

GOD'S WORLDWIDE FAMILY

Loss of community

Diversity is very much extolled in our day. Diversity, in theory, is delightful. Diversity, in practice, is difficult. A few years ago, the Iola Williams Senior Center in San Jose, a longtime haven for the city's elderly African-American residents, reached out to Chinese seniors. The San Jose Mercury News reported:

"The black members complain that the Chinese seniors push and jostle their way to the front of the cafeteria line and secretly gamble on their mah-jongg games. The Chinese members say the black seniors don't seem to understand how difficult it is to adapt to a new culture. If only the African-American members would just be a little more patient, the Chinese seniors say." One of the longtime members of the center said "there is no sense of community anymore."¹ Diversity, it seems, threatens community as least as much as it enhances it.

Is the church of Jesus Christ any different from the senior center? Martin Luther King called 11 a.m. Sunday "the most segregated hour in America." If we have a chance to be different, and certainly we're called to be different, it begins with coming to grips with the grace of God.

In Romans 1-3, Paul told the stories of both the Gentiles and the Jews. He told the story of Christ, which fulfilled the story of the Jews and threw open membership in the people of God to everyone. In Romans 4, Paul tells the story of Abraham, who was a Gentile before he became the first Jew. His story, in particular, is a story for all of us.

Paul cites Abraham not as an example of justification by faith but as the father of both Jews and Gentiles who are justified by faith. The story of Abraham means that all followers of Jesus belong to the same family. Romans 4 therefore appropriately brings to a close the first major section of the letter, which features the revelation of the saving activity of God to bring about a worldwide family defined by faith.

Romans 4:

¹What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." ⁴Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. ⁵But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, ⁶just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

⁷ "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.

⁸ BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."

⁹Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." ¹⁰How then was

it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; ¹¹and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, ¹²and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

¹³For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; ¹⁵for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

¹⁶For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷(as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. ¹⁸In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE." ¹⁹Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; ²⁰yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, ²¹and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. ²²Therefore IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

²³Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, ²⁴but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

Abraham: What kind of father?

Verse 1 would be better translated in a way that demonstrates the concern of Paul in Romans 3:27-4:25. The question does not concern how Abraham was justified but the nature of Abraham's fatherhood. The question is whether Abraham, the first Jew, is "our forefather according to the flesh." The answer in Romans 4 is that Abraham is our forefather not according to the flesh but according to grace, which is connected with faith. As Paul puts it in Romans 9:8, the biological descendants of Abraham, the "children of the flesh," are not related to God on the basis of ethnicity. On the contrary, "children of the promise," people of faith, are children of God.²

If Abraham could have boasted that works of the Jewish law defined his status with God, then Jews who descended from him could boast in the same way. Abraham would be the forefather of the Jews "according to the flesh." This kind of boasting on the part of both Abraham and all Jews is excluded on the basis of Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Abraham, though he was childless, believed God when he promised him descendants as numerous as the stars. The status of "righteousness," which is that of being in covenant, or partnership, with God, was recognized not because of Abraham's works but because of his faith.³

By way of analogy in verses 4-5, Paul demonstrates that justification—the declaration that one is in partnership with God—is a gift from God and has nothing to do with the adherence to the Jewish law. Abraham himself was an “ungodly” Gentile, outside the covenant, before God called him and justified him. Justification is a gift indeed, for God’s wrath is otherwise revealed against “all ungodliness” and because a righteous judge most assuredly should not justify the ungodly (Romans 1:18, Exodus 23:7, Proverbs 17:15). Those whom God justifies on the basis of faith can, in fact, boast “before God” that they belong to him, but only because of the faithfulness of Christ (Romans 5:11).

Quoting Psalm 32:1-2, Paul says that David, the preeminent Jewish king, endorses the view that the status of righteousness has nothing to do with adherence to the Jewish law. Covenant membership, and the forgiveness of sins that comes with it, extends beyond ethnic Israel.

Father of all who believe

The conclusion that Paul draws from the story of Abraham is that partnership with God extends to uncircumcised Gentiles. To back up this conclusion, Paul notes that Abraham was uncircumcised when God pronounced him to be righteous. Like the Gentiles, Abraham was ungodly when God called him and uncircumcised when God justified him.

