

A New Community: “Added”

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.” (Acts 2:41 NLT).

PECULIAR

“You seem a bit peculiar.” That’s not a phrase I ever enjoyed hearing, though I heard it a lot. There I was—8 years old, wearing a 3-piece suit, bow-tie, and carrying a briefcase. Inside said briefcase was a humongous 4-version Bible and all the pens, paper, and magnifying glasses needed to look for mistakes in the weekly bulletin. This was my usual Sunday morning attire. When my little buddies were out playing in the yard, there I was sitting at my desk with a tape recorder, intermittently hitting the “pause” button every few seconds so I could transcribe a sermon. I was 8; but as you can tell, I was quite the ladies’ man. Can’t quite figure out why I remember this phrase so well: “You seem a bit peculiar.”

If you look it up in the dictionary, the kindest definition is this one: “marked different from the usual.” But Collins online dictionary puts it more blunt: “If you describe someone or something as peculiar,” says Mr. Collins, “you think they are strange or unusual, sometimes in an unpleasant way.”¹

Well, there you go. I knew it wasn’t a compliment. And then just to add insult to injury, one day in Sunday School we opened our Bibles to 1 Peter 2:9. And there it was, plain as the nose on my face, sitting there in my King James Version as if it were laughing at me. “You are a chosen generation,” read the text, “a royal priesthood, an holy nation,” and—what’s that? “a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9 KJV).

¹ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/a-bit-peculiar>

I wonder sometimes if God in his infinite knowledge allows our imprecisions, and our misunderstandings to teach a lesson that we wouldn't get any other way. You probably already have looked at another version of that verse. There you might read "God's own special people" or "a people for God's own possession." God's not making fun of us; he is calling us "different" because unlike the rest of the world, we are adopted as sons and daughters, heirs of God and joins heirs with Christ. Oh yes—that makes us unusual. Different. Special. Maybe "peculiar" fits just fine.

After all, most church folk are a little, shall we say "peculiar." The early church, writes the Apostle Paul, was not made up of the line leaders, or the kickball captains, or the trophy winners. No—the early church was mostly made up of the kids who sat at the peanut allergy table; the kids who would barter away the desert their mom put in their lunchbox in order to avoid being picked last for kickball. Or so I've heard...you know...from someone else. Asking for a friend.

In the 2nd century, a famous unbeliever saw Christians hanging around the prisons—giving food and drink to hurting prisoners. Attempting to make fun of them, he said Christians are made up of nothing more than "orphaned children and dried up old widows." His words, not mine. "Not many of you are considered wise according to worldly standards," says Paul. "Not many powerful. Not many of noble birth." (1 Cor 1:26). Far less "have's" and far more "have not's." In a word, "you seem a bit peculiar."

It's helpful to say it out loud. The church throughout the centuries, from beginning to now, is a rag-tag group of square pegs in a world full of round holes. We are the assembly of the weird. And praise God for that.

Knowing that makes this verse taste all the sweeter. You and I—the baptized—we were "added." "I want *her*" said Jesus, as he stood in the midst of the crowd. Pointing at you. "I want *him*," said the Father, looking down on you even as you were feeling down about yourself. "I want *them*," said the Spirit, reading your mind and weighing your heart, finding sincerity, mixed with doubt, struggling, but wanting to believe. If you are still standing against the fence, fingers clutching the metal rings, hoping against hope that today just maybe you might get picked, I'm here to tell you – *you have been added*. You're on the team. You're on the roll. You've been picked. The less than's. The missing outs. Welcome to the assembly of the *wanted*. The added. That includes you.

If we were added by Christ, then we belong to Christ. When Paul writes his letter to the Christians in Rome, he begins by calling them "you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:6). This means we belong to each other. "It was about this time," says Acts 12:1, "that King Herod arrested some who *belonged* to the church." When Saul (later called Paul) went looking for letters to arrest Christians, do you remember what

he called them: “those who *belonged* to the Way” (Acts 9:2). That’s you and me. We belong.

NEVER JOINED

The text says you and I, baptized disciples of Jesus, we were “added.” It doesn’t say we joined. “Added” is a passive word. It speaks of something done TO us. Something done FOR us. I love that the Bible puts the glory where the glory is due. It doesn’t say that “those who were baptized proved themselves, earned a spot, or signed up for a deal.” It says we responded to Jesus. And the Lord added. We see it three times in Acts. “And about 3000 souls were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). “More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (Acts 5:14).

