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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE COVENANT COMMUNITY?

Baptist church meetings in the nineteenth century

Malcolm J. Egner

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- *Malcolm Egner is the minister with responsibility for teaching, programming and communications at Rising Brook Baptist Church, Stafford. He writes from a church which has recently radically changed its church meeting format and constitution.*
 - *Church meetings changed dramatically with the adoption of a business style in the nineteenth century. The change is examined as it appears from the evidence of a number of church books.*
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The early 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 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.¹ 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. However, over the centuries this was to change until this deepest expression of covenant community has for many become the low point of church life. Stephen Gaukroger noted that 'Irrelevance, acrimony, tedium and downright carnality have characterized this gathering which is at the heart of our Baptist life'.² B.R. White claimed that 'the "boredom quotient" is about 95%!'.³ Even Fred Bacon, a champion of the church meeting, commented from his 1984 survey of churches that 'a high opinion of the Church Meeting is not particularly prominent among most of our church members', and that it 'can be the nadir of church life'.⁴ The early Baptist vision for the covenant community has been diluted or perhaps even lost altogether. The nineteenth century was critical in this process.

Baptist churches in the nineteenth century were less marginalized, with many experiencing growth and engaging with society at various levels, but how far did they remain faithful to the early Baptist vision for the covenant community? My approach is to analyse the conduct of church meetings and the development of thinking on church governance through the nineteenth century. To this end, 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, so important in Baptist church meetings in the seventeenth century, disappeared from church meeting agendas.⁵ They had ceased to figure by mid-century at Abingdon, Salisbury, and Maze Pond; and by the late nineteenth century at Bourton-on-the-Water and Kingsgate Street, and by 1900 at Accrington and Hemel Hempstead.

Items relating to membership – applications, requests for dismission (later termed transfers), and deaths – took up far more of church meetings. Church books often contained the membership roll, and there would be an annual summary of the numbers who had come into and left membership. Reviewing the membership roll became an annual task, particularly in the London churches.⁶ Often membership-related matters were the only business discussed in a meeting.⁷ At Bourton, meetings would be especially arranged to facilitate the process for people becoming members.⁸ Prior to 1834, at Marlowes ‘whenever new members were proposed – the church was called together between the services on the Sabbath’.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Maze Pond developed a slick process: typically an individual was proposed for communion and it was ‘Resolved that she be admitted’;¹¹ at the next meeting¹² 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.¹³ 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 Mr Whitaker was invited to preach for three Sundays,¹⁴ following which he was called as minister for five years.¹⁵ Maze Pond meetings in 1825 were dominated by attempts to find a new minister. Eleven meetings were held between April and August with this topic a major item. Sometimes the meeting was called specifically for that reason.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

PROCEDURAL DEVELOPMENTS

One of the most significant developments during the nineteenth 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.¹⁸ By the late 19th century the chairman of a meeting, normally the pastor, was formally recorded in the minutes¹⁹ (the term *chairman* had not been used until mid-century). The proposers and seconders of motions began to be recorded in the second half of the century.²⁰ Maze Pond tended to lead the way, confirming the previous minutes and listing the brethren attending the meeting by 1800, and naming the chairman by 1850.

Voting had become more common. At Maze Pond the search for a minister in 1825 demonstrates this.²¹ At the April meeting²² 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 the ballot result was not recorded.²³ Mr Copley declined their invitation, so it was agreed that Mr Baynes of Wellington would supply for one month. At the June meeting it was resolved '*nem: con*' to request Mr Baynes to continue supply for a week or two more.²⁴ 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.²⁵ The *ballot* was unanimous (33 votes) to call Mr Baynes.²⁶ At a meeting three days later the minutes of the 11th were read and confirmed '*by ballot nem: con: 33 ayes 2 neuter*' and they resolved to communicate this to Mr Baynes.²⁷

The development of procedural devices is epitomized by as many as

nine resolutions relating to the regulation of meetings being passed between 1840 and 1843 at Abingdon.²⁸ 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.²⁹

The introduction of the 'Annual Church Meeting' during the nineteenth century provides further evidence of this formalization. These often included statistical and financial reports,³⁰ a review of the last year by the Pastor,³¹ and reports by the various departments.³² 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.³³ Each could take up a page and a half in the minutes, and often included accounts.