God, after declaring Abraham to be his partner, commanded him to be circumcised. Circumcision was a “sign of the covenant,” indicating that Abraham was in partnership with God (Genesis 17:11). The sign was also “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.” The declaration of righteousness, that Abraham was in partnership with God, was based on the reality of his faith. Circumcision authenticated both God’s declaration and Abraham’s faith.

God’s command of circumcision included Abraham’s descendants, the Jews (Genesis 17:10). Circumcision was designed to do the same thing for them that it did for Abraham: to mark them out as God’s people and to authenticate their faith. Apart from faith, of course, circumcision was meaningless.

Because Abraham’s faith preceded his circumcision, and because circumcision was only an indicator of his faith, Paul can say that Abraham has become the father of both Jewish and Gentile people of faith. Paul is beginning to answer the question of verse 1: Is Abraham our forefather according to the flesh? No, he is the father of both Jews and Gentiles according to grace and faith. Faith, not ethnic descent, is the basis for inclusion in Abraham’s family.

The basis for family inheritance

As part of the covenant, God promised Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:7-8). This promise, like God’s declaration that Abraham was righteous, did not result from his adherence to the Jewish law. It was based on his righteous status, which derived from his faith. This land was his and Israel’s “inheritance.” Paul understands this promise to embrace the entire world. The righteous, those in partnership with God, will inherit the earth.⁴

The law is itself disqualified as a basis for inheritance because it doesn't bring about partnership with God. In fact, it brings about the wrath of God toward those who received the law, because they violated it (Romans 2:12, 3:19-20). If the law were the basis for inheritance, then only the Jews, "those who are of the law," would qualify, which means that no one would qualify, because the law itself disqualifies the Jews.

Abraham, who had been declared by God to be righteous on the basis of faith, received the promise of the land before the advent of the law. He did not violate the law, nor bring about the wrath of God, for there was no law to violate. He thereby blazed a trail for Jews and Gentiles of faith to inherit the world. The law does not stand in their way.

The promise of God

The promised inheritance is not only based on faith instead of the law, it is also, literally, "according to grace" and not "according to the flesh" (verse 1). In Romans 4, faith and grace are on one side, and the law and the flesh are on the other. The law, if appealed to, confines justification and inheritance to the "flesh" of Abraham, his physical descendants. Faith, on the other hand, embraces the graciousness of God toward all so that justification and inheritance are open to all. Justification and inheritance are connected with faith and grace, not law and race.

Therefore, the promise of inheritance is "guaranteed to all the descendants" of Abraham, people of faith regardless of ethnicity. Abraham is thus the "father of us all" by God's grace and our responsive faith.⁵ The universal fatherhood of Abraham fulfills God's promise in Genesis 17:5 to make him a father of many nations.

Paul's description of God in verse 17 demonstrates how he fulfilled his promise to Abraham. He "gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist." God created a family for Abraham in a supernatural way. He gave life to Jews like Paul, whose relationship to God was dead (Romans 11:15). He called Gentiles, whose ancestors knew nothing of God, into relationship with him. For the Jews he resurrects what once was, and for the Gentiles he creates something out of nothing.

Abraham believed God's promise even though it appeared impossible for him to have even one child, let alone multi-ethnic descendants that matched the stars in number.⁶ For Abraham and Sarah to conceive at their advanced ages, God would have to, in a metaphorical sense, give life to their dead bodies. Abraham contemplated the apparently hopeless situation, yet he still believed in the Creator God, who gives life to the dead (Abraham and Sarah) and calls into being that which does not exist (their son Isaac).

Paul concludes his story of Abraham where he began, noting once again, by way of Genesis 15:6, that God declared Abraham to be in partnership with him based on faith. By now, however, Paul has described the nature of Abraham's faith, which coincides with gospel faith in verses 23-25.

The story of Abraham stands in contrast to the story of humanity in Romans 1:18-32 and the story of Israel in Romans 2:17-3:20. Abraham exemplifies human life—faith, worship, fruitfulness and inheritance—against the backdrop of human corruption. Faith that responds to God's faithfulness leads to human restoration.⁷

The meaning of Abraham's story

In verses 23-25, Paul applies the story of Abraham to gospel believers.

