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**Abraham was “A stranger living in tents” (Heb. 11:9, NASB).
(Brian Stiller)**

In my first devotional, we entered Abraham’s life, walking the hallway of faith and reminding ourselves of the stunning portraits of so many who, in the history of the Hebrew people, learned to engage with God in acts of faith.

Abraham was called to leave his homeland, wandering in a new and foreign land. That was his first act of faith. Then he set up home in a land promised by God, the place where he would build a people. This too was an act of faith. He planted his feet and settled his family on territory occupied by others, all based on a promise. Hundreds of years would pass before this land of promise became the land of possession, but Abraham could see with an eye of faith and there he lived, blessing the land.

The parallel for us is that we too are called to take up residence in the land, to be salt and light in the world we occupy. Indeed, our immediate inclination is to set up home and call it ours – to let the issues and demands of our place and time take over. We become immersed in the here and now and what we own, to the extent that eventually it owns us.

Again, we are looking at this biblical text as Pentecostals, more than a century into our sojourn. We are asking for a vision that will keep us from stagnating, as we lift our eyes of faith to prepare ourselves to be in the vanguard of God’s ways and plans.

This brings us to the second comment that the writer of Hebrews makes about Abraham. Yes, we know Abraham made his home there, but that is offset by this curious modifier about *how* he lived: “like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents” (Heb. 11:9, NIV).

You get a sense of two kinds of motion. On one hand, Abraham stays put, living in the land; on the other hand, he is on the alert, not locked into a permanent abode but ready to pick up at a moment's notice, move out and move on. Augustine of Hippo, in *The City of God*, describes citizens in the world as the Latin *parengreni*, or *resident aliens*.¹

I was raised in a church where hymns about heaven and the afterlife offered a weekly reminder that this home was temporary. But there is another take on this metaphor of “living in tents.” Thinking about heaven is not just to remind us that our location in the here-and-now is temporary or that our time of entry into our eternal home is coming soon. Living in tents also means that our current reality does not define our identity, hopes, and security.

We are in danger of making our homes in the promised land too comfortable. We build secure structures, homes, businesses, educational communities, and civil society, all to make our lives comfortable, secure, and predictable. All that is good. That's how we're made. I love to camp in the wilderness, but I don't want to live there. It is too discomfiting, unpredictable, and exposed to roaming bears and annoying skunks. So, if Abraham saw himself as a resident alien, what might that look like for us?

Pentecostal Revolution

Tom Holland, in his book *Dominion*, puts forward an argument that the gospel changed the world. His amazing research begins with how the gospel brought a halt to the despicable and torturous method of killing by crucifixion. In short, the gospel was revolutionary.²

¹ Augustine, *City of God*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) For a focused discussion on the Latin *parengreni* - resident alien see Gillian Clark's essay entitled *Rome, Jerusalem and Babylon: Augustine on transient empires and everlasting cities* in *Nation, State and Empire: Perspective from The Englesberg Seminar*, Axess, 2017 www.engelsbergideas.com

² Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019)

The Pentecostal Movement has also been revolutionary. It opened the door to understanding the Trinity in new ways. The Holy Spirit, so often an overshadowed member of the Trinity, was brought into full light, and the Church has never been the same since.

But history does not stand still. Celebrating that growth does nothing for tomorrow. We are now caught up in wars that we could never have imagined two hundred years ago. We are in discussions about perceptions of sexual identity that boggle my mind as I attempt to decipher the new definitions and acronyms that splash their way across public media. Swirling issues of justice, poverty, new forms of artificial intelligence, capital markets, conflicts and wars, and sabre rattling on many fronts are defining this age.

We have watched spiritual movements through the lens of history, seeing them come and go. We are no different. We too are susceptible to the classic triad – from movement to monument to mausoleum. Spiritual pride could quickly morph our movement into a monument. We have established our offices, churches, missions, foundations, scholars, and heroes. We set up global events, defined by our core beliefs but also celebrating who we have become in both size and influence. The makings of the monument are in place. But what should be next for us? Where is the place that we should occupy?

Our new phase will be different. The Pentecostal revolution has remade the Church. Our message resonates across the many religious boundaries that previously kept us secluded and shut out from each other. The future for us will be different from the past. The importance of the message doesn't change, but the message may take on a different tone.

As this Pentecostal revolution moves into a new phase, it might be wise for us to think seriously about how Abraham lived while occupying the land that was promised but not yet his. As a resident alien, he lived in tents.

