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THE CHURCH MEETING

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At the annual lecture of the Congregational Historical Society, delivered on May 12th 1970 on the subject 'The Survival of the Church Meeting 1691', John H.Taylor began by saying "For more than seventy years these lectures have come and gone and this year we begin the 21st volume of Transactions (the Journal of the C.H.S), yet in all that time there has never been a contribution on the church meeting."¹ Considering the centrality of the Church Meeting to Congregationalism this is an astonishing fact. In 1952 the Life and Work Department of the Congregational Union of England and Wales

published a pamphlet entitled 'The Church Meeting' which states, "Nothing is more distinctive of Congregationalism. Nothing can take its place. For us the Church Meeting is vital"² and again "... if Congregationalism is to survive and if it is to make the contribution it should to the whole Church of Christ, the Church Meeting must come into its own".³ Yet for the past 150 years there has been no significant work of scholarship on the Church Meeting and even the popular booklet has appeared but spasmodically.

Those of us who have been brought up in Congregationalism are not surprised. For example, in 1871, R.W.Dale of Carr's Lane, Birmingham, spoke of Church Meetings as "meetings for the transaction of formal business in which no rational man can feel any intense interest."⁴ The above mentioned pamphlet, 'The Church Meeting' laments "Yet, as all of us know, it is often poorly attended and sadly ineffectual. Many of our members, otherwise splendidly loyal in their support of the church, regard the Church Meeting as dull and unimportant. They rarely attend, unless some special business has to be done. Some never attend. One result is that new members are quickly discouraged. They too stay away. We are caught in a vicious circle."⁵

In our own day the Church Meeting has certainly fallen from grace; in fact in many instances it has become a disgrace. In some cases it is only a business meeting or a debating society. Occasionally it resembles a political assembly and not infrequently a boxing match. Often those who never attend a Bible Study or a Prayer Meeting make a point of never missing it and taking part in it.

The question is, "Can anything be done to restore the Church Meeting to its original spiritual position?" Dale was critical of the Church Meeting in 1871, but in 1886 he delivered an address to a Joint Assembly of the Baptist and Congregational Unions in which he spoke ecstatically of it: "and so, to be at a Church Meeting - apart from any prayer that is offered, any hymn that is sung, any words that are spoken, is for me one of the chief means of grace. To know that I am surrounded by men and women who dwell in God, who have received the Holy Ghost, with whom I am to share eternal righteousness and eternal rapture of the great life to come, this is blessedness. I breathe a diviner air." Can the Church Meeting become again "one of the chief means of grace"? In order to answer

that question we must know what position it has held in Congregationalism.

The Church Meeting as Independents know it, as a special meeting, held monthly or quarterly, was not in the minds of the founders of Congregationalism. The Church Meeting as we know it was part of a gathering of the Church. Our forefathers thought much more in terms of a meeting of the church than of a Church Meeting. At Rothwell, in Northamptonshire, business meetings of the church were held on the Sabbath. This was also true of Nightingale Lane Church, London and John Cotton's congregation in New England. We know that at Castle Gate Congregational Church, Nottingham, there were quarterly Church Meetings until 1843 when they became monthly, and that such meetings were held "after public worship on the Wednesday evening before the first Sabbath of the month." ⁶ At Bury Street, in Isaac Watts' time, they were held on a Friday: "on the Friday in the afternoon, before the Lord's Supper there is generally a sermon preached on some evangelical subject, and if any church affairs require it, as the admission, the dismissal or the seclusion of any members, or any other matter of importance that relates to the spiritual or temporal concerns of the church, the members are desired to tarry a little for that purpose." ⁷

Church Meetings as such were part of the meeting of the church for prayer, preaching, worship and the Lord's Supper and all business was conducted in a spiritual context. Consequently, the modern distinction between spiritual and business meetings is meaningless.

We need to raise the spiritual tone of our Church Meetings. They should begin with a short act of worship which should then pervade the whole meeting. Some churches have made a point, for example, when missionary matters are being discussed, of concluding with a time of congregational prayer for the blessing of God on the preaching of the Gospel world-wide. At almost any point on the agenda of a Church Meeting prayer can be called for and if it cannot the matter has no right to be on the agenda.