Abraham is not simply an example of faith; he is the father of faith. All who believe God, as Abraham believed him, are part of Abraham's family. The faith of gospel believers coincides with that of Abraham. If Abraham believed that God could give life to the dead, bringing forth countless descendants from Sarah and him, those who embrace the gospel believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus marked him out as Lord of the world.

The connection between Abraham and gospel believers means that God has fulfilled his promise to give Abraham a worldwide family of sons and daughters based on faith. The faith of those who believe the gospel is also credited to them as righteousness. Each time someone comes to faith, Abraham's family expands.

God delivered over rebellious humans to their own sinful desires (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). Then Jesus, in fulfillment of the task marked out for Israel as Servant of the Lord, was delivered over to death because of human rebellion (Isaiah 53:5, 12). Jesus suffered in place of the world, as Israel was called to suffer (Isaiah 41:8-9, 44:21).

The resurrection of Jesus, which marked him out as Lord of the world, marks out his followers as those who are in partnership with God. Therefore, Paul says that Jesus was "raised because of our justification," so that believers would have assurance that they are God's people and that they too will be resurrected and vindicated.

God, in the death and resurrection of his Son, has revealed his righteousness: In faithfulness to his ancient promises, he has rescued the world from sin and created a worldwide family.

God's supernatural family

Thoughts about family generate a range of emotions. Some come from supportive and nurturing families. Many others, however, were abused or stifled by their families. Basic and deep human desires for home and relationship, however frustrated, gather around the family.

We have deep convictions, and sometimes concerns, that who we are has something to do with the families we come from: our parents and our ancestors. Many people, particularly as they grow older, become interested in their roots and pour themselves into genealogical research. Some want to know if there's something in their family history that will help explain who they are. But the record only goes back so far.

The scriptures take us back all the way. In Romans 5, Paul will take us back to the first human, Adam, and show how all human problems, including family dysfunction, stem from our relationship to him. But before telling the story of Adam, Paul tells the story of Abraham, and shows that he is the father of those who believe the gospel. The story of Abraham, fulfilled as it is by the story of Christ, undoes the story of Adam.

We find our identity not in our earthly families but in our spiritual family, and in our relationship to Abraham, not Adam. The story of Abraham is the story of our roots—or our new roots, if you will, because our roots in Adam were rotten. If you believe the gospel, these are your roots. And they're as solid as can be—the kind of roots you'd like to have. These are your roots in God.

You are part of Abraham's family, which is, more importantly, God's family. One might like to know what kind of family this is. Enough people have enough bad

experiences with families that this is an important question. The fatherhood of Abraham gives us the answers.

It's a family that has been supernaturally formed. It's the result of God's promise to Abraham to give him a family where none was otherwise possible. Our inclusion into this family is supernatural as well, for it transcends natural heritage. Let it not be lost on us that our inclusion in God's family is a powerful work of God. If you want to see some powerful work of God on your behalf, consider that you're part of his family.

Abraham was part of no particular nation when God promised him a family. He was not even the father of the Jews yet. This tells us that his family is open to all. This family is open to you, whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever your history. So many other associations that we might like to be part of are closed to us because we don't meet the entrance requirements. It's comforting to know that the greatest thing you could ever be a part of—the family of God—is open to you.

The exclusion of exclusivity

Inclusion in God's family is based neither on race nor works. Many Jews in the First Century were insulted when they were told that ethnicity had nothing to with inclusion in God's family. Still, the gospel, if truly understood, comes as a slap in the face to those who think of their cultures, or of themselves as individuals, as superior.

The Jews for the most part wrongly embraced the law, and the works it called for, as demonstrating their superiority and as a reason for excluding the Gentiles. Each culture develops its own law, much of which may actually reflect a biblical morality. The human tendency, apart from the intervention of God, is to put forward adherence to the cultural law as marking one out as belonging to that culture. One then "boasts" in belonging to a particular people and excludes others based on "works," right down to the clothes one wears, the way one talks and the music one listens to.

