

WORKING TOGETHER IS HARD WORK

Matthew 10: 1-4 and Ephesians 4: 11-16

Antioch Baptist Church

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Last week I was at an American Baptist Churches conference in Orlando, Florida. The theme of the conference was “Together in the Lord.” The objective of the conference was to bring together new pastors and churches that had recently affiliated with ABC along with seminary students who were still engaged in their theological studies. The hope was to encourage all of the attendees to become life long members of and active participants in the work of American Baptist Churches. The scriptural theme for the conference was the Ephesians 4: 11-16 passage and the hope was that we as American Baptists could be joined together as that passage suggests. As much as I wished that it was so, I felt it my duty to point out to that assembly that whatever else we are as American Baptists we are not “Together in the Lord.”

There was a time in the 17th and early 18th century when most Baptists in North America were members of this single national body; American Baptist Churches. Then in 1845 the denomination underwent a split when most of the pastors and churches in the southern, slaveholding region of the country left ABC over its opposition to slavery. I guess those pastors and churches valued slavery and its profits more than they did the unity of the church. The group that walked out became the Southern Baptist Church. It seems that being “Together in the Lord” was not working in the 1840s.

By the 1890s many black members of what would become the Northern Baptist Convention¹ walked out, because while white Baptists in the north might have been against slavery they were not necessarily accepting of the idea that all men are created equal. It was because there were so few opportunities for black people to serve in certain churches, or be appointed to certain positions, or have anything they wrote published by the convention that the black members left and joined the National Baptist Convention. It seems that being together in the Lord was not working in the 1890s.

By 1915 the all-black National Baptist Convention had suffered a split over issues of money and power. Today there are six major black Baptist conventions; National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.; National Baptist Convention of America, Progressive National Baptist Convention, National Missionary Baptist Convention, Primitive Baptist Convention, and Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship. It seems that even among black Baptists being together in the Lord has been a difficult thing to achieve and sustain.

There has always been the hope that all of these Baptist groups that emerged out of one initial movement would find a way to resolve their differences and come back

¹ The name Northern Baptist Convention was used from 1905 until 1950 when the name American Baptist Churches was adopted.

together as a single community of faith that was together in the Lord. However, whether it was the Southern Baptist Church rejoining those in the north, or black Baptist rejoining one another under a single banner, no such thing has come close to occurring. As I said to those persons who had gathered in Orlando last week, whatever else one can say about Baptists in general or American Baptists in particular, we are nowhere near being together in the Lord! What you see when you do even a casual review of Baptist life is that we never seem to have been together in the Lord.

There seem to be a great many things that divide us and keep us apart. Look at this church today; we are a congregation of nearly one thousand, and out of that number fewer than five of our members are not African American. In fact, most of the people who made up a beautiful multi-racial and multi-cultural congregation at last week's conference went back home to churches that just as all-black, or all-white, or all-Asian, or all-Hispanic, or all of one economic or educational class. Back in 1961 a theologian named Liston Pope wrote that "The most segregated hour in America was 11 AM Sunday morning." That was nearly fifty years ago, and what he said then is just as true today. What can the church say to the world about division, partisan bickering, and rigid divisions along political grounds when the church is itself as divided and separated and segregated as any other institution in our society?

Not only are there divisions between congregations and denominations on issues of race, but there are also strong divisions over the issue of women in ministry and women as deacons. There are people who believe that only men should serve in this role. I have a new book coming out in the fall of this year on the role of the deacon in the black Baptist church. I already know how the book will be received. Some pastors will read the first three chapters and say to themselves that they should use that book as a training tool for the deacons in their church. Then they will come to the fourth chapter that will be a biblical argument in favor of women as deacons, and many pastors will put the book down because they do not, cannot and, apparently will not embrace that idea. Whether along lines of race or gender we in the local church are not together in the Lord.

The point I want to make today is that the divisions that challenge us today would never have occurred if we had paid closer attention to what Jesus was doing when he called his first twelve apostles or disciples or followers. The listing of the apostles is found in Matthew 10, Mark 3, and Luke 6. However, I want us to focus on the Matthew 10: 1-4 version of this event, and I focus on that version because it offers the clearest description of the diversity that Jesus had built into his followers from the very beginning.

Notice what names always come first; Peter and Andrew, James and John. These four men were a model of what is wrong with almost all of our churches; they were all the same. They came from the same city, they worked in the same profession, they were shaped by the same culture, they probably shared the same world view, and there is a great possibility they had even known each other for a long time before Jesus came into their lives. If Jesus had limited his selection of disciples to Peter and Andrew and to James and John we could rest easy and feel good about the one race or one culture make-up of our churches. Jesus himself came from the northern part of the country in the region of Galilee. If he had stopped with Peter and Andrew and with James and John it might have been possible to say that Jesus simply felt more comfortable doing ministry with "his own people."

