church*, 197.

¹¹ Haymes, Gouldbourne, and Cross, *On Being the Church*, 199.

¹² Nigel G. Wright, *The Church Members Meeting*, Baptist Basics 6 (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2016), 2, <<http://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=168465&view=browser>> (1 January 2017).

¹³ Phil Jump, *Healthy Church Meetings: Discerning the Mind of Christ in a Christ-like Way* (Wigan: North Western Baptist Association, 2007), 6.

¹⁴ Stephen R. Holmes, “Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting,” in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne, Centre for Baptist History and Heritage 6 (Oxford, UK: Regents Park College, 2011), 180–183.

¹⁵ Holmes, “Knowing Together the Mind of Christ,” 180.

participating are often a minority of the active members, many of whom, for various reasons (e.g. childcare), will be over the age of fifty.

Significant issues (e.g. calling new ministers or budget related) will come before it, but most decisions are made by persons authorised by the Church Meeting, without the need to refer. A consequence of the revised constitution is that increasingly the Church Meeting has become a forum for prayer and communication. Key decisions are made by the Leadership Team and it is the Lead Minister and Church Secretary who set the agenda for the Church Meeting. Leaders, after engaging and reaching a consensus among themselves, will bring motions to the Church Meeting for ratification. As a consequence, the Meeting is often asked to respond to issues it has not had an opportunity to fully consider and pray about.

Tensions

Church Meetings can represent both the highs and lows of Baptist church life. A friend, undergoing ministerial training, said that they felt the Church Meeting “hindered them from exercising their ministry.” This was partly explained by their church background (charismatic Anglican), but it highlights a tension that other leaders in the denomination experience, where the Church Meeting is viewed as an obstacle to be managed or reformed.¹⁶ The core question is, are leaders accountable to the Church Meeting or to God in fulfilling their calling?

Deacons or Elders?

Traditionally Baptist churches have either Deacons or Elders (often the terms are synonymous) who serve alongside the Minister(s). Scripturally, however, these are distinct roles. Deacons serve the church, freeing the Elders (Greek *presbuteros*/*episkopos* appear to refer to the same role) to nurture, equip and guide the congregation (Acts 6:1–6, 20:17; 1 Tim 3:1–13; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Peter 5:1–2).¹⁷ The qualifications for an Elder are proven Christian character and an ability to teach (Titus 1:9). They safeguard the apostolic teaching in the church. Combining the two roles

¹⁶ Whalley, “Church Meeting: Time to Be Scrapped or Time for a Radical Change?”

¹⁷ David Mappes, “The ‘Elder’ in the Old and New Testaments,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 165–167; Benjamin L. Merkle, *Why Elders?: A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009), 19–20.

can result in individuals operating outside their calling and gifting. For example, where strategic vision is required. I have seen the stress this can cause.

Selecting Elders?

The new constitution in 2009 had a profound influence on the balance of authority between the Leadership Team and the Church Meeting. Church members are invited to recommend prospective Elders to the existing Eldership, who then nominate those they feel should be considered.¹⁸ Although the constitution allows for more nominations than vacancies, in practice the candidates presented to the Church Meeting always match the available vacancies and the recommendations are anonymous.¹⁹ Previously two Church members would openly propose and second a person for consideration. Conversations took place to ensure they were aware of the responsibilities involved, but the choice of Deacons/ Elders lay with the Church Meeting.

The issue is accountability. The Leadership Team is able to determine its own composition (it is a rare Church Meeting that will reject their proposals) resulting in a diminished role for the Church Meeting. With the best intentions, the Eldership is unlikely to reflect the full diversity of views in the church and risks becoming detached from or pursuing an agenda not owned by the congregation. Leaders are not above the congregation but in partnership with it, and while this can result in tensions, the genius of Baptist ecclesiology is how such issues are resolved so that the whole church contributes to and embraces the vision for mission.

¹⁸ *Altrincham Baptist Church Constitution*, 7, clause 15.11.

¹⁹ *Altrincham Baptist Church Constitution*, 7, clause 15.12.1; *Altrincham Baptist Church: Practices and Procedures Relating to Constitution* (Altrincham: Altrincham Baptist Church, 2009), 2. Note on clause 15:11.

How does it relate to the stated ecclesiology of the church?