COMPLEXITY OF CHURCH ORGANIZATION

Church life had become more complex during the century with various departments and committees set up in the growing churches, and this was reflected in church meetings. In 1900 Bourton had a 'Heating Apparatus Committee'.³⁴ In 1850 Marlowes set up a 'coal society' for the winter evenings³⁵ and a 'Benefit Society' for the sick.³⁶ Eagle Street already had a committee for organizing the Sunday evening lectures in 1800³⁷ and another was established to oversee the conversion to gas lighting in 1825.³⁸ In 1832 Brown Street set up a committee to consider singing.³⁹ 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'.⁴⁰

This reflected the increase in the amount and diversity of business dealt with at church meetings during the century. Early in the nineteenth century it was not unusual to have no business at a church meeting, or not to meet because there was no business.⁴¹ By 1900 business considered at Brown Street church meetings included pulpit exchanges, involvement in inter-

church mission, appointment of delegates to inter-church and denominational bodies, joint services, support for village churches, the setting up of committees in the community, election of deacons, finances, and prayer meetings. Other items discussed related to the content of services, such as 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.⁴² Similar issues would have been discussed by churches prior to this: the difference is the volume of business in that one year. This was considerably greater and much more varied than the former staple diet of membership related items.

This did not necessarily mean that matters closer to the characteristics of the early Baptists were forgotten, rather they had to compete with other items of business. The encouragement of individuals in developing and using their preaching gifts was still practised in the early part of the century: 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.⁴³ 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. Brother C.I. Cole introduced it 'with an earnest address'.⁴⁴ Fellowship was also encouraged mainly through the Teas that were held prior to Annual Church Meetings. These were often regarded as 'cheering', 'very pleasant'⁴⁵ and 'hearty'⁴⁶ affairs.

THE BATTLEGROUND OF CHURCH MEETING

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 month's notice] in writing unless by the consent of the Chairman'.⁴⁷

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 by a large majority', and the election took place.⁴⁸ But that was not the end of it. The following month, 'On 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'.⁴⁹ At the end of the meeting Mr Moore gave notice of a motion to declare the last meeting null and void; however, 'The 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 'The Amendment to notice of motion was moved & seconded when the motion itself was withdrawn'.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

Mr Moore then gave notice of a motion demanding that the Pastor resign, and Mr Wheeler gave notice of a motion requesting that Mr Tucker resign his membership. The controversy was escalating, and a meeting was held at which the Committee's amended motion was put,

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 & Resolutⁿ were then put & the counting being thrice taken the numbers were for the amendment 57 for the resolutⁿ. 31. On the amendment being put as a substantive Resolutⁿ an amendment (so called) was moved by Mr Jas Moore, which was held not in order, & the Resolutⁿ concern Mr R Moore's withdrawal was declared carried.⁵²

The Committee then gave notice of motion to withdraw from Mr Jas Moore and Mr Wheeler. A further meeting was held the following week.⁵³ The pastor vacated the chair for the motion regarding his position,⁵⁴ however Jas Moore withdrew the motion and 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 lent 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ There are also examples of the church meeting agreeing with the Committee's recommendation on other matters⁵⁷. There was also an instance of various alterations to the church building being agreed at a church meeting,⁵⁸ only for this resolution to be rescinded and the decision left to the Church and School Committees.⁵⁹

