**Communal discerning the will of God**

**Sermon for 24 November**

Today is our Annual General Meeting and for many of you who have not grown up in Baptist churches, you may be wondering exactly what those entails.

So I want to explain our ecclesiology about that.

That big word just means understanding the doctrines within the church – how and why we do church the way we do.

All churches have an ecclesiology, about the nature and structure of their Church - its relationship to Jesus, its role in salvation, its polity, its discipline, its eschatology, and its leadership.

For us in the Baptist denomination, the ultimate authority for a church rests not in the people but in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the head or Lord of the church (Ephesians 4:15; Philippians 2:11).

Our church is not a democracy but a theocracy, which means God is in charge, not us.

Demo = people; theo = God

Jesus Christ is the leader of the church, therefore final authority in any church rests not with the pastor, or the elders, but with the risen and ruling Christ in the midst of his people as they gather together to listen prayerfully to his word in Scripture and through community.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We believe that Christ by his Spirit speaks directly to every believer, so we are convinced that every believer in the local church should be involved in discerning Christ’s will for the church.

We believe that each believer has direct access to God through the Scriptures and prayer and is free under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to determine God’s will.

We believe that each believer also is part of a “royal priesthood” in which Jesus Christ is the High Priest (Hebrews 7-10). This means that each believer can seek God’s direction as a cooperative part of that fellowship.

And because Christ promises to be present and to make his will known whenever his people gather together in his name, the church meeting is the place where we can expect the Spirit of Christ to reveal the mind of Christ.

All of the members within the church fellowship have equal voice in the governance of the church.

We believe that all persons who are redeemed have come by grace to saving faith in Christ, not by works, social status, or any other thing (Ephesians 2:8-10). The ground at the foot of the cross is level. No Baptist is to lord it over another. Therefore, a church is to be governed by all of the people together under the lordship of Christ. Church governance is not in the hands of one or of a few but of all the members.

Because of the nature of our Baptist churches, we differentiate between members and those who just attend. Part of that is because of the rules set out in an Act of Parliament back in 1923 called the Baptist Union Incorporation Act which requires us to have members.

So only of those who have been saved by belief in Christ and who have experienced believer’s immersion can become members of the church.

Each member of the church has the right to vote on matters at church business meetings

There are currently 38 members of this church, although the people who attend is a far greater number.

The members appoint Elders to govern on a two-year tenure but ultimately the entire membership is responsible for decisions made on the basis of Christ’s will for the church.[[2]](#footnote-2)

No person or group outside of the Baptist congregation has any authority over the church in regard to beliefs and religious practices. We have no overarching synod or council which can dictate to what this church can or cannot do. We listen to God and decide for this congregation.

That also includes our umbrella organisation the Baptist Union national resource centre or the Regional Leader or any other church. They can suggest but not command.

We see that in our selection of pastors. They are not delivered from on high, but this church chooses for itself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This may seem to be a strange way for a church to function. Putting the governance of a church in the hands of people who have no special training, education or calling appears to be foolish.

But we believe that this congregational style of governance best reflects the practices of those churches described in the New Testament. In that time, the members of a church acting together, not any one person or group, made the major decisions.

Consider Acts 13 *Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them”. 3 And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.*

They sought the leading of the Holy Spirit and acted on what was told to them.

In Acts 6 we also see this: *Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Greek Christians arose against the Hebrew Christians because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.*

At our Annual General Meeting today, everyone (member or not) can attend and everyone (member or not) can have their say but when it comes to a vote, only the members can do that.

The meeting is the gathering of disciples who, together, are seeking the mind of the spirit. In this process, it is essential that all voices have an opportunity to be heard, because all of us are children of God, and all have the spirit in equal measure. [[3]](#footnote-3)

We gather together to meet our Lord.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The great Pentecostal preacher Samuel Chadwick wrote: The church that is man-managed instead of God-governed is doomed to failure. To run an organisation needs no God. The real work of a Church depends upon the power of the Spirit.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There are two indispensable ingredients in communal discernment: a corporate seeking of the mind of God and a consensus of the whole group that God’s will has been discovered by the power of the Holy Spirit.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Our question should not be “what do I think is the right path”, but “what does God say is the right path”.

The key to being effectively used by God is a humble, submissive heart that’s tuned in to the Holy Spirit.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Reaching consensus about what God is saying to a group is no guarantee that God’s voice has been heard clearly, but it is the best we can do.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Consensus helps a group reach decisions that most or all members of a group agree with, that meet the needs or convictions of most of the group members. But that does not mean they have discerned what God actually wants.[[9]](#footnote-9)

As Campbell Morgan (British evangelist, preacher and Bible teacher who died in 1945) wrote: If people make their plan of service and then ask God to help them, they may, by that assertion of self, quench the Holy Spirit. If, on the other hand, they await the Divine vision and the Divine voice and the divinely marked out path; if they wait until they hear God saying, “I am going there, I would have you come with me”, - then the Holy Spirit can exercise his gift in their lives.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Unfortunately, in the past, church meetings have been on occasion battle grounds with people coming with agenda, or barrows to push, or bullying tactics.

We are to come together to listen to God in the midst of a meeting. Congregational discernment does not have to degenerate into bitter formal debates decided by a majority vote.

The goal when we gather together is not to win a vote and impose our will, but to listen to the voice of Christ, and to submit to his will.

This means framing our meetings with shared reflection on Scripture and prayer.

It means bringing issues for discussion and discernment, not just motions for decision and voting.

Our meetings to discern God’s pathway for the church should not be Westminster Rules type of meeting where there is a short time frame and a win/lose vote. Unfortunately, they can be. A show of hands or a vote can leave people with an opposing view feel undervalued or unheard, but if the matter is talked out, there is a chance that we all go away feeling that God has been heard and each person’s views have been valued.

Like a hui on a marae, we should talk until there is an agreed path by all, however long that takes. We are seeking consensus - Win/win

Discernment requires a significant commitment of time and attention.[[11]](#footnote-11) Lunch can wait until we are sure we have heard from God. And if it is unresolved, we commit to going away and reconvening at a later date.

There is a Biblical example of this discernment process in the Council of Jerusalem when they had to consider Gentiles becoming Christians and what rules they needed to keep from the Judaic law and which ones were irrelevant to the new Gentile Christians. The path was eventually discerned after much prayer and discussion and consensus, with James, the leader of the Council saying this: Acts 15:28 28 *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.*

So let us take these factors with us into our meeting today.

We will grab a cuppa and bring it back into this space after this last song and start shortly.

1. https://baptist.nz/what-we-believe/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.baptistdistinctives.org/resources/articles/congregational-church-governance/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Sutherland *Radical Disciples: exploring Baptist ideas* 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sutherland 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Samuel Chadwick *The Way To Pentecost* 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Marva Dawn Joy *Divine Wisdom: practices of discernment from other cultures and Christian traditions* 118 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bill Hybels *Honest to God – Becoming an Authentic Christian* 122 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lynne M Baab *The Power of Listening: Building Skills for Mission and Ministry* Loc. 1362 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Baab Loc. 1241-43 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. G Campbell Morgan *The Spirit of God* 237 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Baab Loc. 1259-60 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)