

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	17		Gary L.W. Johnson
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SOLA GRATIA

The great church father Augustine famously said, *Gratia, nisi gratis sit, non est gratia* – which is translated, “Grace, unless it should be free, is not grace.” The Reformers (all of them were Augustinians) had to contend with the Roman Catholic semi-Pelagianism. “According to the medieval scholastics, man could respond to the *gratia universalis*, not with a truly meritorious act (*meritum de condigno*), but with an act representative of and flowing from the minimal good that was in him, not a truly good act, but a bare turning toward the divine, a *meritum de congruo*. On the basis of this minimal act, God would respond graciously; thus the maxim, *Facientibus quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam* (‘To those who do what is in them, God will not deny grace’).”¹ Throughout this epistle, the Apostle Paul has sought to establish his doctrine of justification as stemming from the undiluted grace of God – justification is not earned. It is a gift. “This gift dimension is all the more profound because the gift is contrary to what people can expect, what they deserve. God pronounces his curse over those who disobey his law (Deut. 27:26). Also in Romans 5 – precisely there! – Paul speaks of God’s wrath over sin. (See also the Canons of Dort, 3-4.5). The perspective of grace in justification cannot be understood without consideration of the law. Grace is extended to trespassers of the law. There is an inner connection between grace and the judicial character of justification. Justification takes place exactly where grace is extended, namely, before God’s judgment seat. We emphatically present it this way. Some (perhaps even many) believe that grace has nothing to do with the forensic aspect of justification. Grace is God’s good favor toward sinners. We fully subscribe to this. However, the revelation of this grace comes to us by way of the law. Only transgressors of the law are in need of grace, i.e., grace in Christ Jesus. God’s favor in general is not the same as God’s grace in Christ. Grace is the culmination of God’s favor toward guilty human beings. It therefore has always the character of something unmerited, of the opposite of what we deserve because of our sin. *We also encounter the forensic aspect of justification in the nature of justification as grace.* It is no coincidence that Paul uses the expression ‘righteousness of God’ as being directly connected and contrasted with ‘the wrath of God,’ which manifests itself ‘against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth down in unrighteousness’ (Rom. 1:17-18). The aspect of grace in justification does not affect the original order that God established for his relationship with man. On the contrary, it confirms this order. Grace is God’s favor toward those who are guilty.”²

I. ANSWERING AN OBJECTION

Question: Has God failed? The question that opens the chapter is a very natural one in the light of the context. The apostle has just concluded chapter 10 by saying, “But to Israel he saith, ‘All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gain-saying people’” (10:21). The words are a citation from Isaiah 65:2, and the reference, of course, is to the longsuffering patience of God with His rebellious elect people. The condition that characterized the people in Isaiah’s day will persist in Paul’s day. What more natural question to ask at this point than, “I say, then, God has not cast away his people, has He?” The connection made by Paul is important for the ensuing discussion. First, the inferential

conjunction “then” makes it plain that the question arises out of the statement in 10:21. That fact is of further importance, for it clearly indicates that the sense of the word “people” in Isaiah 65:2 and Romans 10:21 is the sense that the same word must be given in Romans 11:1-2. And the sense of the term is plainly ethnic Israel. Thus, the opening words of Paul give his readers the intimation of the major point of the following argumentation. God has not cast off His elect people, although the mass of them are at the moment abiding in unbelief. That which is suggested by the question is stated directly and positively in the words that open verse 2, “God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.”

Response: Absolutely not! The explicit answer of the apostle to his question is now given. As is customary with him, his opening rebuttal is a flat and emphatic denial, “God forbid” (cf. 3:3; 6:2, 15; 9:6). If God were to forsake His people, then He would become a liar, a covenant breaker. Can the only One who is absolutely honest and true be that?