There were also 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.⁶⁰ 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 vote of members present having given him the authority to do so'.⁶¹ It is not

clear whether 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. Two accepted their election, and one declined to take up the position.⁶² 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 was an element of reluctance to allow those who were gifted or anointed in leadership to 'get on with it'. It seems that everyone wanted 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.⁶³ Indeed, the desire by members to 'have their say' and their reluctance to give this up may go back to the first Baptist congregation led by John Smyth at the beginning of the seventeenth century as this included at least two or three former clergy.⁶⁴ 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'.⁶⁵ 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 nineteenth 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 of Hebden Bridge, influential in the north of England not least in training ministers, described a gospel church as 'a voluntary society, formed by mutual agreement', whose true nature 'consists in all the members standing in the same relation to the glorious head'.⁶⁶ Thus, 'every particular church, constituted according to the order of the gospel, hath full power and authority within itself, for the exercising of discipline, rule and government'.⁶⁷ 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'.⁶⁸ Where such agreement could not be reached, 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'.⁶⁹ This reflects what Fawcett saw as the major duty of members to love one another.⁷⁰

Writing four decades later Charles Stovel, a prolific author and influential minister in the denomination, also conceived of a church as a voluntary society,⁷¹ and held its members as equal before God, with an equal share in the benefits of being part of the church.⁷² But he observed that 'the business of each church is more complex ... A voluntary Christian Church has thus come to be a little cluster of benevolent societies'.⁷³ He gave as an example a church supporting its pastor, incidental expenses, alms of the church, Sabbath School, Bible Classes, a Tract Society, an auxiliary Missionary Society in aid of the Foreign Mission, Home Mission, Irish Society, and Fund for Relief of Poor Churches.⁷⁴ Stovel claimed that the difficulties of directing a church could 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'.⁷⁵ He then set out a system of organizing the church with each deacon overseeing and keeping the accounts for a specific area or department, working with a committee of four or five brethren. Brief reports were to be made each quarter to the church meeting.⁷⁶ Stovel included a form showing a format for meetings and minutes [See fig 1]:

Figure 1: Stovel's suggested meeting and minutes format
(Stovel, *Hints*, 180-1)

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 the 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 Residences, 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.

An annual church meeting would receive reports for the whole year from each department, a review of membership, auditors' report, and Association report.⁷⁷ He also proposed organizing pastoral visiting so that the area covered by the church would be divided into districts, with visitors appointed for each, advising the pastor of any need for pastoral follow-up.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

This would actually 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'.⁸⁰ Stovel may have been influenced by Maze Pond where he was a member while he trained at Stepney Academy.⁸¹

Three decades later, Joseph Angus, Principal of Regent's Park College, also argued that churches were voluntary associations of men as equals⁸². He saw 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'.⁸³ Like Stovel⁸⁴ he recognized that there were secular as well as

spiritual matters that needed 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...⁸⁵

But Angus was 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.'⁸⁶

For Angus, the key was to act under the Lordship of Christ who transformed anarchy, tyranny, and strife into 'the noblest form of social life'.⁸⁷ In an earlier work he had recognized the dangers of 'the tyranny of deacons, of the democratic tendencies of churches, and of the consequent discouragements and degradation of the ministry'.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹

He recognized 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 organization. They recognized the dangers of the voluntary system, but the procedural method of conducting meetings seemed 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.⁹⁰ 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; 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; the different methods of voting; 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’). The writers assert:

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.⁹¹

Sadly, the detail and formality of the rules laid out in the book seem to indicate that such aspirations were not always met.

REASONS BEHIND THE SHIFT

There are a number of reasons for these changes during the nineteenth century. Firstly, there was a reduction in church discipline matters being discussed at church meetings. J.B. Whitely observed that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, church books contained only the most general description of disciplinary cases. He attributes this to a sense of decorum.⁹² It is reasonable to deduce that this may also have contributed to their disappearance from church 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 sick⁹³ than to 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 seventeenth century was due to their members being mainly men of little education and thus inadequate in coping with the ‘smooth organisation of social groups’.⁹⁴ This was not the only reason for the prominence of discipline, but 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.⁹⁵ 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 without minutes documenting their actions'.⁹⁶ 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 recognized 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.⁹⁷ They wrote, 'Discipline is one of the most august, as it is one of the least welcome of the functions of the Church'.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹

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'.¹⁰⁰ Growth in numbers meant more business had to be conducted. Not only were churches having to deal with more property and equipment matters, but also relationships with other churches and organizations. 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'.¹⁰¹ For Ward, 'the Sunday School open to all rather than the covenanted meeting of baptized saints was the sign of the times'.¹⁰² 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 society, set energetically to the

all important task of extending the kingdom'.¹⁰³ However, this cannot fully explain the changes. Baptist churches had always been aware of the Great Commission!