Peter in his first letter to the Christians in Rome, the power centre of the world, addresses them in this way: “To God’s elect, strangers in the world scattered {...} who have been chosen.” He uses the phrase, “elect sojourners,” or “resident aliens” in some translations, to describe those living out the gospel in Rome. (See www.biblegateway.com for comparison of multiple versions of 1 Peter 1:1)

Peter picked up on Abraham’s pattern. One could argue that being a resident alien was a defining feature of the people of God even before Abraham was called. Noah too was a resident alien. The people of Israel were resident aliens in Egypt and again in Babylon. Jesus, even as a Jew who lived in a Jewish world and ate and drank from their culture, was an alien too.

In case you are planning to carve up this “resident alien” business and say “I’ll be 50 percent resident and the other half alien”, it doesn’t work that way. We are both 100 percent residents and 100 percent aliens. We do not split ourselves half and half with the logic of creating a whole. In this regard, we are not unlike Jesus who in his Incarnation was both wholly divine and wholly human. The integration does not come about by getting half of each. We are fully residents, living in the land, and also fully alien, living in tents. Neither can we shift from one status to the other when it seems convenient. God calls us to live fully in the land but to do so as aliens living in tents.

What might it mean for us as Pentecostals to be aliens living in tents? I want to consider a proposition that may enable God’s Spirit to hold us as an effective tool, rather than allowing this movement to become a monument or mausoleum. This marvellous metaphor of living in tents prompts me to see Abraham as one who was free to respond to God’s call to move on.

To develop this argument, I will start by asking, what is central to our life and witness? We agree that it is Christ. Then what would be most critical to that witness? What constitutes the singular and most potent elements of that witness?

- Is there something greater than the gifts of tongues?
- Is there something more important than the power to raise people from beds of sickness?
- Is there something more important than preaching under God's anointing?

Living in tents suggests remaining free from finding identity in where or how I reside. The tension of living in the land and yet living in tents is that pull-push action that helps me keep my responsibility to God in mind.

Of everything Jesus said, is there one call, one request that sums up his deepest aspiration?

I don't want to cherry-pick the answer. I want to carefully understand what he is asking of us and why it matters so much. Of course, we would cite the passage where Jesus says the greatest commandment is to love God fully and to love our neighbours as ourselves. But to me, the text that best describes Jesus' relationship to the Father occurs when he lets us listen to his prayer time. In John 17, we hear his intimate exchange with the God of all creation. That prayer embraces the grand narrative of creation, the majestic arc of him coming down and lifting us from brokenness and putting in place the eternal bond that cements God and his people.

To make sense of what it means to live in tents, we must be attuned to his prayer, so that his deepest desires will define both how we live in the land as residents and how we live in tents as aliens. In John 17, he expresses his explicit hopes and his deepest yearnings. In doing so, he gives us an inside glimpse of his call to us and his Church.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I

have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (Jn 17:20-23, NIV).

The past six decades have seen the Church expand as never before in history. Yet even with this dynamic outreach, division reigns within the evangelical Church. Multiple churches on the same street battle for members and presence, oblivious to others, acting as if they are the only “real” church in town. Political elections pit evangelicals against each other, divided by ideologies and rhetoric. It is a challenge to maintain a thoughtful and Christ-like presence when Christians are oppressed because of their faith, but these challenges are further escalated when certain Christians, due to their political and social preferences, demonise their brothers and sisters in Christ who might hold another view.

What is the global *zeitgeist* today? We see it within families, countries, and regions. Are not division and hostility the common parlance of today?

The strength of our Pentecostal community is our deeply held belief that Jesus is the expressed will of the Father and that the Spirit calls, equips, and empowers us for ministry. Yet, at the same time, as we pursue our calling and work to achieve goals, we end up with multiple denominations, independent churches, hundreds of thousands of ministries and agencies, often living and serving as if they are the only ones God is using.

In a decade of factionalism, what are we to do with the prayer of Jesus to be one as he and the Father are one (Jn 17:22)?

Jesus gave us the litmus test for disciples: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35, NIV). What a verse to stamp on our foreheads, at a time when loyalty becomes defined in terms of hardened views, often breaking friendships, and pitting believers against another. Where agencies, missions, and ministries too often seek for

position and prestige and as gamesmanship becomes our mode of operation, the Spirit is calling us into a special oneness in Jesus.

Jesus' call for unity was at the top of his wish list. He prayed that we might be one in him. There is power in unity. A husband and wife can handle enormous pressure when they are together in unity. Jesus' prayer is not window dressing. It is not to make life easier or to facilitate operations. Rather, it rises from the essence of the Trinity: where God is, there is unity, for within God, unity affirms loving relationships, acknowledging specific gifts and callings. This in turn generates mutual dependence, underscoring our calling to honour Jesus of Nazareth and make him known.

