

EDITORIAL

A distinguished Roman Catholic professor of New Testament, Dr. John Meagher, was kind enough to comment on the Anabaptist theology represented by this *Journal from the Radical Reformation*. He wrote, "You address radically important issues in Christian theology which are entirely appropriate because in fact the theological exercise is only adolescent and in need of further guidance. I think you are doing a good work that I hope will eventually have an impact on my own church tradition."

A major factor keeping the theological exercise in a state of immaturity is the persistence of textbooks to befog the whole issue of Christian salvation with their jargon about "imputation," "justification" and "righteousness." Though these terms can claim a basis in the New Testament, they carry little or no meaning for the average Bible student. They need to be simplified and become words with real meanings.

A clear understanding of Paul's theology of salvation may be regained when we work out of his major Old Testament "control texts," verses which he cites at critical points in his argument as demonstration of his fundamental points. No verse does better in this regard than Genesis 15:6, cited by Paul in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians: "Abraham believed God and this was counted as making him right" (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; cp. James 2:23). This golden text connects salvation and the Christian Gospel to Abraham, and bases a restored and right relationship with God on God's promises of land (property), seed (progeny) and blessing (prosperity). Abraham became "God's man" by the simple fact of believing and obeying what God promises. This is the essence of Christian faith, or belief, since the Christian Gospel was preached ahead of time to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). Responding believingly to what God promised, Abraham was no longer crooked, but straight. He was right, not wrong; righteous, not unrighteous. He was declared "just" and "righteous." What God expected of Abraham was that the divine promises be accepted as true.

In the New Testament believing the Gospel of the coming Kingdom as Jesus announced it (Mark 1:14-15), in addition to believing in Jesus' atoning and substitutionary death, makes a man or woman right with God. By this procedure we adopt the "faith of Abraham" (Rom. 4:16). Of course the Christian must then continue in that belief and obedience until the end, which is the gaining of the land/kingdom and immortality by resurrection or surviving until Jesus arrives at his Parousia. Believing the Christian Gospel based on the future inheritance of the Kingdom of God

is exactly the same as believing with “Abraham, the believer” (Gal. 3:9) in the promise of the land (Matt. 5:5). The Christian promise indeed is defined by Paul as “the promise to Abraham that he would inherit the world” (Rom. 4:13). This is exactly the same as Jesus’ promise that the faithful will “inherit the land” (Matt. 5:5) and “rule on earth” in the coming Kingdom (Rev. 5:10). The land promise made to Abraham is simply the Kingdom promise offered to Christians of all nations.

Traditional schemes of salvation have confusingly isolated the death and resurrection of Jesus from Jesus’ own preaching of the Kingdom. This creates a half-Gospel. That part-announcement excludes the actual Gospel preaching of the historical (and now risen) Jesus, as the prototype and model evangelist. Hebrews 2:3 anchors the Christian Gospel in the original missionary work of Jesus, commissioned expressly to announce the Gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 4:43). Jesus was the first evangelist, but one would not gather this fundamental fact from most contemporary preaching.

If systems of theology would begin with the easy verses such as Hebrews 5:9, that Jesus “is the author of salvation to all who obey him,” we would quickly recover the idea that true belief (faith) is synonymous with obedience — obedience to the Gospel/words of Jesus. Paul combines the two inseparable concepts of belief and obedience by framing his letter to the Romans with the phrase “obedience of faith [belief]” (1:5; 16:26). Jesus worked out of exactly the same scheme when he presented the two starkly contrasted choices before each human person: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). It is all a question of believing obedience. Believing has to do with saying “yes” to God’s promise of the Kingdom/land. “Obeying the Gospel” abbreviates the same message (2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17).

A human being is right with God, and no longer wrong, when he believes the promises made by God to Abraham and Jesus, and acts on them in obedience. It is not only by faith in the atoning death of Jesus that a man or woman is saved but by believing in the saving Gospel of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. Indeed the “servant of God,” the Messiah, was to “make many righteous by his knowledge” (Isa. 53:11) in addition to dying for them. Jesus came not only to die and rise but “to give us an understanding that we might know” the true God (1 John 5:20; cp. John 17:3).