

Preparing for Pentecost

We noted last Sunday from the Book of Acts the Ascension commission Jesus has given us. Today we'll look at the remaining verses in chapter one, which show us how these first disciples obeyed Jesus' instructions and prepared for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

Read **Acts 1:12-17; 21-2:1**

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶"Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— ¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry."

²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." ²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

2:1 *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.*

The Old Testament believers observed the Feast of Ingathering, of Harvest, during this fiftieth day after Passover called Pentecost. What happened on this Pentecost Day, ten days after Jesus' Ascension back to heaven, is what we'll consider next Sunday from Acts 2. Before these first followers of Jesus were to experience the outpouring of the Spirit, which issued in amazing phenomena, preparation was necessary. Only those who were prepared for Pentecost experienced its blessings.

God's richest blessings are free but not cheap. We can never deserve them or earn them, but we can be prepared to receive what he has provided for us at a great cost. And we must pay the price of preparation, what someone has called "the cost of Pentecost."

After Jesus' ascension and words of instruction and promise, the disciples followed his earlier command to "wait for the gift my Father promised" (4). There was first the coming together as Jesus commanded. What these first disciples did was a symbol for what the church has continued to do, in fact, a symbol of the nature of the church itself. The compound word "ecclesia," which we translate "church," literally means "called-out ones." To receive God's blessings it is imperative that we relate to the fellowship of the church.

Even though conversion is intensely personal, we're not converted to be alone in our faith. God has ordained that we connect with a body of believers, and the church is the living Body of Christ on earth. The question whether one can be a Christian without the church is more one of reality than theory. It is, I suppose, theoretically possible to swim across an ocean alone, but such a journey in reality calls for a ship. And Jesus has ordained his church to be his visible expression, his witness, his family on earth and his vehicle for doing his mission and being his missional people.

The diversity of this gathering is striking from the start. Just the names of the eleven (sans Judas Iscariot) speak of diversity, with Matthew, a right-wing conservative tax collector, in the same group with Simon the Zealot, part of a radical left-wing movement to overthrow the Roman government. This first gathering, preparing for Pentecost, was even more politically diverse than in Wisconsin. And they were diverse culturally and occupationally, from fishermen to office workers. For that time and culture they were a radical mix of men and women. Luke is particularly fond in his gospel as well as Acts, of featuring the prominent place of women as followers and supporters of Jesus and his ministry. This unity is not possible by organization and political parity through arbitration and negotiation and compromise. This unity in the midst of diversity was possible only through the power and work of the Holy Spirit, who would be poured out upon them on the Day of Pentecost.

My previous pastorate was with the International Baptist Church of Brussels, one of the unique churches in the entire world. There're many international churches around the world, but because of its location in Brussels, the Capital of Europe, it perhaps has as diverse of a membership as any church anywhere. There're about 50 different nationalities in its active attendance. And members have a different background and come from different cultures, including the way they do church life. Also, although it's Baptist in its heritage and distinctive practices, it's also very non-denominational in its inclusion of all who share its core beliefs. It experiences unity, not just by its knowledge and use of the English language, but more importantly, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, who lives in each

person and thereby draws them into the unity of Christ himself. But because of its diversity there were always endemic challenges to its unity.

These disciples in the Upper Room in Jerusalem faced the challenges of their diversity. The Twelve Disciples had their moments of division and disunity, as they argued over who would be the greatest and have positions of power and prominence in the Kingdom (Luke 22:24, etc.) Right up to the very end of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances Simon Peter seemed to have undo interest in the future of his fellow disciple and received a mild rebuke from Jesus (John 21:20-23). So, there were all the elements of division latent within this group, this "church." And still today, each church has its potential and real conflicts due to our fallen sin nature and pride—jealousy, rivalry, rumor, gossip and personal and selfish ambition and distrust. All of these can be subsumed under the heading, a lack of Christ-like love for one another.

The solution and antidote to this disunity is the church's commitment to obediently come together and take the next step of persevering together in prayer. The first thing these disciples did was to get down to the business of praying. Had they begun their gathering with the business session, the results could have been disastrous. It was the "joining together constantly in prayer" (14, NIV) that enabled them to take care of other matters in a God-led and Christ-honoring way. The prayers of God's people no doubt moved them to petition and intercession with a great sense of desperate dependence on the power of God. They had just received an overwhelming task called the Great Commission. We today, two millennia removed, with all of our church history, tradition, denominational structure and resources, find it difficult to sense any desperate need for God. In fact, it's almost like we've learned to do things by ourselves.

