

## WHO'S ALL IN?

Over the course of this series on the church, we've spent a great deal of time talking about God's covenant love for His people. It's *covenant* love, not contractual love. He doesn't say, if you do your part, I'll do mine. That's a contract, not the New Covenant He established in the death & resurrection of His Son. Through the death of Jesus on the Cross at Calvary, God paid the penalty, the debt of our sin against Him. God put forth His perfect Lamb—Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man & the Son of God—to be sacrificed as our representative: “He made Him who knew no sin [Jesus] to become sin on our behalf in order that we might become the righteousness of God.” It's a doctrine theologians call *penal substitution*: even though Jesus knew no sin of His own, the Son of God became the Son of Man so that as a real, human, representative, as our substitute He could pay the penalty for our sin. Our sin was an offense against God. It couldn't just be swept under the rug. God is holy, righteous & good, but we have all fallen short of His glory, failed to glorify Him as He deserves; we have yawned at His righteousness & goodness, we have taken His loving benevolence for granted, we are sinners blinded by our own natural pride & arrogance. We cannot, we do not, we *will* not observe that God is supreme and worthy of all praise, and for that there is a holy & *just* wrath that simply must be dispensed upon mankind in order to justly uphold the righteousness of God. You would suffer that wrath. I would suffer that wrath. All mankind will suffer that wrath, except for those for whom Christ has already suffered as their perfect substitute.

To quote Jonathan Edwards, if “sinners in the hands of an angry God” are going to enter into an eternal covenant of love & joy with God, something must first be done about our sin problem. In our foolish disdain for God, we have made ourselves His enemies, children of wrath, as Jesus put it. “But God”—some of the sweetest words in Scripture, “But God”—“being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” Hallelujah! In putting forth His own Son, God poured out upon Him the wrath we all deserved, and in doing so, He exalted Him as the Savior of the world, before whom every knee will bow & every tongue confess: “Jesus is Lord!” So, step one in God's establishing His New Covenant with us: forgiveness of sin. In His great mercy, grace & love, God did that through His Son Jesus Christ.

The second part of the New Covenant involves *our* obedience to Him: observing all that He has commanded. And not just a gritted teeth, reluctant, begrudging, wish-I-didn't-have-to obedience, but the obedience that is rooted in faith, confidence, trust, joy & love: *care-full* obedience! As we saw in Jesus' explanation of the Great Commandment, we are not simply to

obey God but to “LOVE God with all our heart, soul, body & mind...” How terrible would it be for God to establish an everlasting covenant with us that meant we would spend eternity carrying out His will against our own: “I hate this. I wish He would have never saved me. Now I have to obey Him all the time. This is miserable.” Indeed, that sounds miserable; in fact it sounds like hell. That is NOT the sort of New Covenant of love God establishes with His people. It is a *love they love*. He causes us to be full of care about the things of Him. To transform our natural dislike for His will & purposes into loving agreement & faithful obedience to His good will & purposes, God gives us His very own Spirit, the Love that the Father & Son have enjoyed in & for one another from eternity past. In the New Covenant God promised to remove our hardened heart of stone and replace it with His own heart, with His own desires, with His own wants & will, according to His good & perfect ways. And in doing so our desires are transformed, are conformed to His.

So, in His great love for us, He put forth His Son whose death paid the penalty for our sins, washing us clean, establishing covenant with us, and then through the gift of His own Spirit, He has promised to cause us to obey all that He commanded, and not just cause reluctant obedience, but “cause us to be care-full to obey His commands,” as Ezekiel prophesied in chapter 36 verses 26 & 27. God established His loving covenant with us through forgiveness, and promised to uphold *our* end of the covenant as well by giving us a new Spirit so that, by the power of His own Spirit of love & righteousness dwelling within us, we would not reluctantly obey His good instructions, but *lovingly* observe & obey them. In Love He has forgiven us, and by His indwelling Spirit He is causing us to reciprocate our love/His Love back to Him. Praise the Lord! He is the “Author & Perfecter of our faith!” “*He who began a good work in you will bring it to pass.*” He is causing, He is producing within us love for Him, thus fulfilling within us that which He commands of us: to love Him with all of our heart, mind, body & soul.

