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# Heaven and Hell

Acts 2:42-47

A Sermon preached for Christian Unity Week in York Chapel, January 18, 2011 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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I expect you know the old joke about the difference between heaven and hell. It's a European joke, but I'm sure it has an American equivalent. Anyhow, here's the European version. In heaven, all the police are British. All the cooks are French. All the technicians are German. The lovers are Italian. And the administrators are Swiss. But hell – now hell is another story. In hell, all the roles go to the wrong people. The police are German, the cooks are British, the technicians are French, the lovers are Swiss, and everything is run by the Italians.

And I expect a good number of you were once in a youth group. And if it's anything like any youth group I've ever known, one night the youth group leader got you to do the long-handled spoon exercise. You remember: you each tie a spoon to a broom handle, and then see how long it takes a table full of young people to work out how to eat the bowl of soup that's in front of them. The answer, of course, is that they can't, and everyone goes hungry. But what they *can* do is each feed the person opposite them across the table. And when they work that out, everyone gets a good meal. Then the youth leader steps up and says that hell is like everyone trying to feed themselves with a four-foot long spoon. Heaven is when we realize we can only eat if we feed each other.

Now old jokes and tired youth group exercises only get to be clichés because there's a lot of truth in them. The trouble with clichés is that we've heard them so many times we no longer feel the force of them, the poignancy, the personal *ouch*.

But these two stories, clichéd as they are, do pretty well sum up the unity and the diversity of the church. Tonight's reading from the Acts of the Apostles keys into the long-handled spoon story. We're told seven things the early Christians shared together. There is first the discovery of and formation in faith (the apostles' teaching). Then there's time spent with one another, building one another up and deepening support and encouragement (fellowship). Third there's sacramental worship (the breaking of bread), and fourth there are other dimensions of worship (the prayers). Fifth there are amazing acts of God, which bring awe on everyone. Sixth there's the sharing of goods with one another, and seventh there's the selling of goods and distribution to those in need.

But as a pastor now for 20 years there are two lines from Acts I struggle with. To be fair, one isn't in this passage – it's from the very similar passage at the end of Acts chapter 4, where it says "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul." The other part I struggle with is from the end of tonight's passage where it says, "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." Because I've never been among a group of people, certainly anything like as big as the group of 3000 or so that are mentioned in Acts chapter 2, that are of one heart and soul. The reality is, and we can see it in other places in Acts like the Council of Jerusalem in chapter 15, that the church has always been a place of differing traditions and opinions and experience and authorities and wisdom. Ecumenism isn't a recent development based on fear or guilt or conscience or benevolence. The *church has always been ecumenical*, like it or not.

But here's the complicated part. There seems to be a tension that runs quite deep down between ecumenism and mission. If you're in heaven, the French are the cooks and the Italians are the lovers, and so on. If you're in the mission field, dogmatic conservatives appeal to those who like things certain, and social justice activist types appeal to those who like things edgy, and mystic holiness aesthetes appeal to those who like a bit of subtlety and wonder. Above all, cross and conflictual people seem to appeal to those many who actually see the world as a competitive arm-wrestle. In other words, if you want to reach a diverse and antagonistic world, you'd better make your church as diverse and antagonistic as the world is. You make a hell, in this view, by making the Swiss not just run the trains, but do the cooking, the loving, the policing and everything else.

A cynic would say ecumenism only started to catch on at the beginning of the twentieth century when the big denominations started to look over their shoulder and began to see they were in trouble. Growth means conflict and diversity. The biggest obstacle to sharing the gospel isn't doctrinal impurity – it's uniformity: it's assuming we all have to be the same. That line "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul" has caused us a lot of trouble, because we've got the idea into our heads that we should be of one heart and soul, and if we're not, it's obviously time to split.

But this is the secret. To be missionaries, we need to remember the joke about the Italians being the lovers and the French being the chefs. We need to be as diverse as the Holy Spirit, as rainbow as heaven. Because God's creation of humankind isn't just diverse in race and gender, it's diverse in personality and affection and in passion and in disposition. But we must hold onto the broom-handle spoon exercise too. We need each other. God has given us the diversity we need to reach a diverse world. But the good news of the gospel is that God has made a church that isn't just full of people like us. Our gospel is that God has amazingly reconciled us to that lot over there, with all their ridiculous traditions and this lot over here with all their judgmental convictions.

If all we've got is diversity and released energy, we're reaching people, but without the gospel. If all we've got is being of one heart and mind, we have the gospel, but we're not reaching anybody. That's the gift and the call of ecumenism. Somehow to realize we can't get to heaven on our own.

There's one more story that you'll all know. It's about the Christians who went for a briefing at the pearly gates before entering into heaven. "Shhh. Don't disturb that lot of Christians over there," St Peter told them. "It's too painful to break their illusion. If they see you it'll spoil it for them. You see, they think they're the only ones here."