The Declaration of Principle

All Ministers accredited by the Baptist Union are required to subscribe to the *Declaration of Principle*.²⁰ Originally introduced in 1873, it was revised in 1938.²¹ This forms the basis of union within the Baptist denomination in this country.²² It is the closest that British Baptists have to a formal Confession of Faith that everyone is expected to agree to, mirroring as it does the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20).²³ Altrincham Baptist specifically affirms the *Declaration of Principle* in its constitution, alongside a commitment to “the beliefs commonly known as ‘Evangelical’.”²⁴

Clause 1 deals with authority (the other two refer to baptism and mission), it states:

1. 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.²⁵

The *Declaration of Principle* is intentionally “inclusive” and allows for significant variation both in theological emphasis (e.g. Particular/ Calvinist, or General/ Arminian Baptist) and forms of ecclesial structure.²⁶

The Gathered Church

The expectation is that Christ will reveal his will to the church (in accordance with scripture) and that discerning and acting on this is our principle task. From the beginning an important Baptist principle was that “the true church was a community gathered by God, to which admission was through believer’s baptism.” They largely

²⁰ See Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare* for a detailed discussion.

²¹ David Coffey in the Forward to Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare*, 4; Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare*, 9.

²² Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare*, 15.

²³ Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare*, 13.

²⁴ *Altrincham Baptist Church Constitution*, 1, clauses 3:1–2.

²⁵ Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare*, 6.

²⁶ Fiddes et al., *Something to Declare*, 9–10, 15.

avoided “credal tests,” recognising that each person should be guided by their own “conscience” before God.²⁷

Accountability

In the Anglican episcopal/ parish system there is formal accountability and support, both from above and within the local church. This is absent in congregational government, where instead leaders are accountable to the Church Meeting. Independent Baptist churches have an advantage, because they can be flexible and responsive to the opportunities and needs around them. They are not restricted by institutional or geographical constraints.²⁸ However, with this comes greater responsibility.

The role of Leaders

“There is a sense in which all Baptists are ‘ordained’” as a result of their baptism.²⁹ The priesthood of all believers is a key Baptist emphasis (1 Peter 2:5–9; Heb 4:14–16). Among the first Baptists, Ministers (of the Word) and Elders were effectively the same role.³⁰ They both “oversee and feed” the flock.³¹ Their authority, derives from the congregation (of which they are a part). Ordination and formal accreditation are later developments, ensuring that Baptist ministers when called to lead a local church, are trained and recognised by the broader Baptist family.³²

The cumulative effect of the changes discussed earlier leads to a situation where, in my view, the church is “internally governed by ministers or elders,” which is

²⁷ Helen Dare, “‘In the Fray’: Reading the Bible in Relationship,” in *The “Plainly Revealed” Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, ed. Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), 230.

²⁸ Anthony Delaney, *TH6934 Week 1 (Transformational Leadership) Canned Content* (Cheltenham: Westminster Theological Centre, 2017).

²⁹ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 112.

³⁰ See “The Second London Confession” (1677/1688), ch. XXVI.9, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 287 cited in Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 13 (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003), 90.

³¹ See *A Brief Confession or Declaration of Faith, Set forth by many of us, who are (falsely) called Anabaptists*, (London: printed for F. Smith, 1660), generally known as the “Standard Confession”, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 90 cited in Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 87.

³² Wright, *Leadership in the Local Church*, 4–5.

a Presbyterian rather than Baptist ecclesiology.³³ However, Presbyterians are accountable to their denomination, it is essential therefore that the Church Meeting acts as an effective balance and support to the Leadership Team.

The way forward?

The constitution is due for review this year.³⁴ This should be seen as an opportunity to reengage with our Baptist roots. Many in the congregation have come from other church traditions. Their values are broadly evangelical rather than specifically Baptist. There is a need to explain why Baptist perspectives on authority and the role of the gathered church in hearing from God are important.

Conclusion

For Baptists, it is Jesus as revealed in scripture, who is the ultimate authority in the church. Each congregation has a responsibility to discern, when they come together, how the Spirit is leading them forward in witness and mission. While there is a widespread acceptance that the current expression of the Church Meeting is in need of reform, the principle of the “gathered church” as the visible authority in the local church, remains an important Baptist distinctive.

Using my own church as a case study, I briefly described the authority structure and governance in place, before considering how this functions. Like other Baptist churches we are independent of outside control and the Ministers/ Elders are therefore accountable to the Church Meeting. However, in practice only significant decisions come before it. The new constitution in 2009 resulted in the balance of authority shifting away from the Church Meeting to the Leadership Team and I argued that Baptist leaders and their congregations should be mutually accountable. We must be wary of any move to undermine this historic balance.

I concluded by considering how this relates to the stated ecclesiology of the BUGB and traditional Baptist principles. We are conditioned to think of authority in terms of hierarchy and power. However, a Baptist understanding of the church is

³³ Wright, *The Church Members Meeting*, 2.

³⁴ *Altrincham Baptist Church: Practices and Procedures*, 1, Preamble.

essentially relational. There are no spectators, and everyone participates. Leaders are essential for the health of the body, but they are not placed above it and should resist the expectations of those they lead to control and deliver results, choosing instead to nurture and disciple maturity in others (Col 1:28–29; Eph 4:12, 15–16). The values of the kingdom are not those of the world.

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