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, referring to evangelical Calvinist Dissent, 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'.¹⁰⁴ 'Baptists', notes Brackney, 'started nothing less than twenty societies in the thirty years following the establishment of an overseas organization'.¹⁰⁵ Lovegrove attributes this primarily to 'a renewed interest in evangelism',¹⁰⁶ as well as 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.¹⁰⁷

By the nineteenth 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 voluntaryist view of church essentially reflected society and played down the 'crucial fact of divine institution'.¹⁰⁸

Similarly, Nigel Wright argues that the 'charismatic-organic community determined by the leading of Scripture' is replaced by 'an organisational-institutional syndicate determined by the legal criteria of society' during the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰

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

CONCLUSION

Baptist churches had changed dramatically by the end of the nineteenth century. Church life and organization 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 situation did not change much over the next century. Fred Bacon's 1992 manual for church meetings¹¹³ is merely a development of what emerged in the nineteenth century and has striking similarities to Wood and Chick's manual.

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 evangelize. This may well involve a variety of activities and approaches necessitating decisions and organization. Increasingly the idea that the only way of doing this is by using a business-model of church meeting is being challenged, and some of the challengers urge a return to the essence of covenant community.¹¹⁴

- 1 Malcolm J Egner, *Re-imagining the Covenant Community*, MTh Dissertation, Spurgeon's College, ch 2.
- 2 Stephen Gaukroger, 'Renewing the Church Meeting' in *Mainstream* 26, (1987), p5.
- 3 Barrie White, 'The Practice of Association' in Slater, David (ed.), *A Perspective on Baptist Identity*, (Mainstream, 1987), p25.
- 4 Fred Bacon, *Making the Most of the Church Meeting*, (London: Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1984), p29.
- 5 For this trend (and others) I have examined the church meeting minutes 1800, 1825, 1850, 1875 and 1900, for the following churches: 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. All these church books are currently located in the Angus Library at Regent's Park College, Oxford.
- 6 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]
- 7 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].
- 8 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].
- 9 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'.
- 10 Kingsgate Street, formerly Eagle Street, 7 and 19 April 1875, 10, 26 and 27 May 1875, etc. Messengers, in this instance, visited and interviewed prospective members and then reported back to the church meeting.
- 11 Maze Pond, 24 March 1800 – for example.
- 12 *Ibid*, 21 April 1800.
- 13 4 May 1800; reported at the meeting on 19 May 1800. *ibid*, 19 May 1800.
- 14 Bourton, 21 Feb 1875.
- 15 *Ibid*, 28 March 1875.
- 16 Maze Pond, 7 April – 22 Aug 1825.
- 17 Minutes of Church Meeting, Blackburn Road Baptist Church, Accrington, 28 Nov 1850.
- 18 Abingdon, Marlowes and Eagle Street by 1850, Blackburn Road, Accrington, by 1875 [See Note 5].
- 19 Cannon Street (Accrington, formerly Blackburn Road), Marlowes and Kingsgate Street (formerly Eagle Street) by 1875; Abingdon and Brown Street, Salisbury, by 1900 [See Note 5].
- 20 By 1850 at Marlowes and Eagle Street; by 1900 at Abingdon [See Note 5].
- 21 My italics.
- 22 Maze Pond, 18 April 1825.
- 23 *ibid*, 24 April 1825.
- 24 *ibid*, 27 June 1825.
- 25 *ibid*, 10 July 1825.
- 26 *ibid*, 11 July 1825.
- 27 *ibid*, 14 July 1825.
- 28 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.
- 29 Maze Pond.
- 30 Cannon Street Baptist Church, Accrington, 4 Feb 1900.
- 31 Maze Pond, 28 Jan 1875.
- 32 Bourton, 14 Nov 1900; Cannon Street, 4 Feb 1900; Maze Pond, 25 Jan 1900.
- 33 Maze Pond, 25 Jan 1900.
- 34 Bourton, 14 Nov 1900.
- 35 Marlowes, 6 July 1850.
- 36 *ibid*, 30 Dec 1850.
- 37 Eagle Street, 2 Jan 1800.

