

# GOD'S ALL-INCLUSIVE FAMILY POLICY

(ACTS 1:12-14; 2:1-4, 17-21)

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It is interesting to see how many times the word "all" occurs in the opening verses of the book of Acts. After identifying those who were included in the early followers of Jesus in the first chapter of Acts, we read in verse 14, "They all joined together constantly in prayer." Worship was no longer something only for the older men; now it is for all. They all gathered together in that prayer time. Chapter 2:1 tells us that, "When the day of Pentecost came they were all together in one place." The fellowship included all who would let themselves be a part of it. Chapter 2:4 announces, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Savior enabled them." Ministry included all of them: men and women, young and old, rich or poor. All were filled with the Holy Spirit.

We read in Chapter 2:5, "Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven." We understand that for Luke that meant all of the nations of the world known to him at that time. We understand now how many nations there are in the world, how many language groups, how many people groups. God says, "The message of evangelism—the invitation—is to every single nation, people group and language group; no one is excluded." In fact in Chapter 2:17 we read that God says, "I will pour out My Spirit on all people." Every single person is a candidate in God's eyes to receive new life and the gift of God's Spirit, so that in verse 21 Peter concludes the quotation from Joel, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Think of that! Every single person who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Today, however, some individuals and even denominations have lost sight of the fact that God's family policy is an all-inclusive policy. For God, the only exclusion is self-exclusion. The only people who will not be a part of God's family are those who have excluded themselves, who have chosen to say, "No!" to God. But God says to everyone, "Whosoever will may come."

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When I was a child, we used to sing a neat chorus:

*Whosoever will to the Lord may come,  
Whosoever will to the Lord may come,  
Whosoever will to the Lord may come,  
He'll not turn a one away.*

*Jesus, Jesus, heals the broken hearted,  
Jesus, Jesus, heals the broken hearted,  
Jesus, Jesus, heals the broken hearted,  
He will set you free.*

*Whosoever will to the Lord may come.*

You may have chosen today to exclude yourself from God's family. But God says, "Whosoever will to the Lord may come." The church's message should always be God's message: "Whosoever will to the Lord may come." It makes no difference who you are, what you are or even who you have been. Whoever you are now, God says, "You come! My invitation is whosoever will may come. . . . that all who call on the name of the Lord may be saved." That is God's policy. It is inclusive.

This is not a natural thing. Human barriers have existed since the beginning of humankind and the entrance of sin shortly after creation. There are long, powerfully established barriers. It is fascinating to me that when we build barriers, we humans always design them so that we are not eliminated from God's family by *our own* barriers—at least not in our own minds! Yet sometimes we discover that the very building of barriers eliminates ourselves because God's family is barrier-free. God makes that plain in these early chapters of Acts and throughout the New Testament. The New Testament, in fact, becomes really a living, breathing illustration of what God means for the church to be by demonstrating the barriers that are overcome in Christ Jesus.

The very first barrier that some of us erect against others is based on personal history; if you have certain skeletons in your family or personal history, then God won't let you into the family of God. But look at the early church. Peter is the very first name. The last time we encountered Peter he was blaspheming the name of God in his ardor to discount any association he had with Jesus Christ, not only not to be numbered as His disciple, but not even to

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know Him. Then there were James and John and the rest of the disciples, those who fled when Jesus was to be arrested. There they were in the early family of God's people.

Along with them in the infant church were people who were self-righteous, thinking they deserved the favor of God, people who had mocked the work of God by calling it drunkenness, and people who had all the skeletons in their closets that we do.

It would be interesting to know how many of these people had been in multiple marriages. How many of these three thousand first day believers had relationships that had shattered in their lives? How many of these people had seen dreams crash, hopes burned? How many of these people had brought destruction in their own lives and in the lives of others? Yet those personal histories are ignored. What is important is not their background, but their foreground. What is considered is not their history but their present and future. God's policy does not begin with the past. It begins with the right now and says to us, "I invite you to be among my people!"

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One of the barriers that has been erected between people is that of gender. We struggle with what it means to be men and women. Are there some who are created in the image of God and others who are not? Is it really by God's design that men are to be superior and women inferior? There are some who use the Bible to teach that. But God comes to say, "In my family, I see you not as men and women but as people created in my image, whom I love." Gathered in that upper room praying together were men and women, and receiving the spirit were women and men. Those who were to prophesy by the gift of the Spirit were women and men. God is careful to say, "Your sons and your daughters, your men children and your women children, will be gripped by my Spirit."

When the numbers of the early church are given in verse 41, those who accepted His message were baptized and about three thousand (normally when the New Testament writers count noses they use the word that is a generic word for men, meaning people in general, but can be taken as men), but here Luke is careful to say that "about three thousand souls," and a soul doesn't have a female or male shape. It is simply a person before God. "Three thousand souls were added to God's family that day."

