

Tension in the Upper Room



Gary Wilkerson June 20, 2016

Whenever Christians speak of the Upper Room, they usually refer to Pentecost. The very phrase “Upper Room” carries joyful meaning for the church, and not just because amazing things took place that day. It was an event filled with powerful promises for every follower of Jesus throughout the ages.

The Upper Room was where Jesus’ disciples gathered 40 days after his Resurrection at his instruction. The Holy Spirit fell on that gathering just as he predicted, with flames above their heads and a new language pouring from their tongues. Passersby were astonished at the sight, and the Holy Spirit moved Peter to preach to them. Before that day Peter was a broken man, still haunted by his denial of Jesus. But now he was filled with boldness. When he preached the Good News of Christ to the gathering crowd, 3,000 people received salvation.

The Upper Room speaks of refreshment, reinvigoration and renewal for the work of God’s kingdom. Acts 3:19 tells us such times of refreshing would come to all who follow Jesus. The promise of the Holy Spirit was a major part of that refreshing.

But the Bible also mentions yet another Upper Room experience. This one happened several weeks earlier, and the disciples had a very different type of experience there. That Upper Room was the setting for the Last Supper the night before Christ’s death on the cross. On that evening Jesus talked about difficult subjects—the suffering he would endure, his approaching death, and the fact he was leaving the earth and his closest friends, the disciples.

None of this was easy for them to hear. In fact, they were shocked. They were used to the thrill of seeing their Master perform miracles—walking on water, feeding thousands with a few bread loaves and fish, healing people who were crippled from birth, driving demons from tormented people, even raising a dead man to life. Jesus was clearly the long-awaited Messiah that God’s Word promised, coming to establish God’s rule on earth. Imagine how it felt to hear that this was all over. Why was his wonderful reign suddenly ending? When Jesus shared these difficult things, the disciples went into a kind of denial.

To follow Jesus means more than receiving blessings and seeing miracles. It means taking correction, even rebuke when necessary. That’s not a popular topic on Sunday mornings or among Christian authors. To tell people hard things isn’t politically or culturally correct. But God isn’t the culture—he’s our family. And like any responsible parent, he doesn’t shy away from directing his children onto the path of life and away from things that lead to destruction. At times that means confronting hard things.

That’s what Jesus did in the first Upper Room. When he declared he was going to his death, Peter objected, saying everything was fine. Christ responded with surprising force: “But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man’” (Matthew 16:23, ESV).

Talk about awkward. You’ve probably been in gatherings at work or around the dinner table where the atmosphere suddenly turned tense. It’s not a great time for anybody. Yet what Jesus did here was just as crucial as what happened in the second Upper Room. The Bible tells us why: “Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart” (Psalm 51:6).

This kind of painful instruction comes in the first Upper Room. It's about doing business with God, and the news may not be easy to hear. But it's absolutely necessary—because we'll never have a second Upper Room experience without the first.

The Upper Room experience is not a one-time event.

God uses the Upper Room in our lives again and again, in cycles. The first Upper Room—the heart-check meeting—has to happen before we can experience the second Upper Room of refreshing and reinvigoration.

My father used to call this first Upper Room experience “being taken to the woodshed.” It's about addressing things in our lives that aren't honoring to God. At those times, he tells us, “There's an elephant in the room, and I've got to name it. You're drifting from me. You've placed your affections on earthly things, and you've lost your first love for me. I won't allow you to go any further without addressing this.”

At the first Upper Room, Jesus wanted to deal with the mixture in his disciples' hearts. They probably didn't even know such things were inside them. The clearest example is Peter, who told Jesus he would follow him to the death. The Lord challenged him on that: “Jesus said to him, ‘Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times’” (Matthew 26:34).

Peter might have been just trying to make things better than they were. But God won't allow any sugarcoating of serious issues. We might try to wave off difficult subjects with levity, but our Lord has a serious agenda: to get our hearts aligned with his. That is the only way to life.

Are you experiencing a first Upper Room right now? Are there things in your life you know aren't pleasing to God? John 14 makes clear he wants to deal with it. He wants to redirect you from a path of malaise, compromise and potential destruction. To accomplish that, he won't pull any punches. His response to Peter was harsh, but we know from the outcome it was an act of love. Jesus was saying, in essence, “I know you love me, Peter. But there's an agenda in your heart that isn't God's. I'm confronting it now because I don't want it to become palatable to you. I have greater things in mind for you.”

