

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM AND THE IDENTITY OF GOD

Clarence Macartney (1879-1957) was a great Presbyterian preacher. He studied at Princeton Theological Seminary under B. B. Warfield, a close friend of J. Gresham Machen. He is best known for his sermon, “Shall Unbelief Win?” a response to Harry Emerson Fosdick’s, “Shall The Fundamentalists Win?” In an excellent article on The Doctrine of the Trinity, Macartney wrote, “What Athanasius contended against in his day was the effort to give the world a damaged Christ. He knew that a damaged Christ was no Christ. He knew that a redemption wrought out by any other save the God of redemption, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, was no redemption at all. Under different names and forms there appears from time to time that same subtle effort of unbelief to persuade the world to accept a damaged Christ instead of the Christ who is the eternal Son of God. Not since the days of Arius has there been so widespread and warmly propagated a movement to substitute for the New Testament Christ, the Christ of redemption a lesser Christ, a damaged Christ. The leaders of this movement either openly deny the New Testament accounts of the miraculous entry of Christ into the world or hold that the acceptance or the rejection of those accounts of how Christ came has nothing to do with Christianity. This new Christ probably did not work miracles. He did not die on the cross as a substitute for man, taking his place, and bearing his sins before the law of God. He did not rise from the dead with the same body in which He was entombed in Joseph’s sepulchre, nor in that body did He ascend into the heavens to intercede at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; and the repeated statements of the New Testament about His glorious and triumphant return to the earth mean only that truth and right are at length to prevail upon the earth. Yet the men who hold these views still talk, and some of them still preach, about Christ. What Christ? *Who is this?* the people exclaimed when Jesus rode into Jerusalem amid the plaudits of the multitude. Today the Christian Church may well exclaim concerning this new, this damaged Christ, *Who is this?*”¹ It is noteworthy that while Paul never reduces God to a function of human faith, Romans 4 is exclusively concerned with God *ad extra*, with God as He is to be believed in. This has not often been sufficiently stressed but is in fact the case for each of Paul’s “definitions” of God in Romans 4. To put it the other way around, for Paul in Romans 4 human faith is inseparable not only from God, but also from God understood in a certain way. The anti-trinitarian God as set forth in the Koran or the Book of Mormon will not do. For Paul there is no true saving faith that is not faith in “the God who justifies the ungodly” (4:5), “the God who gives life to the dead and calls non-entities to be entities” (4:17), and finally, “the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (4:24). We have already seen above how central the “justification of the ungodly” is to Romans 3:21-4:8. We can take this further, however, and show that in fact this is the first of a triad of “definitions” of God in Romans 4. In addition, it is noteworthy that the action that is crucial to the description of God is governed by the participle “believing” (*pisteuonti*): Paul’s theological statement here comes in the context of human belief about God – but again not God in some generic sense – but particularly the God of the Bible.² Therefore, each of these three designations of God in Romans 4 comes in the context of human faith: these actions of the justification of the ungodly, giving life to the dead, and the raising of Jesus, for Paul, define God as He reveals Himself to be believed in. The other description of God that is integral to faith is Abraham’s belief that God was able actually to do what he had promised (4:21). It is *this* faith which truly means that “we uphold the Law” (Rom. 3:31). The Law as witness is more than established by this faith

in God as he really is. There is no *tension* here for Paul, but rather a conflict between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries over how the Law, God, and faith were to be interpreted.³