I’d like to say this loudly, if I knew how to scream. Even on my angry days, I only go from a 2 to a 4. Hear me now: *God picks his team*. The focus here is on God. God calls. He beckons and chastens. He sent Ananias to Paul’s bedside. He opened Lydia’s heart. He inspired the writings of the apostles. He put you in a family that told you about Jesus; he called that preacher who preached about Jesus. His Spirit led that missionary to your village to share the good news about Jesus. Sometimes all we see is what we did, and we forget all that went before, or even what is really happening on the other side of the curtain. This is a story about God. *You didn’t join the church. God called you into it. He added you to it.* “Herein is love,” says John; “it’s not found in us. It’s not that we loved God. That’s not how we know love. That’s not the definition of love. That’s not the story of love. *It’s that God loved us* and gave himself to die for us.” Yes, you and I chose to say yes to Jesus. But don’t you ever forget that God in Christ *first* said yes to you.

And that not only buries our envious pride; it carries an enormous responsibility. “Jesus I like, but the church—you can keep it.” “Leave the church, but give me Jesus! Because I don’t want the church.” You’ve heard that. Things like that. You might have even thought or said something like that yourself.

To dwell in love with saints above,
Oh my, that will be glory.
But to dwell below with saints I know,
Well, that’s a different story.

There are so many things I’d like to say. When someone says “I don’t want to have anything to do with church, there’s too many hypocrites there,” I want to say, “thank you for thinking of us, but I assure you, one more will not be a problem.” And sometimes I want to say “what hurting person ever says I don’t want to go to the ER.

There's sick people there!" This is not a museum for saints, it is a hospital for sinners. So, what exactly did you expect to find? Yes, I want to say all of that. You've heard all those lines before.

So maybe for this opening lesson I'll just put it like this: If you are in Christ, you've been added. What do you with that fact is up to you. God added you to the team. We've got a hole in right field. And you've got a mighty fine arm. Shame you aren't interested at game time. But your name is on the roll.

You've been added. If you belong to Christ, you are part of the body of Christ. That's what church is. A whole lot changes when we think this way. For example, I'm a big fan of unity. Big fan. I mean, it was the center of Jesus' last prayer for his disciples. But when Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, he tells them that by the Spirit, it is his prayer they may "*maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." It's worth noting that he doesn't say "*create* the unity of the spirit by offering peace." When we see a rift, we usually assume that if we act peacefully, maybe just maybe we can create unity. The text doesn't say that. *We don't create unity. We are called to maintain unity.* We've already been sown together. What we do about it, well that's up to you.

PART OF THE PUZZLE

If we have been added by Christ to his community, then we belong together. "We, though many, are one body in Christ," writes Paul, "and individually members one of another" (Rom 12:5). We are part of something bigger than ourselves. And every part is important.

I mentioned our need in right field. Well, if baseball doesn't work for you...I don't know what to tell you other than to repent. But I'm sure we can find other ways to make this point. Do we have any cooks in the house this morning? How about this one: You are an ingredient in the secret sauce. We are the aroma of Christ, and every new addition enriches the flavor. And that means we should expect some newness, some freshness with each new ingredient. I can just see God at work in the kingdom kitchen with his recipe book turned to "Church": "Let's start with some Peter and Paul for a stable dough; add some Caseys and Pickers to sweeten the pot, sprinkle in some Si Tilton for flavoring. To thicken the batter to make it rich and enriching, make sure there are plenty of Steve's and Carolyn's in there. And just for kicks, to make it stand out, maybe a drop of Devin Stewart. And stir. Yes, the gathered people of God: God's secret sauce. And it gets even better with each new member as God does the adding.

If cooking isn't your thing, maybe a body analogy would help. Paul puts it like this: every person added by the Lord to the body is a part OF the body. Maybe you're an

arm or a leg. Maybe a finger or a toe. I felt some Carpel Tunnel in my pinky, which led to a numb feeling for months. Seems like a little thing. But my whole mind and body experienced it. If you think your toe is unimportant, try stubbing it at 3 am on your way to answer the call of a screaming child. Or so I've heard. And not just that. Your toes support your foot. Your foot is essential for your leg muscles to do their thing. Your legs and arms allow your body to fulfill all those movements your mind directs. Every part...every part...has its place. Every part is needed. That's why every part is added. Equally added. "You are *all* sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus," writes Paul, emphasizing our individual status before the Father. "For *as many* of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is now no Jew or Greek, slave or free, no male and female, for you are *all one* in Christ Jesus." That verse emphasizes how our added nature makes us part of something larger than ourselves. We are added together to make up one body. We—together—make up one body of Christ.

