

Commentary
Ephesians 2:11-13

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Commentary

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Introduction

After laying the groundwork in chapters 1-2:10, Paul now turns in earnest to his purpose in writing this epistle, the unity of the church, in particular the joining of Jew and Gentile into a new entity in reference to Jesus Christ. In the first three verses of the section Paul enjoins his readers, the Gentiles to realize the dramatic shift God has worked for them in Christ.

2:11 Διό is the first word, therefore, and refers us to verses 1-10, to which the current section is in parallel, returning to the temporal terminology used there. In addition to the general nature of the two sections, we have a repetitive ποτε twice in each section (vs. 1 & 3, 11 & 13). The temporal nature of the current section is strong, being reinforced by “at that time” (v. 12) and “now” (v. 13), in addition to “remember” (v. 11).

The imperative, μνημονεύετε, begins this section in a reflective mode, bringing the Gentiles back, again, as in vs. 1-3, to their pre-Christian state. Barth is right to comment on the reluctance of Scripture to bring attention to the past of God’s people. The force of Scripture is very forward and only a few particular reasons warrant returning to the past, one of which we find here. O’Brien is correct that God’s intention here is to draw a contrast with current blessings to highlight them, not the past itself (O’Brien, 187).

A ὅτι of indirect discourse follows μνημονεύετε to give the object, the “what” they were to remember. The ὅτι clause, however, is interrupted by Paul’s concern to identify and describe those he is addressing, Gentile Christians. Paul’s alternate subject in Ephesians to this point, “you,” is specifically identified in verse 11, “the Gentiles in the flesh” (NASB). The prepositional clause, ἐν σαρκί, without the article, serves to draw attention to the qualitative aspect of the designation of Gentile. Barth is wrong to give “flesh” an evil connotation here (Barth, 254). As per Best (239), this is not a theological but natural use of the word in the context. It is a superficial physical qualification of “Gentile”, compared to the religious emphasis given by the περιτομῆς, the circumcision of Jews. The phrase containing this emphasis follows and uses “uncircumcision” to give the separatist slang the first century Jew used to refer to all non-Jews. The distinction between Jew and Gentile, seen in the Jewish use of “circumcision” and “uncircumcision,” is undermined by another ἐν σαρκί clause to close verse 11. The object of this clause is an interesting word, χειροποιήτου, “made by human hands.” It was used in the LXX to refer exclusively to idol worship and in the New Testament to refer to earthly temples, made by man. The inference here is clear in defining Jewish ritual circumcision as a man-made, not God-made, physical designation. Paul may even have inferred that the Jews gave circumcision an idolatrous emphasis. The parallel ἐν σαρκί clauses draw attention to the same physical inference in regard to the “Gentile” designation, demoting both to the physical level and undermining their theological importance.

2:12 The ὅτι clause resumes with a parallel temporal marker, τῷ καιρῷ ἐκείνῳ, further indicating this clause is resumptive to verse 11. The clause contains an indicative verb, ἦτε, with a prepositional phrase, χωρὶς Χριστοῦ, to close it. The prepositional phrase is predicative and describes the Gentiles in a general way, as a subset proposition, “separate from Christ”. There are then two parallel dependent phrases headed by two participles, one a perfect

passive, the other a present active. Both are followed by predicate nouns. The participles are parallel semantically, if not syntactically. The perfect, of course, describes a state of being alienated, the present describes a continual possessing (ἐχῶ, stative idea) dependent on the imperfect past indicative (ἦτε), semantically equivalent to a state of “having (in this case, negated by μὴ so “not having”).” This structure indicates that the two participles and their nouns (ξένοι and ἄθεοι) give the resulting conditions of being “apart from Christ.” Best (240) and Lincoln (136) see χωρὶς Χριστοῦ as predicative, with Best also recognizing the main ὅτι clause as the basis for what follows. Best (240), Lincoln (136) and O’Brien (188) all see only a list of five parts, simply stringing together, with slight differences, these descriptions of the Gentiles plight “at that time.” I believe they have missed the parallels with the incumbent dependency of the participles.

