

Join

Written by Rev. C. Bouwman
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A Bit To Read

Rev. C. Bouwman

Join

The ascended Christ is today at work on Planet Earth. In fact, everything sovereign Christ allows and does on Earth is directed to the good of His church. And you and I are actually allowed to belong to that church! The thought is exciting: it puts us somewhere in the middle of things! It's not the way we usually think, but it's the revelation of Scripture nevertheless – and hence the truth.

I'd like to work out one little aspect of this glorious perspective in this *Bit to Read*.

Chose

The apostle Paul opens his letter to the Ephesians with enthusiastic worship. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," he jubilates, "who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." He explains why he's so excited: "For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world..." (Ephesians 1:3f). The picture is clear: before Genesis 1 God had determined who of the entire human population would be children of God.

Of course, God's decision to choose certain persons to salvation assumes the fall into sin. When God created our parents Adam and Eve, the entire human race belonged to God, was on God's 'side'. With the fall into sin, however, the entire human race in Adam and Eve deserted God in favor of joining Satan's 'side'. The Lord God, however, did not wish to leave all humanity in the misery into which we'd plunged ourselves; He 'chose' particular persons to redemption-from-bondage-to-Satan.

Paul writes about these things to particular Ephesians: "He chose *us*." The word 'us' refers to Paul himself (as writer of the letter) *plus* a portion (not all) of the inhabitants of Ephesus. Specifically, this portion consists of that portion of the Ephesian population who now are "saints", "faithful in Christ Jesus" (1:1) – the church in Ephesus. These are people (I don't know how many; 20? 70?) with particular faces and names. That these specific people –Paul included– are "chosen" from Satan's bondage to "every spiritual blessing in Christ" is obviously exciting; no wonder the apostle jubilates!

God's election is not limited to people of Ephesus of some 1,950 years ago (Paul wrote the letter around 60 AD), but extends also to people of Smithville living in 2012. That gives us the privilege to share his grateful excitement: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed *us*..."

Gave

How, though, did the Lord God go about rescuing sinners from Satan's side and restoring them to God's side? He could, if He so wished, sovereignly *flick* them back – for He is almighty. But His justice requires payment for sin (cf Lord's Day 4).... So the Father "gave" these chosen persons to the Son (see John 6:37,39; 17:2,6,9,24). The Son in turn came to our planet to atone for sin, and so deliver us from Satan's side. Through His sacrifice on the cross of Calvary He completed this task, and demonstrated His victory by His resurrection from the dead. Result: all those whom the Father chose before the creation of the world to be His children through Christ have in fact been set free from Satan's bondage.

Question

But here's a question. Does every one the Father chose (and for whom the Son subsequently died) directly receive this redemption? Put the question differently: is Christ's work done now that He had died to pay for sin? The answer is: No, His work is *not* done. His work of obtaining redemption is finished (cf John 19:30), but He was given more to do than that single task accomplished 2000 years ago. He went to heaven, not to twiddle His thumbs (I say it respectfully), but to *apply* to the elect the redemption He obtained for them. He applies this redemption by governing the world in such a way that He can gather His church – the assembly of those chosen to life and redeemed through His blood (and yes, renewed through His Spirit – but adding that thread would make this *Bit* too big).

How He does that?? The ascended Christ gathers His church through the preaching of the Word. In His love for the persons the Father gave Him, He compels particular persons to preach His word (2 Corinthians 5:14), and through that preaching He works faith in those for whom He died (Romans 10:17). By the direction of the ascended Christ, that preaching happens *in particular places* of this world and *at particular times* in that town's history.

Cooperate

In the process He doesn't treat people as fossils or foxes, void of responsibility. Rather, He takes seriously the fact that God created us with the privileged task of imaging God, reflecting what God is like. It is God's will that we reflect Christ in His manner of church gathering by *working-along-with* Christ. In fact, if I decline to work-along-with-Christ I hinder my own salvation.... Permit me to list two ways in which I am to cooperate with Christ.

To church

If Christ is busy gathering on earth those whom the Father chose to life and for whom He Himself died, then (if I want this salvation), I obviously need to get out of my house Sunday by Sunday and assemble with other forgiven people to hear the Word of God. In other words, working along with Christ means that I *need* to go to church! 'Church' is not just Christ's work, but ours too.

In His labors to gather His church, the ascended Christ does not speak to us *sporadically* but every Sunday, not once but twice (He governs world history, including Canada's laws and opportunities!), and does so to strengthen and encourage us in life's

battles. He well knows that we are weak and that Satan continually attacks us, and the Lord does not wish any God gave Him to be lost (John 6:39). So He sets aside the *entire* Sunday as holy (Exodus 20:11; 31:14f) for the purpose of assembling around His word (Leviticus 23:3), and today leads things in such a way that He *twice* per Sunday speaks to us. Since I am to *cooperate with Him*, I'm obviously to *join* the assembly of the redeemed each time Christ calls me.

In a human organization (think of a quilting club or a woodturning club), the word 'join' means that I get my name on the membership list. As a result, I'm expected to pay my fees, participate in club activities according to ability, and do other things to build up the club I've joined. I am, however, free to skip a meeting or three, as I feel like it. But where the Sovereign-of-the-world is busy assembling those whom the Father gave Him, I do not have a choice whether to attend or stay at home; I am meant to *work in step* with the ascended Christ. If *He* has a word for me-the-sinner, I surely can't say I don't need it. My finiteness requires humility; He works, and so I *join His work*. And 'join' does not mean that I get my name on the church's membership list, but it means that I attend, submit to Christ's Word, and give myself to whatever builds up the church.

Here I take a moment to express my concern that church is habitually less attended in afternoon service than in the morning service. I am not aware of any of our churches that are habitually fuller in the afternoon than in the morning, and that's to say that lower attendance with us in the afternoon means that a percentage of our congregation opt to *not* cooperate with Christ when He's gathering His church. No doubt folk all have different motives for being absent, and some may have legitimate reasons-before-God too. But the big picture is not in keeping with the fact that Christ is at work – and we're meant to work-along-with-Him.

To which Church?

Our town offers so many options for the churchgoer, and the surrounding communities offer even more. If it's accepted, then, that I am to work along with Christ and so go to church "diligently" (Lord's Day 38), which church am I to attend?

Since the church is the work of the Christ who laid down His life for sinners, the church I attend must be one where the gospel of forgiveness through Jesus' blood alone is plainly preached. To preach that forgiveness, the church in question will obviously also need to proclaim clearly why I need forgiveness of sins. In a word, I need to attend the church where the Word of the world's sovereign King is held in high regard.

The consequence of this material is this: the criteria I am to use to determine where I go as I cooperate with Christ's church gathering work can *not* be: where do I feel comfortable? Or: do my friends go to that church? Or: do I like the preacher and/or his style? Is the music and/or the liturgy up my ally? One yardstick alone may determine where I go to church Sunday by Sunday, morning and afternoon, and that yardstick is divine, not human: is the Word of God opened in all its simplicity and glory – whether I like what it says or not. Where one walks in step with Jesus Christ, that address is not so hard to figure out.

In sum

Long ago God gave particular persons to the Son for salvation. For these specific persons Christ laid down His life. Ever since Calvary Christ has continued to work for these persons' salvation; even in Smithville in 2012 He is busy gathering these people together. For the glory of God and the benefit of the neighbor, it's our privilege to *work along with Christ* –enthusiastically– and we do that by joining His church Sunday by Sunday, each time He gathers.

Result? We learn to share Paul's grateful excitement: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us..."

C Bouwman

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