Later on in Chapter 5:14, Luke is careful to say that men and women were among the early believers who came to Christ through the message of the Christians preaching Jesus. Luke says that in the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea and Athens, women *and* men were believers in Jesus and the foundations of the churches in those cities. We remember a woman named Lydia, who was the first to be a believer in the city of Philippi (Acts 16:14). When we come to chapter 21:9 we discover that

Philip, the evangelist, had four daughters who prophesy on behalf of Jesus.

In the 16th chapter of Romans the apostle Paul sends greetings to twenty-nine different people in the city of Rome. Ten of them are women. Now some of their names you can't identify as women because the translators of the Bible have used male names in their place because all of the translators have been men. However, the very first is Phoebe and you can't make that a man's name! You have never heard of "Phoeben!" Phoebe is a woman. She is a deacon of the church. Now your Bible probably says a "servant," but the word is deacon. Whenever that word is used of a man, it is not translated servant, but deacon. So Phoebe is a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.

A few verses later on you will find Andronicus and Junias, except that when Paul wrote it, he wrote it to Junia, a woman, and they were both apostles in the church at Rome. Imagine that! In God's church it doesn't make any difference whether you are a man or a woman. God says, "Come know me, come serve me, come be filled by my Spirit, come lift your gifts to me. Whether man or woman, I will accept the gift of your life and honor it and bless it and use it to My glory!"

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One of the barriers that was common in the early church was the barrier of age. If you were young, then your opinion was worthless. Nowadays if you are old, your opinion is worthless. But God says, "Your young men and your old will see visions and dreams." Whether you are young or old, God says, "I will fill your life and make your life be worthwhile for me." You may be a young person who has a vision for what God can do through the church. You try to say that and you get the feeling that the church says, "Grow up." And you fear that by "grow up" they mean, "Just act like we do long enough and you will become as we are." But God has given you a vision that is not young; it is eternal. We need you to share that vision with us.

You may be an older person who is dreaming dreams and other people are saying, "Oh, you are just daydreaming in your old age." No! It is a gift from eternity. We need you to invest that dream among us, to be God's dream. I will never, never forget that Moses lived forty years in Egypt and forty years in the desert so that at eighty he was the only Jew in the world who spoke Egyptian and knew all the roads through the Arabian desert. By age eighty he was ready for God to do something meaningful with his life.

Our dear friend Georgianna will be ninety. That is exciting! Ninety years old. I wonder what God has for her to do now, because she has lived so long, that God couldn't have done through her at age 88, 78, or 68? We are never too old or too young. Young and old, God calls us together in the family of God.

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Others of us have decided that the church is not for foreigners. We gather here on American soil, but each one of us has been a foreigner sometime. Every one of our parents or grandparents or some ancestor came from somewhere else to here. You say, "Well, I have native American blood." Wonderful, if both of your parents were native Americans and you can prove that they always lived on this site all of their generations in the past. No—we are all interlopers. Maybe my ancestors came to America ahead of yours. Maybe yours came before mine. But the key is that God was careful to say, "In my church, there is not going to be a distinction that allows any to be a foreigner." So on Pentecost, every language known to humans at that time was being spoken. There was no possible way that anyone could say, "You don't fit. You sound funny." Rather, in all the funny sounds being heard, you could indeed hear your own funny sound. So, although we can mock each other's accents, God says, "They are beautiful to me because every one of them represents an individual person."

The first Christians were all Jews, so in Acts 10, God gives Peter a vision of animals. And then God says, "Peter, some of those animals are forbidden by the Old Testament Law but don't you call unclean what I call clean." Peter was reflecting on that when there came a knock at his door. A Gentile Roman soldier named Cornelius had also had a vision. His vision said, "Go down and invite a man named Simon to come and talk to you about a message that I have for you." Cornelius didn't know who Simon was. Maybe he knew he was Jewish. But Simon would have known who Cornelius was. When the three men arrived and knocked at his door, Peter's first thought would have been, "They are Gentiles, they are unclean, they are foreigners. I don't want to have anything to do with them."

Imagine if a delegation from Saddam Hussein came to your door and invited you to come to Baghdad to talk to Saddam. How would you feel? Would you wonder what everyone else thought? That must have been how Peter felt, but God had said, "Don't you call unclean what I have called clean." So he went to Caesarea and there he met Cornelius and Cornelius' family and his troops, those who were in his entourage. He preached Jesus to them, and they became the first Gentiles to become Christians. Do you know why the message of Jesus has come to every one who is a Gentile (someone who is not Jewish, who

does not have a Jewish mother)? If you don't have a Jewish mother, then you are descended of Cornelius in the church. The reason is because God said, "Every single person is clean by my judgment. Let them come, whosoever will to the Lord may come!"

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Then we invented something called classes—not sophomore class and junior class—but upper class and lower class, middle class and upper middle class. The working class and the non-working class. Those classes were there in ancient society too. In the 16th chapter of Acts, God is careful to say, "My gospel, my good news, my church includes all classes." The first person Paul encountered when he got to Philippi was a woman named Lydia. She was a single business woman in a world where a woman could not run a business by herself. Somehow she did it. No doubt she was very successful. She may have been in the upper level both personally and financially. She became a Christian.

