

Advice on Being a Church Delegate at QB Assemblies

A Discussion Paper by John Sweetman

Baptist Decision-Making

Baptists believe that God's will for the local church is made clear in major decisions by the Holy Spirit's leading of the church members. This is called congregational governance.

Congregational government is based on the theological premise that every member of the church is part of the priesthood, with no need for an intermediary, and therefore able to discern God's will and speak on his behalf. Baptists believe that God doesn't only speak through ordained leaders. All members are free and competent to study the Scriptures and interpret their application – both for themselves and for the church. So major decisions are best made by the members together discerning God's will.

In QB churches, this discerning of God's will is usually done through a vote of the members. A vote is a convenient way to make decisions when differing opinions are held, but consensus is always preferable.

The Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) was convened to discern whether circumcision should be demanded of Gentile believers. This is probably biblically closest to our Baptist decision-making process. The leaders discussed the issue first (15:6). Then the whole assembly was involved in the discernment process (15:12). Although it appears that James (the leader of the Jerusalem church) made the final judgment (15:19), the assembly must have been in agreement with this. In communicating the decision to the Gentile believers, the leaders were able to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15:28).

A Dilemma for Assembly Delegates

The QB Movement tries to reflect this decision-making process through member churches appointing delegates who come together in an Assembly to make the major decisions (e.g. discerning our polity, appointing leaders, deciding on vision and values, working through controversial theological issues) for the Movement. Registered QB ministers and some QB Movement leaders are also independently members of the Assembly, but this paper is about the role of church delegates.

You see there is a major question for church-appointed Assembly delegates. Is the Assembly an assembly of churches (represented by delegates) or is it an assembly of trusted, church-appointed members who can discern God's will together by listening to God's Spirit (as occurs in church members' meetings)? The answer to this question has significant implications for the role of delegates.

If it is an Assembly of churches represented by delegates, then delegates need to be careful to know and represent the views of their church, not their own personal perspectives.

If it is an Assembly of Spirit-led members trusted by their churches, then delegates need to listen carefully to the leaders of the Movement and the discussion that ensues on an issue, and indicate their own decision on what they sense God's Spirit is saying.

Advice from the QB Constitution

There are a few statements in the QB Constitution that may pertain to this dilemma.

5.1 “The Members of the Union (QB) are Churches, Ministers and other individuals and bodies who are admitted as Members...”

The members of QB consist of some bodies (e.g. churches) and some individuals (e.g. registered ministers). Delegates to Assembly are not members of QB in their own right so they have some responsibility to represent their church which is a member.

6.4(a) “Each Church is entitled to appoint delegates who are Members of Assembly as follows...”

While delegates are not members of QB, they are members of the QB Assembly. As individual members, they have some responsibility to voice their own opinions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

A Way Forward

If this dilemma is not completely resolved by Scripture or our QB Constitution, we are free to discern a possible way forward that aligns with our theology and practice.

Churches need to be able to give some direction to QB through their delegates. They are members of QB and therefore their voice needs to be heard at Assembly. This direction would normally come via a decision of the church members (our Baptist way of discerning God’s will), but on more minor issues may also come through a formal decision of the church leadership. This direction would be relayed to the Assembly through the church delegates who would speak and vote on behalf of their church.

But delegates coming with fixed positions to an Assembly inhibits the Assembly’s ability to discuss and discern God’s will as a body. If the those assembled at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) were locked into representing their constituents’ positions, they would have had no freedom to listen to Paul and Barnabas or James, and may well have arrived at a very different decision. Discerning the leading of God’s Spirit in the Assembly is foundational to our Baptist decision-making process.

So while churches must be able to instruct their delegates to represent a church-made opinion, by far the majority of the time, it is best for churches to appoint godly, wise, mature delegates who understand their church and who are trusted to discern God’s will through the Assembly meeting.

Instructions on Being a Church Delegate at a QB Assembly

1. Find out what business and other matters are on the agenda. Agendas, reports and other relevant papers are always issued prior to each Assembly meeting and distributed to Assembly members. Read the reports and preliminary papers carefully and prayerfully.
2. Find out whether your church has made a decision on any of the issues being discussed at the Assembly. This would normally be through a Church Meeting or a formal meeting of the church leaders. Your pastor’s opinion would not usually be in this category. If the church has made a decision, as a church delegate you are obligated to speak and vote in keeping with this decision.

3. If needed, seek out the opinions of those you trust who may know more about the background to the issues being raised. Your pastor's opinion would normally be in this category. You are not bound by these opinions, but they will inform your discernment of God's will.
4. Come to the Assembly with a heart to listen to the Spirit and carefully weigh up what is said and how it is said. Particularly take into account the views of leaders in the QB Movement that you know and trust. Ask questions or participate in the discussion as appropriate.
5. Unless you have been instructed by your church, vote according to what you sense God's Spirit is saying to the QB Movement.
6. Ensure that the decisions and developments of the Assembly are reported back to your church.