

Abraham, Our Spiritual Father

Abraham 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 father of all who believe without being circumcised (Rom 4:11).

Abraham is the father of Ishmael by way of Hagar, Isaac by way of Sarah, and many other sons by way of Keturah. Still, none of those biological sons is why Abraham is “the father of us all” in Romans 4:16. What does the Apostle Paul mean by “of us all”? Who is the “all” of Romans 4:11? In Genesis 17:5, Yahweh changed Abram’s name to Abraham because Yahweh would make him the father of a multitude of nations. How can this descendant of Terah become the father of a multitude of families, peoples, and nations (Gen 12:3)? The word “nation” is used in two ways in the OT. Sometimes, it means a particular people with a shared leader in a land with boundaries. At other times, it means ethnicities or non-Jewish people (Gentiles). Abraham is the father of all who believe in Christ and all who believe in His promises without regard to ethnicity or national origin. Asian, Hispanic, German, and British believers all have Abraham as their spiritual father.

Paul communicates this truth in Galatians 3:6-7, “just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’? ⁷Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons [and daughters] of Abraham.” Those of faith are the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham. Abraham believed in God’s promises to him (Gen 15:6), and all who believe in God’s promise of salvation in Christ are Abraham’s spiritual offspring. (This is how Abraham will have offspring like the dust of the earth and stars of the sky [Gen 13:16, 15:5]). Describing these sons and daughters as “spiritual” is necessary to make the distinction from Abraham’s biological offspring. Jesus was the first to make this distinction.

In John 8:33, a group of Jews said they were “descendants of Abraham.” To this, Jesus replied, “I know you are descendants of Abraham” (37). Jesus acknowledged the reality of biological descent but challenged the Jews when they said, “Our father is Abraham” (39). Jesus said, “If you were Abraham’s children...” implying they were not (40). Notice closely the distinction Jesus communicates. These Jews are the biological offspring of Abraham, but they are also not Abraham’s children. Jesus went on to nail down this distinction with the words, “You are of your father the devil” (44). God was not their father—the devil was their father. Abraham was not their spiritual father.

Paul reinforces this critical distinction between offspring by blood and spiritual offspring in Romans 2:28-29. He writes, “For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh.”²⁹ On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter” (CSB). Notice the words “by the Spirit.” Paul wants his readers to understand the difference between a Jew and a Jew. In Genesis 17, Abraham was physically circumcised—this physical circumcision set Jews apart from Gentiles. But Romans 2:29 describes an inward circumcision of the heart by the Holy Spirit. These are the true Jews—the sons and daughters of Abraham whose spiritual hearts have been circumcised by God’s Spirit.

Moses prophesied about this circumcision of the heart in Deuteronomy 30:6. He predicted a time when Yahweh would circumcise their hearts, and with this new heart, they would love Yahweh with their hearts and souls. In Ezekiel 36, Yahweh promises, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (26). I cannot give myself a new heart any more than I can make myself a child of Abraham. This is the inner transformative work of the Holy Spirit described by Jesus in John 3:5 as being born of water and the Spirit. In Ezekiel 36:25, the verse before, “I will remove your heart of stone,” Yahweh says He will use water to cleanse and give the people He cleanses a new heart. Water is a metaphor for an agent of cleaning. Titus 3:5 also describes “a washing [the same water metaphor] of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

Together, regeneration and renewal describe the Holy Spirit’s transformative work on the person being saved. He or she becomes a new creation, a new (spiritual) man (2Co 5:17, Eph 2:15) in the New Covenant Christ established by His sacrificial death (Jer 31:33, Luke 22:20, 1Co 11:25, 2Co 3:6, Heb 8-9). Colossians 2:11 describes a circumcision without hands. This is because the Spirit does not have hands, and this circumcision of the non-biological heart is not physical. It is the internal spiritual work God does to the one He is saving. Paradoxically, one cannot believe the gospel until this spiritual surgery occurs (born again or born from above [John 3:3-8]), and the Triune Divine Surgeon does His work only on those who believe. By faith, we believe our hearts need this surgery from above, and we know only God can change our hearts to love and obey Him, our Lord and Savior. So, we believe. Do you?