Next Paul encountered a slave girl, owned by her masters and put on public display and humiliated because she would shriek due to her demon possession. Paul reached out to her in the name of Jesus and set her free from the demon. So the upper class and the lower class were joined in that church in Philippi.

Then Paul encountered a jailer. A jailer likely was a Roman soldier in his pre-retirement years, waiting to finish his twenty and out in the safety of keeping a jail. Then he could

retire and live in peace. This jailer too became a Christian. So all of the classes were rolled together in the church of Jesus Christ.

Later on, Paul met a man named Philemon. He was a business person in one of the Asia Minor cities. Philemon became a Christian. He was a slave owner. One of his slaves was a man named Onesimus. Onesimus stole money and ran away to the city of Rome, met Paul, and became a Christian. Paul sent him back to his master with a letter, saying in effect:

You can kill him if you want to, you can cut off his ear to mark him as a fugitive if you want to, you can brand a huge "F" for fugitive on his forehead, you can cut out his tongue so he can't try to convince anyone else to flee, you have that right by law. But he is now your brother in Christ and you are both slaves, with me, to Jesus Christ. Philemon, what will you do with that?

**The church's message should always be God's message:  
"Whosoever will to the Lord may come." It makes no difference who you are, what you are or even who you have been. Whoever you are now, God says, "You come! My invitation is whosoever will may come." "That all who call on the name of the Lord may be saved." That is God's policy.  
It is inclusive.**

Tradition says that years later at Ephesus there was a bishop named Onesimus, the first black person to be a bishop of the Christian church. There are some who think it was the same Onesimus, who went from slavery to brotherhood in Jesus Christ with his master because now they both had a Master in Jesus Christ. In Christ there are no classes.

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In the church of Jesus Christ every barrier is removed. Let not the church ever rebuild the barriers that God has removed!

Do you have barriers in your heart against some people? Are those who are on welfare rejects to you? Do you reject people who have been divorced, or who have divorced and remarried? People who have borne children out of wedlock? People who have done time in a penitentiary or jail? People whom the headlines have accused, but then the paper never mentioned what actually happened to them? Do you have those barriers that you can't seem to overcome? Or maybe you *are* one of those people and you wonder if, because the church has put up the barriers, God has. Both of you need to hear God say, "No, all the barriers are overcome in Jesus Christ!"

God, you see, has this breathtaking vision of who his people are. Paul wrote to the Galatians early in his career that, "Now we are all the children of God in Jesus Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Gentile"—no ethnic ancestral difference. Now there is "no male or female"—no gender difference. And now there is "no slave or free"—no class difference. "For in Christ we are all one."

Paul said to the Ephesians, "This is God's mystery." What God has meant all along is for God's people to become one by the work of God. The church is to be like God's "show and tell." The church is to be what God can hold up and say to a hungry, hurting, lonely world:

Look! Look what I am doing! Look what the grace of Jesus can do. Look what it can mean to be a Christian. You have brothers and sisters who are every conceivable kind of person. Look, look what I am doing!

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The problem is that many times the world is accomplishing, by its own efforts, a little bit of what God wants to do through Christ, and it is the church that builds barriers. It was the church that helped maintain all the anti-black laws in the South for years. It was the church that was the last to come on board the civil rights movement. It is in the church where the cheap shots are heard about people who are on welfare. It is in the church where there is still rivalry and hatred between races and classes, ages and genders.

But God's dream for the church is that we be God's illustration of what God can do through Jesus Christ. God says to every one of us, "What I began at Pentecost by sending my Spirit to every single person who would receive my Spirit on that day, I continue to practice." The only exclusion is self-exclusion. The church cannot exclude from the family of God, no matter what rules we set up, no matter what rituals we set up, no matter what kind of policies we practice. God says, "Fiddle with your policies, but my church includes *all* who come to me through Jesus Christ."

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Today God says to us, "Why don't you be that church? Why don't you receive and accept to yourselves anyone who comes to the church through faith in Jesus? Why don't you reach out and touch those pockets of society that no one else wants to touch? Why don't you let your hearts be softened so that there are no barriers in your lives or in My church?"

God also says, "Whosoever will, may come," and we must echo and illustrate the invitation of God through Jesus Christ.

That is still God's invitation to us today. If you have excluded yourself, God says, "Don't do that. I love you. My son died for you. My Spirit awaits you. Whosoever will, may come."

If you have been excluding others and your heart is cold and stony, God says, "Don't do that. My Spirit can warm your heart and give you an inclusive vision for my people."

We are all invited to come to Jesus, who receives us as children, (whatever else may be true about us!). We are all invited to be a part of this family of God's people, no matter what our background.

John 1:12 assures us that "To all who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God." And for each one who is now a "new creation in Christ Jesus" (2 Corinthians 5:17), be assured your present and your future is as a child of God.