II. ESTABLISHING THE ANSWER

A. From the Apostle’s Own Case. He underlines his Jewishness with three statements: he is an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin (cf. Phil. 3:5). The Jews venerated Abraham as the great forbear of their race; Paul will have this in mind, but also the fact that the patriarch had special significance for him as the great exemplar of faith. Benjamin was the only son of Jacob born in the land of Israel. It was the tribe in whose territory was the holy city Jerusalem; it was the one tribe that remained faithful to Judah. And may it not be out of mind that the first king of Israel came from this tribe and that his name was that of the apostle?³

B. From the Purpose of God’s Election. What Paul indicates by his own salvation is stated categorically in the opening sentence of verse 2. The further description of God’s people, “whom he foreknew,” is of considerable interest doctrinally. Practically all of the sound and recent commentators on the Greek text affirm that the verb *to foreknow* is used in the Semitic sense of *to choose in advance* (cf. Jer. 1:5; Am. 3:2; Hos. 13:5). If the word meant simply *to know beforehand*, in the sense of knowing beforehand that they would eventually believe, then the question, “Has God cast off His people?,” could not arise. “Of course,” one could say, “they are not cast off, for He knows they shall believe.” If, however, the word means *to choose in advance*, then the question could arise. The matter could be put this way: Yes, God did elect Israel, but Israel has fallen into unbelief. It would be natural for one to ask, “Are not the promises, then, cancelled?” It is plain, then, that *to foreknow* here means to foreknow in the Semitic sense of entering into intimate relations with beforehand, or *to choose to love*.⁴

C. From Historical Analogy. The spiritual situation of Israel in the days of Elijah corresponded to that of the Apostolic period. 1 Kings 19:10, 14, 18, quoted to show that general national apostasy does not always involve total and unconditional national rejection; but that it is, on the contrary, consistent with the existence of a “remnant” which by its presence proves that God had not rejected His elect people.

D. The Remnant Exist. “Even so then” (ESV, “So too at the present time”) introduces the conclusion of the paragraph. Paul, admitting that general apostasy exists in his day, still argues from the existence of a remnant of Israelite believers for God’s continued committal to them. The unbelief of the mass does not annul His faithfulness to His Messianic promises (cf. 9:4-5), and the existence of a remnant is a testimony to His continued activity in Israel’s behalf. And the fact that it is a remnant that exists by *divine* grace proves the point. The “remnant” in verse five corresponds to the 7,000 of Elijah’s day. The word in

the original text was suggested by the expression, “I have reserved,” in verse 4. It comes from the same Greek root.

III. GOD’S SOVEREIGN GRACE

A. *The Contrast Between Grace and Works.* Logicians usually identify three laws that all seem to stem from the basic principle of contradiction:

1. The *law of contradiction* asserts that *A* can’t be both *A* and non-*A* at the same time and in the same relationship.
2. The *law of identity* asserts that *A* is *A*; that every event and every judgment is identical with itself.
3. The *law of excluded middle* asserts that everything must be either *A* or non-*A*.

These three laws, taken together, make it possible for us to communicate rationally. Terms must have a certain specificity if we are to use them in rational discourse. A word must have a limited meaning. For, if a word meant everything, therefore, a term must *include* itself and *exclude* or *contradict* its opposite.⁵

The Apostle makes the same point when it comes to *grace* and *works*. Therefore, *any* definition of grace that includes the slightest element of human merit or reward renders *grace* something other than *Biblical grace*. Calvin’s summary is most fitting. “Paul amplifies his statement from a comparison of opposites. The grace of God and the merit of works are so opposed to one another that if we establish one we destroy the other. If, then, we cannot allow any consideration of works in election without obscuring the unmerited goodness of God, which Paul so greatly desired to commend to us in election, those fanatics, who make the worthiness which God foresees in us the cause of our election, must consider what answer they are to give to Paul. Whether it is past or future works which we are considering, Paul’s statement that grace leaves no room for works will always resound in our ears. He is not speaking here only of our reconciliation with God, or of the means or immediate causes of our salvation, but goes higher and asks why God chose only some and passed by others before the foundation of the world. He states that God was led to make this distinction for no other reason than His own good pleasure, and contends that any concession given to works detracts to that extent from grace. It follows from this that it is wrong to confuse foreknowledge of works with election. If God chooses some and rejects others according to His foreknowledge of whether they will be worthy or unworthy of salvation, then the reward of works has already been established and the grace of God will not bear sole sway, but will be only a half part of our election. Just as Paul has previously argued in the case of Abraham’s justification, that where a reward is paid, grace is not freely bestowed, so now he draws his argument from the same source and states that if works are taken into consideration when God adopts a certain number of men to salvation, it is a matter of reward being due, and therefore salvation will not be a free gift.”⁶

