



Taboo Taboos

Acts 10:1-24

Christmas is a time when you get to do all those things that you never do during the year and in my family parties that is group board games – and one of those is Taboo. It's a team game and what one person in the team has to do is get the team to guess a word without using taboo words to help them e.g. to try to get the team to guess the word Baptist without using the words denomination, church, baptism.

Taboo = forbidden. It is a word from the South Pacific: Taboo: Set apart or sacred by religious custom among certain races of Polynesia, New Zealand, etc., and forbidden to certain persons or uses; hence, prohibited under severe penalties; interdicted; as, food, places, words, customs, etc., may be taboo. (Webster).

It is not surprising that the origin of taboo is religious. All religions of the world have taboos – rules that forbid certain things and Christianity is no exception as we found out this morning. The problem arises when our taboos – or beliefs or practices – actually work against the word and works of God.

This story this evening is about that. Last week you will remember that we saw the way in which the church in Jerusalem had to start to entertain that Christianity was not Jewish, but that it was open to non-Jews and they were led to preach and teach in Samaria. The Samaritans weren't Jews, but at least they had tenuous links with Jewishness.

This week we see the next step as Peter is faced with something that brought him face to face about what was acceptable towards God. Gentiles could be saved. It started as usually with the Holy Spirit working in someone's life – the Roman Centurion, Cornelius who gets a vision of an angel. He prayed and got an answer!

Easy to understand for us, but Romans coming to Christ at that stage of the church was, well, taboo. It hadn't happened before and it was assumed such things didn't happen. It would not have been part of Peter's world view.

That's why Peter gets this vision of the sheet coming from heaven with all kinds of animals and birds in it and then he gets the command to eat. Eating unclean meat was taboo for Peter. He was a Jew. Meat had to be kosher and this lot certainly wasn't. But then there is the sentence: "Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean."

You'd have thought that Peter would have just said "Fine, Lord. Anything you say". But no. He got it three times and he was still left wondering after that.

I know this passage is one of those we quote for not following kosher laws but that wasn't the purpose of the vision as such. It was there to break Peter's personal prejudice down. It was a prejudice that Jews had developed and Judaism still has that as God's chosen people that they should take care not to defile themselves through contact with Goys – Gentiles. Gentiles were outside the orbit of God's grace and dealings. And that was Peter's position - as was the church in Jerusalem. Interestingly, while Peter was struggling first with Samaria and now Cornelius, a Gentile Church had already been established in Antioch!

The thing about this piece of belief Peter had was that it was unscriptural. Jewish rabbinic practice had added something that wasn't in the Old Testament. Look through the prophetic books and you'll see almost immediately that the Jews were meant to be the light to the Gentiles but even with the diaspora - the Jews were hardly a light to the Gentiles – just a handy source of business and they kept separate.

Right down the ages, we have often confused the customs and practices of church with the word of God. So as Baptists we say proudly how our faith is based on the word of God. Here it is, the final authority in all matters of faith and doctrine. Go to a Pentecostal Church and they will say the same. And the Brethren. In fact all mainline Protestant denomination and right the way through the new church movement.

If that's the case, then why do we have different doctrines and practices. Many of our core beliefs may be the same, but how come people with the same high view of scripture get to do things so differently.

Worse is that when you get to examine many of our practices, they don't have biblical origins.

And even worse, very often the aim of most of our mission is to try to get unbelievers to conform to them. We try to get them into services they find strange and even bewildering, to try to answer questions they're not asking in a way they can't understand.

Why? Because our mission is based around us and trying to make people conform to what we want. And we don't want to change because we sometimes think we are changing the unchangeable word of God. And that's not true. And we need to have a sheetfull of "unclean" things placed before us to help us to embrace the idea that doing different does not mean that we have to diminish God, the word of God, or the Good News – quite the reverse actually.

What sea change do we need to see:

A Change from Maintenance to Mission

I certainly heard it at my last church, very rarely at my previous one and a few times here. The words go something like this: "we need to get more people in" "let's invite people to church". A lot of our time and effort is for church events, church based activities, making best use of the fabric and facilities of the premises. In fact the church is equated with the premises and we do what we must to maintain the integrity of the premises. Most "traditional" evangelical churches follow this model. Occasionally mission works and people become Christians and grow in the faith. But that's the exception, not the rule.

But is it scriptural? No. What is the church? It's people, not premises. For the first 300 years of the church, there were no specialised church buildings in the way that Jews had synagogues. Because the church is people – a building on whose foundation is Christ. We are the body, He is the church.

Our forefathers actually had a better idea of this distinction because when the church was founded, it was illegal to call a dissenters meeting house a church. Baptists called their meeting houses just that, or followed the convention of calling their buildings a chapel. We started life as Walton Chapel.

The problem with the maintenance model is that it is inward looking. Everything is to further the buildings and the fellowship. It looks in, not out and when we look out, we see a clear separation of "us" as the church and "them" as the community. But is that the reality of what is actually happening?

What are we doing here? I can only see one purpose the church has here on earth – to bear witness to Christ – we are the evidence that He exists and the speakers of His message. We are the allotted way the Holy Spirit brings the Good News to people. Therefore we should be a missionary community – one exists to reach out and not look inwards.

