

On Palm Sunday, fifteen new members — many of them young —
were welcomed into the fellowship of this church.

What a great day! There were *oohs and aahs!*

And there was much happy chattering about how this church is growing
and growing younger!

Fifteen — added to about 800 others. It makes quite an impact.

But did you catch what Luke just told us
about the church in Jerusalem?

Three thousand new members in one day!

And more were joining day by day.

That is astounding.

But flip back just a few verses and what do we discover
except that this congregation which these 3,000 joined

was a congregation of *120 members!*

Talk about impact!

One hundred and twenty — — —.

Frankly, it is a symbolic number.

It is a number that represents *wholeness*.

It is a number that declares that this little congregation was just fine.

It had all the people it needed to function well as a church.

Enough for worship.

Enough to care for one another.

Enough to teach the faith.

Enough to serve the needy in the community.

No more were really needed, thank you, very much!

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I know churches don't really say out loud that no more members are needed.

But do they, in their way of life say that — —

say, "We're okay just as we are. We don't really need anyone else.?"

Last Sunday I returned to eastern Mecklenburg County

to preach at the twentieth anniversary

of the church I served as founding pastor.

There in suburban Charlotte the presbytery decided to start that new church

because in some ways the nearby Presbyterian churches were saying

they really didn't need any more members.

Indeed, one well-established congregation publicly proclaimed

that it welcomed all the newcomers moving into houses

springing up in what had once been corn fields.

To that end, that congregation began *something new* for them —

the *passing of a worship register* — the little red book.

In worship everyone was asked to sign that register.

And the hope of this new procedure was that from that book
the church could glean the names and addresses
of newcomers, follow-up on them, —
and invite them to join the church.

Yet, several new residents who did visit that church, told an interesting tale.

They walked in. No one spoke to them.

Instead members there just kept on chatting among themselves.

These newcomers found a pew and no one came to sit beside them.

The pastor invited everyone to sign the register.

Everyone did so.

The benediction was pronounced, the newcomers walked out.

Again no one spoke, except the pastor at the door.

But as they left, looking back down the aisle, —

they noticed a couple of members grabbing the register

where they had been sitting

and opening it to read who they were.

That church wanted new members?

Not really. They were okay just as they were.

For what would happen to that congregation

if newcomers actually joined —

and then some more came and joined?

How could that congregation stay *just fine like they had always been?*

So imagine a congregation of 120 members

receiving 3,000 new members on one Sunday alone.

Could that congregation ever be the same?

Could the same people who had always made decisions for the church
keep on being the ones to make all the decisions?

Could the cozy worship services they had always known
remain the way they had always been?

Three thousand people baptized in one day

What is going on here?

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But more than this, notice who the 3,000 were.

They were enemies of Christ and the church!

And now they were being forgiven and given a second chance!

Peter full of the Spirit of God, had laid it on these people —

people of the house of Israel, —

people who were sure they were God's people.

But being so sure they were God's people,

they were also very sure about who wasn't ever

to be a part of God's people.

So when Jesus touched the outcast, welcomed and ate with sinners, —
associated with hated tax collectors, collaborators with Rome, — —
when Jesus did not stay away from foreigners
and challenged the restrictions about who could worship at the Temple
declaring that God intended God's House
to be a house of prayer for *all people*, — —

Jesus was too much for them.

They turned on Jesus. They threw him out. They got rid of him.
They crucified him.

And that is exactly what Peter charged them with doing.

Preaching right to their face he said, —

“ . . . let the entire house of Israel know with certainty
that God has made this Jesus, whom *you* crucified,—
both Lord and Messiah.”

Now keep in mind those 120 members in that little church, —
they may not have been always faithful to Christ.

They may have deserted Jesus.

Yes, when the going got tough

they may have even denied that they ever knew Jesus.

But had they ever been part of that crowd that turned Jesus over to Pilate?

Had they been part of the crowd that scoffed at him

as he hung on that cross dying in agony?

These new members coming in — — —.

they had been enemies of Christ and opponents of the church.

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In the paper this week I read about *Ted Turner*, founder of CNN.

Turner, a flamboyant character, has been a disparager of the church.

He once called Christianity a “religion for losers.”

He made fun of the Ten Commandments

and wrote his own version of them.

He mocked his own employees who celebrated Ash Wednesday

calling them “Jesus freaks”

and urged them to go to work for Fox, —

which was like telling them where to go!

But now it seems Turner is cooperating with Methodists and Lutherans

joining in ministries of caring in Christ's name around the world.¹

Now I know Ted Turner has a lot of money.

But to let someone like that into the church, —

to give him a second chance, — — ?

Could his repentance be real?

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¹ Asheville Citizen Times, April 2, 2008, p. A2

Those enemies of Christ, those opponents of the church, —
Peter declares the *promises of God are for them*.

They, too, are summoned by God.

Yet, *do you reckon they could ever fit in?*

Those 120 who had always been there, —

would they ever accept them, give them a second chance, —
trust them, —

share fellowship with them, —

relinquish control over the church

by sharing church leadership with them?

But then Luke tells us this is exactly what happened!