If the law of God, wrongly embraced as both a sign of superiority and a reason for exclusivity, brought about his wrath, so will every other law, even if it reflects biblical morality. If the law of God did not in and of itself indicate partnership with God, neither will any other law. The gospel excludes all boasting based on the works of any law.

The law—any law—wrongly embraced confines membership to one tribe. The gospel, rightly understood, opens up God's family to all.

God's family defined

God's family is not defined by race and works but by grace and faith. In that inclusion in God's family is based on grace, it's a gift. It is not owed to anyone, simply because they belong to a certain race or culture. Neither can it be earned, as if someone could somehow meet the entry requirements.

Just like Abraham, all are ungodly upon hearing the gospel. In that inclusion in God's family is based on faith, it is a reality for all those who receive the gift. It is not marked out by certain works, be they biblical or cultural, but by faith that responds to God's grace. Baptism, church attendance, Bible study or acts of compassion have no meaning in God's family apart from faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Such faith gives us our humanity back. To believe in God who can do the impossible is to be human. To be human is to have this kind of faith and to worship this kind of God.

Grace and faith give us something in God's family we can't find anywhere else: his forgiveness. Whatever we experience of forgiveness in our settings—and families, friends and associates aren't always known for their forgiving ways—doesn't get us what we need most: God's mercy. The gospel overflows with mercy.

If this is what we receive from God, then we must extend his grace to others. In Romans 4, grace means not so much that God is gracious toward me but that God is gracious toward all. Grace means that a church that follows Jesus must be a church of grace and faith, not race and works. We must be open to all who have found God or are seeking him, regardless of race, gender, age, income, vocation or personality.

Faith in God who raises the dead marks out his people, not political affiliation. Faith marks out his people, not the music they worship by. We must extend God's grace to those who vote differently from us or prefer different worship styles than we. It also needs to be said at this church that Bible knowledge and Bible study have nothing to do with defining God's people.

It will not do to say, or even to think, that certain kinds of people should be worshipping elsewhere. Paul did not tell Jews and Gentiles in Rome, with their different cultures, to separate from each other. He wrote this letter to bring them together. Most of us are most comfortable with people who are like us. Therefore, we are prone to form and choose communities based on demographic uniformity. The gospel calls us to something less comfortable and more challenging—and more reflective of the one God who desires one family. If the gospel is producing only homogeneous churches in multicultural areas, it is not doing its work. And it is not saying very much to a fractured world. It's not saying very much to the folks at the San Jose senior center, for example.

If we want to be different from the senior center, and we want to be the kind of counter-cultural community that points to another way to live, we must connect with what gives us a chance to be different: the grace of God. To connect with the grace of God means that you are more amazed by what God's given you than what he's denied you. If you appreciate that you don't deserve anything you have, most significantly relationship with God and the forgiveness that comes with it, you'll be more inclined to extend his grace to those who aren't like you.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the great Russian novelist, was arrested and sentenced to death in 1849 because of his advocacy of radical socialism. At the last minute, he was reprieved. On his way to prison, a woman thrust into his hand a New Testament, by which he entered into the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. He did four years of hard labor and five years of exile in Siberia. He went on to give the world its greatest stories of grace and faith: "The Idiot," "Crime and Punishment" and "The Brothers Karamazov." One writer observed that the stay of execution "marks the change from the intellectual dilettante playing with ideas like a Greek hero-God to his involvement with sinners as a sinner."⁸ If God pardons us, and if we connect with his grace through faith, we are compelled to live stories of grace and faith, extending his grace to others.

So what kind of church are we going to be? A community of grace and faith, or of race and works? Abraham's story tells us, more than anything else, that we are people of grace and faith.

The gospel's cosmic scope

The gospel is often diminished in church circles to something that happens solely between the individual and God, who sends that person off to heaven after death for everlasting and disembodied bliss. But it is much more cosmic in scope.

The gospel is not simply about God and me; it's also about the worldwide family of which I'm a part. I have millions of brothers and sisters all over the world. In my visits to churches in other parts of the world, I have always been amazed by the instant connections I have felt with followers of Jesus, many of whom spoke with a different tongue.

