

Covenant Life: A Living Testimony

Ephesians 5:6-16

preached @ Hawkwood Baptist Church
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Intro.

Let me tell you a story about an experience I had in my college days way back in the dark ages of about 1973. It was late November, the last week of classes before we got a couple days off for American Thanksgiving. Jeanne and I both went to Carson-Newman college, which is in the hill country of East Tennessee where it can get quite cold, or at least cold enough to snow. The particular day I have in mind was cloudy and cold, and outside a few snowflakes were drifting down. They weren't sticking, and there were too few to make a difference if they did. I was in the student centre getting a coffee, when suddenly the door burst open and a first semester student, a girl fresh out of Florida, came in crying. I asked what was wrong, and she said, "It's snowing, and it's so beautiful, and nobody cares!"

Do you see what I see?

I wonder if you've ever been in a place to appreciate something more deeply than those around you, and you found yourself wishing the others could feel what you were feeling, or see what you were seeing. Like two lovers walking through a crowded park. He's just asked her to marry him, and she's just said, "Yes," and as they walk together the whole world is suffused with a very special glow that apparently no one else can see—and the two of them wonder how the rest of the world can be so blind.

Or, like if you were a Calgarian living and working in Edmonton, and by some miracle the Flames were suddenly headed for the Stanley Cup, and you had to wonder why no one around you could understand that hell had just frozen over, and pigs were flying past the window, and the sun was suddenly rising in the west.

Are you as blind as the disciples?

When Jesus met with His disciples for the last supper you know He had to wonder how they could miss the importance of the evening, and the doom hanging over Him all through that awful night. He was about to be arrested, tried and crucified. Even worse, He Who knew no sin was about to take on the sins of the world as though they were His. He was about to hang on a cross between earth and sky, between heaven and hell, where He would intercede for a world that had rebelled against God (Isaiah 53:12). Meanwhile, His disciples were arguing among themselves over which of them was the greatest, and making promises to Jesus that He knew none of them could keep.

No wonder we see Jesus repeatedly trying to awaken them to the magnitude of the moment. Listen to the desperation in His voice as He speaks to them.

Luke 22:14 When the hour came, He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him. 15 Then He said to them, "I have fervently desired to eat this Passover with you *before I suffer*. 16 For I tell

you, *I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.*” 17 Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks, He said, “Take this and share it among yourselves. 18 For I tell you, *from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.*”

From our perspective we can see that Jesus was trying in vain to get His disciples to enter into His awareness that the hinge of history was about to swing in an entirely different direction, and that they alone would be the witnesses who could testify to the world of the significance of it all.

But is it any different in our day? When Jesus said, “This cup is the new covenant established by My blood; it is shed for you” (Luke 22:20), do we hear any more than the disciples heard? Do we just hear words? Or do we truly understand the weight of the moment as the eternal Son of God, now become man, explains that He is about to atone for our sins? And not just atone for our sins, but create out of his suffering a new thing, the body of Christ, the church.

Ephesians 5 is about the church

Too often we quote Ephesians 5:25 with emphasis on the first part of the verse. As you read through the passage with fresh eyes, I think you will see that Paul has just as much to say about Christ and His relationship with the church as he does about husbands and wives.

Eph. 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. 27 He did this *to present the church to Himself* in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless.

This is clearly a case where the comparison overwhelms the main point of the sentence. Do you see that although Paul mentions husbands loving wives, he then gets lost in the wonder of what Christ did for the church. He died to make the church. Moreover, He died to make the church holy, washing the church, cleansing His bride with the word of God applied by the Spirit. And why? Because He intends to present her to Himself in unimaginable splendour, without spot, without wrinkle, without anything to mar her perfection—holy and blameless.

Then we have verse 29 in which Paul is once again going on about the church.

“For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 since we are members of His body.”

Finally, we have verse 32.

“This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

Listen carefully. Christ loves and watches over every single one of His dear children with a close attention that today we can't even imagine. Like the sparrow whose precise location is always noted as it flits about (Mat. 10:29), our Lord watches everywhere we go and all that is happening in our lives. When we cry out to Him in moments of need or moments of joy, He isn't surprised, because He has been there with us all along, sharing in our sufferings and our joys.