I. **THE NATURE OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH.**

- A. ***Its impediments*** (Rom. 4:18-19). The apostle in the preceding verses of the fourth chapter, a chapter in which he seeks to demonstrate that the Old Testament men were justified in the same way that New Testament men are, his great illustration being the patriarch Abraham. Having very cogently made his point, it would be expected that someone should say to him, "But, Paul, just exactly what is saving faith? You say a man is justified by faith, not by the works of the Law. But what do you mean by *faith*? Just what is the kind of faith that justifies?" This question the apostle seeks to answer in the last section of Romans four. His answer is, very simply, that faith is unswerving trust in the God of the resurrection. That, too, was the essence of Abraham's trust (cf. v. 17; Acts 27:25). The impediments to Abraham's faith were large and imposing. Paul puts them in this way, "Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, so shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb" (vv. 18-19). It was as Chrysostom put it, "against human hope, in the hope which is of God."⁴ Paul may mean that Abraham was beyond the time of hoping by the expression "against hope," which may mean literally *beyond hope*, but it seems more likely that he means simply beyond human expectations, or perhaps, calculations. Calvin aptly remarks, "When he had no grounds for hope (humanly speaking), Abraham still relied on hope on the promise of God."⁵ The expression, "that he might become the father of many nations" (cf. Gen. 17:4-5), may express the content of Abraham's faith, the result of his faith, or the purpose of his faith. The last named is the most common usage of the grammatical construction.⁶
- B. ***Its encouragements*** (Rom. 4:20-21). The encouragement to faith found in verse twenty is the promise of God, which in this case includes the promises of Genesis 12:1-3 and the reference to them in 15:5-6. By the grace of God (cf. Eph. 2:8-9) Abraham was enabled to believe the promises given to him, and the result was that he gave glory to God. That is the heart of the validity of justification by faith. It leads to the glorification of the Triune God. Any plan of salvation which does not lead to that is not of God. That is why a plan involving the free will of man cannot be in harmony with the biblical text, "Salvation is of the Lord" (cf. Jonah 2:9). In the twenty-first verse the second of the encouragements to faith is mentioned. It is the character of God. As Paul puts it, it is, "And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform." The word "fully persuaded (or assured)" is *plerophoretheis*; it is the term for the firm conviction upon which action without wavering is predicated.⁷ The two participial clauses "giving glory to God" and "being fully persuaded" described the mental effects, which attended the strengthening of Abraham's faith.⁸ The best biblical definition of faith is found in the expression of Paul in Acts 27:25, "Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer; *For I Believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me.*" That is it, simply believing that things are and shall be just as God says they are. The gospel of a crucified Savior is to be believed in the same way, that is, the cross is the heart of a work of the Son that is an effective, penal, substitutionary satisfaction rendered to the holiness and justice of God for sinners, not for all without exception, but for all without distinction. Faith, then, is simply taking the Word of God at face value. It is not delusion, nor is it the presumption of rationalism, with its fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man doctrine, nor is it credulity, and it is certainly not the nonsensical "faith in your faith" that is the mantra of the cultic Health and Wealth crowd Machen correctly observed – "When you want assurance of salvation, think not about your faith, but about the Person who is the object of your faith. Faith is not a force that does something, but it is a channel by which something is received."⁹

- II. **THE DIVINE RESPONSE TO ABRAHAM'S FAITH.** The apostle writes in verse twenty-two, "And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness." The faith of Abraham was not merely in the

promise of God, but it was also a faith in the God who had promised, as the preceding verses indicated. And now we have the divine response to the faith of the patriarch.

- A. **Imputation.** The preceding verses have been a detailed exposition of the first part of Genesis 15:6, “And he believed in the Lord,” noting the characteristics of that faith. With the “therefore” (lit., *wherefore*) the apostle points out that the resultant imputation of righteousness is the result of the expression of saving faith on the part of the patriarch. Abraham’s faith was *not* his righteousness. The obedience and atoning sacrifice of Christ are the grounds for justification. The words “imputed for righteousness” are used in the instrumental sense (cf. Phil. 3:9).¹⁰

