

July, 2003

# A Basket of Figs

Dedicated to the idea that the decree makes the difference. Jeremiah 24:2,3

## You Stand By Faith

*Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: --Romans 11:20*

How do you get into the covenant and how do you remain in it? Some would say that **you get in by faith, but you remain in by obedience.** The idea that we get into the covenant by faith and remain in by obedience is so wrong that it is difficult to know where to start with it. It is because of formulations like this that some of God's people have rejected covenantal theology completely.

"You get into the covenant by faith, but you remain in by obedience." This contradicts the flat, clear statement of Paul quoted above. Israel did not fall from the covenant because they disobeyed the law. God had provided abundantly for the forgiveness of their sins. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow," Isaiah had promised. Israel didn't believe; they followed other gods, they hewed themselves out cisterns, broken cisterns that could hold no water. [Jer. 2:13]

The promise that God had made to Abraham was not replaced or supplemented by the law of Moses. The inheritance that God had promised [which was the gift of the Holy Spirit, according to Paul in Galatians 3:14] was by faith. The promises to Abraham and his seed were not through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. "For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, *was* not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." Romans 4:13, The law did not make the promise null, but was given for other purposes [see next article]. So it was not because of their transgressions of the law that Israel was broken off from the root and branch [the covenant with Abraham]. The problem was unbelief.

**First: It is imprecise to say that men get into the covenant by anything that they do.** Abraham was called by an eternal election and his faith was a response to God's call. Abraham wasn't sitting around one day thinking about the idolatry of Ur when he suddenly had this great idea of starting a new religion. Did God, being privy to

Abraham's thoughts, suddenly cry out, "Eureka, finally there is someone down there that gets it! Maybe the world isn't a lost cause!"? Christianity can be transformed into humanism by placing the initiative with man, and plucking God from His throne. Faith must not be regarded as a human work that changes the mind of God toward a man. Faith is *evidence* of things not seen, not the *reason* for things not seen.

The biblical faith is that we are

Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. –I Peter 1:2-5

The elect are placed in the covenant by the eternal decree of God in the hidden counsels of God before the world was. Their faith is the result of their election; their election is not the result of their faith. Nothing on this earth can change the decrees of heaven. Humanism directs much of the theology of the modern church.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. –Ephesians 2:8-10

This is saving faith. Again, Paul states it as clearly as it could be stated:

Who hath saved us, and called *us* with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, -2 Timothy 1:9

The grace which saves us was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. It must be so, or salvation must be the result of time and chance. Time would move eternity, a humanist concept. If time and chance can move us to God, then they can also move us away from Him.

The idea that man can get into the covenant by his faith assumes that there is no curse resting upon mankind, that the fall of Adam in the Garden did not leave his seed in sin and misery. The fact of the curse is stated by Paul in Romans:

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned –Romans 5:12

Because we all sinned in Adam, death came upon all men. The curse of death came upon mankind, not because of our own sins, but because of Adam's sin. We cannot remove the curse ourselves, for we have no ladders tall enough to reach unto God to pluck wrath from His hand. Not even our faith is tall enough, as if our puny effort could change the mind of God. No, the faith that saves must be one that originates in the decree of God, a divine and irresistible faith, given by God, that convinces us that the Gospel is true in all its parts and draws us effectively to Jesus Christ. Without this faith we are in a helpless condition:

Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. –Eph. 4:18,19.

It is through the blood of the Cross of Jesus Christ that the curse is removed for all believers, as we read in Galatians 3:

But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, *it is evident*: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

So we do not enter the covenant by faith; faith is the demonstration or the evidence that we have the inheritance of things hoped for and things not seen. [Hebrews 11:1]

Because of the Lord Jesus there is no curse or condemnation upon anyone who believes, as we also read in John 5:24:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

**Second. We do not remain in the covenant by works.** This also is so wrong it is hard to know where to start. People do not remain Christians by living sinless lives. The *Heidelberg Catechism* confesses the Biblical faith:

Q114: Can those who are converted to God keep these Commandments perfectly?

A114: No, but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of such obedience,[1] yet so that with earnest purpose they begin to live not only according to some, but according to all the Commandments of God.[2]

1. I John 1:8-10; Rom. 7:14-15; Eccl. 7:20

2. Rom. 7:22; James 2:10-11; Job 9:2-3; Psa. 19:13

Q115: Why then does God so strictly enjoin the Ten Commandments upon us, since in this life no one can keep them?

