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## WHY YOU MUST SPEAK UP

Abuse of power is a hot topic these days. And church leaders are able to misuse their authority just as much as anyone else. We believe 'all have sinned and fall short...'

**Comment**

John Benton

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In the congregational form of church government (see Matthew 18.15-20), the church meeting acts as the final court of appeal. The elders, or leaders, have a certain authority in the church (Heb. 13.17), but it is an authority subject to the word of God and to the church. Hence it is the gathered church which appoints elders and to whom they must answer if they go astray (1 Tim. 5.19, 20). So the church meeting provides a mechanism for checking and balancing the leadership's power. It is, I suppose, similar to the House of Lords, which can return Parliamentary Bills to the Commons with the message to 'think again'.

In a climate which is now extremely sensitive to the misuse of power, the church meeting needs to be healthy and strong – not simply an exercise in 'rubber stamping'. Other forms of church government do have checks and

balances, but congregationalism enables a church to self-correct and to do so speedily – which is a blessing. For good church

government therefore, members must be people who feel able to speak up and express their thoughts. This requires a loving atmosphere. We need churches in which people can voice different points of view (on non-essentials) and yet agree to disagree without recriminations.

## What goes wrong?

Healthy discussion in the church meeting is often absent these days. Why is that?

First, it can arise from a good motive. Perhaps the church has known a period of blessing under the leadership – praise God – and there is a genuine desire on the part of members not to disturb that. But the trouble is that it can easily spill over into keeping quiet even when members know that things aren't right.

Second, it can arise when members are simply a group of shy people and the leadership has never, gently but persistently, encouraged them to take responsibility and contribute to a church meeting. Maybe the leadership simply feel that if they don't drive the meeting nothing will ever get done.

Third, silence reigns when members are too busy elsewhere, and just want to get meetings over with and get home.

Fourth, silence can arise through a mistaken view of spirituality which brings fear. To raise a question is not the same as being a grumbler. To raise a question is not to threaten the unity of the church. To raise a question is not to be disloyal to the leadership – it may actually come from a desire to help them.

Fifth, silence can prevail because of unhelpful church members who just love the opportunity to sound off belligerently at the leadership (much to everyone's unhappiness). And so, sadly, anyone with questions fears being tarred with the same brush – troublemaker.

Sixth, of course, and most importantly, it can arise from the pride and 'micro-management mindset' of an eldership which feels they must control the church rather than nurture it. They are a leadership which needs to be seen to be 'right' all the time or else they think their authority is undermined. They find means to censor or manipulate what can and can't be said at the meeting.

In all these ways we really have the church being silenced and that can turn into a low-level form of spiritual abuse. In such a situation ostracism is often the result of challenging anything.

## The red box

Actually, the deafening silence robs a church. We learn through having our ideas or the way we do things challenged. Even secular companies have the sense to see this.

The Toyota car company in Japan, being concerned for continual improvement, painted a red box on the assembly line floor. It was a safe zone, where you were free to say what you felt needed saying without any comeback. Employees, especially new ones, were encouraged to stand in the box and make criticisms of what happened in the factory. This was a key part of Toyota's success.

Is there any mechanism like that for your church? The members' meeting ought to be something of a red box.

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