

Which Stream Are You Drinking From?

There's an old bush saying, "Never drink downstream from where others are camping." But when drinking upstream from others we are unaware that others are camped further upstream from us. Likewise, as we seek to preserve our theological purity we may be unaware of the influence on our beliefs of ancient Greek philosophy. Could it be that our beliefs, and those of the Great Reformers, and even those of the first Church Fathers, are more polluted than we know?

So many different denominations have camped upstream from us in history that the doctrinal purity of the stream we now drink from is questionable. Yet we sense that if we could find the biblical source of the stream we could drink from it with confidence.

Many years ago, on a hot summer's day, my family and I traced our local creek upstream into the tall timber of a state forest. There we parked our car and on foot traced it even further up a mountain range, until it was little more than a trickle. Our search ended at a moss-covered pond fed by a spring. We had found the source of the stream that wound its way down into a river that flowed into a greater river that lost itself in the ocean.

Just as we traced the source of the stream we drank from, we can also trace the source of our beliefs. In so doing we should find that the closer to the source we get, the purer the truth should become; until at last we are able to drink from the pure sweet spring of New Testament truth.

The spiritual river that "makes glad the city of God" (Psalm 46:4) is clear and pure, and streams God's unfailing love and mercy to His people. It has no tributaries, yet its depth and flow are constant, and its downstream supply is as pure as its upstream source.

Not so the theological river successive church leaders drank from in the early years of the Church. Clement, Origen and Athanasius, all of Alexandria, and Tertullian of Rome, imbibed the teachings of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and so polluted the doctrines taught by the apostles of Christ. Those downstream from them in time incorporated into their creeds the ideas of those pagan Greek philosophers.

It was Athanasius who at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD urged Constantine the Great to accept the Nicene Creed. The Roman Emperor presided over the opening of the historic event and closely monitored the proceedings. Although Constantine treated the bishops with respect they well knew that he favoured the idea of a preexistent 'God the Son' who was eternally co-equal with God the Father. They also knew that their stamp of agreement would encourage the Emperor's support for the Church.

The elevation of Jesus the Messiah to divinity severed the last remaining ties between Judaism and Christianity. No observant Jew, instructed since childhood in the Law of Moses, would accept that the One God of Israel was now to be worshipped as two divine persons. At the Council of Constantinople (381 AD) the concept of the Holy Spirit as "the Third Member of the Trinity" was added, and the One God became Three Persons. The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) clarified and reaffirmed the decisions of previous councils, and from then on the scattered Jews, demonized as "God-killers," were persecuted throughout Christendom.

Meanwhile in the Church itself Hellenistic ideas had long blended with the tradition of the Church fathers to produce a religious entity the apostles would never have called Christian. After the fall of the pagan Roman Empire the papal Roman Empire rose in its place. The world must have marvelled at such a miraculous recovery! What the city of Alexandria had been to the East the revived city of Rome was to the West. Religion and politics had embraced, and their union would thereafter be known as Christendom. The question then was, and still is, whether those who are known by Christ's name should drink from a polluted stream of pagan philosophy?

The answer is No. Not when we can drink from the pure stream of prophetic promise. That stream has its source in God's covenant with Abraham, a covenant later confirmed with Isaac and later

again with Jacob. From His heavenly viewpoint God usually begins by referring to the promises made by Him to Abraham.

"And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God knew them." He recognized them! (Exodus 2:24) God had confirmed the covenant with an oath (Deuteronomy 7:8). To this day Israel is "beloved for the fathers' sake" – for the sake of the covenant God made with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Romans 11:28).

However in Leviticus 26:42 God does not follow the prophetic river of promise downstream, but instead traces it back upstream to its source.

"Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and I will also remember my covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land."

Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, traces the source of the stream to Abraham in his song of praise: "That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant; the oath that He swore to our father Abraham..." (Luke 1:70-75)

Zacharias began with the promise of his people's salvation and traced the prophetic river of promise upstream to the mercy promised by God to his fathers, and beyond that to its very source: the oath of the covenant.

Since Abraham is "the father of all those who believe" – not only of Jews but also of non-Jews – all who "walk in the steps" of Abraham (that is, in his faith) are "Abraham's descendants, and heirs according to the promise." (Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:29) If this isn't the WOW Factor, what is?

What does it mean to be a "son" or "daughter" of Abraham? When the dodgy tax gatherer Zacchaeus pledged to give half of his possessions to the poor, and to restore anything he had taken by false accusation – a statement of repentance and restitution – Jesus called him as a "son of Abraham" who had been lost but was now saved. (Luke 19:9,10)

When the ruler of a synagogue was angry with Jesus for his Sabbath day healing of a woman who had been bent double for 18 years, Jesus called him a hypocrite. "Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead it way to water? And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound, lo, these 18 years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:15-17)

Jesus identified Zacchaeus as a "son of Abraham"; and the woman as a "daughter of Abraham." The first was saved and the second healed! Jesus described healing as "the children's bread" (Matthew 15:26). Some who called Abraham their father showed they were not his true descendants at all by wanting to kill Jesus. (John 8:33-40)

Are you drinking this in? As a son or daughter of Abraham by faith in Jesus Christ, you should be! Why would you drink downstream from pagan philosophy polluted by doctrines of doubt and unbelief, when you can drink from a pure stream of prophetic promise?

Trace your belief stream back to its source, and if that source is pagan philosophy – stop drinking from it! The effects downstream on those who drink from a river indicate whether or not it has been polluted upstream.

There is such a contrast between the polluted stream of ancient Greek philosophy and the pure stream of prophetic promise that it's not all that difficult to spot the difference. The polluted stream has us in heaven in gowns, sitting on clouds and strumming harps; whereas the pure stream has us on a renewed earth, enjoying our kingdom inheritance with Abraham. (Matthew 5:5; Romans 4:13) The polluted stream would have us loathe the physical body and seek escape from it into an ethereal spiritual dimension, in a hazy life after life; whereas the pure stream brings the hope of the

resurrection of the body, of life after death, and of a tangible immortality. The polluted steam would have us escape from the problems of life into unending personal bliss; whereas the pure stream renews our lives so that we can be a blessing to everyone we meet.

If your church teaches the polluted doctrines of ancient Greek philosophy, search out one that proclaims God's prophetic promises. This may take some time, though, since pure beliefs these days seem to be in short supply.

Peter Barfoot July 2008