A115: First, that as long as we live we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature,[1] and so the more earnestly seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ;[2] second, that without ceasing we diligently ask God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we be renewed more and more after the image of God, until we attain the goal of perfection after this life.[3]

1. I John 1:9; Psa. 32:5

2. Rom. 7:24-25

3. I Cor. 9:24-25; Phil. 3:12-14; Matt. 5:6; Psa. 51:12

Jesus is the only man who has loved God with all His heart, soul, mind and strength. Because no one else can keep the commandments in this life, if a man is to be saved he must be united to Jesus Christ for righteousness. All our good works are polluted with sins. Shall we offer to God the blind, the lame, and the sick [see Malachi 1:8]?

The simple truth is that no man can offer to God a sacrifice for sins that will be acceptable. The blood of bulls and goats in the Old Testament did not take away sins, as we read in Hebrews 10:1-5

For the law having a shadow of good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. ["completed, or finished" -cwp] For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. But in those *sacrifices there is* a remembrance again *made* of sins every year. For *it is* not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination: how much more, *when* he bringeth it with a wicked mind?” [Proverbs 21:27] Shall we offer to God our polluted and soiled works? The idea itself is polluted and does not consider the purity of God.

But someone will say, “But doesn’t God justify us by the works that we do in the Holy Spirit by faith”? There is a rotten, stinking smell of hell about the question, for it would alienate the work of the Holy Spirit from the Gospel. I will speak in plain terms to those who understand, for a fool has no capacity for knowledge.

The Holy Spirit is not the author of humanism. The Holy Spirit will not corrupt and pollute the Gospel. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to work faith, not confidence in the flesh. This is the reason that Paul would write in Galatians 3:1-3

O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?

The Holy Spirit comes by faith not by the works of the law. Paul equates the “works of the law” with the “flesh.” The Holy Spirit is received by the hearing of faith, specifically by faith in Jesus Christ who has been set forth “evidently” in the Gospel, crucified among us.

Having been received by the hearing of faith, does the Holy Spirit turn around and begin to preach justification (salvation) by the law? Does He tells those adopted into the family of God, who are no longer under condemnation, who have passed from death unto life, who live by the faith of the Son of God who gave Himself for them, that they shall be under a curse if they do not keep the law? Does the Holy Spirit build again that which He destroyed when we came to Christ. Shall He build again confidence in the flesh, after destroying it in the Gospel. Nay! the only curse of the Gospel is “If any man love not the Lord Jesus, let him be Anathema Maranatha.” [I Corinthians 16] for such a man does not have the Holy Spirit [Romans 5:5]. The promises of the Gospel are all yea in Jesus Christ. [2 Cor. 1:19]. Our preaching and teaching should be as clear as the promises of God in Jesus Christ for men to come and to take the water of life freely. Those under the law are under the curse; those in Christ are dead to the law for righteousness. We must be as plain as Paul is.

A far better formula is something like this: You get into the covenant by God’s eternal decree; you confirm it by faith and stand by faith, an irresistible faith that is the work of the Holy Spirit Who is given to you to bring to pass the eternal predestination of God, that you be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ [See Romans 8:28-31].

This writer was brought up on Arminian humanism. I was taught to believe in order to be born again. How hard I tried to believe! How I labored to be born again! Then one day near the end of my college years an overwhelming sense of the truth of the Gospel came upon me. “A man’s heart devises his way, but the Lord directs his steps,” was one of the scriptures that showed me how small I was and how great God is. An irresistible sense of the grace of God was as a fire in my soul.

I have done many things wrong since then. I have not been a very good or productive servant of the Lord Jesus, but since that day I have had no doubt about the truth of the

Bible or of the mercy and goodness of the Lord Jesus Christ. I knew that my sins were forgiven and that the grace of God is the fountain of eternal life.

Anytime you are tempted to think that anything that you have done, are doing, or will do can have any part in your salvation, remember the bloody body of the Lord Jesus hanging on the cross on Golgotha. Remember the agony of that soul that was made an offering for sin. The cross is God's exclamation point in history as to the possibility of man ever doing anything worthy of eternal life. That cross did not purchase the Holy Spirit to give you supernatural strength so that you could save yourself. No, the Lord Jesus was made sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. [2 Corinthians 5:21] This is the doctrine that the Holy Spirit teaches. Do not blaspheme by putting something else in His mouth.

