

Acts 2:1-21
 May 23, 2010 Pentecost

Hampton Baptist
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“When People Come Together”

Two persons were talking together in front of a large church which was being destroyed by fire. The first man spoke in a tone which could be heard above the voices of the firemen: "This is the first time I ever saw you at church."

To this, the second man responded: "This is the first time I ever saw the church on fire." There are many prophets of doom saying that the age of the Christian Church is over - that it has lost its zeal! The Church is taking a beating right now in this country and around the world. (Why Belong to The Church? anthology, CSS one Publishing Company, Inc.) For some time, we have lived in a post-denominational culture. There was a day that when a family moved to a new community, they sought their brand of church and joined. If the family was Baptist, they automatically joined the Baptist church in their new city. Those days are long gone, as evident by the numbers of our church members who have come from other denominations.

Brand-name loyalty has taken a back seat to how a particular church meets the values and needs of a person or family. A family with young children immediately seeks a church with a strong children's ministry and/or opportunities for young adults.

We also now live in a post-Christian culture. Given the pluralism of our nation, the Church has become just another institution on the landscape. The preferred status which Christians have enjoyed for centuries now fades, and the Church has no one to blame except themselves. The lack of relevance to society and the in-fighting that gets broadcast through mass media communicates that the Church has become more interested in preserving what it *had*, than on finding a way to meet the needs of the world outside the stained-glass windows. Christians have done far more to hurt the cause of Christ than any group of atheists or agnostics. Claiming to love other people and then damning them instead, saying we care and then refusing to help those who need it, or simply blaming others because we can't solve the problem rather than seeking a solution does not exhibit what was intended for the Body of Christ at the founding of the Church on the Day of Pentecost.

The Book of Acts is the only book of history in the New Testament; it chronicles the beginnings of the Church. Chapter one records Jesus' ascension back to heaven forty days after his resurrection, and then reports that the eleven remaining disciples sought to fill Judas' *expired* term as an apostle. They chose to cast lots between two likely, qualified candidates, and they decided upon Matthias over Joseph called Barsabbas who was also called Justus. There is no mention of rancor from Justus, or any fallout from his supporters, because he was not chosen. Those 120 people who were gathered in the Upper Room viewed the decision as guided by God, and while we don't know the vote count, we know that Matthias received the majority of votes.

Immediately following *that* incident, Dr. Luke writes that, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." As a physician, Luke paid attention to details. His writings include dates and places so that the reader can follow along like mileposts on a map.

Our text begins on the Day of Pentecost, which was ten days after the Ascension of Jesus. Luke's choice of words is not accidental, "They were all together in one place." Some could misconstrue the meaning to be an organizational statement, as in, "He's got it *all together*," exhibiting that a person's plan has worked out, and his behavior is to be held in high esteem. Others may simply quickly read the verse as an indicator of geography, meaning that the group was not scattered throughout Jerusalem. I think there is more to this verse, which I understand to be foundational for the Pentecost event to occur. The words "all," "together," and "one" speak to the unity found in the Upper Room, which is *significant* given the diversity listed in the roll call of nations. Luke deliberately took the trouble to itemize all the people groups represented at this event. The diversity was spectacular! Inhabitants from all over the known world were gathering together. Despite their *differences*, and I contend *because* of their unity, those 120 understood each other, although many different languages and dialects were being spoken. The point is not that each one of these groups spoke a different *language*, but that wherever there was a local tongue, they heard people speaking it.

The people *heard* something, and they *saw* something. The *sound* of a rushing, mighty wind coupled with the *sight* of divided tongues as of fire resting upon their heads removed doubt. With *two* senses involved in the experience, it would be difficult to discredit the reality of some kind of supernatural occurrence. Instances of sound *and* sight changed everything. These believers in Jesus, who were Jewish and not yet called Christians, were all together in one place. But unity can be challenged.

When I offer pre-marital counseling, I facilitate a discussion on conflict resolution, noting that in every healthy marriage there will be conflict. When someone tells me, "My spouse and I have never had a fight," I realize that one of them is giving in too much, for we are not clones of each other. Conflict is a natural component of our humanity. Individuals do not go through life traveling on parallel streets during their entire existence. At some point, the streets intersect, which could produce a crash. Because we are all uniquely created with individual hopes, dreams, and needs, conflict is inevitable. Unfortunately, many see conflict as an occurrence which automatically has to be bad. Some seek to avoid conflict at all costs. As a word, "conflict" is value-neutral.

