LAW-ABIDING GENTILES

Problem Texts (7)

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'When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law' (*Rom. 2:14*).

More than once in the opening chapters of Romans Paul declares that a Gentile who does what is right, although he is uncircumcised, is more pleasing to God than a Jew who does what is wrong, although he is circumcised (cf. *Rom. 2:25–29*). Most of us now would regard this as almost a truism, but for a man of Paul's antecedents to say so was a daring innovation. Circumcision, he now insists, is irrelevant in God's sight—it is the merest externality and has nothing to do with the inner life. This is essentially what he means in *Rom. 2:14–16*, although circumcision is not expressly mentioned in these verses. Why then should the three verses, and especially *verse 14*, be regarded as a problem text?

Two reasons

One reason is that some readers feel it strange that, after the blanket condemnation of the Gentile world in *Rom. 1:18–32*, the existence of law-abiding or God-fearing Gentiles should be contemplated. But Paul knew the Gentile world of his day well enough to be aware that there were exceptions to the black picture which he drew of that world as a whole; he had met some. These people took seriously the standards of right and wrong which were built into their consciousness and which served them as a 'law', although they had not received the Old Testament law in the specific form in which the Jews knew it. When they lived up to those standards, their conscience expressed approval; when they fell below them, it convicted them of doing wrong, unless indeed it provided them with excuses for their wrongdoing—but such excuses would do them no good at the final review, 'on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus' (*verse 16*). For God on that day 'will render to everyone according to his works' (*verse 6*)—judging them according to the light that was available to them, not according to what was not available (*verse 12*). Divine judgment is regularly according to works, for members of God's household as well as for others; justification, on the other hand, is according to grace. When Paul himself looked forward to the day of review, he knew that his record as an apostle would be examined and assessed, and that the verdict would be in accordance with the findings; but his personal relation to God, his acceptance for Christ's sake, had been assured to him already by God's justifying grace.

A further reason for finding a problem in *Rom. 2:14* is that nothing is said here about justification by grace. True, the subject of justification by grace is not introduced until *Rom. 3:21*. But when it is introduced, it is preceded by the uncompromising affirmation that no one will be justified in God's sight by works of the law—whether the law of Moses or the Gentiles' awareness of standards of right and wrong. Does not this affirmation undermine the inference that might naturally be drawn from Rom. *2:14–16*?

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Like some other Reformed theologians, Karl Barth was so conscious of this problem that he maintained that Gentile *Christians* were in view in *Rom. 2:14*. In accordance with this understanding of Paul's words, they have been construed: 'When Gentiles who have not the law by nature do nevertheless—not by nature but by the Spirit (cf. *Rom. 8:4*)—what the law requires' once they have come to faith in Christ, the rest follows. But this is an unnatural way to read *Rom. 2:14* in its context.

The danger of frameworks

The trouble is that we systematize the teaching of Scripture. We have to do so, in fact, in order to grasp it clearly. But our systematic framework is regularly too limited to accommodate some parts of the teaching of scripture. The temptation is then to treat that particular part of scriptural teaching as a 'problem', because it will not fit into our framework, or even to twist and mutilate it to make it fit. But it is Scripture that is the word of God, not our framework; it is our framework that should be modified.

Again, we may construct a system of theology on the basis of Paul's teaching and call it 'Paulinism'. But Paul is bigger than any 'Paulinism', and he repeatedly says things that cannot be squared with such a system. It is wise in that situation to conclude that our system is inadequate, not that Paul is inconsistent.

The narrative of Acts presents us with a Gentile called Cornelius who recognized that the standards of right and wrong which he acknowledged were embodied more explicitly in the Jewish law, and conducted his life accordingly. God, who is himself the perfection of righteousness and mercy, appreciates those qualities in whomsoever they are found, and he approved of them so manifestly in Cornelius that Peter was forced to confess that 'in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (*Acts 10:35*). Yet it was not Cornelius's good deeds that justified him; God manifested his approval of them by telling him to call Peter with 'a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household' (*Acts 11:14*).

The Old Testament tells of a righteous Gentile called Job, of whose life and behaviour God highly approved. But Job learned at the end of the day that his justification lay not in his character or his works, blameless and upright as they were, but in God himself.