

DISCUSSING BAPTIST VALUES AND SAME SEX MARRIAGE WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH

The Taskforce has been asked to provide some help to churches in their preparation to have meetings to discuss these potentially difficult matters. This document is an attempt to do this.

We need to recognise that difficult discussions have been part of the life of churches since the New Testament era and throughout church history. Sometimes they have been done badly but at other times they have been done well, and there is no reason why we can't do them well if we have a sincere desire to do so, and we approach the task with earnest prayer.

In Acts 15:1-35 we have the record of a Christian gathering which did very well in discussing a contentious and critical issue. What can we learn from the Council of Jerusalem? Luke's record is not a blueprint for meeting procedure, but we can learn from it if we ask what was healthy about what they did. These things might well be inferred:

- The issue was not pushed aside but squarely faced (vv.1-2)
- Different views were expressed and heard (vv.4-12)
- The godly wisdom of a key leader was heard with respect (vv.13-21)
- The leading of the Holy Spirit was discerned in their proceedings (v.28)
- Their decision was both firm and compassionate (vv.24-29)
- Care was taken in communicating their decision (vv.22-23, 30-34)

Other relevant material is to be found in the letters of the New Testament. In Romans 14 Paul addresses differences of conviction among the Christians of Rome. There were those who valued freedom and opposed observing of sacred days and dietary restrictions, thinking of themselves as "strong" and those who disagreed with them as "weak". Paul rebuked them for looking down on their "weak" fellow Christians. But he also rebuked those who passed judgment on others, probably those who were less scrupulous than themselves. Paul urges the so-called strong Christians to value the welfare of the so-called weak, and he urges all of them to do what leads to peace and to building one another up.

In meetings involving controversial matters we need to act like this, seeking not to win an argument but to respect one another as we endeavour together to find God's way for us.

In 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 Paul offers guidance to Christians whose gatherings were not good places to be. This was not obviously because of differences of conviction, although these may have existed, but Paul's teaching is relevant to all gatherings, including those which address differences. He puts forward as basic principles the need to build one another up, rather than competing for attention, and the need for good order, since God is not a God of disorder but of peace. Furthermore, it is surely no accident that this passage follows shortly after Paul's exalting of love in Chapter 13.

But what about truth, you might want to say. It is helpful at this point to turn to 1 John. John warns those to whom he writes not to accept every claim to speak words given by the Spirit of God, but to test such claims. Specifically, he says that those who speak in line with the Spirit of God "acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2). So it is not the case that all opinions should be acceptable in the church. The core beliefs of Christian faith must be held in common.

Yet no one more strongly declares that love between Christians is essential than John. He goes so far as to declare that "whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8), and that "anyone who does not love his brother (or sister, surely), whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). Therefore, when we come together to discuss differences of conviction, we must seek earnestly to uphold the truths of the gospel, and we must never depart from love for one another.

How can we do this? Certainly it sometimes won't be easy. We will need the humility to admit that none of us is always right. We will need to endeavour earnestly to distinguish between clear essentials of the gospel and matters of importance where difference of conviction is nonetheless possible. We will need to pray for God's guidance, seeking to honour God by our decisions and by our manner of making them. We will need to commit ourselves to resisting the desire to win the argument, and to look consistently for God's way of truth and love.