

## Getting On The Same Page – Acts 11

### When people say “God told me...”

One of the occupational hazards of being the Pastor of a church is that on a fairly regular basis, you have to discern what God is saying when people come to you with what they believe is a word from the Lord. Sometimes it happens during a worship service, where someone believes the Spirit of God has given them a message for the congregation, and they want the microphone so they can deliver it right there and then. In almost every case, you have no idea what the person is going to say. Here’s an example. When I was Pastor of Central Baptist in Tauranga a guy I had never seen before asked to speak to the congregation during a church service. He told me he had a word from the Lord for the congregation. What he brought was a whole heap of condemnation, accusing our people of not caring for the nations of the world, especially the islands of the Pacific. I found that accusation astonishing, for more than 50 years that church had given hundreds of thousands of dollars to world mission, and had regularly sent people into mission, on both short term teams and long term service. In fact to encourage a mission worldview, we had a stylised map of the world on the wall, to remind people of the task of world mission. Afterwards I asked him how he was so sure it was a word from the Lord. He told me that when he looked at our stylised map of the world, and saw that all the tiny islands of the Pacific were not featured, he was sure that was what God wanted to say to us as a people.

### When people say “God told me about you...”

Sometimes it’s not for the church but it’s directed at the Pastor personally. In my last church I had a man who would regularly write down what God was saying to me through him. Most times it was several pages long. Here is a paragraph from one of them. *“Dear brother David. In the Spirit I have a message for you. Until now you have preached a light gospel where God’s power has been completely absent. From now on you have to preach the entire gospel, fearing God and not the church members. From now on God desires that there will be a revolution in your spirit and He will give you power as you will be obedient to Him. You are to stop preparing the teaching on Sundays in advance, and just stand up and trust that the Holy Spirit will fill your mouth as you speak.”* He used to make it very clear to me that if I didn’t do what that Lord was saying through him, I was being disobedient to the Lord. All too often, these so called “words from the Lord” leave people feeling crushed and discouraged. Often these messages are full of condemnation of the way things are, but contain the promise that if the message they are bringing is obeyed, revival will break out and the Lord will pour down his power on the church.

What do you do with this stuff? What do you do when someone says “God told me”. It’s not so bad when the “God told me” is for their life, but what about when the “God told me” is for someone else. I know a couple who got married because he came up to her and said “God told me I should marry you”, even though she had no feelings for him at all. The marriage has survived, but they both admit it hasn’t been easy.

### Peter – “God Told Me”

I’m raising these questions because the scripture we are looking at today in Acts 11 contains two “God told me” messages. Both of them were absolutely vital for the future of the church. With the benefit of hindsight, both of them were obviously words from the Lord. But the church didn’t know that then. They had to figure out if this was a genuine word from the Lord or not. Let’s take Peter’s one first.

***“The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ “I replied,***

***‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11: 1- 17 NIV)***

The implications of what Peter did in taking the gospel to non Jewish people was absolutely huge for the church then. It was a big deal. For up until then it was assumed that if you wanted to follow a Jewish Messiah called Jesus, you had to be Jewish. If God really had told Peter through this vision that he was to eat unclean foods with Gentiles, then all of the scriptures had to be understood in a different way. It meant that the existing followers of Jesus no longer could claim any special privileges. It meant that the existing disciples had to make way for a whole lot of people who didn’t have the God framework that they had. It was a radical shift from “Church is for us” to “church is for us and them”. Peter had broken the laws of Kosher. He had gone into the house of an uncircumcised man and eaten with him. He was setting a precedent that meant that Gentiles could come into Jewish houses. Where would that lead? And the whole thing rested on Peter saying “God told me”.

### **Agabus – “God Told Me”**

There is another “God told me” in this chapter. It’s right near the end. The church in Jerusalem heard that the gospel had reached Antioch, and that a great number of Gentiles in Antioch were also following Jesus. So they sent Barnabas to Antioch to check it out. He was convinced it was the real deal, so he went to Tarsus to get Saul, and the two of them stayed a whole year teaching the church. Lets pick up the story from Verse 27;

***“ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)” ( Acts 11: 27 – 28 NIV)***

What do we do with these “God told me” messages? Well, you can do what some people do and say that all that belonged to the New Testament age, but it doesn’t happen now. They argue that God gave special revelations before the Scriptures were written, but now that we have the Bible, that’s the way God speaks. God no longer speaks through these sort of special revelations. I can’t subscribe to that teaching. Certainly I believe God speaks through the pages of his word, but who am I to tell God that is the only way he can speak? All through the Bible we see examples of God speaking in miraculous ways. Through a burning bush. Through Balaams donkey. By writing on a wall. Through visions. Dreams. Voices in the night. God spoke in those ways then, and I believe he still does today.