These 3,000 welcomed Peter's message and were baptized.

More than that, those original members of the church

together with these newcomers were overwhelmed with awe.

The harmony of the congregation was palpable, — so much so

that the whole congregation shared all their possessions in common.

That meant no one in the congregation ever was in need.

Everybody was deeply involved in Christian education and worship.

The whole society around spoke well of the congregation.

Their faith grew by leaps and bounds.

And the church rolls kept expanding exponentially.

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Can this picture of that church really be true?

Hyperbole! That is what scholars call it.

An *idealized* picture of what the church, empowered by the Spirit, —
looks like.

But does that mean that this picture of what that church looked like is a lie?

If it is a lie, *what about this?*

“. . . the . . . church [was] faced with the challenges arising

in an age of confusion, disillusionment, and social and racial unrest.

To meet those challenges, it [followed] the pattern set through the years . . .

[it reached] out as a servant church, —

remembering that the Head of the Church was a Servant Christ

Its responses to the needs of the times [were] world-wide in scope

. . . . in the name of Christ [it reached out] . . . to meet community needs.

It [joined] hands with Christians in other denominations

in a program of personal relationship and involvement with . . .

families lacking the basic needs of life

In 1886 a church spire was added to the newly constructed Gothic church.

Towering above the business houses of the growing town, —

it became a symbol of goals and values far loftier

than the daily toils and ambitions of the market place.

It became . . . a symbol of the church
that through its teachings and its missions in the city
gave men [and women] a vision of the love of the Master.
Thus, because of what it has meant to *all sections of the town*, —
the church with the spire has been called
‘A symbol of more abundant life . . . and life everlasting.’”²

That is what Ora Blackmun wrote almost 40 years ago about this congregation
as she closed her local church history, A Spire in the Mountains.

Is what she wrote factual?

Did *all the sections of this town*

feel the impact of this congregation’s ministry? *Really? All sections?*

Or is what she wrote instead *hyperbole — exaggeration?*

Thus, is it, therefore, a lie?

Or is it in fact at *some deeper level indeed the truth*, —
the truth about this church we know?

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This account of the church filled by the Spirit of God after Easter
there in Jerusalem is *hyperbole*.

But that does not mean it is not true. It is deeply true.

It is in fact the church that Luke knew and saw.

It is, as the teacher and preacher Tom Long points out, —

the church as seen through the eyes of a person of —

“faith, love, and, most of all, of theological hope” — —

a person like Ora Blackmun, a local church historian.

It is the church seen not just in terms of the “cold, hard facts”

of the reality of its past and present, —

“but in terms of where the church trusts

that its ministry and its Lord are taking it.”

“If Luke is a scientific historian,” Long goes on to say, —

“then the only thing we can say is the sad news that the church

has gone down hill ever since [that day when Peter preached].

If [Luke] is a nostalgic romantic, —

then he has simply exaggerated the church’s history needlessly, —

giving us little realistic comfort in a hard world.

If, however, [Luke] is a radical theologian and a local church historian, —

then he has looked at the life of the church *as it was then*

through the *lens of the Spirit’s promise of where it surely shall be*.

As such, he knows that because the Spirit is with the church

there is always more to the life of the church than meets the naked eye.”³

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² Blackmun, Ora. A Spire in the Mountains, First Presbyterian Church — Asheville, 1970, pp. 363-4

³ Long, Thomas G. “A Night at the Buresque: Wanderings Through the Pentecost Narrative,” Journal for Preachers, Pentecost, 1999, pp. 30-1

This church — —
when it moved into this sanctuary back in 1951
and only men stood in this pulpit or lectern; —
and only men in dark suits and starched white shirts served as elders
and shared this feast with the people; —
and only people dressed in their finest — every male in a coat and tie, —
almost every woman with a hat and gloves; —
and only white people ever sat in these pews, — —
is this the church we know?

This church — —
as it is today where men *and women* now preach from this pulpit
and stand at the lectern;
where men *and women* serve as elders and share this feast among the people
people, yes, still smartly dressed, —
but now dressed in a way that not one woman wears a hat
and many wear slacks
and men are free to enter with open collar shirts;
where people are primarily white
but people of color also grace the pews and the membership rolls; —
where children and young people lead in worship
even offering up the gifts for this feast, — —
is this the church we know?

This church — —
where because God's Spirit loosed by the Risen Christ among us
day by day is becoming no longer the church we can control
for the Spirit is always moving
all sorts of people into our midst
changing us and our life together forever; —
where persons continue to be given a second and third
and fourth and fifth chance; —
where persons from whom we have been estranged are now our friends; —
where we live not as a part of this twisted age
but as joyous citizens now of the kingdom of God, — — —.
We may sometimes have a hard time glimpsing all of this, —
but is this really the church we know?

Which one of these is the church we know, *really know?*

It is the last one, isn't it?

By the power of the Holy Spirit —

by what that Spirit is doing and continues to do among us, —

that indeed is the reality about this church we know.

Pete Peery — First Presbyterian Church — Asheville

Third Sunday of Easter

6 April 2008