

## Believing in the Style of Abraham

There is a consensus among Christians that we are reckoned righteous by faith rather than by works of the law. But that consensus seems to break up when it comes to the matter of the content of faith. What must we believe to achieve that blessed condition of being “right with God”?

It is the conviction of this journal that the problem lies in the loss of the Hebrew Bible. While Paul bases his Gospel and thus his recipe for faith on the Old Testament most churchgoers do not. The crucial base of operations for Paul is Genesis 15:6 which he quotes in Romans 4:3 and again in Galatians 3:6: “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Faith is believing. The Greek *pistis*, faith, is directly related to *pisteuo*, to believe. As a recent study of Romans 4:3 remarks, “Faith is neither a work, nor an intuition, but persuasion of the promises as they are summed up in Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Abraham believed God by taking Him at His word. He embraced the divine promises. This is also the Christian model of faith, since Abraham is “the father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11) and “of all those who are of the faith of Abraham” (Rom. 4:16). From this it follows that the knowledge of God is mediated through His word/promise. Apart from God’s revelation of His intention in His word, faith is impossible. Only when God spoke did He cease to be the unknown God and only when Abraham believed what God said did the patriarch gain the status of being right with God.

The content of Abraham’s faith is defined by the promises of which he became persuaded. Firstly, he was to be the progenitor of a multitude of descendants — the posterity-promise (Gen. 15:5; 17:4-5). Faith is the tool by which Abraham grasped the divine intention and purpose. Secondly Abraham laid hold of the property-promise, the future permanent inheritance of the land both for himself and for his descendants

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Holst, “The Meaning of ‘Abraham Believed God’ in Romans 4:3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997), 319.

(Gen. 12:7; 15:7-8; 17:8). Paul alludes to the promise of the land forever in Romans 4:13, where the land is expanded to include the whole world.

Abraham's willingness to be persuaded, i.e. to become a believer, by his acceptance of the divine Plan is the paradigm of Christian faith. The promises have not changed, because the Gospel was preached ahead of time to Abraham (Gal. 3:8) and Jesus came to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs (Rom. 15:8). "The objects of Abraham's faith, both personal and propositional, are the same for the New Testament believers present and future."<sup>2</sup> Thus the loss of the posterity and property promises constitutes a threat to the Gospel itself. Christians believe in Christ, but a Christ inextricably bound up with and defined by the promises made to Abraham.

It comes as a shock to some to learn that Abraham's faith in the divine covenantal promises and faith in Christ are essentially the same. At present this fundamentally important truth is often obscured by the pious-sounding but misleading argument that Abraham believed in God rather than the promise itself; that he clung to the God who had promised rather than to what had been promised. This is a false dichotomy which tends to deprive faith of its biblical content and leaves the believer constructing his own version of the faith, as a work, an intuition, a desire for goodness, etc. At that point "faith" ceases to be true faith and relapses into human works. Biblical faith is impossible in the absence of an understanding of God's covenant propositions: His desire to bless His children with life forever in the land, which in the New Testament is alternatively called the Kingdom of God. "Blessed are the meek," says Jesus, echoing the Abrahamic property-promise, "for they will have the land as their inheritance" (Matt. 5:5; cp. Ps. 37:11). Equally he can vary his terminology by stating that *the Kingdom* is to belong to them one day.

Faith is never to be divorced from believing and being persuaded in regard to the *word* of God to Abraham, "the word about the Kingdom" of Jesus' famous parable (Matt. 13:19). The seed of rebirth, in fact, is that seed-word of the Kingdom, the saving Gospel which the believer allows to take root in his heart, just as Abraham embraced the divine word of promise.

Across the pages of Scripture God grants His favor to those who believe what He says. This is to treat God as the great truth-teller and this alone brings about a condition of right-standing before God. There is

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<sup>2</sup> Holst, 324.

more to believing than just the acceptance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is the vital matter of the property/land promise which forms the basis of the Christian covenant.

— Anthony F. Buzzard