

January, 2004

# A Basket of Figs

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

## Turning Grace into Law

To present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and *be* not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, *and* which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister; --Col. 1:22, 23

“Be careful how you hear,” the Lord Jesus said (Luke 8:18), following up on the Parable of the Sower. Lots of people who hear the word do not understand it and go astray, because they read it to give confidence to their flesh. The Scripture is filled with many passages such as the one above, Scriptures which those who do not understand the grace of God read as though God has placed conditions upon His grace. Their interpretation would go something like this: “You will be saved IF you continue in the faith, grounded and settled, but you will not be saved unless you do. Faith without works is dead, and you are justified only if you add works to faith, for true faith works by love.” Reasoning this way shows that every seed that springs up does not bring forth the fruit of real faith and righteousness before God, just as Jesus said.

Modern legalists, such as many theonomists, reconstructionists, and New Perspectives people, have adopted the Roman Catholic view of justification. Rome teaches that we are justified not merely by the sufferings of Christ, but also by the new works that we do by love, worked in us by the Holy Spirit. In Reformed churches it appears something like this:

**“What saves is true faith, but true faith is the gift of God and includes good works, which are an essential element of true faith. This is what saves. It is all of God, of course, so we have nothing in which to boast, because God works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. This is how we are justified, by the faith and works that we do because of God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. This is made possible by the Holy Spirit who is given to us because Jesus died for us.”**

Arminians also say, “See, see, see.” There is no eternal security, because you have to “continue.” He that endures to the end shall be saved, is the way it goes. This writer heard this stuff with a thousand variations, growing up in Arminian circles. It is amazing that it is now heard in Reformed circles. But it makes it easy for the reunion of Calvinism and Arminianism in a loving stew of Hegelianism. It also makes it very easy for Reformed and Presbyterian ministers to go home to Rome, which is happening even as you read this. They say that the Reformed churches have been wrong to follow Luther and Calvin, and Paul’s teachings need to be reconsidered. Even covenant theology is used to support the “new perspective” for doesn’t covenant imply that we have something to do? There is even a Coming Home website for those Presbyterian and Baptist ministers who are returning to Rome. <http://www.chnetwork.org/>

They are all very smug, of course. After all, they have solved the age-old conflict between Calvinists and Arminians. They ask us to believe two contraries, *ala* Hegel. We are saved by grace and we are saved by works. It is no longer “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness” but Jesus the Wayshower, Jesus the Enabler, Jesus the Truth Speaker, Jesus the Life Giver.

The Lord’s sheep do not hear them, for we have been taught of God to have no confidence in the flesh. We are saved by an “alien” righteousness that is not our own, for it is not by works of righteousness which we have done. It is the blood of Christ alone, or it is not the blood of Christ at all. When we are in the flesh, we have departed from Christ for we are under the curse of the law [Gal. 3:10]. The elect of God trust in nothing but Christ and His righteousness; if we trust in anything else, we have no part in Christ.

Q30: Do those also believe in the only Savior Jesus, who seek their salvation and welfare from "saints," themselves, or anywhere else?

A30: No; although they make their boast of Him, yet in their deeds they deny the only Savior Jesus;[1] for either Jesus is not a complete Savior, or they who by true faith receive this Savior, must have in Him all that is necessary to their salvation.[2] *Heidelberg Catechism*

To think that this passage teaches that “continuing” is a work that is added to faith and forms part of the ground of our righteousness before God is to misread Paul, a misreading that in a subtle way turns the focus away from Christ to the subjective state of the one seeking to be justified. The entire passage reads:

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in *your* mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith

grounded and settled, and *be* not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, *and* which was preached to every creature which is under heaven.

We who were enemies of God have been reconciled to God in the flesh of Jesus Christ. The work of the cross is to reconcile God to sinners. We are naturally children of wrath, guilty and sinful. Unless the curse of Adam's sin is removed, we have no hope in earth or in heaven. But doesn't the following "if" clause mean that we are reconciled only if we stay reconciled? No, not at all. It is precisely because of sin that we are alienated from God, and if that is removed then we are reconciled.

To be "not moved away from the hope of the Gospel" means to continue to believe the Gospel. To make this "if clause" a condition of justification is to turn the sentence into a contradiction. The "hope of the Gospel" means that we trust Christ and renounce our own works.

Those who add their good works to the perfect work of Christ are doing exactly what Paul warns us against. It would be the same as saying, in order to not move away from the hope of the Gospel, you must move away from the hope of the Gospel, an absurdity. How clever and subtle are the ways of the devil, the hater of the souls of men! He would try to persuade us that the Holy Spirit who teaches us to trust in Christ as the complete Savior also works trust in the works of the Holy Spirit, and that we can really have no confidence that we are Christians until these saving works, which are the gifts of God, reach a level that will satisfy the requirements of God in His holy law. They never tell us what this level is. But experience teaches us that always involves some form our outward ceremony and outward form, for this is all the flesh can attain.

