

## **2026 TALK, 5.7.26 - EPHESIANS 4:1-13 & ACTS 11:19-30**

### **BEING DETERMINED & DETERMINING TOGETHER**

Today we start a short series on 'Baptist basics'. What we might call: 'The particulars of a peculiar people'. This is an attempt to help us understand what it means to belong to a Baptist church. Over the next three Sundays, we will identify some of the core principles which make Baptist churches distinctive. So today, we will consider the authority of the church meeting. Next week we will think about freedom (freedom of religion & freedom of conscience). And the week after that, when Peter & Louise Lynch, our BMS Mission Partners are with us, we will be thinking about faith-sharing & world mission. We may return to other 'Baptist distinctives' later in August or September.

But in thinking about these core Baptist principles, it's important to say that we are not claiming that this is the only, true way of being church. As Baptists have through our history, often championed freedom of religion, we celebrate the truth that there are many other churches & ways of being church. So, if we are true to our spiritual DNA at Carey, we should be strong supporters of ecumenism. Baptists should also support movements which seek to build up understanding between different world religions. That's not the same as saying that whatever you believe, it will bring you to the living God. It is simply about finding a Christ-like way of respecting that others are seeking God, as we are.

No doubt most of us know the joke about St Peter showing a believer around heaven. But it is worth repeating. St Peter takes his guest to a closed-off area of heaven, and the guest can hear particularly loud & enthusiastic singing coming from this area. But St Peter warns him to be quiet around there. He says: 'Shhh... They're the Baptists. They think they are the only ones here'... An exclusive attitude which Christians of all types should always guard against.

So, that's my brief introduction to this new series of talks about belonging to a Baptist church. And today, as I say, we are thinking of the authority of the church meeting. This might not sound like the most exciting place to start this series... But the Baptist church meeting is too often under-valued & misunderstood. The church meeting should indeed be central to being Baptist. We need to celebrate the church meeting much more than we do. And Carey (& most Baptist churches too) desperately need much better attended church

meetings, for them to function fully... Do you hear me?. So, I do hope & pray that our next Church Meeting on Wed 22<sup>nd</sup> July will be better attended...

But you might be wondering: where do we see a 'typical church meeting' described in Acts 11? (Let's look at Acts, before we turn to Ephesians). There are actually two church meetings mentioned here, in this passage in Acts. One in Jerusalem, which is completely glossed over. Then one later in Antioch, which thankfully has a bit more detail. The church meeting in Antioch features a word that is particularly significant for us in understanding the nature of church meetings. It's the word 'determined' in verse 29, which I am using instead of the word 'decided', which is used in our church Bibles. But this word doesn't carry quite the same weight as 'determined'. Now, I know that it is always dangerous to hang a sermon on one word, but that's exactly where I'm going to start. You see, this word 'determined' in the Greek, also means to be 'bound' to a particular course of action. It speaks of the Christian understanding of prayer: that wherever two or three agree, this is something which is bound both on earth & in heaven. It's been 'determined' as God's will.

Firstly, the believers in Jerusalem 'determined' to send Barnabas to Antioch, to research the reports about Gentiles coming to faith there. Then, the church in Antioch, responds to some words of prophecy, delivered to the group of believers there by a man called Agabus, with a recognised gift of prophecy. They agree together to send a gift to the church in Jerusalem, to help them through a time of famine. They further determine **how** they will send this gift. Via two messengers: Saul & Barnabas.

So, Acts 11 shows us that church meetings are a particular meeting for hearing from God & our fellow believers, where certain courses of action can together be prayed about & agreed upon. A coming together of bodies and minds which - through the discipline of listening & discerning God's Holy Spirit guidance - in order to lay out plans together for the church's future. So far, so simple eh?.

However, there is an important qualification here. Acts 11 shows examples, both of 'determining together', as well as some determined individuals taking particular decisions for themselves. As we know, not every decision needs to be referred to the church meeting. Certainly, the church in Jerusalem agree together to send Barnabas, to find out more about the church in Antioch - & presumably to report back to Jerusalem.