Then, just when it looked like Jesus was heading in the direction of racial and cultural sameness, just when it looked like Jesus had no interest in diversity he slips in two of the most improbable names and two of the most unlikely men you could have imagined in first century Israel. Their names have been included in the Bible from the very beginning, but we have been slow to recognize just how startling it was that Jesus would call these two men to be numbered among his disciples. Along with Peter, Andrew, James and John, Jesus also called Matthew the tax collector and Simon the zealot. That may not mean much to this 21st century audience in the United States, but in the context of 1st century Israel this selection of disciples was shocking to say the least.

Let's start with Matthew the tax collector; he was one of the most hated men in Israel. Tax collectors were Jews who worked for the Roman Empire whose army was occupying Israel and whose laws regulated much of Jewish life. The tax collector was the person who gathered money from Jewish people, gave that money to the local Roman governor, who used that same money to maintain the army that was holding those Jewish people in bondage. I should remind you that tax collectors, like Zaccheus who is mentioned in Luke 19, had an unusual job incentive. Tax collectors had a quota given to them by Rome that they had to meet if they wanted to keep their job. However, once they had reached their quota they could keep for themselves any additional money they were able to generate from their own people. Thus, tax collectors not only collaborated with the Roman oppressors, but most of them managed to get rich in the process.

Everybody in Israel hated tax collectors, and yet when Jesus called his first disciples one of them was Matthew the tax collector. It was all well and good that Jesus would express some support for Matthew, but the selection of a tax collector raised a recruiting problem. Once you have picked a man that everybody hates who else do you expect to recruit as a member of your team? Once Jesus had selected Matthew the tax collector as one of his disciples it seemed unlikely that anybody else would be willing to sign up for service.

However, Jesus was able to find an additional recruit for the work of being his disciple, and in identifying this person we see what Jesus has been trying to teach us about differences and diversity from the very beginning. The person that Jesus was able to recruit to work with Matthew the tax collector was Simon the zealot. If you can imagine Dick Cheney agreeing to work together with Louis Farrakhan than you can imagine what it was like to expect a tax collector and a zealot to work together. Matthew worked for Rome and Simon was a sworn enemy of Rome. Matthew raised money to support the Roman army while Simon took up arms to fight and hopefully to kill Roman soldiers. In fact, the only people that Simon might have wanted to kill as badly as Roman soldiers might have been Jewish tax collectors like Matthew.

This was the most unlikely match up in the Bible. Nobody in 1st century Palestine would have thought about trying to bring Matthew and Simon together. Neither Matthew nor Simon would ever have agreed to work on something together. If there had been a 1st century equivalent of a computerized matching service like e-harmony.com it would never have matched up Matthew the tax collector and Simon the zealot. But here in Matthew 10 that is exactly what happens; Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector and Simon the zealot. As remarkable as their selection might seem to us, here is something even more remarkable; both of them agreed to come.

I cannot imagine what the first encounter must have been like with Matthew and Simon were drawn together. All I know is that when they were called they came, and once they had come they stayed. Not only did they stay with Jesus, but apparently they stayed with each other. We never hear anything more from them. They are not the ones who caused Jesus any trouble. It was not Matthew or Simon that were caught by Jesus wondering which of them was the greatest; that was Peter, Andrew, James and John. It was not Matthew and Simon refusing to believe in the resurrection of Jesus until they could see him for themselves. That was Thomas. It was not Matthew or Simon that denied three times even knowing Jesus and it was not Matthew or Simon that kissed him and delivered him into the hands of his enemies. When Matthew and Simon came together they remained together with no conflicts recorded; they were, to say it plainly, "Together in the Lord."

I should remind all of us that God can call anybody God chooses into service as preachers or deacons or any other position, no matter what that person's background may be and no matter how unlike others in that church that person may be. God is not in the business of limiting His selection to the principle of conformity. Not everybody came to the ministry by my route. God began calling me into the ministry in 1964 when I was only 16 years old, but the process was not resolved until I was working for Poole Brothers Print Shop; whose major client was Playboy magazine. I was 17 years old and working at a printing company that made Playboy. In 2010 that does not carry much shock value, but in 1966 when you told your friends that you helped to produce Playboy magazine you were the most popular man in Chicago.

I assured my mother that I did not work in that section of the shop where the photos were produced; my actual job was setting type for stories and advertisements. However, I knew how to find my way to where the pictures were being printed and collated, and I must confess that I spent an extraordinary amount of time away from my work area and where the more "interesting" part of the job was going on.

However, one day while on a lunch break at Poole Brothers Printing I was reading the newspaper and saw that Martin Luther King, Jr. was coming to Chicago that very night to begin an open housing campaign to draw attention to the fact that my hometown of Chicago was the most racially segregated city in the United States. I had been watching the civil rights movement on TV as if the problem resided somewhere else, and now here I was being told that I was living in a place far worse both in segregation and in hatred than Birmingham or Montgomery or Selma or any of the southern cities I had been hearing about.