They then become enmeshed in absurdity after absurdity. "Of course God does not demand perfection," they say. "Just a good faith attempt. The Rich Young Ruler kept the law; Paul was blameless before the law even before he was a Christian." They boast in the law as if keeping the law fills up what faith alone lacks. The subtle message is, "We are trying to keep the law and that puts us a notch or two ahead of you who have renounced your own works and trust in Christ's righteousness alone. Our 'good faith trying' is better than trusting in Christ's perfections because "trying" plus Christ is better than Christ alone. Taking their eyes off Christ, they, like Peter trying to walk on the water, are overwhelmed by the storm of sin and unbelief that reigns in their own souls.

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. Eph. 2:8-10

Good works are the fruit of grace and God's mercy, and they are his workmanship; but they have nothing to do with our justification. If justification is of works, it is no more of grace, according to Paul [Rom. 11:6].

The fruit of reconciliation is faith in Christ alone. Any works that you add to Christ's righteousness are not works of the Holy Spirit, for He does not do that. He teaches us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, but He does not teach us to trust in our sobriety, righteousness, and godliness. Any work that we trust in for peace with God is NOT the work of the Holy Spirit and is NOT the work of faith, because the Holy Spirit and faith do not teach us to trust in our works, which spoils grace. We not only begin with grace, but we continue in grace. We begin in the spirit and we are perfected by the spirit. (Galatians 3:1ff) We live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved us and gave Himself for us, for Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Apart from Him we have nothing but alienation from God, pretense instead of truth, death rather than life. Trust in any works is proof of an unreconciled heart. If we mix our works with grace, works either before or after regeneration, then it is no longer grace.

## Truth, the Daughter of Time

The eyes of the LORD preserve knowledge, and he overthroweth the words of the transgressor. Prov. 22:12

This preacher has lived long enough to see the truth of the proverb. A book that had a profound effect on me as a young man was Whitaker Chamber's great book *Witness*. People under forty probably don't even know who Whitaker Chambers was, but he was the senior editor of *Time* that gave evidence against Alger Hiss before the House Un-American Activities Committee, headed by a young congressman from California named Richard Nixon.

Chamber's testimony touched off the "Red Scare," and launched the career of Nixon. The whole liberal establishment was up in arms, because Chambers said that Hiss was a member of a secret Communist spy cell reaching clear to the state department, for Hiss was a top aid to Owen Latimore, Secretary of State under Harry Truman. It was a great issue in the election of 1948, which Truman won by a whisker, after trailing Dewey throughout the campaign. The election was complicated by the rebellion of the Southern "Dixiecrats" who ran Strom Thurman as the Democratic candidate of the South. Truman labeled the whole Hiss thing a "red herring."

Hiss went to prison for perjury and became a martyr for liberalism, especially in the higher education establishment, who used him as an example of how good people were persecuted by conservatives.

But truth is the daughter of time. Over the years it became established that Hiss indeed was a communist spy who, along with Harry Dexter White, helped shaped the formation of the United Nations and US policy toward Russia during those years. If it had not been for the true patriotism of Harry Truman the damage might have been far greater than it was.

One very touching passage in Chamber's book recounts the incident that led to his own break with communism. One day sitting at breakfast with his baby daughter, he had an experience that changed his life. His daughter was just old enough to sit in a high chair and was beginning to eat oatmeal. As children do, she plunged in with both hands and in a very short time had covered herself with the cereal. Chambers reached over with a towel and began to wipe off the cereal.

He was suddenly struck with the perfection and beauty of her tiny ear, still smeared with oatmeal. "That could not have happened by chance," he thought. He would later write in *Witness* that although he did not know it, at that moment he ceased to be an atheist and a communist. It took a great many months to extricate himself from the spy apparatus in which he had known Hiss, but his entire thought process was transformed.

The vain dreams of liars are always exposed eventually. The totalitarian dreams that dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fascism, Nazism, communism, are all on the dust heap of history, as will someday be the totalitarian dreams of Islamic Jihad.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a historical event, but it is also a great parable of the triumph of truth. Truth cannot be kept in the grave. The Way, the Truth, and the Life could not finally end in the grave. Error and hate cannot triumph because it is the true, loving, and living God Who created and sustains the world. Sin will run its course and evil men will have their day in the sun so as to fulfill the purposes of God, which are usually hidden to us, but they will be exposed to be liars and their evil will come to nothing.

In the proverb quoted at the first of this article, the eyes of the Lord refer to His foreknowledge and predestination. God knows all about the wicked before they know themselves, and all their ways are predestinated by Him. How can they succeed?