I know that many people think that we should be a worshipping community. True we should. And what is the main purpose of worship – to give God of ourselves to express what He's worth. What's that? Our obedience. And His command – be my witnesses! You can't get away from it.

Mission is what we are. It's what we do. We are His witnesses. We are called to reach out. Why - not to fill the building, but to build the Kingdom – to bring men and women to Christ.

From Building-Focussed to People Focussed.

Peter had to start to embrace the idea that Jesus wasn't ushering a new version of Judaism in. He wasn't going to bring the kingdom back to Israel.

Acts 1:6 (TEV) When the apostles met together with Jesus, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time give the Kingdom back to Israel?" 7 Jesus said to them, "The times and occasions are set by my Father's own authority, and it is not for you to know when they will be. 8 But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Peter already had the notion that they were no longer to be Jew-focussed but go to the uttermost ends of the earth as witnesses. But he obviously hadn't got the plot even though between Jesus and the OT it was fairly obvious. They were going to be the fulfillment of the prophecies where the nations were going to be blessed and come into the orbit of God's grace.

It's the same for us. We are called to be His witnesses. Our faith is people centred, not building centred, or baptist centred. So lets turn it the other way. Rather than starting with lookig at what resources we have such as our buildings, or finances, or ministries and seeing how we can maintain them – let's have a look at the people God has brought into our orbit.

Church membership

Believers associated with the church

Friends of the church – not necessarily believers – who may feel they belong here even though they don't believe

Those who we minister to – Collimer Court, children's work

Those who are friends, family, workmates of the above who know something about us.

The community around the church

That's a lot of people. And the needs of each are quite different.

The problem is, one size does not fit all. They are all at different stages of the journey of faith. Most of the methods of reaching people we currently are just not going to reach them because we have little understanding of where they are with God. As a result, we we are trying to scratch where it doesn't itch.

You'll see what I mean by that in a minute. In many ways we are a traditional church. Most of our mission activities – and there are quite a few – are ones that have been used for a long time. Look in the history and you'll find that many of them are long standing. Most come form a time when church attendance was common. People knew about Jesus. They heard the Good News so often that bringing people to faith was usually via some evangelistic event – the seed having been sowed over a period to people with a background in the faith because everybody got it from a young age. Within parameters, a limited range of social and evangelistic activities sowed and reaped.

We live in an age where most people have little to do with Christians in their life – they are unchurched and their view of Christians isn't particularly good – although usually we are regarded as "mostly harmless". We struggle to make our old techniques work and we sometimes even find more innovative things difficult to deal with.

Over the next few weeks I'm going to try and take us through the Joppa roof of mission. To finish tonight I want to give you some homework. It's to study this piece of paper for next time. See if you can make it make sense! It's called Engel's scale named after a chap called James Engel who realised that to come to Christ and then grow as a Christian, it was a journey. Some people go through the journey quickly, some people go along in fits and bursts. Some people get stuck somewhere. When we encounter people, we do so at different stages of the journey. Where they are, their needs and what God is doing is different at each stage. What we say or do to them will have different impacts at each stage. An invitation to a Guest Service won't wash with someone on level -11, but what will is someone who comes alongside and befriended them and tries to fill the spiritual emptiness. Similarly, telling someone on level -9 will probably not respond to the gospel but may be interested in finding out that someone called Jesus exists.

What we've got to learn is how to reach people at each level and particularly to learn how to lead them through the levels until they find faith in Christ. That may not be something that lasts 20 minutes. Surveys show that the average adult takes up to 4 years to come to Christ from initial contact with Christians. The reason why it takes so long is that 30 years ago, we encountered people at -7 because of religious education and Sunday school. Now we encounter them at -11 or 12. They've got a long way to go. but with the help of the Holy Spirit and some know-how, we can walk with them and help them on what I call The Incredible Journey.

How that works is where we shall go in a fortnight's time.

At the end of his encounter with Cornelius, Peter's world was changed, but we know that it took him a while and a bit of personal struggle to make it a reality whilst another, Saul of Tarsus coped with it much better and it's Paul we shall look at next. Let's pray that we take on board where God is leading us – to His glory and the extension of His kingdom.

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The Modified Engel Scale

<u>The Dynamics of New Birth</u>			
Level	Description	God Is	Man's Task
-12	No God framework	Confirming	Prayer
-11	Experience of emptiness		Presence
-10	God framework	Revealing	
-9	Vague awareness and belief in God		
-8	Wondering if God can be known		Preparation
-7	Aware of Jesus	Guiding	
-6	Interested in Jesus		
-5	Experience of Christian love		Proclamation
-4	Aware of the basic facts of the gospel	Convicting	
-3	Aware of personal need		
-2	Grasp the implications of the gospel		Power
-1	Challenged to respond personally	Converting	
0	Repentance and faith		
+1	Holy Spirit and baptism	Transforming	Encouragement
+2	Functioning member of local Church	Empowering	
+3	Continuing growth in character, lifestyle and service		
+4	Part of Team Leadership		Support