The above structure supports a bleak picture of the Gentiles’ former condition without Christ, setting up the dramatic turnaround in verse 13. We have them in a state of alienation from two very great advantages to God’s relationship with Israel. The first is the πολιτείας of Israel. There are three possible lexical senses to this word: 1) citizenship, 2) state or body politic, and 3) way of life (BAGD s.v.). Lincoln prefers 2) but the context here, written to Gentiles of Asia Minor, would more likely support 1), the rights, privileges, and duties of citizenship in Israel (Best, 241; Barth, 257). The following καὶ is a simple connective and ties the two parts of the participial phrase together. This is followed by a predicate noun, ξένοι, “strangers” linked to the equative ἦτε, the main verb of the ὅτι clause. Its distance from the equative verb leaves it awkwardly isolated, serving to draw attention to it in a staccato-like punctuated way. The covenants that qualify this word are the second great advantage these Gentiles were not a part of. Probably all the pacts God had made with Israel are in view here since there is nothing to specify any of them for us. However there is only one promise signified by the singular ἐπαγγελίας, almost certainly the promised “blessing to all the nations of the earth,” Jesus Christ.

The second participial phrase, which is not preceded by καὶ but contains one (contributing to the parallel structure of this verse), has the Gentiles without two more important spiritual necessities. Whereas the first participial phrase mentions two things that are specifically Jewish in nature, this phrase contains two more spiritual deficiencies of a general nature. The first was hope. Being “apart from Christ” left the Gentiles without any true hope no matter how they might have consoled themselves culturally. Even with cultural consolations, “the absence of hope in the face of death is amply attested in the literature and epigraphy of the day” (O’Brien, 189). The predicate noun that follows, ἄθεοι, indicates that the Gentiles were without the true God, not that they were irreligious, to their own gods, or did not know about God. The final clause of verse 12, ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, is spatial, indicating the sphere of the former life, the point of reference and extent of experience of a Gentile “separate from Christ.” This sets up the next parallel grammatical construction of ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, verse 13.

2:13 “But now” is the dramatic turnaround in 2:11-22 and verse 13 is the dramatic transition in the progress of Paul’s thinking about the unity of the church. If Ephesians spins with 11-22 as its center, 11-22 itself spins with verse 13 as its center. As the transition in this section, verse 13 actually belongs to both the paragraph above, connected by δε, and the paragraph below, connected logically by γαρ. Not only is verse 13 the dramatic and syntactical transition, it is also the narrative transition taking us from the temporal language of verses 11 and 12 to new spatial referencing that continues through the next paragraph. We go from “formerly” and “now” to “far” and “near.” The primary position of emphasis in this dynamic is νῦν δε at the beginning of the new sentence. It is reminiscent of the equally powerful ὁ δὲ θεὸς in verse 4 of the parallel

2:1-10. Two prepositional ἐν clauses serve to define the main verb. The first more emphatic one defines the sphere, the general environment of the change in Gentile fortunes, "in Christ Jesus." The second gives the more specific means, "by the blood of Christ." The verb itself is interesting given the spatial nature of the new context. One would expect to find a verb of motion, and most English translations use one, but the Greek has ἐγενήθητε an aorist passive of γινομαι, to become or happen. Bouttier calls this a divine passive (Best, 245). What seems to be in view is a change in nature as they come to exist (are "born") in a new relationship, no longer "separate from," but, in Christ.

This relationship consists in nearness contrasted to the "far" of their relationship "formerly." Near and far were common terms used in relation to the proselytism of Gentiles into Judaism. This seems to be the usage here rather than an explicit reference to Isa 57:19. However, reference to this verse is almost certainly in view in verse 17 and Best (245) sees that context informing the reference here. Both backgrounds are probably influential but proselytism is the dominant theme in verse 13. An alteration of the strict traditional usage is necessary here, though, since these Gentiles are not proselytes to Israel but to a "new man" in Christ, the church (O'Brien, 191; Lincoln, 139).

Now we have the facts of a new existence for the Gentiles. We are ready for the mechanism or methodology to follow in 14-18.