

Grace and the Ephesians

This might appropriately be titled “Grace and the Gentiles” for that is what the letter to the Ephesians is about. Though it is addressed to disciples in Ephesus, a great Gentile city, it deals generally with God’s basis of acceptance of Gentiles universally. Paul is not answering questions from individuals regarding, “What must I do to be saved,” but he is discussing the basis of the acceptance of those who were not descendents of Abraham through Jacob/Israel. This epistle is not written to you and me. When Paul says “**you**,” he is not addressing **us** but the **Gentiles in particular among them**. When he says “**us**,” he is including himself as a Jew with other Jews and Gentiles – **not us in 2006**.

The promise to bless all the families on earth through Abraham was in the original covenant with Abraham but its details were hidden through the age. Paul, as a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles, explained: “*Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s **grace that was given to me for you**, that is, the **mystery** made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit of God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that **through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel**, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:2-6; all quotations from NIV).*

Formerly, the Gentiles had no claim of acceptance due to any plan they had devised, or due to a revealed promise, or because of their goodness, or for works that would deserve God’s favor. Paul elaborates, “*Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcision’ (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (2:11-13).*

The Gentiles were hopeless and helpless, even as Abraham was before God’s gracious provision conditioned on his faith. However, God had planned their inclusion on the **same basis, or principle, offered to Abraham** even though their faith would be expressed in different details. Abraham and Israel expressed faith in the **promises** while the Gentiles had the advantage of expressing faith in **Christ** who fulfilled the promises.

“*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – **it is by grace you have been saved**” (2:4-5). Please notice that Paul was still addressing the Gentiles as a people rather than telling an individual what was required of him to be saved. He was explaining the **principle of faith** rather than the details of expression of that faith.*

That puts our favorite proof-text in a different light: “***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast**” (2:8-9).* As God had accepted Abraham and his descendents by a gift rather than

worthiness – grace through faith rather than earning his acceptance – that same grace was being offered the unworthy Gentiles. What was it that was “*not from yourselves*”? It was the whole plan for saving Gentiles by grace through faith. Gentiles had not devised the plan any more than Abraham had. It was the gift of God. If the Gentiles could have worked out a method or principle by which God would have accepted them, they could have boasted of worthiness. Instead, they were accepted as Abraham was whose faith, made alive and completed in action, was accounted for righteousness. It is a gross error to conclude that grace saved Abraham or a Gentile as an irrevocable gift at a moment in time when they gave mental assent. Faith must show both acceptance and compliance.

The popular misunderstanding contends that “not of works” rules out any effort of acceptance or compliance. However, it is widely taught that the individual must believe, have an openness of heart, be penitent, “accept Christ,” pray “the sinner’s prayer,” or do some other responsive action. Such instructions were never given in any recorded case of conversion. If a person must believe, or follow any of the procedures mentioned, in order to access salvation, then that belief or action becomes a condition to be met. It would be as much a “work” as submission to baptism would be.

The whole plan for saving the Gentiles was “not of works,” that is, not an access to God’s grace which they themselves had planned, devised, or merited. Please notice this: Paul wrote that “*by grace YOU (Gentiles) were saved,*” then he concludes, “*For WE (Jews and Gentiles) are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*” It was the plan and work of God rather than that of Jews or Gentiles to save both by grace so they could both do the good works God had planned for them. It was not a denial of good works but a call for good works.

Now, we get to the critical application to individuals. How was the principle of salvation by grace through faith which was not of works applied to individual seekers of salvation?

Paul reviewed for them, “*And you also were included in Christ when you **heard** the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. In him, when you **believed**, you were marked with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing **our inheritance** ...*” (1:13-14). The Holy Spirit had guaranteed the acceptance of Gentiles at the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10-11).

So far, in this essay, we have stayed in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians without pulling supportive proof-texts from other sources. It is appropriate at this time, however, to look back to the beginning of the gospel among the Ephesians.

In later years Paul reviewed his initial work in Ephesus, declaring, “*You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they **must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus***” (Acts 20:20-21). God had granted access to both Jew and Greek through repentance toward God and belief in Jesus. The confessing and divulging of their practices resulted from Paul’s teaching and miracles there which brought fear to Jew and Greek (Acts 19:17f). These activities were vital in their being chosen of God in Christ (Eph. 1:4) and accepting the grace of God.

Paul had gone to Ephesus as is recorded in Acts 18:24; 19:1-41. There Apollos “... *had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, knowing only the baptism of John.*” When Paul came to Ephesus, he found about a dozen of those converts. He immediately questioned them about their baptism. Why would he make an immediate issue of their baptism if it was not of most vital importance?

Paul asked, “*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*” When they responded negatively, Paul baptized them into the name of the Lord Jesus, and “*when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them ...* .” It was then that they had the guarantee of their inheritance, even as it had been with Cornelius.

This guarantee predates both of those records of conversions. On Pentecost, Peter said Joel’s prophecy was being fulfilled that “*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people*” (Acts 2:17). Peter then makes a general application of the sinner’s submissive acceptance of God’s grace in baptism and the guarantee that follows. To penitent Jews, “*Peter replied: ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.’*”

The Holy Spirit given at baptism was the guarantee of acceptance both for the **Jews and their descendants** and for those who were **far off** – the state of Gentiles described in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. This gift of the Holy Spirit never saved anyone but it was given on Pentecost, to the Samaritans, to Cornelius, and to the Ephesians as a guarantee of their acceptance by God – whether Jews, mixed breeds, Gentiles, or Gentiles formerly taught only the baptism of John who and were re-baptized.

So, in being saved by grace through faith and not of works, the Ephesians heard the gospel which produced faith and they responded to that faith in repentance and submission to baptism, thus receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit which was God’s guarantee of their acceptance. Both Jew and Gentile were initiated into the one body through the same one baptism (4:5).

Who can deny that? Yet, it seems that the whole evangelical world wants to deny it!

Then Paul urges them “*to live a life worthy of the calling you received*” (4:1). Much of the remainder of the epistle is dedicated to telling them how to do that involving those “good works,” how to avoid grieving the Spirit of God in whom they were sealed (4:30), and to avoid the wrath of God (5:5). All of this is involved in being saved by grace through faith! Life-long responsive action is necessary for the perfection/completion of faith.

Legal rituals have no merit, “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love*” (Gal. 4:6). If our faith is not working through love, we gain nothing, but lose all. Later, to disciples in Ephesus, Jesus warned, “*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your*

lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:4f). This dire warning was to the community of believers in Ephesus who were saved by grace through faith and not by works!

For sake of brevity, I have quoted scriptures sparingly and only given a skeletal outline. Out of deep concern, I urge you to read the entire Ephesian epistle again to see the flesh put on these bones. It shakes up entrenched interpretations so universally taught! []

(Cecil Hook; November 2006)