But just as the sparrow is always seen in relationship to its flock, so our Lord thinks of his children as an integrated part of His body, His own flock—the church. Our Lord knows that we are individuals, but He never thinks of us apart from the fact that He died and rose again for the purpose of making us a part of His bride. It's an inescapable fact. We cannot realize the fullness of our salvation apart from being integrated into Christ through full participation or sharing (*koinonea*, I Cor. 10:16-17) in His body, His bride—the church.

Do you see what Christ sees?

The question is, do you see the church with the importance Christ placed upon it? Or is that something to which you are mostly blind? To go back to the beginning of today's sermon, do you see the beauty of the snow? Or are you indifferent? Do you feel the joy of the lovers in the park? Or do you brush past them in your hurry to get somewhere else? Do you feel with Christ His passion for His people, the church? Or are you indifferent to that for which Christ *gave Himself*?

If I may become a little political just now, let me say that it's at moments like these that I am particularly proud to be a Baptist. Why? Because it seems to me that from their beginning Baptists separated themselves from a thousand years of church tradition and worldly politics, and pretty much everything else, and formulated their doctrine of the church from Scripture alone.

Church covenants are as old as the church

Those early Baptists from 400 years ago understood that the church was to be made up of regenerate people, people truly born again and publicly committed to Jesus through believer's baptism, and that regenerate people can only fulfill their covenant responsibilities to God in the context of a local church. This is why from their earliest days, Baptists have created secondary covenants to help members reflect Biblical ideals and make an impact upon the world through our witness, ministry, missions, education, worship and stewardship. It is a fact that church covenants are as old as Baptist churches.

Older, actually. Much older. It turns out that something like a church covenant is as old as Christianity. Let me tell you about a fellow named Pliny the Younger, who served as governor of Bithynia from 111 to 113 AD (only about 80 years after Christ's crucifixion). Now Pliny had never met Christians before arriving in Bithynia, and he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with them. He only knew that they couldn't be good citizens because they wouldn't offer incense to the image of Caesar. Thus he wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan to ask advice, and in doing so he did the world a favour by describing what he had learned about the way the early Christians worshipped. Here's a quote from Pliny's letter.

They (Christians) asserted that ... they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, *and to bind themselves by oath*, not to do some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food — but ordinary and innocent food.

Now we know from other sources that early Christian worship involved much more than a hymn and an oath to help one another do right. They regularly took the Lord's Supper together, they prayed, and they also listened to a homily based on God's word. But it was the oath that stuck in

Pliny's mind. He was amazed that Christians would bind themselves under an oath, not to do evil, but to help one another live holy and pure lives for the sake of their common Lord. Doesn't that sound a lot like a church covenant? And do you not hear the echo of Pliny's description of early Christian worship in today's text?

Eph. 5:8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light— 9 for the fruit of the light results in all goodness, righteousness, and truth— 10 discerning what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Don't participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead expose them. . . . 15 Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise— 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

I will serve the testimony of my church

1. **By attending faithfully**—"And let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, not staying away from our worship meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other..." (Hebrews 10:24-25a HCSB).
2. **By living a godly life**—"Just one thing: Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." (Philippians 1:27 HCSB).
3. **By giving regularly**—"On the first day of the week, each of you is to set something aside and save in keeping with how he prospers, so that no collections will need to be made when I come." (1 Corinthians 16:2 HCSB). "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have." (2 Corinthians 8:12 NIV)

We need to ask what is meant by "serving the testimony of my church?" The testimony of my church is the church confessing Jesus Christ together. This fourth point is not about the reputation of the church, or the ministry of our church, but rather our readiness to stand together and declare *with our bodies* what we believe about the meaning of life, the universe and everything. And we do this by our faithfulness in at least three specific areas:

(1) **Faithfully gathering ourselves together.** How can we stand together if we do not gather together?

(2) **Living according to a common code.** The supporting verse is shortened in our covenant, but notice that Paul had in mind that we would live a gospel-worthy life together with other Christians.

Phil. 1:27 Just one thing: Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, working side by side for the faith that comes from the gospel, 28 not being frightened in any way by your opponents.

(3) **Orienting our finances toward God.** I sometimes think that giving sacrificially is the 21st-century equivalent of walking on water. People should see us giving so much that they wonder, "How on earth do they do it?" The world needs to see that in the most practical way possible we really are seeking God's kingdom, and His righteousness, and trusting Him for all the things.