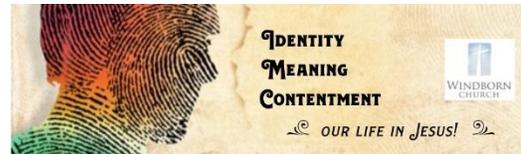


Lent 2018 ✠ Chapter 3
The Newness of the Church



When I was in junior high I had one of the best summer jobs a junior high boy could ever have. I got paid to dig in the dirt. All summer I re-dug irrigation trenches in one of my grandpa's brother's vineyards. It was awesome. Not every job is "the greatest" (I have cleaned college men's dorm bathrooms), but I hope that you have had good jobs. I hope that you have things "on your plate" and tasks that are enjoyable. As a pastor I get to hang out with God's people, and I get to hang out with God's Word. I love my job even for its hardships, because I love Jesus. So I love His church. I love the local church. I love the embodiment of the universal church. I love the concept of what Jesus has done in creating this thing called the church.

God has chosen to work differently with humanity throughout time. But yet, everybody that has ever walked the earth that has been saved, has been saved by grace through faith. As God revealed His plan for salvation, the object of faith became clearer and clearer: JESUS! In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve walked and talked with God. They received from God what He had for them, because He had graciously given them their life, given them this relationship. They were to trust in Him and then to follow Him by faith. Sin messed up, came into the scene, so then you have someone like Noah. It is said of Noah that he had favor with God. The word for "favor" is the Hebrew word for "grace." So God didn't look out at humanity and see one guy and his family that did the right things to earn God's love. God had poured out His grace on Noah, and, as a result, he lived differently than the people around him. Noah lived by grace through faith. But notice that the Law hadn't even been given yet. Before the Law was given, people walked in God's favor by receiving His grace--grace through faith.

Then God made a covenant with Abraham. A covenant is an agreement, a contract. This is God's way of saying, "I'm with you." Simply, it is God way to work with humanity in a love relationship. Covenant sets the space for God's people to experience His care and faithfulness. There are different types of covenant and they are initiated differently. In covenant, people are responsible to keep their end of the "deal." God is saying, "Look, this is what I have for you if you will follow Me. I want to bless you with my goodness,

which comes when you take your life from Me, and not from living in what you yourself think is wise.”

In Genesis 15, God instructed Abraham to arrange halves of “a heifer, a goat, and a ram,” “opposite each other,” creating a path between them. When the individual walked through the path, this initiation rite confirmed the covenant agreement. If they broke the covenant, they were legally required to have their own blood shed. Amazingly, only God passed through the path, suggesting He would shed His own blood when Abraham’s descendants failed the agreement.

Yes, covenant lays out a path for obedience. In fact, through Moses, God gives His people the Law to learn God’s way. The problem quickly manifests--no one can keep the Law perfectly. If a person removes or underemphasizes relationship, then he is on the fast track to Pharisaical legalism. In fact, just before the Israelites enter the Promised Land, Moses predicts, “You’re going to get this wrong, but God will provide,” (both Deuteronomy 17.14-20 and 29.9-30.20). Israel is not saved by obeying the Law. They are saved by God’s grace. Grace comes when one looks at covenant and the corresponding law.

Grace is not a license to sin. That is why the prophets keep calling God’s people to come back to following God’s love. The prophets voices are raised for reawakening, renewal, revival. Through the prophets, God is restoring His relational agreement for living in community with Him and with others. Nuances can be debated over coffee, but the Biblical focus is clear: God wants our hearts! When we walk in grace through faith, obedience happens. That is why David could say that God did not want sacrifice, but hearts, in Psalm 40.6,8. Anticipating regeneration, the newness of our hearts cannot be taken out of the grace context of covenant--before Jesus died for our sins. Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 talk about this new way God will work with His people.

Then comes Jesus.

“After taking the cup, He gave thanks and said, ‘Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body given for you; do this in

remembrance of Me.’ In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you.’” (Luke 22.17-20)

God has always wanted all people to walk and talk with Him. Humans, however, have wanted to find life on our own terms. God gives the Law. The Law points out sin. The Law points out our need for grace. The Law points out that the Savior is coming. But now, after the cross, after the empty tomb, after the ascension, the object of our faith has become crystal clear. JESUS! To walk in a grace relationship with God requires not a covenant but a person. JESUS! Relationship comes through relationship. JESUS!

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1-2.

A new covenant results in God calling to Himself a new people. He calls a people who previously had no relationship with Him to now bear his name (Acts 15.14; 1 Peter 2.10). This newness is manifested by the presence of the Holy Spirit. He said that He was going to put His Spirit on us (Joel 2) who would never leave. In the old covenant the Holy Spirit would come upon someone or help with a task but not permanently fill the Israelite. That’s why David prayed in Psalm 51, after his sin with Bathsheba, as he was confessing that sin, “Lord, take not your Holy Spirit from me.” This newness of the church gets kicked off in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. Now Ephesians 1 tells us that the Holy Spirit is never going to leave. He’s our deposit, our guarantee. Why? Because we are made new, because we don’t have hearts of stone. If we had hearts of stone, the Holy Spirit wouldn’t be able to indwell us all the time.

This is all grace. This is all grace through faith, even in the different ways that God has revealed Himself in salvation history.

Paul beautifully cements the importance of the newness of the church in redemptive history.

“For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in His flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” Ephesians 2.14-18

Within the context of Israel, the Gentiles were formally outsiders until Jesus destroyed the wall. Did you catch that? There was a people of God, the Israelites; the Gentiles were outside. He has brought them together as the people of God in the flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ, making a total new race. Again, you notice some continuity--the expansion of the concept of being the people of God, but yet you also see there is something new in the church that is different from Israel--the continuity of being the people of God, and the discontinuity, in the newness of the church. We were excluded from citizenship in Israel, but now that we are in Christ, our citizenship is not in Israel, but in this new thing called the church, through which “the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realms.” God had worked in Israel in the past and now he is working in the church. There is still a future for Israel. People in Israel and Jews can be saved, the same way we are, by trusting in Jesus. So you see the expansion of the people of God. Perhaps the best way to think of it is to consider the thousand years before the Law was given. The patriarchs, Job, Abraham, Adam and Eve, became people of God by walking in grace by faith, having a relationship with God. Then the Law came and that defined the people of God. But now that Jesus has come, the church defines what it means to be the people of God.

If we understand that grace through faith is the means for salvation, then we don't have to over-emphasize covenant, but we also don't have to under-emphasize covenant. And we can understand that what God wants is our hearts. And it's seen especially in this passage. He's taken our heart of stone and given us a heart of flesh. That's what he wants. So we see then how Jesus is the fulfillment of this covenant, of this agreement. As a result, we put Him on, we walk in Him. We let Him do his work. This is our identity as the people of God. We rest in Jesus. Jesus is our life. We take our identity in Him.