

## Romans, Part 20 10-30-22

### Exhibit A: Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Romans 4:**1-12** *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." <sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup>But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, <sup>6</sup>just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup>"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. <sup>8</sup>Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." <sup>9</sup>Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." <sup>10</sup>How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; <sup>11</sup>and 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, <sup>12</sup>and 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.*

So, you are getting to know a new neighbor and you notice that this person has a bumper sticker with a Christian symbol on it, so you take the bait and ask – *Hey, I saw the sticker on your car and was wondering if you are a Christian.* Your neighbor looks at you and says, *Oh yes, I was baptized as a baby.* And they stop right there. How do you process that? How do you react? Do you think, *Oh, great, I guess my new neighbor is a Christian.* Or, are you thinking something else? Are you thinking, *Hmm, it doesn't sound like my neighbor really understands what being a Christian is.* Would it make any difference if your neighbor responded to your inquiry by saying, *Oh, yes, I was baptized ten years ago?* That may be somewhat more hopeful, but still it is concerning isn't it? What is the problem? The problem is that your neighbor seems to think, may think, that being baptized by water in some church is what makes one a Christian. And you, because you have read the New Testament, know better than that. You know that it is nothing outward that makes a person a Christian. The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart and whether or not there is faith in that heart, and repentance in that heart.

Frankly, that is what the apostle Paul is after in this portion of Romans. He is attempting to obliterate the common Jewish confusion of the outer accoutrements of true religion with the inner realities. He is trying to focus us on what really matters – which, it is clear, is one’s personal faith orientation toward the Lord Jesus Christ. To make his point especially powerful with the Jewish folks in the church, he uses Abraham as his example, as exhibit A. Last Lord’s Day we looked at the first eight verses in which we are told that Abraham was made right with God, that Abraham was credited by God with righteousness on the basis of his faith – not because of anything he did or was. Indeed, Paul says that God justifies the ungodly – which is something Abraham was at the time God pardoned his sin and received him as his friend. He was an ungodly man, who came to believe the promises of God, was forgiven, accepted and then entered a life of faith in which he became more and more obedient to his Lord.

One of the ways that Abraham was obedient, was in the matter of circumcision. God commanded Abraham to be circumcised. Here is what he said in Genesis 17:**10-11** *This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup>And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.* So, Abraham obeyed. He was circumcised. His son was circumcised. This became the practice of the Hebrews from then on. The little boys were circumcised on the eighth day. Anyone from outside who wanted to join in with the elect people of God was expected, the men at least, to be circumcised. This was a big deal and it set the Jews apart from the other nations, the other religious groups. It became a major part of Jewish identity. For a man, to be circumcised meant you were of Abraham and his people. You were taught then that the promises made to Abraham and his offspring applied to you and to all your family.

Now, along comes Paul, and he is seeking to undermine that teaching. He is telling you that, in fact, as a violator of God’s law, you are in trouble despite your circumcised status. Paul is trying to lovingly convince you that you have been hoping in something that is flimsy, that is not substantial. His desire is that you put your faith in something sturdy and real which a religious ceremony definitely is not. So, he calls you to look again at the Abraham story where you may notice something. That something is the timing, the order of things. He notes that Genesis says two things happened for Abraham. One, he was credited with righteousness. We call that justification. He was justified. Secondly, he was circumcised. Okay? But

which of those came first? Oh my. Clearly, and by a wide margin (fourteen years in fact) – justification on the basis of faith came first. It was in Genesis 15 that God pronounced Abraham to be righteous through faith. It was in Genesis 17 that he commanded him to be circumcised. From that, Paul draws the conclusion that the justification did not, could not, depend on the religious ritual called circumcision.

The logic here is unassailable. The argument does not suggest that circumcision doesn't matter. It clearly did. The argument is not that circumcision was optional. It clearly was not. But, the argument is that receiving the sign of faith, the sacrament, the sign and seal of righteousness is not what makes a person righteous before God. Justification, the imputation of Christ's righteous virtue, is not necessarily connected to the time of one's circumcision or baptism or any such thing. It is at the point when one trusts in Christ from the heart. Romans 10: **9-10a** (ESV) *if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup>For with the heart one believes and is justified.* Abraham believed and was justified. When Brooke believed he was justified. When Amber believed she was justified. When or even if they were baptized, which is the New Testament equivalent of circumcision, is beside the point. Faith is the issue.