The bonds have been such, even after a few days, that it's been heart-wrenching to part from these people. But I take comfort that I will see them again, perhaps, for a while in some disembodied heavenly state but most assuredly here on earth, when God remakes it and followers of Jesus receive the inheritance that was promised to Abraham and his family so long ago. Abraham blazed the trail of faith that leads us to inherit, with all God's family, the new creation.

Search for grace

We have our issues, as all families do. That's why God gave us the book of Romans—to help us sort them out, to help us become a community that is more supportive and nurturing than abusive and stifling. Philip Yancey writes of such issues:

“As I look back on my own pilgrimage, marked by wanderings, detours, and dead ends, I see now that what pulled me along was my search for grace. I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else.”⁹

For all its flaws, the church of Jesus Christ remains the best place to find the grace of God and extend it to others.

Scott Grant / 2-19-06

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¹ Celia King, *Cultural Adjustments*, San Jose Mercury News, Jan. 3, 2002. P. 1A.

² Paul begins Romans 6:1, 7:7, 9:14 and 9:30 with the exact same phrase with which he begins verse 1. In those verses, the phrase is translated as a question in and of itself: “What shall we say then?” The translation of Romans 8:31, which also begins with the same words, offers only a slight variation: “What then shall we say to these things?” With similar phrasing in Romans 3:5, Paul asks, “... what shall we say?” In Romans 3:3 and 3:9 he asks, “What then?” These examples suggest that the beginning of verse 1 should be translated, “What shall we say then?” A second question would then follow that concerns whether Abraham is our “forefather according to the flesh.” The word “then,” often translated “therefore,” connects Romans 4 with the statements in Romans 3:27-30 that God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles and that Jewish boasting is excluded.

³ In verse 11, Paul understands the word “covenant” from Genesis 17:11 in terms of “righteousness,” demonstrating that he understands righteousness to be covenant membership. Abraham's response is

recognized in this instance, though his faith preceded it, for the sake of the spiritual descendants who are the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Romans 4:23-24).

⁴ Christ will bring Jews and Gentiles from all over the world into the family of God (Romans 8:12-25, 9:8, 10:13). Paul expected the Messiah to rule over the entire earth (Psalm 2:8, Isaiah 11:1-10). Jesus himself said his followers would inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).

⁵ The distinction between "those who are of the law" and "those who are of the faith of Abraham" is not between Jews in general and Gentile believers; it's between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. Paul noted in verse 12 that Abraham was the father of Jews who "follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham." In verse 16 Paul defines "those who are of the law" as Jews, for they are distinguished from Gentiles. Paul is not referring here, or in verse 14, to people, regardless of ethnicity, who seek to adhere to some general moral law of God. Those who are "of the law" and "of the circumcision" (verse 12) are Jews, or Gentiles who have become Jews by being circumcised and by coming under the Jewish law.

⁶ Literally, in "hope on hope" he believed, perhaps a two-fold hope that God both "gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist," and perhaps a two-fold reference to the otherwise hopeless condition of both Sarah and him.

⁷ In Romans 1:20 and 25, humans rejected the Creator God and worshiped idols; in Romans 4:17, Abraham believed the Creator God. In Romans 1:20, humans were aware of God's power but ignored it; in Romans 4:21, Abraham was convinced that God was able, or "powerful." In Romans 1:21, humans, literally, did not "glorify" God; in Romans 4:20, Abraham gave glory to God. In Romans 1:24-27, humans dishonored their bodies and resorted to fruitless same-sex relations; in Romans 4:18-20, Abraham believed that God could give life to his and Sarah's bodies and make them fruitful. Paul, in Romans 2:17-3:20, demonstrated that the story of Israel paralleled the story of humanity, so that Abraham stands out against the nation that came from him.

⁸ Ernest Gordon, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, © 1988 by The Plough Publishing House of the Woodcrest Service Committee Inc., Hutterian Brethren, Farmington, Penn. P. 15.

⁹ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, © 2000 by Philip D. Yancey, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Mich. P. 16.