III. **THE PAULINE APPLICATION TO US.**

- A. **The twofold application of the Old Testament** (Rom. 4:23-24a). The apostle here makes the point that the story of Abraham is not written for the sake of Abraham alone, that is, as a memorial of him. Or that he might live on in the memory of men. It is written for others, for us, since the manner in which the patriarch was justified is the same method by which we, too, are justified by a just God and a Savior. The imputation of righteousness is secured by us in the same way, faith in the God of Abraham and in His promises concerning the Redeemer. Cf. 1 Cor. 6-11.
- B. **The essence of saving faith** (Rom. 4:24b). The essence of saving faith, Paul says, is found in believing on Him who raised up Jesus, our Lord, from the dead. It is no vague, indefinite, amorphous feeling; it is the conviction that a set of facts concerning Christ is true. There are few, if any, promises from God to the unsaved man. There is the offer of salvation in Christ. An offer, however, is not a promise. Promises pertain to the ones who have responded to the universal offer of salvation in Christ. Incidentally, the “if we believe” of the Authorized Version is in the original text simply, *to us who believe*. The expression “that raised up Jesus, our Lord, from the dead,” points to the essence of faith. It is in the God of the resurrection, or in the God who, in this context, “quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which are not, as though they were” (cf. v. 17). Cf. v. 19 (the deadness of Sarah’s womb). There is a harmony of essence between the begetting of Isaac and the resurrection of Isaac’s Seed, the Lord Jesus Christ.
- C. **The rationale of the saving acts** (Rom. 4:25). Who was delivered for [better, *on account of*] *our offenses*, and was raised again for [better, *on account of*] *our justification*. The apostle, after discussing the case of Abraham as a ruling instance in proof of justification by faith alone, proceeds at the close of the chapter to describe faith as it is exercised on its proper object. “He uses a striking name or title of God when he describes Him as the Christ-raiser, and represents faith as exercised on God in this capacity; that is, on God as the source of the atonement, and the acceptor of it at the hands of the Surety.”¹¹ In this expression, which by its balance suggests that it was used by Paul and became something like a formula, and which seems to clearly recall Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (cf. 53:11-12, 5, 6, etc.), the apostle expounds the meaning of the cross and the resurrection. His death took place because of offenses, while His resurrection took place because justification had been completed.

CONCLUSION: Some of you may remember that long before he became famous as the so-author of the bestselling *Left Behind* series (which combines bad fiction writing with equally bad theology), Tim LaHaye first rose to prominence in Evangelical circles for his book *Transformed Temperaments* (Tyndale, 1970)¹² LaHaye was one of the first, as David Wells points out, to tap into pop psychology preoccupation with self-actualization.¹³ LaHaye, despite his claim that the book was Bible-based, swallowed hook, line and sinker the Freudian concept of personality (introvert, extrovert, with these being developed further by Freud’s disciple Carl Jung into Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholy and Phlegmatic). Christians in evangelical churches around the country began trying to determine their particular temperament with the help of LaHaye’s “Biblical” portraits. The Apostle Peter, according to LaHaye’s facile labeling, was a “Sanguine” (outgoing, life of the party type). The Apostle Paul was “Choleric” (strong-willed, type A and quick tempered). Moses, well he is supposedly a “Melancholy” (perfectionist, introspective) and, as it turns out, Abraham is LaHaye’s example of the “Phlegmatic” (easy-going, adapts to his circumstances and, so we are told, trusting). As it turns out, according to LaHaye’s uncritical acceptance of secular psychology (which he superimposed on the Bible),¹⁴ Abraham, by temperamental make-up was *predisposed* to exercise his free will and trust God. Given LaHaye’s hostile attitude

towards all things Reformed,¹⁵ it is not surprising to find him serving up this warmed-over brand of Arminianism. Far better to listen to the wisdom of John Calvin. “Let us also remember, that the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality; we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that He counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that He is propitious and kind to us; outward judgments threaten His wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true.”¹⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited by Lorraine Boettner, *Studies In Theology* (P&R, 1975), p. 130.