ADDED THE SAME WAY AS THE OTHERS

There is one more aspect of "added" we need to discuss this morning. To get clear on. Just who do we mean by "we"? It seems clear in the texts that "we" refers to all who put their faith in Jesus Christ and share the experience of baptism. You saw that in Galatians 3, didn't you? "You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." You see that in our text this morning too, don't you? "Those who believed what Peter said were baptized," says our main text this morning, "and there were added to them about 3000 souls." I was added the same way you were added. The same way *they* were added. The say way people today are added to the body, the community of God's people. By grace, through faith, at God's appointed time. And in that way "I" and "you" become a "we."

There is no doubt in our world today that some draw the community of God's people too large. You'll hear the slogans "there are many roads that lead to heaven; Jesus is just one of them." But Scripture is abundantly clear that the foundation stone of God's community has been laid—and Jesus Christ is not only that foundation (1 Cor 3:11); he is the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20). "I am the way, the truth, and the life" declares Jesus Christ; "no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). If anyone is right with God they are right with God through Jesus Christ. There is no salvation outside of him. There is no true community without him.

But it's equally true that some draw the community of God's people too small. Have you ever noticed that something happens to us between kindergarten and high school? Think back to your high school cafeteria. Do you remember the tables? I do. The sports jocks sat over there; the nerds sat over there. The goth-looking kids all sat over there.

The foreign exchange students, they sat together as well. Based on our preferences, styles, interests and hobbies, where we live and how we look...we divide.

But kindergarten? Kindergarten was a free-for-all! I had a new best friend every day! And instead of looking for the smallest things to keep us apart, we welcomed any shared interest—like favorite crayons or lunch box superheroes—to prove once and for all we would be friends forever. We knew not everybody went to that school; but we assumed that everybody who went to that school *belonged*.

Maybe you appreciate the analogy. So many believers have become very comfortable with the idea of factions or parties (or, to put it another way, with being a certain “kind” of Christian) and sitting at their own table. You tell somebody today that you are a Christian, they will respond, “well I get that, but what *kind* are you? To which table do you belong?”

When Peter preached his sermon, telling all those gathered in Jerusalem that God has made the crucified Jesus both Lord and Christ, they were cut to the heart and asked how to respond. “Repent and be baptized,” said Peter. Do this in the name of Jesus. Do this and wash your sins away. Do this and receive God’s holy Spirit.

They responded with repentance and baptism. And the Lord added them. To what? To the saved. To the body. To the gathered people. He made them Christians. Yeah, but what *kind* of Christians?

Go back to Pentecost. 3,000 people surely represent a lot of preferences. Let’s imagine what *could* have happened. Some of those 3000 *could* have gathered themselves together and based on their love for the color blue became known as “blue hat” Christians. And another group could have separated themselves out and joined together with people who loved the color red and become known as “red hat” Christians. And still another group couldn’t stomach blue or red—not when *green* was readily available—so they could have made their own table and become known as “green hat” Christians. I could see that. In fact, if we fast forward just a bit, we *do* see that. We see 2000 years of that.

But go back to the original story. What if some of those Pentecost believers who had been added to the body, added to the saved, made Christians at their baptism, were to say “we don’t want to be blue hat Christians, or red hat Christians, or green hat Christians. In fact, I’m not too crazy about the fact that you’ve gone out and separated yourselves by that, giving the impression to the world that the blue hats and the green hats aren’t on the same team. “Well then,” they shout back, “what color hat are you and what is your group going to be?” “We don’t want to be any color hat,” this last band of believers reply. What would you call them? I imagine they would call themselves

“Christians.” Just Christians. When believers divide up into differing groups and parties, it isn’t long before we love our parties more than we love Christ. But what if we tried with all our might to be “Christians only.” What if I didn’t hang my hat on what “kind” of Christian I am, but was simply content with just being a Christian? To belong to nothing more than what Christ has added me to?

That’s a beautiful dream, isn’t it? It is a beautiful dream. Of course, there is a reality that would be unfair for us to ignore that comes along with that dream. If there is a group that refuses to wear blue hats, or green hats, or red hats, I suppose someone could legitimately call that group “the no hats” and give them a table of their own. I mean, choosing to join together on the basis that you all agree not to be joined together by any statement that joins you together is, in fact, what constitutes you as a group joined together. That’s a messy way of saying this: I don’t know if there is a way in the modern world to be “just a Christian” to everyone’s satisfaction. Some shared name on the sign out front is usually inevitable—to let people who think like you know that if they are visiting a new town they might find people who also don’t want to wear any of those hats. The “no hat” people meet here. That happens in history. And that’s why it’s not a coincidence to find people who share this “no hat” dream, but they went to the same church camps as kids, went to churches that had the same song books, they went to the same college, their preachers went to the same lectureships, their churches used the same VBS material, and when Disney or the local baseball team had offered a special discount day for all who consider themselves the “no hat” kind, they instinctively assumed that was meant for them.