Could it be that in this very period of Church history, in the middle of unprecedented growth in the evangelical world, when divisions and factions seem too often to be the sign of who we are, the Spirit is calling us to change the narrative, to raise up a new standard of love for each other and a new determination to be one in him?

What does unity look like? Jesus' prayer builds our understanding of the relationship of the Father and the Son, a dynamic he invites us to live out. Indeed, the marker of unity notes what God is doing in our very lives. "My prayer is [...] that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21, NIV).

Unity respects the varieties of people, institutions, and ministries, yet always while reminding us that what we do is for the glory and in celebration of Jesus Christ. We are drawn up into him. He is the centripetal force that mitigates the centrifugal forces of our ideas, personalities, and plans. We affirm that "in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17, NIV). His gravitational pull works against my tendency to go my own way, to celebrate my tribe's success,

to view Kingdom life in terms of God applauding my own country, church, denomination, or theological variety.

Unity with others in the body of Christ is an idea that challenges the natural state of organisational life, which tends to its own self-interest. Unity is what we pray for. It requires discipline of the heart. It is something we should pray for and work to make so.

The idea of unity calls us to consider how we might affirm others in their calling and gifting, to find time to encourage and even promote others. It brings the presence of the Spirit into the varying gifts and strengths of those who choose to live in unity. Rather than going our own way, we acknowledge that the apex of our life, now and into eternity, is in the crowning of King Jesus.

What might the Church become if, in our own worlds, we made unity in Jesus more dominant than other worthy callings such as “engaging the culture”?

- We would be free from our own drive to be successful.
- We would be released from self-congratulatory reminders of how big and influential we are now
- It would break the bondage of trying to deliver the gospel on our own terms.
- We would be freed from our absolutes about what the Bible defines as “Spirit-filled.”

How might this change happen? We could imagine Christian leaders in a few countries agreeing to give greater attention to this call. Then, they might bring together other leaders for whom this call resonates, and in prayer and discussion, they would ask the Lord what unity might look like in the towns and cities of their country. From these results, we might anticipate the Spirit enabling a similar hope and prayer to emerge in other places. The influence of the

Spirit in making Jesus known through unity has crossed boundaries, overcome downright hatred, and melted hearts.

As we craft our various outreach strategies, along with clever and contemporary styles, we believe those things draw people to Jesus. Yet in John 17, we see Jesus describing this profoundly mystical relationship as that which matters most to him, even more than the polished marketing plans of our contemporary Church. The God of creation reminds us that living in unity is more powerful, enduring, and compelling than our grandest schemes. And in his prayer, Jesus gives a strategic rationale for this emphasis. As others see God's people in close relationships, this will be the best marketing device ever imagined, for in our bonding as his followers, people come to see Jesus in his grand and loving self. We may think that we need to advance compelling apologetics, craft catchy worship tunes, design attractive buildings, format dynamic media, and generate overwhelming presentations to call people to Jesus. What might happen if we made deeper Christian unity the foremost part of our vision instead?

In some countries, there is open warfare: church against church, pastor against pastor, deacon against deacon, taking political sides in verbal wars like I have never before seen. And amidst of all this, the Church seems separated by the same cleavages as the broader society. Divisions become so deeply ingrained that the idea of unity is not even an afterthought.

We know what lack of unity does in a marriage or family. I have looked into the troubled eyes of parents or young people who do not speak to each other, or whose family is broken by abuse or misunderstanding. At the core is a lack of love.

The solution is found in the love of God. Where you and I are his beloved, and when we are brought together within the boundaries of his love, that unity becomes a natural working base.

In this moment of national, regional, and global factions, one side pitted against the other, the solution can be found in Jesus' prayer to the Father that his people would be in unity as he and his Father are. And the gravitational pull that brings about unity again is the powerful, redeeming, transforming presence of his love.

That's a broader solution. How that comes about, I don't know. But I do know that the Spirit wants us, as resident aliens living in this land, to remain free and unhindered so that his love becomes our living reality, and so that the deepest desire of our risen Lord becomes reproduced in all we say and do.

So today, let us seek to settle our hearts in God, and as our hearts are nestled among the Trinity, we will then be positioned to answer the prayer of Jesus and, by so doing, to live as his called ones in the land while residing in tents. Being resident aliens is to live a real life in the enfolding circles of mystery. It is the Pentecostal way.

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