

In Church or in Christ?

In their turn, both John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ bluntly confronted the Jews over their descent from Abraham; specifically, the Jews' presumptuous boasting about their physical descent from the patriarch.

Take John the Baptist:

Do not presume to say to yourselves [he told them]: 'We have Abraham as our father', for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up [spiritual] children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt. 3:9-10).

In other words, John was telling the Jews that while they were indeed physical descendants of Abraham, it did not mean that they were necessarily his spiritual descendants. A man might be a Jew, but this did not mean that he was, as Abraham was, a believer, a child of God. And that wasn't all: the Jews had to realise that physical descent wasn't the issue: it was a man's spiritual state which counted. And as for spiritual descendants for Abraham, rubbing salt into the wound (as his hearers would have thought it), John told them bluntly that God could raise spiritual children for Abraham from the most unlikely material – lumps of rock!

Strong meat!

The Lord Jesus Christ took a similar line when addressing the Jews who had nominally believed in him. He opened thus:

If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32).

His listeners didn't like that, not one bit! Having been touched on the raw, they snapped back (you can almost see their index fingers jabbing their puffed-out chests):

We are [the natural] offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say: ‘You will become free’? (John 8:33).

Jesus told them straight:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are [the natural] offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father (John 8:34-38).

The Jews resented this, and how! They retorted:

Abraham is our father (John 8:39).

Jesus came back, spelling it out:

If you were Abraham’s [spiritual] children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did (John 8:39-40).

They exploded:

We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father – even God (John 8:41).

Jesus again:

If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires... Because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God (John 8:42-47).

Yet again, strong meat!

What was it about this issue, this spiritual connection of the Jews with Abraham, that caused John and Jesus to be so confrontational, so direct, so passionate?

As both men knew, regeneration was the number-one issue. It was the absolute necessity of regeneration that moved Jesus to cut across Nicodemus in so stark a manner:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you: 'You must be born again'. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:3-8).

And that brings us to the point. We are not dealing with some local, temporary issue which concerned the Jews some 2000 years ago, something of little or no consequence to us today. Taking that line would be to make a mistake of the first magnitude.

We have to remember that both John and Jesus were ministering at the watershed of the ages,¹ that breakpoint – that discontinuity – between the old covenant and the new. As Christ stated:

The law and the prophets were until John [the Baptist]; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it (Luke 16:16).

John the apostle put it this way:

The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

This supersession of the old covenant by the new signalled many major changes: the outward gave way to the inward; shadows were replaced by reality; ceremonies gave way to Christ; the

¹ See my 'Watershed of the Ages' on my sermonaudio.com page.

weak² and ineffective was removed, and the effective established; and so on.³ While there is a measure of continuity between the two covenants, it is their essential discontinuity which is vital. Nobody should try to cobble them together, as Christ's wineskins' parable makes clear:

No one puts a piece of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matt. 9:16-17).

God gave the old covenant to Israel, and Israel only (Deut. 4:6-45; 5:26; 7:6-11; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 9:4), and he gave it to them as a temporary covenant, lasting only until Christ came, fulfilled it, and rendered it obsolete (2 Cor. 3:6-13; Gal. 3:19-24; Heb. 7:18-19,22; 8:13).⁴ Sadly, Israel always was a mixed body, the majority being unregenerate, with only the minority – by anticipation in the new covenant – being regenerate.

And herein lies another two major differences between the old and new covenants. The new covenant is not confined to physical Israel, but extends worldwide, to all nations. More than that, membership of the new covenant has nothing to do with physical

² In Christ, in the new covenant, 'God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do' (Rom. 8:3). In his *Commentary*, Calvin wrongly limited this to justification: The apostle 'means that the law has no power whatever to justify'. True, the law cannot justify, but that is not what Paul is asserting here. The context, from Rom. 6:1, has been about justification leading to progressive sanctification. Indeed, Paul's argument goes on until Rom. 8:39 and includes glorification. Trying to limit 'the law' to 'the ceremonial law' (a covenant-theology invention imposed on Scripture) is refuted by Heb. 7:18-19,22; 8:13. The old covenant in its entirety, not just some part of it, was weak and has been rendered obsolete.

³ Read Hebrews.

⁴ See my *Three Verses Misunderstood: Galatians 3:23-25 Expounded*.

descent: the beneficiaries of the new covenant are the regenerate, and the regenerate only. And this is the point here.⁵

We must be clear: the issue is not a question of natural relationship to Abraham. That is not the point! Ever since the fall of Adam – long before Abraham – the human race has been divided into two, into two families, two seeds. And the consequences of this division are eternal. Apart from the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, every one born into the world has been – and (until the end of time) will be – born fallen in Adam, born under the wrath of God (John 3:36; Eph. 2:1-3). That means me; and it means you. And unless we are born again and transferred (Col. 1:13-14) or adopted (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:3-7; Eph. 1:5) out of Adam into Christ, we will eternally perish (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22,45-49). Nothing could be more serious than that! And that is why John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ were so passionate about the issue.