How did the founders of Congregationalism see the future of the Church Meeting? "A church", writes Isaac Chauncey, "is impowered by commission from Christ to choose its own ministerial officers, and if they are one or more belonging to other churches, or non-

members, they can receive them members. Likewise they can admit other members that desire to join them. Lastly it has power to admonish or reject any scandalous or any offending member and that before such a church has Elders or Deacons. These are plain from the nature of a body corporate."⁸ Election of officers, reception and excommunication of members were the main concerns of the "meeting church". Such matters, Chauncey affirms, should be dealt with "by the hands of the Brethren; for though each sister is a true member of this corporation and accordingly upon that ground should vote, yet Christ having made a particular exception upon that account that women may not speak or exercise authority in the church, therefore whatever passeth in the Church by the majority of the Brethren is a church act, so that it be done in a congregation, the sisters present, otherwise it is no Church Meeting."⁹

John H. Taylor in his article on the Church Meeting notes that up until 1872 women were not allowed to vote at Carr's Lane Congregational Church, Birmingham, and that in fact the men sat on the right and the women on the left hand of the chair. I believe that our own Church Meetings would greatly benefit if in fact men took a more leading role. This is not a popular thing to say in a feminist age, but as we are not to be governed by the spirit of the age it needs to be said. In a husband and wife partnership where only one can be present at a Church Meeting, it should always be the husband.

Regarding the admission of members Chauncey writes that after a candidate has been examined by the pastor or elders "he is in a Church Meeting to be propounded to the Church and a competent time (should be) allotted to the Church for converse with the said person and enquiry after his Christian deportment, that all the members of the congregation may be satisfied in a person whom they admit to so holy a communion with them, which time being expired and nothing objected against the said person, the elders bring him before the Church to give the reasons of his hope either by word of mouth or by writing (if bashfulness hinders him or her from speaking)."¹⁰

We need to observe the closeness and warmth of those early fellowships' "so holy a communion". The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658, says "In the carrying on of church-administrations, no person ought to be added to the church but by the consent of the

church itself; that so love (without dissimulation) may be preserved between all the members thereof." ¹¹ The preservation of love was, and is still important. The Congregational Church at Ipswich formed in 1686 bound themselves together in the form of a covenant (signed by the seventeen who formed the church) and "related to each other what God had done for their souls, embodied together as a Church of Christ, giving themselves to the Lord and to one another to work together as a Church of Christ in all God's holy ordinances according to the rules of the Gospel, to the glory of God and their mutual edification and love." The church formed at Woodbridge in 1651 made a similar covenant: "We freely and cheerfully give up ourselves to the other to become one lump and stick in the Lord's hand and will, the Lord assisting us, submit ourselves to one another in the fear of God, watch over one another, bear one another's burdens taking the same care one for another and doing all things becoming those of the same body and whose heart is one and way is one in the Lord."

We need to remember the words of P.I.Forsyth that salvation is personal, but not individual. We are saved into the community of the local church and as such we have both the responsibility and the privilege of caring for each other. The Church Meeting ought to be one of the places where such care is demonstrated.

The admission of members into the fellowship of the local church was always a happy but serious matter. Take the church at Manchester under William Roby, one of the "fathers and founders" of the London Missionary Society. Dr Gordon Robinson in his life of Roby writes, "Much of the life of the church centred in the Church Meeting held regularly at monthly intervals ... New members, especially those who came on profession of faith were proposed for membership at the Church Meetings and were then visited by two deacons, or other persons, appointed by the church. After this visit, candidates appeared before the Church Meeting and read a written statement of their religious experience and of their desire to be united to the church." ¹² There is a good example of this method belonging to the period of the ministry in Grosvenor Street, preserved in the pamphlet "The Converted Atheist", published by Roby in 1820, which gives the statement presented in 1817 by a "reclaimed infidel" who was a candidate for membership ... Not all the statements of candidates can have been as full and eventful as this, and sometimes candidates were hard put to it to express themselves. But the statement was

insisted upon, and after the vote of the Church Meeting had been taken, and if "the evidences of his religious character and experience" were considered satisfactory, the new member was admitted to the fellowship".¹³

Baptists make use of the service of Believer's Baptism to encourage the giving of testimonies. Would it be enriching to Congregational churches if prospective members were encouraged to give testimonies at the Church Meeting?

