

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	62		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Ephesians 2:1-13		
Date:	December 13, 2015 a.m.		

Amazing Grace

33. Lord's Day

Question 91. But what are good works?

Answer: Only those which proceed from a true faith, (a) are performed according to the law of God, (b) and to his glory; (c) and not such as are founded on our imaginations, or the institutions of men. (d)

(a) Rom.14:23 And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin. (b) Lev.18:4 Ye shall do my judgments, and keep mine ordinances, to walk therein: I am the LORD your God. 1 Sam.15:22 And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. Eph.2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (c) 1 Cor.10:31 Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. (d) Deut.12:32 What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it. Ezek.20:18 But I said unto their children in the wilderness, Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols: Ezek.20:19 I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; Isa.29:13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: Matt.15:7 Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, Matt.15:8 This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. Matt.15:9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

In Ephesians 2:8-9, we read familiar words: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." The "you" addressed in these verses were once "dead" in "trespasses and sins" and destined for God's judgment ("children of wrath") (2:1-3). But now, we are told, they have been saved by grace as a sheer gift from God, apart from any works of their own. The whole scenario is recreated in Titus 3:3-7:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Similarly, II Timothy 1:9 stresses that God "saved us . . . not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace." In Ephesians and the Pastorals, the "works" repeatedly rejected as playing a

role in salvation are good “works” in general, deeds done “in righteousness,” as Titus 3 puts it. And those “saved” or “justified” by divine grace are sinners, plain and simple, slaves of their sins and otherwise destined for divine judgment; they are not Gentiles inquiring about entrance requirements to a desired community. In broad terms as Stephen Westerholm points out, the interpretation of these texts is not controversial. Now nothing in these texts allows us to decide what question Paul addressed in Galatians and Romans when he spoke of justification by faith, apart from the “works of the law.” The suggestion is often made—and a plausible suggestion it is—that a Pauline formula originally designed to address a particular mid-century crisis (so Galatians and Romans) was later reformulated and generalized when the original crisis had passed (so Ephesians and the Pastorals). Something along these lines is, from the perspective of the New Perspectivists, what must have happened. What can be said with certainty, however, is that already in the first century the Pauline justification texts were invoked to address the predicament of sinners facing God’s wrath; and already in the first century they were used to insist that God offers such sinners salvation in Jesus Christ by grace, through faith, apart from a demand for righteous deeds that they are in no position to meet. The claim that such a reading “modernizes” Paul can only be maintained if we date the onset of modernity prior to the composition of Ephesians.¹

I. THEIR PAST RELATION TO GOD (vv. 11-12)

Outward privileges, such as those enjoyed by Israel, do not exempt men from the wrath of God. However, the Jews did occupy a unique position before God, one which Gentiles did not. Therefore, Paul declares REMEMBER (Gk. *MNĒMONEUETE* – imperative. The word implies not only the mental process of recalling, but the attitude of repentance and gratitude in the process.) THAT YOU GENTILES IN THE FLESH, were considered in the following way:

A. As viewed by the Jews – the CIRCUMCISION, outwardly, the physical emblem, you Gentiles were called *AKROBUSTIA* (lit. “uncircumcision”, a term of intense derision and contempt among the Jews – especially since they proudly called themselves the “circumcision”). The Jews referred to the Gentiles as *HAGGÓYIM*. “The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he had made... It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of the Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.”²

B. As it actually was – What other people think is one thing; how things really are, that’s something else. The Jews despised the Gentiles and rightly saw the Gentiles’ condition before God. But the Jew completely failed to see his own! (comp. Romans 2) Paul is quick to point out to the Gentile Christians their past. AT THAT TIME, before Grace found you (Paul uses *five* predicates to describe their condition):

1. You were WITHOUT CHRIST – this is *WHAT* they were;
2. You were ALIENS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH OF ISRAEL. The word translated “alien” is *APĒLLOTRIŌ MENOI*, a strong verb used again in Ephesians 4:18 and Colossians 1:12. It expresses generally the idea of being a complete stranger as over against someone who was at home or comfortable in the presence of another person. Gentiles were not part of the theocracy established by God with Israel (cf. Amos 3:2). This attitude was manifested by Jesus in Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 10:5-6. This is *WHERE* they were;

3. You were STRANGERS FROM THE COVENANTS OF THE PROMISE. The word “strangers”, *XENOI*, expresses the idea of one who is not a member of a certain state or class, as having no share, strictly an outsider or foreigner. The covenant referred to is the Abrahamic, it is THE COVENANT in Scripture (cf. Genesis 13:15; 15:18; 17:18; comp. with Galatians 3:17-19). This is *WHO* they were;

4. You were WITHOUT HOPE - Hope is built upon promise, and Gentiles did not have any to rest upon. They were “hopeless”, no hope of any kind. God was truly the “silent God” as far as Gentiles were concerned. This is *HOW* they were;

5. You were WITHOUT GOD (Gk *ATHEOI*, from which we derive the word “atheists”) in the original sense of the word, being without God, and also in the sense of exhibiting hostility to the true God because they refused to worship Him (cf. Romans 1:18-32). This is *WHY* they were the way they were.

II. THEIR RELATIONSHIP THROUGH CHRIST (v. 13)

What could the Apostle possibly say after that stunning speech! The world has summed up the situation, and said, “let us eat, drink and be merry... for tomorrow we die” or some version thereof. Paul spoke truth. BUT NOW (Gk. *NUNI DE*, a very strong contrast) “at THAT time you were... BUT NOW you are this!”

A. The New Situation – IN CHRIST... YOU WHO WERE ONCE FAR AWAY (Gk. *MAKRAN*, stresses distance and separation), but not anymore!! Why?

B. The Means – THE BLOOD OF CHRIST – comp. 1:7. There is no relationship with God except through Jesus Christ and His shed blood. “Outside Christ,” declared Calvin, “there are only idols.”³ No religion, no works, in short, “no nothing” can change the situation of v. 12 but the Gospel of Christ crucified. Is it any wonder the Apostles demanded this? (cf. Acts 4:12; II Timothy 2:5).

C. The Effect – BROUGHT NEAR (Gk. *EGENĒTHETE EGGUS*, refers directly to the privileges denied them in vs. 12. This parallels Paul’s remarks in Romans 11:24; Gentiles are heirs together *with* Israel to the promises made to Abraham!

CONCLUSION: You will “remember” that Paul had prayed that these Christians would KNOW the power of God that wrought them up from the dead, and is at work in them (1:15-2:10). To help them realize this truth he urges them to remember the situation out of which God had brought them (comp. with Galatians 4:8-9). Forgetfulness is an all too common vice in the Christian life. By this, I am referring not to the lack of memory, but to the purposeful neglect of those things that God calls us to heed. REMEMBER! Why? So we might *praise* the God who has dealt so kindly with us; REMEMBER! Why? So we might *prize* that which He wrought for us; REMEMBER! Why? So we might *proclaim* His glorious Gospel of Grace to others shut up to the misery of the present world; REMEMBER! Why? So we might *point* only to the Lamb of God, Christ our only Savior, now and forever. REMEMBER! WHEN? Now and forever!

¹ This section is adapted from Westerholm’s lecture, “Justification by Faith is the Answer: What is the Question?”, given at Concordia Theological Seminary: Symposium on Exegetical Theology (5/22/06). A fuller development is seen in his excellent *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Eerdmans, 2004).

² W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (St. Andrews Press, 1958), p. 125.

³ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* Vol. XI (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 149.