# Baptist Basics

## 2 The Congregation

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The Christian Church is spread throughout the earth and the primary way in which people will encounter it is through local congregations (another word for 'church'). All over the world it is possible to find groups of Christians gathering in the name of Christ. They vary in size from tens of thousands to a mere handful. They will meet sometimes in the most beautiful and historic buildings the world possesses, and at other times in simple gatherings in people's homes. These congregations mean that the Christian Church is present in hundreds of thousands of neighbourhoods across the globe, making the Christian faith present and accessible to whoever is searching for faith and attracted to the Christian way. Through congregations, the universal Christian Church becomes the local church. They have the potential to contribute to the well-being of the wider society by supporting people and motivating them to seek the welfare of the whole community. Through the congregation, Christians are empowered to seek the common good. The congregation is a truly remarkable and unique phenomenon and is often the most diverse and enduring community presence in a society. It seems that it plays a fundamental part in the purposes of God for the world. The congregation is God's idea.

## The congregation in the New Testament

A large proportion of congregations in the New Testament were Baptist in conviction or very close to Baptists in what they believed. But over the two thousand years of Christian history all kinds of cultural and religious traditions have developed and been adopted by Christian churches. This means that church life can vary in practice from the highly elaborate and ritualistic to the most simple and unstructured of forms. Baptists have preferred more simple ways in the belief that the religion of the heart is what counts. With many others, Baptists have tended to refer back to the early church as described in the New Testament to find a pattern for church life. They have then used that pattern as a reference point for their own church life. The first Christian church ever to exist is described in the early chapters of the Book of Acts in the following terms:

So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptised, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:41-42).

These verses set out some of the essential ingredients of congregational life and they are worth describing as principles valid for all time. A congregation comes into being amongst people who believe the Christian message. This was being preached by Peter on the day of Pentecost and was an appeal to believe in Jesus Christ who had been raised from the dead, to turn from sin and be baptised. People declare themselves to be members of a Christian congregation when they are baptised 'in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven' and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to transform them inwardly (Acts 2:38). Having done this they devote themselves to the life of the local community of Christians, sharing in its worship and its relationships. They truly belong to each other and give themselves to the shared life of the community.

## New Testament patterns for church life

The Christian congregation has a number of things at its heart:

- *There is the 'apostles' teaching'.* The apostles were the witnesses to Christ's life and resurrection and occupied a unique position of authority in the early church. Because they had been with Jesus

from the beginning and were witnesses of the resurrection they were in a position to bear witness to Jesus, to pass on his teaching, to interpret the Old Testament in the light of Christ, and to develop a faithful interpretation of the Christian faith that was still in its infancy. In due time the apostles' teaching came to be identified with the writings now contained in our New Testament. When we read the New Testament we have access to what the apostles taught.

- *There is the 'fellowship'*, which means sharing together in the things of Christ and in mutual support. This even extended in the first church to the sharing of possessions so that nobody was left in need (Acts 2:44-45). This truly was an expression of community and there was an intense level of joy involved in belonging to it (Acts 2:46).
- *There is the 'breaking of bread'*. This could refer to the fact that these Christians ate together on a regular basis, giving and receiving hospitality. But it may also refer to the Christian practice of communion which in the early church took place within the context of a regular meal. These were later called 'agape' meals because they were expressions of Christian love.
- *There are the 'prayers'*. This could be a way of saying that these Christians prayed together, which they plainly did. It may also suggest that there was a regular rhythm of prayer along the lines of the Jewish synagogue, with which all of them were acquainted. At the heart of the church was a disciplined life of prayer.

We may say then, that a Christian congregation is a gathering of those who have turned to God in Christ, confessed this in baptism and devoted themselves as a priority to learning, sharing in fellowship, breaking bread together and prayer. When they do this they create a spiritual energy that is both attractive and transforming. It is no surprise to read about the first church that, 'Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles' (2:43) and that, 'day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47). Mission and evangelism[1] flow out of churches that are spiritually alive.