- 38 *Ibid*, 1 Dec 1825.
- 39 Minutes of Church Meeting, Brown Street Baptist Church, Salisbury, 1 May 1832.
- 40 Maze Pond, 19 Nov 1900.
- 41 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'. [Brown Street, 1832 and 1850]
- 42 *Ibid*, 1900.
- 43 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' [Eagle Street, 29 Sept 1825].
- 44 Marlowes, 1 April 1875.
- 45 Bourton, 30 Nov 1875.
- 46 *ibid*, 14 Nov 1900.
- 47 Abingdon, 4 May and 1 June 1875. Presumably the word 'notice' has been omitted.
- 48 Brown Street, Salisbury, 3 March 1875.
- 49 *ibid*, 1 April 1875.
- 50 *ibid*, 2 June 1875.
- 51 *ibid*.
- 52 *ibid*, 16 June 1875.
- 53 *ibid*, 23 June 1875.
- 54 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.
- 55 Marlowes, 1 Feb, 1 & 7 March, 5 April 1850.
- 56 Blackburn Road, Accrington, 31 Oct 1850.
- 57 On the sale of property [Cannon Street, 24 Feb 1875]; on communion wine [21 July 1875]; and all three items at one particular meeting [26 June 1900].
- 58 *ibid*, 21 July 1875.
- 59 *ibid*, 24 Nov 1875.
- 60 See, for example, Maze Pond, 19 April 1875 and 17 Dec 1900.
- 61 Abingdon, 16 May 1900.
- 62 *ibid*, 30 May 1900.
- 63 Bourton, 31 Dec 1802.
- 64 James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation*, (Ontario: Herald Press, 1991), 35.
- 65 *ibid*, 31.
- 66 J. Fawcett, *The Constitution and Order of a Gospel Church Considered*, (Halifax, 1797), 12.
- 67 *ibid*, 25.
- 68 *ibid*, 51.
- 69 *ibid*, 52.
- 70 *ibid*, 53.
- 71 Revd C. Stovel, *Hints on the Regulation of Christian Churches*, (London: Jackson and Walford, 1835), 1.
- 72 *ibid*, 29-32.
- 73 *ibid*, 164.
- 74 *ibid*, 165.
- 75 *ibid*.
- 76 *ibid*, 165-6.
- 77 *ibid*, 168.
- 78 *ibid*, 169-70.
- 79 *ibid*, 171.
- 80 *ibid*, 172.
- 81 In membership 1823-1826 [Minutes, Maze Pond, 30 Oct / 2 Nov 1823 and 10 Sept 1826].
- 82 Angus, *Christian Churches*, 17 & 8.
- 83 *ibid*, 45.
- 84 Stovel, *Hints*, 34f.
- 85 Angus, *Christian Churches*, 67.
- 86 *ibid*, 76.
- 87 *ibid*.
- 88 Angus, Joseph, *The Voluntary System*, (London: Jackson and Walford, 1839), 196.
- 89 *ibid*, 197.
- 90 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.
- 91 *ibid*, 39.
- 92 J.B. Whiteley, 'Church Discipline in the Loughwood Records', *BQ XXXI*, (1986), 294.
- 93 As, for example, the reports from 'Sick Visitors' in Minutes, Marlowes, April-Dec 1850. Eagle Street celebrated the jubilee of