I’m talking about natural grouping. I don’t believe anyone should feel guilty or try to deny or explain away the fact that even among those who share the “no hat” dream, we have shared characteristics. But if we’re not careful, we can move from finding common cause with such people, to finding our comfort *only* with such people, and finally to finding our *identity* only with such people. And then, before you know it, its only the “no hats” that we even recognize as Christians in the first place. And when that happens, we’ve become the very thing we set out to deny.

When it comes to “we,” those added to the body, “we” must include whoever God includes. Or, to put it another way, *if God does the adding, who am I to do the subtracting?*

In 1928, N. B. Hardeman (of Freed-Hardeman fame) held a weeks-long meeting in the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee. His sermons not only were given to a packed house, but they also ran in full in the *Tennessean* and the *Nashville Banner*. I say all that to emphasize these words do not express some fringe position by a straggler in our movement on some random occasion. This was a central component of what Churches of Christ, at that time, could assume we all believed. Here is the quote:

I have never been so egotistic as to say that my brethren with whom I commune on the first day of the week are the *only* Christians on this earth. I never said that in my life. I do make the claim that we are Christians *only*. But there is a vast difference between that expression and the one formerly made.²

Did you hear that interesting line? “Christians only...but not the only Christians.” What a beautiful idea. It wasn’t original with him; it had been a slogan among restoration leaders for nearly a century before that. It is a recognition of all whom Christ has added, not just those who think and agree with me. That’s harder than it might seem, since it’s so easy to slip into a sectarian mindset. How many times have you or I read a story about some famous sports player or politician or some other public figure, and they happen to mention the name on the church sign where they attend, and because it sounds familiar we’ll find ourselves saying, “I didn’t know he was a member of the church!” And that phrase “member of the church” becomes synonymous with “worships like I do; has the same church sign as I do; grew up singing #728B like I did.” But if we look beyond anything but what God added me to, by his own design, as we see in this text, we would care only about one name—the name of Christ. And while working to please Christ in every way, to worship like he would want us, and to believe as he would want us, we would accept whoever God accepts, and let God do all the adding.

There is nothing so freeing, so liberating, as resting on this and this alone: *God does the adding*. And I’m content in my faults and misunderstandings to stand with Christ and rejoice with anyone else who does the same.

As I grow in maturity, and as I come to find ways the Lord would have me live, I know that my circle of participation may narrow. I may discover there are activities I cannot in good conscience join in—as I read Scripture. There may even be those difficult situations where a congregation will need to send one of their own out from among them in keeping with the Lord’s command to cease all fellowship with a brother caught up in harmful, sinful actions and beliefs and we do so with tears to help them see the error of their ways. Yes, that circle may narrow. The discussion of how I treat my Christian brother, or when I need to warn or refuse to join in something with my Christian brother is an important question. Addressed elsewhere in Scripture.

² N. B. Hardeman, “Unity (No. 1),” *Hardeman’s Tabernacle Sermons*, Vol III (repr., Henderson, TN: FHU, 1990), p. 125.

But on this day, Pentecost day, those brand new soaking wet believers knew one thing: they were added to one and only one body. And so was everybody else baptized that day.

Before two Christians disagreed about how many communion cups are allowed on the Lord's table (one or many), both of those Christians were added, and added together.

Before two believers found themselves at odds with one another over whether to support a missionary society, both of those Christians were added, and added together.

How a church spends its money, or uses its buses, or conducts its Bible classes; how two believers differ in their understanding of the operation of God's Spirit, or how to conduct a worship service. How one thinks the world will end, or how long it took for God to create it. These are issues over which Christians differ and even divide. But not one of those issues made you a Christian. Not one of them was asked on the day you were added. A simple confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and a plunging in the waters of baptism. And you were added.

Don't you find it appealing to begin your conversations on difficult and important Bible matters by seeking as much common ground as possible? What if we acknowledged all whom God has added, and prayerfully consider that the seed containing the simple message might have fallen on more fertile soil than our language sometimes implies? It cannot be relegated only to people who are just like me.

CONCLUSION

Added. Even though I'm a bit peculiar, I was added. When I see love and warmth, care and healing provided by this community for members of this community, I remember with a smile that I was added. When I see the needs of others, and the call for all in the community to serve a vital role, I hear the call for I was added. And with others who have responded to the gospel of Christ through faith, with others who have risen from the healing waters, back before and beyond our differences, I know that we have been added. I hear the joy. I hear the challenge. And I hear the opportunity. God, you can count me in.