## Commended in Christ

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. –Rom. 5:8

The Christian's worship of God is not in the abstract. We do not worship an idea or principle. Even the love of God is not a philosophical abstraction or only a mental concept. The truth about God and His love for His people are made concrete in Jesus Christ. The word translated "commended" is a very rich word, meaning to demonstrate, or prove, or even to introduce. When something is proved, its truth is "commended." When something is put on display, it is "commended." When someone is introduced to another, his acquaintance is "commended."

Apart from Jesus Christ, the worship of God is just a flutter in the head, with no substance or meaning at best, and a wicked idolatry at worst. The only reason that people can say that all religions worship the same god is that they have not the slightest idea of who the Living God is. When a person says that chocolate ice cream tastes the same as garlic it is proof that he does not know one or the other. He simply does not know what he is talking about and can convince only those who are as ignorant as he is.

1 Timothy 3:16 And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

Just before Jesus was crucified, He comforted His disciples by promising them that although He was going away, He would return to take them to where He was. [John 14]. He assured them that they knew where He was going and they knew the way. One of them said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way." Jesus' answer is profound:

I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. –John 14:6

This answer shows that Jesus was going to the Father, and that He was the way by which they also could come unto the Father. The disciples understood because Philip asked, "We will be satisfied, Lord, if you show us the Father." Although Philip understood that Jesus was returning to His Father, Philip did not understand the true nature of God and the Lord Jesus.

Jesus replied, "Have I been so long with you and you still don't know me? He that has seen me has seen the Father. Why do you say, "Show us the Father"? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?"

Jesus, then, is the one who gives concrete meaning to the idea of God. Not only that, but His claims are so absolute and total that there is no wiggle room left: we worship the Father in Jesus Christ, or we do not worship God at all.

1 God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,

- 2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by *his* Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;
- 3 Who being the brightness of *his* glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high. –Heb. 1:1-3

In God there is perfect union, the three Persons in the Oneness of God. In this unity the Second Person, the eternal Son of God, was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died and rose again. After His resurrection He ascending as the God/Man into heaven, to His Father, where He reigns over all things [Eph. 2] until the time appointed for Him to return to resurrect the dead, judge the world, and take us to be with Him forever.

Any dream of God that is not in Jesus Christ is vanity and lifeless. Dead people worship dead gods with a dead faith, bring forth dead works that are praised by people as dead as themselves. It is Jesus Christ who is the Son of the Living God. Without Him there is death and decay as far as you can see.

## This ‘N That

- If the Bible is a “living document” that must be twisted and corrupted to meet the demands of modern sociology, psychology, and other pseudo-sciences, why does the church complain when the Constitution of the United States is treated the same way? The church is the salt of the earth, and if she does not treat her covenantal document with respect, won’t this mindset make its way into the world? There is an article from an old *Basket of Figs* that deals with this. Go to:

<http://basketoffigs.nstemp.org/Figs/oldfigs/1993/9308/covefeeln.net.htm>

- Speaking of covenant, the only covenant that saves the soul is the one that God took on Himself in Christ. In the Gospel, God in Christ reconciles the world unto Himself and sends forth His Spirit to call us to this reconciliation. Our flesh has nothing to do with it. The Lord Jesus Christ took it upon Himself to guarantee our salvation, and none of His sheep is lost or can be lost. I am not saved because of the strength of my commitment to Christ but because of the strength of His commitment to me. And so the Scripture says,

“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. –1 Peter 1:2-5

- “Give me a break.” In modern jargon that means, “overlook my boorishness, my carelessness, my indifference. Do not hold me accountable for precision in my work or my life. Don’t hold me to a high standard. I want a pass for my stupidity, sinfulness, and irresponsibility.” It is pretty much the mantra of the New Age.
- Similarly, “I want to get on with my life.” I know I killed my girlfriend, or raped a friend, or beat up my neighbor. But I want to get this behind me, so I can continue to make millions “rappin’” or bouncing balls on the hardwood, or catching passes. I want to get all my bad behavior behind me, where I won’t have to think about what a despicable person I am. I have never been held responsible for my actions because I am a star. I have put it behind me; why can’t you? I want to move on, man.
- Don’t allow people to have any power in the church that you do not want the official in the state to have. Both are ministers of God, you know. Why can you expect to put checks and balances on the one, if you allow the other unchecked power. Why can we expect the state to respect the freedom of the body if we allow ecclesiastics to tyrannize our souls?
- We are slow learners, if we ever learn at all. The Waldensians many years ago said that celibacy in the ministry would encourage “boy love.”
 

