



18th GENERAL CONVENTION OF SYNOD



Bible Study 3 **... COMES TO LIFE.**

Consider the most troubling, protracted and bitter falling out you can imagine, or that you've been involved with.

You know the sort of thing: relatives not speaking to one another for years on end; estrangement that just goes on and on; and each and all justifying to themselves—and anyone who'll listen—why they are right.

Now turbo-charge it. Let it lead to bloodshed, even genocide. Let it fester for centuries. Let it breed suspicion, hatred and fear from one generation to the next. Let it bring forth terrorism.

And now let's have all that with divine justification.

Let the divisions, hatred, and even bloodshed, be legitimised by appealing to the Scriptures.

When you're at that point you're only just beginning to understand the world of the New Testament.

Paul was a religious zealot, of the strictest sect of the ancient Pharisees. They didn't want Israel to repeat the sins of the past. Israel had been sent into exile because of its disobedience to God and protracted rebellion.

The Pharisees wanted everyone to obey the holy writings and respect the long-standing traditions. They wanted to honour God, and believed that God would be pleased with them if they tried hard to venerate him, not least by purifying the nation of the ungodly. They were the moral policemen of the nation, in high-vis clothing. They were on God's side, so that Israel would be kept in step. If only that could happen long enough and well enough, the Messiah might come!

So, when you read statements like this from Paul's pen, 'There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free', you realise that something momentous and impossible must have happened. Here whole communities were living in the love and freedom that faith in Jesus brings.

Ah ... there's the key!

The divisions and hostilities we've been speaking of had a powerful catalyst: religion. Religion, not faith; a life lived law-way, not Spirit-way. It's self-righteousness, not gospel righteousness. It's holier than thou, not least of all.

We can barely understand what the New Testament Christian communities were like. The world had never seen anything like it! Jews and Gentiles were eating together, rejoicing in one another's new-found freedom in Christ. Their homes were open to one another. They were learning about one another's history and culture, all through the new eyes Jesus had given them. Jews and Samaritans, slaves and free, male and female, were serving one another in love, freely giving and receiving. Each was now a member one body: one of the other and all together they members of Christ. They honoured one another, prayed for one another, served one another, cared for one another.

In fact, if you take a list of all the 'one-anothers' in the New Testament they cover the whole gamut of life ... a life lived in love.

It was, literally, love come to life.

ACTIVITY 1

Read **Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37**.

- What are these believers doing?
- Why are they doing this? (Look at the immediately preceding context in Acts 2:36–41)?
- How would you describe the kind of love that they are showing each other?

Look at **Ephesians 2:11–22**.

- What do you know about the hostilities between Jews and Gentiles?
- Now what has happened to remove that hostility?
- On what basis was this possible?
- What practical difference might this have made in the lives of people who had lived with the enmity for generations?

The Pharisees showed their love for God by judging and condemning others, and by keeping themselves separated from outsiders. How different is God's love to ours! God did not judge or condemn us, even though we had rebelled against him. In John 3:17, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has not come to condemn the world but to save it!

Paul and the other apostles almost needed to invent a new vocabulary to describe this new kind of love that Jesus brought to them.

The Greek they used had a number of words for 'love', describing different types of relationships, but the New Testament writers didn't find these sufficient.

They took a little known word—*agape*—from the fringe of the Greek dictionary and filled it with a new meaning.

This is the sort of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

ACTIVITY 2

Read **1 Corinthians 13:1-13**, and then the comments from Martin Luther below (from his commentary on 1 John 4).

For nature loves, praises, does good, and speaks well as long as it has not been offended. But when you injure nature or oppose its will, then it does its own work, and its love falls away and turns to hatred, shouting, malice, etc. For its clinging was a matter of appearance, not of truth. It loved the person and the outward appearance, not the reality itself. It was a friend, not of the neighbour but of the neighbour's goods and property. Love, however, never falls away. It bears all things, believes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13:7). It loves an enemy as well as a friend. Neither does it change when the neighbour changes; for just as the neighbour remains a neighbour, no matter how much he changes, so love remains love, no matter how much it is injured or aided.

But Christian love is a strong kind of love that perseveres in the midst of trouble, approves its friendships on the basis of the services it renders, seeks the advantage of others, and is ready to give, not to receive. Indeed, genuine love hands out good things and accepts evil things; but carnality accepts good things and hands out evil things or at least takes flight.¹

- What differences stand out to you between God's new love and the old selfish human love?
- Where and how have you experienced God's love in your life?
- What changed for you when that happened?

The love of God comes to life in us through the gospel, which is to say, through Jesus himself. It's not just that he speaks to us in the preached word, but he comes to us in the sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not only reminders to us of God's love, but are also the ways through which that love comes to us in tangible form. In Holy Communion we have the word of God's love in a form we can taste and touch. But at every point, the emphasis falls on him, not us. It's his grace, his faithfulness, his love. These are our security.

So, along with Paul our main concern should be to see 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). He knew that to return to the old arguments—in his case about circumcision, dietary laws and Sabbath keeping—was to return to bondage. The freedom of love would be eaten away by the acid of legal religion. We can't come to God on the basis of anything we claim about ourselves. If that were the case, Christ died for no purpose.

¹Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 5-6; 1519, Chapters 1-6. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 27, pp. 353-354). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

ACTIVITY 3

Read **Galatians 5:13–26**.

- Why do we need the Holy Spirit to guide us and to help us to live this new kind of love?
- How does he do this?
- Why might the Spirit's work in us be described as fruit, rather than as deeds? What is the difference?

Love comes to life, in us.

Note the plural. It's not just in me (though that is true, too), but in us.

God's love is relational. It comes from the relationships between the Father, Son and Spirit. They open themselves up to us, to receive us, but even more, to make us participants in their life. We're not spectators, but participants.

God brings us into relationship with himself, and in so doing he brings us all into relationship with one another in him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way:

... a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. Among men there is strife. 'He is our peace,' says Paul of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:14). Without Christ there is discord between God and man and between man and man. Christ became the Mediator and made peace with God, and among men. Without Christ we should not know God, we could not call upon Him, nor come to Him. But without Christ we also would not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own ego. Christ opened up the way to God and to our brother. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together. To eternity he remains the one Mediator. ²

Life is inescapably relational. Where relationships are full and rich, life is full and rich. Where they're in tatters, life is hard, no matter how much we might try to fill the gaps with money, fame or power.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, HarperCollins, 1954) p. 23

ACTIVITY 4

- What experiences have you had of a relationship being restored and healed? What difference did these experiences make in your life?
- If Jesus is the source of God's love coming to life in us, and the Holy Spirit is the agent, how can we let that love grow in our lives? In the church?

End this session in prayer, thanking God for sending Jesus to make love come to life in us, and asking God to work in you in those areas where you still long for his healing touch.