## The welcoming congregation

Christian congregations aim to be accessible to all people who are serious about their relationship with God. It is a fundamental aspect of the Christian faith that, unlike some other religions, it is not defined by race or ethnicity. It is

a truly international faith which includes people on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ and which invites people of all kinds and conditions to share in the benefits he brings. Christ creates a bond that is greater and stronger than the bonds of ethnic identity, gender and social status. In this sense the Christian faith is both radical, in that it contradicts standard human prejudices, and egalitarian, in that it affirms the fundamental equality of all people before God and in each other's eyes. This is what is meant by the apostle Paul when he writes, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). Christ is the common bond that supersedes any other and renders them of less importance. The first major council in the church is described for us in Acts 15. The divisive issue at stake was whether Gentiles needed to become Jews by being circumcised in order then to be true Christians. The decision was that the decisive qualification for entry into the church was faith in Jesus and the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:11, 19-20). Since that time it is clear that any attempt to reintroduce into the church, divisions based on ethnicity, gender or status are anti-Christian. They contradict the very nature of the church.

Congregations are called to be welcoming and hospitable to all who come to them. This is true of the welcome given to those searching for faith. It is also true of those who choose to become committed to the congregation as active church members. Participation in the life and government of the congregation is based upon spiritual gift, character and ability alone. In this way the congregation becomes a genuine sign of the kingdom of God in that it proclaims God's favour towards all those whom God has created. The Book of Revelation gives us a vision of the fullness of time and describes 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb' (Revelations 7:9). This inclusive, affirming vision is what inspires local congregations in their practice of Christian hospitality.

## Healthy congregations

Because the congregation plays such an important part in the purposes of God, the health of Christianity is intimately bound up with that of the local church. There has been much research as to what makes for a healthy congregation. The following signs of health are taken from Robert Warren, *The Healthy Churches' Handbook* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004)

and are worth reflecting upon carefully in each congregation. Churches thrive when they are:

- **Energised by faith:** It stands to reason that only where there is a strong spiritual core to a church is it likely to thrive. This spiritual heart is healthy where there is attention to scripture and to the sacraments of baptism and communion, allied to prayer and personal spiritual commitment. This reflects the life of the early church as described in Acts 2.
- **Outward-looking in their focus:** Churches which have become religious clubs, concerned only with those who are already members, are not likely to thrive as spiritual communities. Instead they need to be aware of the community around them and to find ways of serving it and pursuing its welfare.
- **Seeking to find out what God wants:** Congregations exist to serve the purposes of God and therefore need to devote time and attention to seeking to know and do the will of God. Without this they lose the sense of going somewhere and end up going nowhere.
- **Willing to face the cost of change:** Every congregation has a tendency to settle down into a way of life that is comfortable and undemanding. Religious organisations are particularly prone to develop traditions that they then are unwilling to dispense with or change. These can then obstruct the effectiveness of its mission. Churches which are unwilling to face the cost of change (and change can be painful) are likely to become more and more irrelevant to the world around.
- **Prepared to operate as a community:** The church is a community before it is an organisation. Although it does need to be organised, it is first and foremost a fellowship and a community where people discover and sustain life-giving relationships. This is a church's greatest strength. Often it is expressed through small groups where people can draw closer to each other.
- **Willing to make room for all:** This is in line with the kind of welcoming community a church is called to be. It is important to make room for newcomers and enquirers, of all ages. These people, as they are welcomed, will bring spiritual gifts that will help renew the life and mission of the congregation and serve people, both in and beyond the congregation.
- **Doing a few things and doing them well:** A church cannot do everything. If it attempted to, it would do nothing very well. Having

sought God's will, it needs to decide where to put its energies. There are some things that all churches do, such as worshipping, preaching and caring for others, and all of these need to be done attractively and well, as do the 'occasional' services suc as weddings and funerals. But each church will be given particular opportunities to serve and should do these to the limits of its ability.

## A congregation of congregations

It is worth remembering that each Baptist congregation is called to be part of a movement, expressed in Baptist circles first by Regional Associations of churches and then nationally by the Baptist Union of Great Britain. These connections exist for the mutual support and help they are able to give each other. The value of such structures is that they are able to help local congregations maintain a healthy spiritual life, stay focused on God and their mission and serve effectively in their neighbourhood. Christ is present not only in the local congregation but in the wider network of churches that confess him. This means that the local congregation can draw life, encouragement and resources from the larger network, and at the same time contribute what it has itself to offer. The unity of the whole Church is therefore something pleasing to God and beneficial for every congregation. Jesus prayed for his Church with the words, 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:20-21).

[1] For more information see Baptist Basics: Mission and Evangelism

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