The summer of 1966 changed the direction of my life. I left my job as a printer and went off to college to study for the ministry. The admissions office did not hold against me the fact that I had gone to a vocational high school and had worked as a printer making Playboy. More importantly, God did not hold that against me, because God calls people from everywhere. The challenge is for us to be willing and able to work alongside of other people no matter how different from our own their past may have been.

Now here is the point I want to make from this text; God does not hold against us who and what we were, and we should be willing to do the same for one another. Christ could cause Matthew and Simon to come together and remain together. If those two men could come together despite everything that divided them, then surely all of us and all

Christians everywhere can truly be together in the Lord. However, that is the phrase worth remembering. The only way we are ever going to be *together* in the Lord is when we truly become together in the *Lord*. Nothing else can bring us together and keep us together; our only hope is to be together in the Lord. It will not come as a result of national pride, or partisan politics, or racial and/or ethnic unity. Those bonds are easily broken whenever greed or hatred or prejudice or the lust for power begin to attack our lives and or institutions. The only hope we have is what happened to bring together Matthew and Simon; they were together in the Lord!

If we as Baptists are ever to overcome our divisions of race, gender, class, and doctrine, it will only come when we place Christ above and before our narrow and petty agendas. The reason we are so divided as Baptists, both between the races and among ourselves is because we are willing to ignore what Christ did in Matthew 10 and form our churches and conventions and denominations along lines of sameness and conformity. There is nothing I know of nothing in this world that can or will lead us away from our tendency toward self-segregation and toward a genuine acceptance of difference and diversity except Jesus. We must be together in the Lord like Matthew and Simon.

There are many songs that we sing that point to this fact, but apparently we don't really hear what they are saying. One song says:

*In Christ there is no east or west,
In him no south or north,
But one great fellowship of love,
Throughout the whole wide earth.*

There is another song that says:

*Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
All are precious in His sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

We know these songs and we have been singing them for years inside of churches that are defined not by Matthew and Simon, but by Peter, Andrew, James and John; our two thousand year concession to racial and cultural conformity.

However, I have an experience of what it feels like when the shackles of sameness are broken and we Christians are able to delight in our diversity. It happened when many of us went some years ago when I was invited to preach at the Chinese Christian Church of Cleveland located on Trebisky Road in Richmond Heights. At that time I had no idea there was a Chinese Christian Church in Cleveland, and given the history of both Communism and Buddhism and other traditional Chinese religions I was not that aware of Chinese who were Christians. I was anxious to experience this event, and many members of Antioch accompanied me that day.

There was one thing that was not mentioned when I was invited to preach to the Chinese Christians which was that many of them spoke very little if any English. That seemed to have been a detail they might have mentioned to me when I was invited, but I

did not discover this until I arrived there that morning. I should remind you that while they spoke very little English, my Chinese was also very limited; moo shu pork, shrimp chow mein, and Peking duck was about as far as it went. This was going to be a tough morning.

However, my hosts had a plan; they arranged for me to have a translator that would take whatever I said in English and translate it into Mandarin Chinese. I can only assume that what I was saying in English is what he was saying in Mandarin; but it seemed to be working. Of course, there was another problem which was that about half the congregation did not speak English or Mandarin; they spoke Cantonese. So there was a man in a booth in the back of the church wearing a set of headphones and speaking into a small microphone. His job was to take what he heard in Mandarin and translate it into Cantonese so the other half of the congregation would know what I was saying.

There we were with two cultures and three languages going on at the same time. I really had no idea how things were going except for one thing; every time I said the name Jesus in English the people who spoke Mandarin and the people who spoke Cantonese knew the name of Jesus. I don't know how to say Jesus in Mandarin or Cantonese, but when those translators said that name in those two languages it was as if all of our cultural and linguistic differences began to melt away. At that moment, and every time I think about that day I can hear the words of Philippians 2: 10-11 that says:

*At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
In heaven and on earth and under the earth,
And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord
To the glory of God the Father.*

That passage constitutes one of the earliest hymns or songs of praise of the Christian church. Let me end this sermon by reminding you of another song of praise that holds the key to the church being able to work together and worship together and serve together despite differences of race, gender, culture or class. This song says:

*The name of Jesus is so sweet,
I love its music to repeat,
It makes my joy full and complete,
The blessed name of Jesus.*

*Jesus, O how sweet the name.
Jesus, every day the same.
Jesus, **let all saints proclaim,**
His worthy praise forever.*

If this church or any church is ever going to be **together** in the Lord it will only happen when we, like Matthew and Simon find ourselves together in the **Lord**.