For the Jews, all this was couched in terms of their descent from Abraham – whether physical or spiritual. For Gentiles, the issue has nothing to do with physical descent from Abraham, but is a purely spiritual matter. Abraham is, in Scripture, the archetypal believer – ‘the [spiritual] father of all who believe’ (Luke 19:9; Rom. 4:11,16-17; Gal. 3:7). All who believe, therefore, whether they be Jews or Gentiles, are the spiritual children of Abraham.

But the fundamental issue for us all is whether we are in Adam or in Christ.

Let me prove it. I start with the Jews – those who can trace their physical descent from Abraham. Paul clearly laid out the issue:

No one is a [real, spiritual] Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a [real, spiritual] Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (Rom. 2:28-29).

⁵ For all this, and more, see my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

In other words, a real, spiritual Jew is one who is regenerate. A man may be a physical descendant of Abraham, but unless he is regenerate and so brought to saving faith he is not a spiritual descendant of Abraham. And that is what counts! He is not trusting Christ! And that's fatal!

As for Abraham himself, as Paul put it:

We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the [spiritual] father of all who believe without being circumcised [that is, believing Gentiles], so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the [spiritual] father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our [natural and/or spiritual] father Abraham had before he was circumcised [that is, he is the spiritual father of believing Jews].

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his [spiritual] offspring... (Rom. 4:9-16).

I break off. It is in this crucial passage that Paul takes the argument beyond the Jews and their physical and/or spiritual descent from Abraham, broadening it to encompass all men – whether Jew or Gentile. And the apostle states what really matters; namely a person's spiritual descent from Abraham, his trust in Christ:

... it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his [spiritual] offspring – not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one [who is a Gentile] who shares the faith of Abraham... In hope [Abraham] believed against hope, that he should become the [spiritual] father of many nations, as he had been told (Rom. 4:16-18).

A little later, Paul set out the fundamental principle:

Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his [natural] offspring, but: 'Through Isaac shall your [spiritual] offspring be named'. This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring (Rom. 9:6-8).

In other words, the great essential is election producing regeneration leading to saving trust in Christ. It is not a question of physical descent from Abraham, but of a spiritual relationship with God:

[Christ] was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own [that is, the Jews], and his own people [that is, the Jews, by and large] did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:10-13; see also John 11:52).

And this applies to all men – whether Jew or Gentile:

It is those of faith [whether Jew or Gentile] who are the [spiritual] sons of Abraham... If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's [spiritual] offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:7,29).

Being a Jew or Gentile is irrelevant:

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (Gal. 6:15).

The fact is, if a man is in Christ it is because he is elect and has been regenerated and brought to faith. He is, therefore, no longer a child of the devil but is a child of God (John 1:11-13; 8:47; 10:26; Rom. 11:5-7).

In short, each one of us is a child of Satan or of God (Matt. 13:38-39; John 8:44; 1 John 3:8-10), in the flesh or spirit (or Spirit) (John 3:6; Rom. 8:1-17; Gal. 5:16-21), and we are living (spiritually speaking) on one of two mountains – Sinai (the law, by works, in Adam) or Zion (grace, by faith, in Christ) (Heb.

12:18-24), in one of two covenants – Hagar (law, by works, in Adam) or Sarah (grace, by faith, in Christ) (Gal. 4:21 – 5:1), in darkness or light (Luke 16:8; John 12:36; Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5), far off from God or near (Eph. 2:13); and so on.⁶

This fundamental division governs all humanity.

No wonder John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ were so passionate about it, so direct. Clearly such a truth must never be brushed aside.

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First, let me directly address fellow-believers about the effect this doctrine must have on our evangelistic efforts. We must make sure that the reality of this fundamental division governs the way we approach sinners with the gospel. It, and its consequences, must be clearly set out in our addresses to them. This inevitably means confrontation. The preaching of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ, plus the preaching of the first believers as recorded in Acts, leaves no room for doubt on that score.⁷ The people we address today are unregenerate or regenerate, and until they are regenerated and thus brought to conviction of sin, repentance and trust in Christ, they are utterly without God and without hope in the world (Eph. 2:12; 1 Thess. 4:13). As Christ told Nicodemus, unless a sinner is born again he will never see, let alone enter, the kingdom (John 3:3,6). No amount of surface tinkering will alter this solemn truth: until a sinner is taken out of Adam and brought into Christ, until he has passed from death to life and become a new creature (or creation) in Christ (John 5:24; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; 1 John 3:14), that sinner is lost, ruined.

Joseph Hopkins set Christ's words in a hymn:

*Sinners! this solemn truth regard;
Hear, all you sons of men!*

⁶ Scripture constantly highlights the division – goats or sheep, on the left hand or right, walking the broad or narrow way, with lives built on sand or rock. Eternity seals it permanently in outer darkness or eternal bliss.