“The monastic life is the sink of the church, and a hellish institution; its vows are vain, and subservant only to the filthy love of boys....” The above quote is from Guy De Perpignan, bishop of Elna, in Roussillon, who exercised the office of inquisitor against the Waldenses. This was one of the charges that the bishop made against the Waldenses to justify their persecution and death. This quotation is found in the Catholic historian Thuanus, quoted by William Jones, *The History of the Christian Church*. Vol. II, p76. 1826.
- Man looks on the outward appearance only. This is the reason why church membership must be based upon covenant and not regeneration. It is impossible for the church to know the condition of grace in the heart of a person, but it is possible to examine whether or not the covenant of the church is being observed. Otherwise we become unrighteous judges, contrary to the commandment of Christ. There is also a hidden elitism in insisting on regeneration, for what is really required is a certain level of sanctification, and not regeneration at all.

- The foundation of the church has already been laid in Jesus Christ. Ministers are supposed to build on the foundation. We build in gold, silver, precious stones; wood, hay, stubble. If the doctrines are derived and grow out of the truth that Jesus is the Son of God, then they are gold, silver, and precious stones; otherwise they are wood, hay, and stubble. [1 Cor. 3:11-13] What then is that which is built for ambition, wealth, self-aggrandizement, or vainglory?
- Jesus claimed to be “the way, the truth, and the life.” [John 14:6] This is the essence of Christianity. It includes both the concrete and the ideal. He said He would build the church on the truth that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. [Matt. 16:18 and 1 Peter 2:4-7]. The church does not rest upon ideas alone, for that would make it just another historical movement. The church rests upon the truth about a Person, that Jesus of Nazarus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus called men to Himself—the express image of God [Heb. 1:3]. He is the Truth, not merely true; He is the Way, not a way-shower; He is the Life, not merely alive. When men find the Lord Jesus, they have found God Himself in His Fullness. [Col. 2:9] They find Him, not in mystical experience, but in confession and acknowledgement of the truth.
- Men cannot live without sin. It is enough that we do not commit crimes. Those who pretend to live without sin have not found perfection; they have lost forgiveness.
- God cannot deny Himself and therefore the world He made must reflect truth, making science possible. Man has been given a mind to understand. If this were not so, truth would be impossible to determine, for we would have nothing to measure by. Because God is God and always will be, dogs are dogs and cats are cats. If this were not true, science would be impossible for how could we know anything. God cannot deny Himself, but if you deny Him, you can’t know anything.
- Rape shield laws are intended to help the weakest and most vulnerable of society. They are intended to protect those who have been victims of rape from the intimidation and scrutiny that always accompany rape accusations. The rich and the powerful do not need such protection, and very often it is the rich and the powerful who commit such crimes. The shield laws in Colorado are now under attack by a rich and powerful and famous basketball player [translation: spoiled gifted baby who has never had to be accountable for anything] who thought he could come into our hick state and do as he pleased. It is rather ironic, don’t you think, that he is now pleading racial discrimination—pitting one protected minority against another protected minority? How do you decide which protected minority is going to get favored treatment under the law? Who is the weak and defenseless one: the young, famous, and powerful millionaire basketball player with his team of famous lawyers or the hotel attendant? Seems like a slam dunk to me. This isn’t Mississippi in 1920, and this isn’t a sharecropper on trial. But this is a good lesson for the young girls: don’t sleep with the famous basketball player, unless you are married to him.
- God gave us sixty-six books, most of them very short, over the space of a bit over two thousand years [Moses to Christ], and nothing after Christ. He hasn’t been talking much. Of course, being God, His word is certain and He doesn’t have to say it over and over again. After Christ, He has nothing further to say, for Christ is the last word for the last days [Heb. 1:1ff]. The best thing to do in God’s temple is to listen to the voice of God [Habakkuk 2:20]. But with the drums and the noise and the dances and the carrying on, who can hear the voice of God? Where can you find silence today? Sure can’t find it in most churches. Perhaps people don’t want quiet: it might be scary for them. People even jog through the quietness of the forest listening to rock and roll on their headsets. Go figure.
- The best quotation read lately was in the November issue of *National Review*, which I have just got around to reading. In an article by John W. Symington, “Someone once defined insanity as the constant repetition of the same act in expectation of a different result.”

Try browsing the wealth of information at <http://basketoffigs.org>.

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<p><b>Trinity Covenant Church</b></p> <p>Location: Grace Presbyterian Church          2511 N. Logan Ave. Colorado Springs          Mail: 6050 Del Paz Dr.,          Colo. Spgs. CO 80918          Phone: 719-590-1477          Worship: 2:00 p.m.</p>	<p><b>You Are Invited</b></p> <p>Trinity Covenant invites you to attend our worship services. If you desire a church that uses the Apostles’ Creed and the <i>Heidelberg Catechism</i>, emphasizes family worship and responsibility, then Trinity Covenant may be for you.</p> <p>Pastor: C. W. Powell</p>
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