



November 15, 2016

*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dearest family,

We met together on Sunday after an intense week. As a pastor, one feels completely overwhelmed in the process of preparation to speak to the flock you love, in a context of such contrariness in our hearts. Despite weakness, inadequacy and inarticulacy, my goal was to at least try and relate to the meanings of our service last Sunday with Pastor TL Rogers, to the Presidential Election on Tuesday, to the consequences of that decision and to the social and racial reality of the aftermath, to the study we have just done in Acts of the Apostles, to the study we are about to do of "principalities and powers". Luke's narrative of the early church maybe better titled, the acts of the Holy Spirit, and I was arguing for the urgent need for a "healing model" for racial reconciliation that acknowledged the need for God's Spirit-empowered, heart-transforming, delivering, healing power. Technically, we finished the study before the election, but I suggested that we needed a post-script after it. If we finish this narrative and think there is any place for a homogenous church we've missed the point, or more disturbingly, failed to perceive the work of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. The story began with an ethnocentric group – they were all Jews. But Pentecost baptized them into something they hadn't experienced before. I think that Pentecost has been wrongly individualized and personalized by charismatic theology. They were not just baptized personally in the Spirit, but it was in a context in which they were simultaneously, baptized into the nations, into cultures beyond their experience. This is why I spent an entire message a few weeks ago arguing that you could not have a privatized view of tongues. If we end up as an ethnocentric community that speaks in tongues in cozy upper rooms then again we have completely missed the point. Every one hearing the greatness of God in their own tongue was the preview of the power of the Spirit, expressed through worship to effect the reconciliation of races.

But the Book of Acts proves that even Spirit-filled Christians can be ethnocentric and bigoted. It still took God a few more supernatural acts to get Peter to Cornelius' house, didn't it? The apostles had been with Jesus but they were learning that their identity in Christ did not erase their racial or ethnic identities but superseded them, and in the process, recovered for them their redemptive experience of their own racial identity in unity with other peoples' equally God-given, God-loved redeemed identity.

If you think about it, they should have seen it coming. Hadn't Jesus said, post-resurrection, to go and make disciples of "all nations", "all the world", "all creation"? That's all races, right? You cannot have a commitment to mission or evangelism and retain a view of ethnic separatism. When you read Acts, however, Luke does not avoid the experiences of ethnic conflict, tension and rank prejudice. But he also makes sure that we see how they are resolved in Christ.

- The "Hellenist Jews" of Acts 2:5 were what we would call interracial people.
- In Acts 6:1-7 there is reconciliation between Hellenist and native-born Jews after a sharp divide and as a result, interracial leadership emerges, Stephen being a good example.
- The Samaritans were not just ignored and despised but ethnically hated. In Acts 8 we see the gospel, through Phillip, unite them with the Jewish believers, and by the end of the chapter, a black Ethiopian is converted.
- Two chapters later, Cornelius, a hated Roman and representative of Caesar worship and the most offensive views of Jewish culture and identity, is baptized by Peter and speaks in tongues.
- In case there is any remaining doubt about God's heart for racial reconciliation through the gospel, the creedal council of Acts 15 commits to evangelism to all nations, all personalities, all races.
- Paul's encouragement and promotion of ethnic diversity causes Ephesus to riot. The protesters were in the street.

- The most important picture of local church life in the narrative is that of Antioch, a city that was racially diverse and culturally pluralistic. They had four major ethnic blocs: Jewish, Syrian, African and Greek. What a church! Why did it attract attention? Why were the observers not aware of their differences when they looked at their church, but only the fact that that they could all receive the same nickname – Christians. Not Syrian Christian, Jewish Christian, Greek Christian, white Christian, black Christian – just Christian. This kind of reconciliation was nowhere else in town, in any other public institution or private relational circle – only in the church. Why wouldn't you want to join it, regardless of your ethnicity? Has it got into our thick heads why Antioch would happen to be the springboard of international mission? It was here they worked through the challenges of making the gospel meaningful and relevant for a multi-cultural community. If it doesn't work at home, don't export it, is the rule. Because they worked it out at home and thus were trusted with the nations. We cannot leave the study of Acts without letting this sink into our hearts and influence our desires and intentions for local church life. Could we just be called The Antioch Group as a community instead of Christ Our Shepherd?

I explained the importance of Amos' prophecy for the early church's character and sense of calling and purpose. Amos indicted the sanctuaries of Israel for their compromise and complacency and their loss of authority to address the national leadership, and addressed very strong words of judgment to "the foremost nation." Like the church in our own day, they were better at courting power for their protection than confronting it for the sake of public righteousness. It is so significant that in Acts 15, when the future of God's intentions for racial reconciliation through the gospel-proclaiming church was at stake, it was Amos 9:11 that James quoted. I suggested that we could do worse than take that scripture as our present cry for personal and national life: that the fallen tent, the feelings of collapse in national and personal life, would yet be raised again by the restoring, repairing, renewing and reconciling power of God.

We are fighting an "unconventional war." The call to take up arms is, according to Paul, "first of all", the call to raise up arms, to "lift up holy hands." (1 Tim. 2:1-6) If, despite all that we have been through as a nation that has placarded that we are as divided, especially racially, in the body politic as in the body of Christ, we are still not motivated to lift our hands, then we are not discerning rightly the times. Paul calls us to ask for "**ALL** those in authority" and gives us three non-negotiable things to ask for: **God's pleasure** (godliness and holiness in personal and social life for "**EVERYONE**"); **our peace** (the preservation of creational liberties because God wants "**ALL** men to be saved"); the **Gospel's proclamation and propagation** (because Jesus gave Himself a ransom for **ALL** men). We have an exclusive message but an inclusive mission. And by the way, if you think that our political leadership is challenging, he is writing while Nero is ruling! If we don't ASK we won't ACT, and if we do ACT then we must ASK for the sustaining power to stay committed. Raised hands are usually a sign of surrender under threat. Yes, we are under threat, but our lifted hands are not because we are giving in or giving up, but raising arms, taking up arms for this present engagement against the world, the flesh and the devil, against everything that opposes the reconciling purposes of God through the gospel, against principalities and powers, that will neither separate us from the love of God for us, or the love of God through us for all.

A dear friend of ours, a seasoned asker, was stopped publicly by her pastor in a prayer church meeting after the election when she began to lament the pain and brokenness in the nation, and the deep concerns about the direction of the Republic. She was told that there were only grounds to rejoice. I could not disagree more. There are grounds to lament. I affirm the sovereignty of God in the affairs of men, but I am not always discerning enough to know whether His allowances are so obviously mercy, or judgment. I think the verdict is out. But I am convinced that we have been given clear instructions about what position to take. Take your position: lift your holy hands.

Pastorally yours,  
Stuart