In March 2005 I was worshipping in the congregation here at OBC when I distinctly heard God say to me “You are going to be the Pastor of this church soon”. I didn’t know what to make of that, for I was very happy Pastoring a church in Palmerston North, and a new Pastor had started at OBC just a few months before. I thought it was bizarre. Only once before in my life had I heard God as clearly as that. It didn’t make any sense to me. Nine months later, when the church was experiencing great difficulties, I got a phone call from the Baptist National Office, asking me if I would leave the church at Palmerston North to come to OBC and bring healing to the church. It wasn’t a difficult decision to make, because I had heard God speak nine months before. It was one year to the day, in March 2006, that I began as Pastor of OBC.

**So how do we know when it is God**, and when it's just our own wishful thinking or when it's a result of eating too much lunch? We can learn from the example of Peter.

**1. It happened while he was praying.**

This wasn't something that just popped into Peter's head while he was watching TV. He was spending time with the Lord in prayer. He was consciously taking time to be with the Lord when God gave him this revelation. If you want to know the will of God, it's much more likely that you will hear him when your heart is tuned to his in a time of prayer or worship. For Peter, prayer was a regular part of his life. He was used to making time and space to be with God. So when someone says "God told me", it's legitimate to ask questions about how and when and where that happened.

**2. What he saw in his vision was confirmed by circumstances.**

Immediately after he received this vision, the men from Cornelius' house appeared at his gate. Peter felt he had heard from God. That vision was immediately followed up with circumstances that exactly fitted with what God had told him. If you think God has spoken, expect confirmation of the message in other ways. There was a further factor in this story that is really important.

**3. He involved other believers.**

Peter didn't just act alone, but took six other believing brothers along with him. This is a key principle. If this is of the Lord, it will stand the scrutiny of other brothers and sisters in Christ. So often today people want to say "Thus says the Lord" when they haven't submitted that word to the scrutiny of other brothers and sisters in Christ. Peter was aware that what he had seen in his vision would have far reaching consequences for the whole church. He didn't act alone but involved other believers as well.

**4. He found the people prepared for his coming.**

The same Holy Spirit who had been speaking to Peter had also been speaking to Cornelius and his household. We don't always get immediate confirmation that something is God's will, but often when we move forward in faith we find that the Lord has already opened doors. When he preached, Peter saw a repeat of what had happened at Pentecost, which was further evidence that this was a work of God.

**5. He submitted to the total leadership of the church.**

Peter could have said "I'm an Apostle, and if you don't like the way I'm doing things, you can leave, and don't let the door hit you on the way out". Unfortunately, that attitude is far too common today. "God told me and don't you question it." Peter was wise enough to explain precisely what had happened and to lay that out before the leadership of the church. And the response from the other Apostles was a complete acceptance that God had spoken, and that the Gospel was for the Gentiles as well.

When the leadership of the Baptist churches asked me to consider becoming the Pastor of this church, I shared with them what I believed God had said to me nine months before. It was a joy to me to have them confirm that together we were hearing God. The prophetic gift has suffered so much abuse because too many Christians are making these "God told me" pronouncements without submitting to the body of Christ. A genuine word from the Lord will stand up to scrutiny.

**The famine to come**

In the last part of this chapter, the prophet Agabus brought a prophecy about an upcoming famine.

***"During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul" ( Acts 11: 27 – 30 NIV)***

This was not Agabus acting alone. He was part of a group of prophets in the church, whom the disciples recognised as having a legitimate gift. The disciples together accepted this prophetic word and acted on it for the good of the church.

**God speaks today**

In some Christian traditions, there is a belief that God mainly speaks through the Pastor or Priest. Baptists have always held to the priesthood of all believers, recognising that God can speak through anyone. In our day the prophetic gift has been misused so much that people have become sceptical, even cynical when a person says "God told me". But the corrective to misuse is not disuse, but right use. What would our church be like if each of us were seeking to hear what God was saying, and when we felt that God was speaking, we submitted that to trusted brothers and sisters in Christ? Wouldn't our faith be stronger? Wouldn't our sense of the Lords leading be greater? Wouldn't our sense of God being in our midst, speaking to us be much greater? Let's hear the word of the Lord together.