What then is the sacrament? What is circumcision? What is water baptism? Verse 11 uses two words to describe what these are. One word is "sign." The other word is "seal." The sacraments – communion, baptism, Passover, circumcision are signs and seals. Our confession of faith picks up this language. It says *Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace.* A sign is a visible, tangible thing that points to another more substantive reality. A seal is an indicator of authenticity and ownership. Many of you are wearing a sign and seal right now. On your left hand is a ring that is more than a decoration. It is intended to convey something about who you are. My ring says *I belong to Beth. I am committed to her.* We can note here that the ring without the commitment is a shallow mockery – right? As an expression of my heart, the ring is precious and valuable. Just so circumcision and baptism. In water baptism we say that we belong to the Lord. We are His. It serves as a sign and seal. These are important functions but they are not saving functions. We are not saved by, justified by, redeemed by baptism or the Lord's Supper, just as Abraham was not justified by the sign of circumcision. Abraham was delivered from his sin, through his faith, then he got the sign. His children would thereafter get the sign first – and hopefully the reality would follow. The order is not so important as long as we recognize that one is the symbol, the other the reality. To

quote an old song, we are signed, sealed, delivered, we are His – but the deliverance is the important part of that and the sign and the seal do not accomplish that. The deliverance is the work of the deliverer, who is Jesus.

So, let me speak plainly for a few minutes about a pernicious error that has infected many parts of the church throughout the centuries. It is the error of sacramentalism, by which I mean the mistake of ascribing saving power to the sacraments. Untold millions have died thinking they were safe and saved because they had undergone some ritual in their church. They were baptized. They took communion. And they were taught to think these things were their ticket. But they are not. Several denominations formally affirm these ideas – most notably the Roman Catholic communion. Mormons teach their folks that baptism in their church is necessary to be saved. Down south many are part of the Church of Christ and other offshoots of the Campbellite movement. These people love the word, but they are taught that water baptism, by immersion, in their churches is required to be truly saved. A term you may hear is “baptismal regeneration.” This suggests that the rebirth, the making new of a sinner, occurs by or during water baptism. Official Catholic dogma states: *Baptism washes and purifies us from sin. It frees us from original sin and from all previously committed personal sins. Baptism is rebirth to new life. It bestows justification and sanctification and makes us children of God.* Dear friends, such a teaching sadly denies justification by faith alone. It clearly contradicts what Paul is expressing in Romans 4 and elsewhere in his writings. We don't want to make an opposite error. We don't want to disregard the sacraments as irrelevant and useless, but we must understand their role. They point to the saving powers and graces, they do not bestow them. I Corinthians 1:17 *Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.* It is hearing with faith that leads to salvation. If baptism is what bestows eternal life, how could the apostle possibly say that Christ did not send him to baptize and then contrast that to his calling as an agent of gospel truth. To conclude – by the example of Abraham, Exhibit A – we see that, by grace, faith alone results in justification apart from any sacramental act – old covenant or new. As Charles Hodge says with reference to circumcision and baptism: *what serves well as sign, is a sad substitute for the thing signified.* The point is that sacraments do not save, but Christ does, by his grace, through our faith.

Let's turn a corner now and wrap up by grasping the significance of our relationship to father Abraham. 11-12 *That he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them,*<sup>12</sup> *and 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.* Again, we are reminded that we are the true Jews. We are the descendants of Abraham by faith in the Savior who came from his line. Nowadays we have mechanisms to trace our biological heritage. 23 and Me, Ancestry.com – I am sure some of you have utilized one of those services. I get why people are interested in that – to a point. Some folks struggle with something we may call “identity.” Who am I? Where do I belong? For us, we who believe in Jesus, the identity issue is truly crystal clear. Whether our DNA links us to Africa or northern Europe or New Zealand, our faith links us to Abraham and to his seed, who is Christ. And which matters most? There is no comparison. We hear all the time these days about the various “communities” in our society. I don’t remember this from years back – but now it is non-stop. The LGBTQ community. The Trans community. The disabled community. The faith community. The POC community. Community Community. Community. *You keep using that word – I don’t think it means what you think it means.* Truly, I question how much these groups function as communities – but they certainly get brought up for political leverage and people claim to speak on their behalf. Are you in any of the “communities?” You bet we are. More than a community, we who love Christ are a family, linked to father Abraham and even more critically, to Father God. Those who look to Jesus for salvation and hope – that is my group. And this – the communion service, is our family meal in which we celebrate our unity with our Savior and with all who love him with us. We come with faith, to strengthen that faith and to proclaim the saving death of Jesus until He comes again.