Transformation means change, and change produces conflict. The request of Jesus to become one of his disciples produces change, creating a conflict of what was with what could be.

Change is constant; conflict will occur. Churches without a healthy intensity of conflict are not moving forward, but the Church has to create a *healthy* way of handling conflict. Conflict is only dirty when it becomes unhealthy.

I love the violin; this instrument creates beautiful music, but it takes time to learn. Sometimes this period of learning produces painful and messy sounds, but when the right skills are used and practiced, stunning music results. As the student is learning, if the emphasis is placed upon the *now* and how awful those unpleasant notes sound, the student may become discouraged and quit playing the violin. But as the student is learning, if the emphasis is placed upon the future, and how practice will produce beautiful music, the student will be encouraged to withstand the auditory attacks until delightful melodies result.

As churches learn healthy ways of handling conflict, messy, unpleasant sounds may result. If the painful sounds receive the most emphasis, rather than focusing on the attempts to resolve conflicts, then churches will remain stuck in an unhealthy place.

The choice to replace Judas Iscariot could have created an unhealthy conflict. Someone might have said, “Why do we want to bring a new person into this elite group of Jesus’ students?” The choice of Matthias over Justus could have created an unhealthy conflict, if an individual had been more *person*-focused rather than *group*-focused, if a person had fixated on having his candidate selected, rather than the will of the people.

Yet “when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” We have no record of the conversations among the 120 between the selection of Matthias and the Day of Pentecost. We *do* know that those gathered in the Upper Room refused to remain stuck. Their desire for something better was too great for them to become divided; they knew that at the Ascension of Jesus, they were told to wait for something good. Their anticipation of what would come next kept them watching, praying, and wondering what God would do next.

A tourist stood for long periods of time upon the beach, facing away from the ocean, pressing a seashell against his ear. The water lapped at his feet, the sun beamed down upon his head and shoulders, and the waves crashed just behind him. Firmly, he pressed the seashell against his ear. He wanted to hear the powerful surge of the ocean as it heaved and rolled. See the picture in your mind's eye: a man standing with his back to the ocean, attempting to hear the ocean in a seashell. Although in the presence of the very thing he was seeking, he was oblivious to the actuality.

Some people have difficulty in recognizing that they have caught up to what they have been chasing, or are in the presence of the object of their desire. Such persons, in their extreme forms, are always running but never arriving, always searching but never discovering, always looking but never seeing, always measuring but the numbers are forever wrong. (Larry Powell, *Blow the Silver Trumpets*, CSS Publishing Company)

The Church was created to be the Body of Christ, to continue the mission of the Incarnation. When the 120 were unified in the Upper Room, great, supernatural events happened. Two-thousand years later, too many times, we find ourselves like the tourist: God wants to do great works in and through us, yet we don't even realize that we are capable because of the disunity.

On the Day of Pentecost, the 120 people who had gathered from all over the known world received the gift of the Holy Spirit, which empowered those individuals to take the gospel story everywhere. Peter began preaching, and as a result, three thousand people were added on the first day. The church immediately became the ideal community of faith (v42-47). Just as Jesus' sermon in Nazareth served to inaugurate his ministry in Luke 4, so this Pentecost event and Peter's sermon served to inaugurate the newly constituted people of God. Yet none of this would have happened had they not been all together in one place.

Ira Yates was like many other ranchers and farmers in West Texas during the Depression. He had a lot of land and a lot of debt. Mr. Yates wasn't able to make enough on his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, so he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family (like many others) had to live on a government subsidy.

Day after day, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling West Texas hills, he was no doubt greatly troubled about how he would pay his bills. Then a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told him there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract.

At 1,115 feet, they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many subsequent wells were more than twice as large. In fact, thirty years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed it still had the potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day.

And Ira Yates owned it all. The day he purchased the land he had received the oil and mineral rights. Yet, he'd been living on relief. A multimillionaire living in poverty. The problem? He didn't know the oil was there even though he owned it. It is fair to say that you and I are a lot like Ira Yates at times. We are heirs of a vast treasure, and yet we live in spiritual poverty. We are entitled to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and incredible energizing power, and yet we live unaware of our birthright. (Come, Holy Spirit, Dan Rondeau)

On this Pentecost Sunday, let's try to remember just how rich we are, that we have been called into relationship with the God of the Universe, whose Son came to earth to show us more fully the character of God, and whose Holy Spirit continues to sustain us, prompting us to do great things for the One who first loved us. Let's accentuate the importance of us all being together in one place. And finally, let's live out this basic truth: God will do great wonders when people come together.