This came to the fore when Bill Hybels, pastor of one of the largest churches in America, the Willow Creek Community Church in the outskirts of Chicago, ordered an intensive and extensive study of the church's membership. He made a sobering and even shocking admission that has rocked the many pastors and churches seeking to build their churches on his mega church model. The admission was basically that the power is gone, the power to change lives and not just to gain adherents, to make a difference in lives and in the world around them, which is done only by God's Spirit, who seemed to be missing in much of their activities.

One quote from Willow Creek's recent self study gave this evaluation: "...spiritual growth doesn't happen best by becoming dependent on elaborate church programs but through the age old spiritual practices of prayer, Bible reading, and relationships. And, ironically, these basic disciplines do not require multi-million dollar facilities and hundreds of staff to manage" (See http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/10/willow_creek_re.htm/).

Before God will pour out his Spirit and make a difference in our lives and in our church, there must be an admission that we cannot live and serve to please him in our strength. The task demands our absolute dependence on his Spirit and power. This is true in my life. I must learn to always “ask, seek and knock” for God’s fullness day by day and throughout the day if I am to enjoy his full anointing of power on my life and ministry.

Persevering together in prayer is essential for preparing for Pentecost. Only then we’ll be ready and able to take the step of submitting together to God’s word and will. It was out of the context of prayer that this incipient church in Jerusalem was preparing for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Thus it is true today that the only road to God’s fullness of blessing is by the way of submission and obedience to the word and will of God. Simon Peter stood up before the 120, in the Upper Room or, perhaps more likely in the temple, and presented a matter of business. You might even say that this was the very first church members’ business meeting. The business at hand was the replacement of Judas Iscariot as the twelfth member of the band of apostles.

There was no question that for this first church gathering under the leadership of Peter and the other apostles, the word of God, the Scriptures were their authoritative guide. The confidence of these first disciples, apostles and church people was not just theoretical. It was real and practical because they believed that the word of God was also inviolable. Before we as individuals or as a church can expect the blessings of God in our lives and church life, we must first of all recognize that the foundation of our faith and also our conduct is the word of God, the Scriptures.

We gladly submit to the word of God because it gives us the wisdom of God for faith in God. As Peter stood and spoke the truth from God’s word about the need and the procedure for replacing Judas Iscariot, he said something very important that showed the wisdom of God and his faith in God’s sovereign purposes. Peter noted that “the Scripture had to be fulfilled” (verse 16) concerning Judas, who had “shared in this ministry” (verse 17). Judas was the treasurer for the Twelve, and he did have a part in the ministry, even though he was outside of God’s saving grace. The word and Spirit of God give us a faith perspective that enables us to see the hand of God, who’s sovereign, even over evil that may touch our lives. Despite fallen sinners and even the devil himself, God’s purposes for his people will prevail.

The believer and the church preparing for Pentecost know that the Holy Spirit leads us in the perfect will of God. It’s interesting how the church came about choosing Judas’ replacement. There were two equally qualified men, so, after praying they cast lots. This was done by writing their names on two stones and placing the stones in a basket, which they shook until one of the stones fell out. The name on the one that fell out was chosen to replace Judas as the twelfth member of the apostolic band. This was not unlike rolling dice or drawing straws

and was an acceptable way of determining God's will, under the Old Covenant. But now they were preparing for Pentecost, and after the Holy Spirit came upon the church in fullness of power there is no more mention of casting lots. From now on they prayed until the Holy Spirit gave them a consensus. When God's people pray, a consensus is possible because he will lead his church into the truth and the peace of Christ will rule in our hearts (Acts 15:28; Colossians 3:15). Paul called for the Ephesians to demonstrate their obedience to God by submitting to one another "out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).

Note, Matthias was chosen over Barsabbas, but we never hear of them again except in church tradition. Both were good men and equally qualified but they and the entire church were willing to accept God's leading. And this they did without quarreling and without jealousy. This spirit of submission to God's will, without second guessing, rivalry and discord, is the spirit and attitude essential in preparing for and setting the stage for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

What we can clearly see in our text is a church in formation, the nascent church of Jerusalem, doing what is necessary to prepare for the great Day of Pentecost. I personally realize how much I need this church fellowship as a body of encouragement and a source of power in prayer and in unified mission. I also realize how desperately I depend on the Holy Spirit to enable me to live and serve God, to fulfill the mission he's assigned to me.

I hope we're ready to pay the necessary cost for Pentecost and to do what is necessary for us to do in order to receive his fullness. We cannot expect to reproduce the same phenomena that were evidenced on the Day of Pentecost, but we can expect the same Holy Spirit, just as real and every bit as powerful, to descend on us. He is the one who'll make all the difference in our lives and in our church. We are a fellowship of redeemed children of God, given the Holy Spirit through the death and resurrection of Jesus, who lives with and within us.