CONCLUSION: Evangelicals by and large have become semi-Pelagians. In this regard, they have more in common with the Mormons than they do with the Reformation.⁷ For the record, the statement “God helps those who help themselves” is not in the Bible; it originated in pagan religion. Five hundred years before Christ, Aesop wrote, “The gods help them that help themselves.” Euripides, a Greek philosopher, said, “Try first thyself, and after, call on God.” And George Herbert of the 17th century said, “Help thyself, and God will help thee.” We received our present formulation from Benjamin Franklin: “God helps those who help themselves.” **This statement is an enemy of grace**, and if Franklin believed it, it contributed to his rejection of the gospel. As a deist, Franklin was a firm believer in God and divine providence, but he could not accept the deity of Christ. He was a close friend of the great evangelist George Whitefield, who pleaded with people to repent and believe

the gospel. But despite a warm and mutually helpful friendship lasting 30 years, Franklin wrote after his friend died, “Whitefield used to pray for my conversion, but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard.” And as death approached, Franklin saw no reason to believe, since he said he would shortly know whether it was true or not. Whether we can help ourselves depends on what our problem is. “If our most pressing problem is ignorance, we can help ourselves by getting an education; if it is the need to express our deepest feelings, we can get help from a psychiatrist. If we are drowning, we just might be able to struggle to safety, or a lifeguard might be able to rescue us. Unfortunately, our problem is far greater than all of these. If you are dead, you have a God-sized problem. Resurrection is something only God can do.”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1981) p. 113.

²J. Van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (P & R, 2008) p. 615.

³Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (IVP, 1988) p. 398.

⁴The substance of this analysis is taken from class notes from my late professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.

⁵Cf. A. J. Hoover, *Don't You Believe It! Poking Holes in Faulty Logic* (Moody, 1982) p. 15.

⁶Calvin's New Testament Commentaries VIII (Eerdmans, 1971) p. 242.

⁷Cf. my chapter, “The Reformation, Today's Evangelicals, and Mormons” in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Decline of Justification*, eds. G. L. W. Johnson and G. P. Waters (Crossway 2007). This is an analysis of the Mormon Robert Millet's book *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-Day Saints*, wherein Millet attempts to convince Evangelicals that Mormons are true Christians. What Millet does do is clearly show how openly Pelagian Mormonism is. For example (p. 198), where Millet has no hesitancy in declaring that Mormonism rejects any concept of total depravity (84) as well as the critically important doctrine of original sin (86). In fact, Millet presents what only can be called a full-blown Pelagian concept of grace (this is woven through the book [21, 26, 53, 65, 69, 84, 87, 95, 97, 103]). Like Pelagius, Millet (quoting from 2 Nephi 31:19 and Moroni 6:4) says, “We must work to our limit, and *then* (emphasis added) rely upon the merits, mercy, and grace of the Holy One of Israel (69). Like Pelagius, Millet underscores Mormon belief that children are born innocent (87). Like Pelagius, Millet teaches the Mormon doctrine that all beings have “the (innate) capacity” to be saved (95), and to “strive to do what we *can do*” (emphasis in original) to secure salvation (97).

⁸E. W. Lutzer, *Ten Lies About God and How You Might Already be Deceived* (Word, 2000) p. 175.