² Thomas Goodwin, in his classic work, *Of The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, made this point centuries ago when he noted that due to the difficult nature of faith “the consideration of the mercies in God’s heart and nature is the strongest, the most winning and obliging” of all the divine attributes. However, Goodwin was not even content to allow faith’s gaze to rest upon an abstract attribute of mercy in God, but took it yet a step further: “And God hath minted his mercies forth from out of his purposes into promises where they lie exposed, and to be given forth to everyone that will come in for grace, and take them from mercy’s hands, even *redemption from all iniquity*.” In short, the mercy of God is evident in his revealed promises. As cited by Michael Horton in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, eds. K. M. Kapic and R. C. Gleason (IVP, 2004), p. 110.

³ My introductory remarks have been distilled from S. J. Gathercole’s article, “Justified by Faith, Justified by His Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21-4:25,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume II, The Paradoxes of Paul*, eds. D. A. Carson, P. T. O’Brien, M. A. Seifried (Baker, 2004), pp. 165-168.

⁴ As cited in C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to The Romans I* (T&T Clark, 1975), p. 245.

⁵ *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries VIII* (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 98.

⁶ As stated throughout these series, I am indebted to the lectures of my late prof. of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. for the substance of my analysis.

⁷ A. Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (rpt. Hendrickson, 1995), p. 116.

⁸ Cf. E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of St. Paul to The Romans* (rpt. James Family, 1977), p. 107.

⁹ J. G. Machen, *What is Faith?* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 250.

¹⁰ Cf. the discussion in H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 177.

¹¹ G. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles* (rpt. Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 146.

¹² LaHaye committed the cardinal sin for a writer: plagiarism. His book was practically taken verbatim from a work written years before by the Norwegian theologian Ole Hallesby entitled *The Temperaments*. LaHaye made no mention of Hallesby in the first edition of his bestseller, something that did not set well with the trustees of Hallesby’s estate. LaHaye did make a settlement and in subsequent editions of this book he acknowledges his extensive reliance on Hallesby.

¹³ D. F. Wells, *No Place For Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993), p. 175.

¹⁴ Recent studies have shown that much, if not all of this, turns out to be seriously flawed psychology. “Millions of Americans take personality tests each year: to get a job, to pursue an education, to settle a legal dispute, to better understand themselves and others. But where did these tests come from, and what are they saying about us? In *The Cult of Personality*, award-winning psychology writer Annie Murphy Paul reveals the surprising and disturbing story behind the tests that claim to capture human nature. “Combining cutting-edge research, engaging reporting, and absorbing history, Paul uncovers the way these allegedly neutral instruments are in fact shaped by the agendas of industry and government. She documents the dangers of their intrusive questions, biased assumptions, and limiting labels. And she exposes the flawed theories and faulty methods that render their results unreliable and invalid. Personality tests, she contends, produce descriptions of people that are nothing like human beings as they actually are: complicated, contradictory, changeable across time and place. “The widespread use of these tests has deeply troubling consequences. Students are being consigned to narrow categories even as they’re still growing and developing. Workers are having their privacy invaded and their rights trampled. Companies are wasting hundreds of millions of dollars, only to make ill-informed decisions about hiring and promotion. Our judicial system is being undermined by inaccurate evidence. Perhaps most distressing, we are all increasingly implicated in a *cult of personality* that celebrates the superficial over the substantive, the static over the dynamic, the standard and average over the distinctive and unique” (excerpted from *The Cult of Personality* by Annie Murphy Paul: Free Press, 2004, inside jacket cover).

¹⁵ LaHaye is very explicit about his dislike for Reformed theology. He wrote the forward for Dave Hunt’s book *What Love Is This?*, a strongly anti-Calvinistic book calling it the most important book of the century. For a refutation see *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views*, D. Hunt & J. White (Multnomah, 2004), where White and Hunt debate the issues and Hunt comes out looking badly and resorts to simply ad hominem arguments.

¹⁶ Calvin, op. cit., p. 99.