

Lenten Reflection

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Who are the offspring of Abraham? This is the question addressed in Chapter 8 of John's gospel. The answer to that question influenced the Jews' relationship to Jesus Christ and it influences ours.

The Jews claimed Abraham as their father. Jesus refutes this claim, saying, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did." [John 8:39b-40]. Jesus goes on to say, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.... Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." [John 8:56, 58]. Here Jesus claims eternal transcendence over time that could only be true of God and to be God who self-identified as "I AM WHO I AM" to Moses at the burning bush.

This is the same God who made covenant with Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude of nations. God promised an everlasting covenant that He would be their God and they would be His people. The Jews confronting Jesus view Abraham as their father based merely on physical descent, which included Jesus Christ, and cultural descent. They do not understand being spiritual offspring of Abraham, which encompasses all who trust in Jesus.

God's covenant with Abraham was a covenant of faith. Although Abraham was childless at the time of the covenant and would not live to see its fulfillment, he still believed God's promise and "walked before" God in ongoing intimacy. Abraham was "blameless" not because he was without failures and sins, but because "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." [Romans 4:3].

Abraham stood right before God by believing, not by doing. Faith and works are fundamentally opposed, for faith is trusting on a promise of God's work and not depending in any way on our own performance. It is "those of faith who are the sons of Abraham" [Galatians 3:7], not merely those of physical or cultural connection. If the Jews confronting Jesus understood themselves as Abraham's spiritual offspring, they would have had Abraham's faith and believed in Jesus as Messiah.

Are we like those Jews? Is our relationship with Jesus based on cultural traditions of doing good works? Do we think we know Jesus because generations of our families have belonged to particular churches? Do we think our efforts are good enough?

As admirable as good works and church membership are, they do not make us Abraham's offspring, heirs according to God's promise. It is in having the joyful and confident faith of Abraham - faith that Jesus' death, not our works, paid for all our sins - that we are one in Christ and stand righteous before our Almighty God.