## Ok. So What Good Is the Law?

Wherefore then *serveth* the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was* ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. --Galatians 3:19

Notice the time references here? It was added—there was a time when it was not in force. What did Moses add that Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not have? There is also an ending point: “till the seed should come to whom the promise was made.” What was added was done away in Jesus Christ, the promised seed.

The context of Galatians 3:19 concerns the inheritance that was promised to the seed of Abraham, Who is Jesus Christ. That promise was eternal life through the Holy Spirit. [see 3:14] There was no commandment which could have given life [see 3:21], because the Holy Spirit is the gift of the Gospel, not of the law [see 3:5]. The Holy Spirit was not given until the obedience of Christ was accomplished [John 7:39]. He is given to the church in a way that He was not given to Israel. He is the reward of Christ's obedience, not ours.

1. **Man is created to be God's image.** Hence, it is impossible that God could ever be satisfied with anything less than full and complete love with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. This eternal necessity that God's image love Him was incorporated into the Law of Moses and has never been repealed, never will be repealed.

2. **The requirement for us to love God was not new.** The provisions of the Mosaic law which require and define the love that we are to have toward God and His

image are clarifications of the law embedded in man's own nature, but corrupted by the Fall. We call this the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, which are binding on all men everywhere in all ages. It has never been right to steal, to murder, to neglect the times and places of worship, to commit sexual uncleanness, etc. David, with an irresistible faith, could cry out, "Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and thy law is the truth" [Ps. 119:142]. But these provisions could not set aside the promise given to Abraham, nor were they given to give energy and life to faith, for faith needs no assistance from works.

### **3. Moses gave the Law, but Grace and Truth came by Jesus Christ. [John 1:17]**

In the mysterious counsels of God, He determined to honor His Son by giving Him the privilege of clearly revealing the grace and truth that was hidden until He offered Himself up to God as a sacrifice for sins and rose from the dead. The Holy Spirit would be poured out by the preaching of Christ Crucified and Christ would make His dwelling with His people [John 14:15-17]. Until the Gospel was revealed, the covenant people of God must be restrained and confined within the bounds of a discipline that would be unsuited for those to whom the Spirit had been given. So the law was a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, according to Galatians.

In addition to requiring us to love God, the law served the purpose of preparing the world for the coming of the Lord Jesus. It set apart a people in whom there was a remnant who would believe and receive Him. The law also made sin exceedingly sinful for it exposed the helplessness and depravity of man's nature. The former of these uses is no longer necessary for Christ has come and the Spirit has been given; the later use remains, for without the law there can be no knowledge of sin. Without the knowledge of sin, the Cross and the Gospel are incomprehensible. The law still serves the purpose of condemning sin in the flesh that it might drive us to Christ, our complete Savior, made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption.

**4. So we are left with Jesus Christ, the Author and the Finisher of our faith.** We are complete in Him, for he was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification [Romans 4:25]. "Let not your heart be troubled," he said. "Ye believe in God, believe also in me."

*There is* therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak

through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. –Romans 8:1-4.

This is one of the paradoxes of the Gospel: the law cannot teach its own use. As Paul said in Galatians 3:1ff [see above], “walking after the flesh” is seeking to be made perfect by the law. Israel, zealous for the law, did not attain the righteousness of God, not because they did not seek it, but because they did not seek it by faith [Romans 9:1ff]. Seeking the righteousness of God by the law, they did not attain the righteousness of God.

But Esaias is very bold, and saith, I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me. But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people. –Romans 11:20,21.

This is the reason that Paul in the last chapter of I Corinthians exhorts us to “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.” It’s always about faith. We “keep [guard] our hearts with all diligence, for out of them are the issues of life.” [Prov. 4:23] How can I keep my heart, my poor wandering heart that is so prone to error and sin? By surrendering it up to Jesus Christ: “Son, give me thine heart” [Prov. 23:26]. We give it up to Jesus Christ, and he is able to ‘keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.’ [2Tim. 1:12]

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#### Trinity Covenant Church

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#### You Are Invited

Trinity Covenant invites you to attend our worship services. If you desire a church that uses the Apostles’ Creed and the *Heidelberg Catechism*, emphasizes family worship and responsibility, then Trinity Covenant may be for you.

Pastor: C. W. Powell