But what do we read, soon after he is encouraged by what he sees? Barnabas himself determines that he needs someone else to help him. So, he goes & finds Saul, who is not far from Antioch. The both of them stay in Antioch, teaching the people there for quite some time. Is this a case of Barnabas not following the instructions he was given by the church in Jerusalem? Much more likely a case of Barnabas being led by the Holy Spirit. Of Barnabas knowing that he can get clear & immediate instructions from Jesus, who is Head of His Body, the church. If he had to refer all his decisions back to Jerusalem, this whole process would have taken a very long time. Barnabas would not have been living by faith, but being ruled by a distant church meeting, which would not understand the particular situation he faced. This is 'spiritual devolution' in action! This is just like Baptists wanting to declare that each local church meeting has authority to 'determine' what God is saying to them. So, of course, Antioch start holding their own church meetings, instead of deferring in all things to Jerusalem.

We are not told exactly how they 'agree together'. No doubt this takes some time. This is 'slow wisdom' in action. Getting a growing sense of what is right, by listening to each other and by listening to God. By trusting God to guide & bless - and by trusting their fellow believers to do the right thing.

And Ephesians 4 helps us to more fully understand what it takes for God's people to make godly decisions in God's time. Let's look at three essential truths, needed for every church meeting, from this letter of Paul. We need 2 b:

- 1) Living Christ's grace
- 2) Celebrating Christ's glory
- 3) Sharing Christ's gifts

### **Living Christ's Grace**

How determined are we to be like Jesus? Paul talks here of 'humility, gentleness, patience'. Do your family see you like this? Perhaps more pointedly: is this how others would describe you? I can think of lots of other words people would use to describe me, both complimentary & not so complimentary. But I'm not sure these are the first three words which would come to people's minds. So, please don't follow my example! Follow the eg. of Jesus...

I'm reminded of the old story from an Abbey. One brother was found to have committed a particular sin. So, the priest of the Abbey got the brothers to agree to put him out of the Abbey. Straight afterwards, the Abbott got up & said: 'I too am a sinner' and followed the other brother through the exit...

It takes some determination (& more than just determination) to 'bear with each other in love'. Not to mention 'making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace'. Nowhere is this more challenging, at times, than during a church meeting, when difficult issues can come up & it seems impossible, at times, to reach agreement. But where is there a better training ground to develop our patience & gentleness & humility than our church meetings? Where better to learn to bear with each other in love? Where better than to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, through the bond of peace?

### **Celebrate Christ's glory**

Our Jesus descended to this world for us. He took on the nature of a servant and humbled himself to death on a cross. And now He is ascended to his rightful throne in glory! Jesus's glory now fills the heavens, the whole universe ! Alleluia! If we keep our crucified & glorified Jesus at the heart of all we do here, we will see God's glory fill our church & our church meetings too. Would that be something of a miracle to witness? Would you like to see this?

I have to confess, I can't think of many occasions in my ministry (both when I have been chairing the meetings & when other ministers have been chairing them) when a church meeting was filled with God's presence. But I can also say, from experience, that there is nothing quite like a church meeting coming to agreement over something, where previously there were strong disagreements. There is nothing like God's people coming to 'one mind' & determining to follow Jesus along a particular path.

### **Sharing Christ's gifts**

Christ has showered his various gifts upon His people... We are called to receive these gifts gratefully, from Christ's nail-pierced hand. And we are called to share these gifts with our fellow believers, with the church where we find ourselves. None of us are meant to claim particular gifts, but to develop the ones we are given. All of us find it hard to identify our particular gifting. That's partly because these gifts are best identified by others.

Each of us here has gifts & experience which will contribute something to our church meetings. So, when anyone is missing, the church meeting feels that lack. The more gifts we are each exercising the better. That way, as Paul puts it, 'the body of Christ can be built up'. That way we can 'grow in maturity & attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ'! What a vision for Carey. PTL!

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TIME OF SHARING? (Let's use some gifts now – share something encouraging to build up others here)