

Becoming Human: Faith, Doubt, and Righteousness

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Romans 4:1-17, John 3:1-17

Adam:

The other week, as part of preparing for my ordination interview I was writing a response to a question about what I've learned from my congregation. I wrote:

“Engaging with people who have profound doubts about faith who yet demonstrate lives of discipleship and service has inspired me to understand doubt as a sign of genuine engagement with God. Those who behave in the world as though creation is becoming new despite their misgivings about resurrection, perhaps have a deeper faith than those who say all the right prayers and believe the correct doctrines, but do not love their neighbors.”

I was pretty pleased with how darn eloquent that sounds. But then I was confronted with the scriptures for this week, which seem to turn my formulation on its head — it really does matter what you believe, Paul seems to say, even more so than what you do. Well, shoot.

This type of quandary requires more grey matter than I bring to the pulpit, so I decided to call upon one of the great philosophers of our age, our resident Romans expert, the nearly-Dr. Micah Tillman. Micah, was Paul a Lutheran? Did he really teach that action didn't matter and that belief was everything?

Micah:

Well, Lutherans are certainly Paulines or Paulists or whatever. They love them some Paul. And I can't blame them. But I'd be willing to mount some pretty impressive

arguments against anyone who claims that Paul thought that action is irrelevant and belief is everything.

Adam:

Ok, so what is Paul saying about Abraham in this passage? It looks like his works were unrelated to his salvation.

Micah:

It *is* true that Paul says works didn't justify Abraham. But this doesn't mean that actions don't matter. It just means that if you break a law now, starting to keep the law later won't erase the fact that you're already guilty.

Adam:

So being righteous means being free from guilt?

Micah:

That's what it sounds like, isn't it? Abraham, like everyone else, had sinned, and he couldn't erase that past sin by starting to act correctly in the present.

Adam:

That's all well and good; but doesn't it verge on making action irrelevant? Shouldn't being righteous mean acting in a righteous way?

Micah:

That sounds right to me. But maybe the issue here is that human life is a whole. You can't cut it up into parts, and say that only one part matters — the part that exists in what we call the present or the part that exists in what we call the future.

Adam:

Your Baptist roots are showing here. This sounds like it could become an argument for the doctrine of “Eternal Security.” But I think we can at least agree about how God treats our past.

Micah:

Well, I lived my Baptist past and have to continue living with it even if I try to act like a righteous Mennonite in the present and future.

Adam:

Hey, I managed to lose much of my Baptist baggage. I still like dunking baptisms, though.

Micah:

And *there's* something we can agree on. But still, whatever kind of unrighteous past I have, it is still a part of me, since it's where I'm always coming from. There's no way I can get rid of it.

But, Paul is saying, God can. God can — in some sense — change the past. It would be impossible for me, and that makes it hard to understand. But if God claims to make me or Abraham or whoever righteous, all we can do is trust that God wouldn't lie.

Adam:

This still strikes me as pretty un-Anabaptist. Does salvation have nothing to do with how we live our lives?

Micah:

Maybe today's passage from John can help. Salvation or justification or whatever other fancy word we use for it, is about being born. And getting yourself born is *just the beginning*. If that's all you do, then ... well, you're not really living. You're just lying there.

Living the eternal life — that is, living a *full, abundant and unstoppable* life — is our mission. It's what we'll spend the rest of forever on.

So, I think Paul is describing Abraham's rebirth. Abraham believed that God would do the impossible, since God had promised it, and thus Abraham got born.

Adam:

Ah, and then he began to live the *eternal, full, abundant, unstoppable* life. Is that what salvation is? Is that what salvation meant to Paul?

Micah:

Well, salvation is your birth into righteousness — into the eternal, full, abundant, unstoppable life. But whether you actually live that life is another question. This passage is part of Paul's attempt to convince his readers in the church at Rome — a church that was being split down the middle by boasting about ethnicity and heritage — that part of living the eternal life means treating each other as equals and living in harmony with each other.

Adam:

So instead of pitting faith against works, Paul is expanding on the very notion of what church is. It was previously limited to keepers of the law. Now he is saying that you don't even have to become a keeper of the law to have eternal life. So law, the kind with the little "l", isn't required to be a part of the church.

Micah:

Exactly. Circumcision was the ritual act whereby a male identified himself as a follower of the law, as a descendant of Abraham. But if we follow Abraham's example, we'll see that righteousness comes before ritual. Rebirth comes before rules.

Adam:

Nice alliteration!

Micah:

Hey, I try. And I think that Paul — in his less alliterative way — is arguing that we can become concerned with the laws for living only because we have all been given a new life to live — regardless of our ethnicities.

Adam:

So maybe the law was a *means* of living out the *eternal, full, abundant, unstoppable* life, rather than being the *source* of that life. It gave expression to salvation, but it was not itself salvation. Likewise, perhaps Jesus preached the sermon on the mount not to say “live this way and you will be saved,” but to say, “be born again, and this is how you can live.”

Micah:

Ooh, maybe so. You remember that passage in Galatians 3 where Paul says the law was a teacher who prepared people to “put on Christ?” Living the life of the law somehow led up to living the life of Jesus. And in this life, Paul says, putting people down because of their ethnicity, class or sex ceases to make sense.

Adam:

Ok, this discussion has been seriously fun — at least for the two of us. But I want to come back to my original question, but I’ll rephrase it a bit: can someone be righteous without articulating the correct beliefs?

Micah:

What? Now you're just talkin' crazy. How could you be righteous without being right?

Adam:

What if action is an expression of belief, whether that belief is articulated or not? Could it be that belief is deeper than the intellect, and the two may seem to conflict? We sometimes do things that we can't explain, or act according to systems of faith that make no sense to us. But the action itself reveals what the gut holds true, even if the mind won't admit it.

Micah:

That's a very intriguing way of putting it. If you *believe* that you have to adopt a certain ethnic identity to be born into the Church, that gets in the way of *living* out our mission as Christ's unified body in the world. But if someone is unified with the Church in living out our mission, maybe we shouldn't be troubled when he can't produce a notarized birth certificate.

Adam:

This isn't to say that the conflict between intellect and belief is unimportant. That sort of internal division would be very difficult. But isn't that precisely what faith is? Reliance (or action based on) things unseen? That which cannot be empirically verified? So again, isn't living *as though* we are a part of the new creation, even when we can't convince our minds of the truth of the resurrection, actually evidence of faith?

Micah:

Well, John's First Epistle says, "everyone who loves is born of God." Perhaps your life proves your birth, whether you're sure about that birth or not.

Adam:

[sings] *And they'll know we are Christians by our love, whether we know it or not...*

It is ideal that belief and action coincide — that our works and our intellect are in concert, and that is what we aspire to. But walking with God is an act of faith. Even in the midst of doubt, if the walk continues, there is faith.