But that’s not all we love. Last week we saw that there are two parts to His Great Command of love. It is not just a love for Him that His Spirit produces in us, it is a love for one another. We are commanded, not just to love God, but to love our neighbor as ourselves, and “especially the household of faith” according to Galatians 6.10. By the power of God’s Spirit at work within us, He causes not only our love for God, but also our love for one another, especially the people of God. And that brings us to the title of this series: “O How He Loves Her”. So now, after four weeks and two full pages of introduction, we have arrived at our subject for this sermon: the loving fellowship engaged in & enjoyed by the marked-off, set apart, separated, sanctified people of God, the Bride of Christ, the members of His household, the Church.

Welcome to church history 101: a (very) brief overview of God's establishment upon the earth of His alien civilization: *People of the Way*. Shortly after Jesus ascension into heaven, emboldened by the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts chapter 1, the apostle Peter stood up and declared before all the crowds & Jewish leaders in Jerusalem: "God made Jesus, whom you crucified, the Lord & Messiah!" Wowzers! That's some serious "hutzpah"! The kind that just might get you killed, especially in those circles. But that's not what happened at all. Instead, the Scripture says that the crowd was "cut to the heart" and began asking "What must we do to be saved." "Repent & be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive His Holy Spirit." (Ac2.38) Repent & be baptized, be marked, be publicly identified as different, as no longer belonging to the world, to satan, to sin, but make instead the public profession that you belong to Jesus now. In other words, the Bride of Christ would not simply elope, but she would have a very public wedding. The establishment of God's Kingdom upon the earth—His Church—was a very publicly identifiable movement of God. And I want us to notice what Dr. Luke says next in his account in Acts. In 2.41 he wrote, "those who accepted were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." Apparently they were taking note of names & numbers, weren't they? Just before Peter's sermon, the Scripture says there were about 120 followers of Jesus praying together. The Spirit came at Pentecost, Peter stood up and preached the Gospel, men were cut to the heart, and next thing you know, thousand were being added. And the church was taking count & keeping records. In other words, they knew who was part of their church family, didn't they?

Through the preaching of the Word of Christ, God's Kingdom, His alien civilization upon the earth was beginning to grow. They followed an entirely different code of conduct. God's Spirit of love, care & concern for one another was alive within them. They In Acts 2.46 we're told that they gathered daily in the temple courts, they shared meals together, they met in their homes with one another. And as they did, they continued to grow. Again Dr. Luke noted in 2.47 that "the Lord added to their number daily."

It wasn't long before persecution began to arise. You recall the stoning of Stephen? There was a young zealot named Saul there that day. He would spend his days going from house to house, dragging members of the Church off to prison for their love for Jesus. But, as the Lord would have it, as persecution arose in Jerusalem, God's people were scattered across the region. In Acts 1.8, Jesus told His small band of followers that when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were to reach the nations: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," He said, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and

Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” But up until Stephen’s stoning and the persecution that followed, the Church pretty much stayed put in Jerusalem. But that’s not what Jesus told them to do, was it? And so persecution arose, and in fear for their lives, the family of faith scattered throughout the region of Judea, taking the Good News of Jesus Christ, the message of salvation with them wherever they went. And next thing you know, faithful followers of Jesus started showing up in the surrounding regions of Samaria. And get this, word began to spread that even hostile Saul was converted. He was now called the apostle Paul.

Another little church family popped up beyond the borders of Syria in Antioch. God’s Kingdom was spreading beyond just the Jews. Even Gentiles were being converted by the Gospel. Paul & Barnabas were launching missionary journeys. The Church was exploding! Christian churches were showing love & concern for one another across national borders. Churches were planted in Philippi, in Thessalonica, in Ephesus, Corinth, even a renown Berean fellowship was born!

Special letters written by the apostles were circulated among the churches. Some were written to particular church families, but then copied & passed along to other churches throughout the region. God’s alien civilization was spreading through the world’s civilizations. While the people of God belonged to different countries & nationalities, ultimately & primarily they belonged to the Kingdom of God: dual citizenship, if you will. They were in the world but not of it, exiles, as Peter called them in his first epistle.