⁷ See my *To Confront or Not to Confront?: Addresses to Unbelievers*.

*For Christ the Saviour has declared:
'You must be born again'.*

*Whate'er might be your birth or blood,
The sinner's boast is vain;
Thus says the glorious Son of God:
'You must be born again'.*

*Our nature totally depraved,
The heart a sink of sin;
Without a change we can't be saved,
'You must be born again'.*

*That which is born of flesh is flesh,
And flesh it will remain:
Then marvel not that Jesus says:
'You must be born again'.*

This vital distinction has not always been clearly made.

After the apostles came the Fathers. Although the Fathers knew that Christ had fulfilled the old covenant and rendered it obsolete (Heb. 7:18-19,22; 8:13), and although they were not ignorant of the parable of the wineskins (Matt. 9:16-17) (see above), even so they drove a chariot and horses through Scripture by going back to the old covenant, and bringing its principles into the new. They turned to the levitical priesthood in order to establish a theology and a practice which would eventually lead to a hierarchical clergy/laity split within a State-Church sustained by the abominable rite of baby sprinkling, with baptismal regeneration never far below the surface – if that! In a word, the Fathers, in cahoots with the Roman Emperors Constantine and Theodosius, invented the monstrosity of Christendom,⁸ a hybrid Judaistic, paganised Christianity. This produced a catastrophic breakdown of the division between the unregenerate and the regenerate. Indeed, the advocates of Christendom gladly embraced both in one Church, thus setting up an institution which continues, to this day, to ruin a countless number. For the Reformation, alas, while

⁸ See my *The Pastor: Does He Exist?; Infant Baptism Tested; Battle for the Church: 1517-1644*; Appendix 2 in my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*.

it accomplished much, invented a theology (Covenant Theology) which actually bolstered the confusion of the old and new covenants, and systematised the diabolical doctrine and practice of baby sprinkling, which, many, despite the tortuous metaphysics and double-speak of their teachers, think regenerates the baby. In this way, the Reformers solidified the concept of mixed – unregenerate and regenerate – churches. Indeed, not a few have gloried in such, and derided those – like the Anabaptists – who demand churches made up of the regenerate only.⁹

Sad to say, in their efforts to attract the unregenerate into ‘public worship’ ‘in church attendance’ (unmitigated Christendom-speak and practice) so as to evangelise them, a growing number of evangelicals have adopted programmes, devised schemes, and set up systems which inevitably further erode any clear distinction between the unregenerate and the regenerate; so much so, unless the tide is soon turned, virtually no separation between the *ekklēsia* and the world will be left.¹⁰ Indeed, a generation of believers is being produced which knows little or nothing of this vital biblical principle of separation, and a generation of unbelievers is being produced which mistakes religion for regeneration, mistakes being ‘in church’ for being ‘in Christ’.¹¹ Conversion, instead of being a crisis (I do not imply a dramatic crisis), is becoming a process: evangelism is becoming a call to ‘attend – complete – a course of instruction in the elements of the faith’. Instead of: ‘Flee to Christ’, the cry is: ‘Come to Church’. Instead of unbelievers being confronted with Christ, no effort is spared to make them feel comfortable and at home among the saints. In this way, sinners are being made religious, when they need to be regenerated. Conformity not conversion will be the disastrous result.

⁹ See my *Infant; Battle*

¹⁰ See my *Relationship; Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder*.

¹¹ See my *Public Worship: God-Ordained or Man-Invented?; Evangelicals Warned: Isaiah 30 Speaks Today*.

And that is why I have written this article. Nothing could be more relevant. As a matter of urgency, we must recover the biblical, new-covenant principles which undergirded the way John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the first believers confronted sinners with the gospel. We mute the biblical ‘You must be born again’ at our peril, and to the ruin of a countless number.

Finally, let me address any reader who is mistaking religion for regeneration. I urge you not to rest content in church attendance: trust Christ alone for salvation.

If my words have failed to reach you, perhaps these from C.H.Spurgeon might:

So long as you trust in ceremonies, prayers, or good works, you shall not find eternal grace; but when stripped of all strength and power, you shall gain a glorious salvation in the Lord Jesus. If morality can join the pieces of a broken heart, the cement shall soon cease to bind, and the man shall again be as vile as ever. We must have a new heart and a right spirit, or vain will be all our hopes... It is easy enough to get religious notions and fancy yourself safe, but a real saving work is the work of God, and God alone. Seek not to the priest; he may console, but it is by deluding you. Seek not to your own self; for you may soothe yourself into the sleep of perdition. See that your heart be washed in the blood of Jesus; be careful that the Holy Spirit has his temple in it; and may God, of his great and sovereign grace, [awaken]¹² you that you don’t deceive yourself.¹³

¹² Original ‘look to’.

¹³ C.H.Spurgeon sermon 53.