

## **DISSENT IN THE CHURCH MEETING**

*Baptist Times* 9 December 2004

For Baptists the church meeting is the occasion when we seek to discover God's pattern for our life together. In this seeking of the mind of Christ a bare majority is never sufficient. We look for consensus. However, consensus does not necessitate unanimity. For although, ideally, when God is guiding one, he will be guiding all, in practice the receiving of guidance is not that simple. As a result there are occasions when there are some who see things differently.

The question then arises: What do we do if we see things differently? What are the options open to us if, after having conscientiously sought the mind of Christ, we find ourselves in the minority on a particular issue?

The first option is to accept the decision of the church meeting as an expression of God's will. From a theological perspective God speaks not just through those who have contributed to the discussion in the church meeting, but also in the actual decision that members have prayerfully made. In church meetings we come together in the name of Jesus, and when we do so, he has promised to be present (Matt 18.20). To oppose the decision of a church meeting can be tantamount to opposing the Lord Jesus himself. The fact is that none of us has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. All of us are fallible. At the time we may well have believed we were right, but on reflection we realise that perhaps we were wrong.

Alternatively, although we may still see the strength of our original position, we are prepared to recognise that the majority of our brothers and sisters have seen things otherwise, and so we accept the decision of the majority and move forward accordingly. In theological terms, the church has tested the spirits (see 1 John 4.1) and the church has been led to make its decision. Who are we to quarrel with the leading of the Spirit?

Just occasionally, however, the situation may arise when in all conscience we struggle to accept the decision of the church meeting. Although God appears to have spoken clearly to his church as a whole, we ourselves find it impossible to hear him speaking in the decision that has been made. What then are we to do?

One possible way forward is to follow the example of Gamaliel. For although Gamaliel in all conscience could not respond positively to the preaching of Peter and John, he strongly advised his fellow Jews not to oppose the new preaching. Instead, he told them to wait and see: "If what they have planned and done is of human origin, it will disappear, but if it comes from God, you cannot possibly defeat them. You could find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5.38,39).

But what if we cannot accept the Gamaliel option? Then, sadly, the only option left is surely to leave the church and find another church whose direction we can more happily accept. The fact is that a parting of the ways (see Acts 15.36-39) is always preferable to in-fighting in the church.

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