There were distinct, underlying, unifying aspects of God’s family. They were the people of the Way, the Way of Jesus, those who had been forgiven of their sins through Jesus’ death on the Cross, no longer children of wrath, but citizens of God’s Kingdom. For such a great salvation, they loved Jesus. He was the Lord, the Master, the Kurios of their lives. They lovingly obeyed His Word & instruction. Infused with His personality, His Holy Spirit, they too were humble & obedient to worldly authorities to a point, but their ultimate authority was Jesus Christ. They were His representatives, His Body upon the earth. Though scattered abroad through the world, gathering together in smaller church families, they were all still part of one another’s lives, still part of Christ Jesus. As best they could they cared, not just for those belonging to their own church family, but all of the churches cared also for one another.

All of these believers bore the mark of baptism into Christ, into His family. It was their way of saying, I no longer belong to the world, but to Jesus, to His family. As the Gospel was proclaimed, some folks were cut to the heart, just as had happened to those who first heard Peter’s message. They repented of their sin, and made the clear & distinct public profession of

their faith through baptism. It was an outward sign of their new inward affection & love for Jesus and His people. They put on Jesus robe of righteousness, they sported a new jersey, His uniform. They were now playing/living for a new team, for a new family: the family of God.

Life together shaped the life of the individuals who gathered together in those little local bodies of believers. They were stalwart individuals. They were a people living life together in Christ. They were oddities in the world, aliens, weirdos. They needed one another. God kept their faith in Him through the fellowship they shared with one another. God was alive in them, living & shaping their individual lives through their little called-out corporate lives together, through the little bodies of believers, the little church families that He had brought about through the preaching of Christ's Word, through the missionary journeys of men like Paul, Barnabas and John Mark. Wherever they would preach and a group of people would be brought to faith, they would establish leaders to watch over and care for the new little family of faith, for the new addition to the flock of God. Paul told the elders at Ephesus that it was their job to "keep watch over yourselves and *all the flock* of which the Holy Spirit made you overseers." Again in 1Pt5.2, Peter admonishes elders to "Be shepherd of *God's flock that is under your care*." It sounds to me like those particular elders were appointed by God to watch over, not the whole Church at large, but specific, smaller groups of people in smaller churches. Particular elders in their own little churches apparently knew the flock they were responsible for. To put it in a modern day illustration, Pastor Zesch was to keep watch over the flock at Bethany Lutheran, while Cody Carnett looks after Fredericksburg Christian Fellowship, and Pastor Paige and the elders of South Church care for the Lord's lambs that gather among our fellowship.

Throughout nearly 20 years of ministry, I've heard Christians say things like, "Church membership? That's something man made up. You won't find that in the Bible." Now to me that sounds a lot like a Jehovah's witness' argument that because the word "Trinity" isn't in the Bible, there's no such thing. But we know for certain that our One Triune God exists in three Persons: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. No, the word "trinity" may not appear in Scripture, but God the Father, God the Son & God the Holy Spirit are on every page of the Bible. That's like a fish saying, "Water, what water?" Church membership in the Scripture was just a normal, regular part of Church life; a given, if you will. No one had to say they word "membership" because, to be a Christian, meant you were a part of a local church, a smaller gathering of the called-out people of God, a fellowship of repentant, humble, united lovers of their Lord Jesus, salvaged from sin & death, adopted into His family, a family of brothers & sisters caring & concerned for one another, helping each other stay alive, continue faithfully pursuing, enjoying & loving their

Lord. As I mentioned earlier, in Acts 20.28 Paul told to the elders to keep watch over the flock that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers of. But if they didn't know who their members were, how would they know who to watch over? If you're reading along with us in the Know.Gd reading plan, later this week you'll come across Hebrew 13.17, where the author admonishes the church family to "Obey your leaders and submit to them." Well how could they know which leaders to obey & submit to if they didn't know who their specific leaders were? In no way whatsoever do I expect the members of First Baptist to submit to my leadership, but I fully expect them—I Biblically expect them—to submit to their pastor there at that church, to the shepherds God has appointed there. In 1Ti5.17 Paul wrote, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor." It is simply assumed that the Christians in those churches are going to know whom to honor, isn't it?

We're going to close here for now. I'm not exactly sure what the Lord has in store for us next week, but I'm hoping to explore this aspect of God's New Covenant family a bit further, and for that I hope you will join us. God is up to some good things here. Honestly, the growing pains can be agonizing at times. But by His grace we will abide in His promises to work all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purposes.

**SONG:** *O Church Arise*

## **COMMUNION**

**SONG:** *Victory In Jesus*

**BENEDICTION:** *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect... May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. –Ro12.2,15.13*