We all have reckonings with God; it comes with being a Christian. And the effect of God's holiness is to bring every hidden thing to light. If there is any darkness in us, his way is to expose, confront and address it before he brings an outpouring of blessing.

Yet if we're honest, we'll admit we tend to keep our dark areas hidden. We're ashamed to expose those areas to another person. But sometimes that's exactly what we need to do, to help remove sin's grip on us. This kind of intimate confession requires a trusted friend—someone who can walk alongside us, help carry our burden and stand with us in prayer. James describes the blessing that comes with this practice: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16).

The second Upper Room comes only to those who allow their hearts to be mended, healed, changed and transformed by the power of God's Word. If your heart is repentant—if you turn from sin and align your life with his Word—he'll restore you to his fullness. You'll experience Pentecost, the outpouring of his Spirit into a purified heart. And your joy for life will be renewed because your heart is strengthened by his holiness rather than weakened by sin.

In the midst of the tension, Jesus spoke a word of life to the disciples.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). A lot has been written about this verse. What does Jesus mean when he says we'll do greater works than those he performed?

We find a key in the last phrase: “because I go to the Father.” What exactly happened because Jesus went to the Father? We find out quickly in the scenes just after his death: Scripture says the earth literally trembled. Graves opened and the dead emerged to life. We're told Jesus preached the good news to the dead in Hades. Finally, when he ascended to the Father, he made this request for us: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever” (14:16). By going to the Father, Jesus was going to save all who called on him. He was going to provide resurrection life. And he was going to fill his followers with his very own presence through the

Holy Spirit. These works had never been done before while Jesus was on the earth. Out of all he did in the brief time after his death, it added up to this: He made us one with God. That could only happen “because I am going to the Father” (14:12).

This explains the greater works Christ said we would do “because I am going to the Father.” In our flesh we tend to think of “greater works” on the same scale as Jesus’ awesome miracles: feeding vast throngs with a few leftovers, walking on water, amazing demonstrations of healing power. But with this one phrase—“greater works than these will (you) do, because I am going to the Father”—Jesus showed us what that work is: to bring the light of his gospel—the saving, delivering, life - transforming gospel — to the world.

Scripture says the angels look down on us and marvel at the gift we’ve been given. Think about it: It’s one thing to offer physical healing to someone—it’s quite another to offer salvation for all eternity and abundant life for this world. Jesus gives us all the resources of heaven to deliver this Good News in truth and power: “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (14:13-14).

When we read this verse, once again we think of the amazing scale of Jesus’ jaw-dropping miracles. But Jesus speaks here of kingdom activity—salvation, transformation, life abundant. When he says, “Whatever you ask in my name,” our request will reveal what’s in our heart. Do we ask for miracles because we think they’ll bring God visible glory? Or do we ask for kingdom results no matter how small the scale? James warns, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (James 4:3).

According to Jesus, there is only one qualification to do the greater works he speaks of: “whoever *believes* in me will also do the works that I do” (John 14:12, my emphasis). Every Christian believes. That means we’re all capable of doing the greater works Jesus has ordained for us.

But to do those works, we must have a clean heart. The very next thing Jesus says is, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (14:15). We are to obey his Word. And if our hearts are cleansed, that obedience won’t be grudging but an act of love, as Christ says.

Do you have trouble keeping God’s Word? Here is Jesus’ capping promise to you: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth” (14:16-17). Note the word “Helper” here. Jesus gives us the help we need to obey him, through his Holy Spirit, who counsels us along our path.

I want to point out something subtle in this verse that I think is important. When John speaks of the Spirit, he uses a word that’s different from the other gospel writers. They use the Greek word *pneuma*, which has a meaning close to the word “breath.” But John uses the word *hagios*, which is masculine and can be translated “He-breath.” Jesus is saying, “The Spirit I send you is not a mist or a vapor. He is a solid person—another me.”

“In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him” (14:20-21).

What more do we need than this? Christ has filled us with his very own presence. And he manifests himself in us as we do the works he has laid before us. I urge you to pray along with me: “Lord, I’m willing—bring me to your first Upper Room. Speak to my heart; don’t leave me uncorrected in my path. Make your Word precious to me again, that I might do the works you desire. Do whatever you will to lead me into the fullness you desire for my life. You are my joy. Amen!”

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