Regarding discipline the "Savoy Declaration" has this to say, "Every church hath power in itself to exercise and execute all those censures appointed by him (the Lord Jesus Christ) in the way and order prescribed in the gospel. The censures so appointed by Christ are admonition and excommunication ... in the case of non-amendment upon private admonition, the offence being related to the church, and the offender not manifesting his repentance, he is to be duly admonished in the name of Christ by the whole church, by the ministry of the elders of the church, and if this censure prevail not for his repentance, then he is to be cast out by excommunication with the consent of the church."¹⁴

We can see this illustrated in 1776 at Castle Gate Congregational Church, Nottingham: "A still more interesting case is that of a woman who made very serious charges against a fellow member of the church. She, however, declined to attend a meeting of the Church to substantiate or retract the charges. A deputation was appointed to go and hear the charges in presence of the accused. She declined to receive the deputation. This was taken as proof that she had been guilty of making accusations which she was unable to confirm and would not retract, and she was separated from the Church." A letter was sent to her in which was written, "No one can be continued in any society who refuses to submit to its discipline and its rulers of government. The Church has thought it its duty to separate you from its communion and prays that you may be convinced that you have sinned and that you may be led to exercise true and sincere repentance."¹⁵ The woman, in this case, was restored to the Church eight years later.

At Rothwell, under the ministry of Richard Davis, discipline was very severe. The records give the following cases:

"Richard Gam for injustice about hiring a horse.
Bridget Rowlett for sloth in business.
Sarah Kirk for idleness and rebellion against her parents.
Sister Hollick for her pride.
John Cussens for threatening to knock his brother's brains out.
Brother Campion for professing love to a sister, when engaged to another."

Of Roby's church at Manchester, Dr Robinson writes, "Great care was to be taken to avoid uncharitableness, censoriousness and provocation, so that 'it may evidently appear that (the Church) hath no other aim but the glory of God and the good of the brother reproved'. If there was no amendment by the offender, the Church Meeting specially called proceeded to censure him or to cut him off. But first the pastor prayed for 'a blessing on the ordinance' (of discipline), confessed the offender's sin, spoke on the gravity of the offence, and then put the question. Henceforward the offender was 'to be reckoned amongst the ungodly, and his conversation to be avoided so far as it may be without any violation of natural or civil bonds ...' When a member was to be suspended Roby addressed the church as its pastor and reminded them that one of the duties incumbent upon members was to watch over each other, to warn the unruly and to put away those who 'walked disorderly'. However painful the process it must be attended with partiality. This must be done, he continued, for the glory of God (who would be dishonoured by its neglect), for the safety and prosperity of the church and for the good of disorderly brethren ... When a suspended or excluded member was received back again, it was Roby's custom (as indeed it was the custom of all Independent ministers) to hear a statement from the offender and then, after the vote had been taken, to address the church to which the offender was now reunited. He used the opportunity to 'improve' the occasion and to reflect on human liability to sin, on the sad effects of sin and declension in religion, on the faithfulness of God and the gratitude men owe Him for forgiveness and restoration, and on the human need of dependence upon God and of prayer." ¹⁶

There is nothing that is more likely to show up the true spiritual state of our Congregational churches than the question of discipline. Let a pastor try to execute discipline and he will quickly discover, I suspect, that his normally docile, loving fellowship

will show marks of pride, arrogance and self-righteousness. I have always held to the view that the true spiritual state of our churches is not to be gauged by either public worship or prayer meetings, but by the Church Meeting. What we are there, and how we behave there, is the true test of our spiritual state.

Nothing shows up the desperate need for revival more than the present state of Church Meetings, and while we can do much to restore the Church Meeting to its former spiritual state, our labours will not be attended with a great degree of success unless we beseech God in His grace and mercy to pour out His Spirit upon our languishing fellowships. May God soon bring us to the place where with R.W.Dale we can say in all honesty that the Church Meeting is where we "breathe a diviner air".

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