

July, 2004

A Basket of Figs

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

Is It All a Pretense?

For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin;
that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. –2Cor. 5:21

Has the Luther and Calvin's reformation all been a terrible mistake? It is too bad, some people say, that there is so much division between Christians. Why can't we all just get along? It's a sort of Rodney King theology, before Rodney King.

One of the major points of division is the biblical doctrine of imputed righteousness by faith. The *Heidelberg Catechism* puts it this way in Question 60:

Q60: How are you righteous before God?

A60: Only by true faith in Jesus Christ: that is, although my conscience accuses me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil; yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.

Rome doesn't like this answer; Arminius didn't like it; heretics of all stripes don't like it. It is all based on dishonesty and pretense, they say. It involves God in a fiction, pretending that sinners are righteous. Besides, if Christ paid the penalty for our sins, then where is mercy? Arminius made fun of those who said that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to sinners. If the debt is paid, then where is forgiveness?

Arminius taught that God accepts faith instead of righteousness, that in mercy He accepts what we can do for what we cannot do. We cannot please Him perfectly, but he accepts faith instead of obedience, but that only accounts for past sins; in order to stay in the faith, we have to obey, but God only requires a good faith attempt. Norman Shepherd and some of the New Perspective people have revived a form of this sentimental accommodation.

Rome has its own wrinkle. God *infuses* righteousness into us, and declares us righteous because of the good that He has put in us. Our sins are either purged by tribulation in this world, or by the fires of purgatory in the next.

There have been many wrinkles on these themes over the years, all of which have been rejected by God's people.

Does the imputed righteousness of Christ involve God in a pretense, a fiction?

Not at all, for the righteousness of Christ is a perfect and complete righteousness. In Christ is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and we are complete in Him. God's predestination unto eternal life for the elect is that we be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, so there is no pretense in God. His perfect salvation involves not only the declaration that we are righteous, but the actual implanting of eternal life in the elect by the Holy Spirit. At the coming of Christ we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. On this the scripture is plain. But the implanting of eternal life in the elect is not the cause of our righteousness, but is itself the effect of the righteousness and perfect obedience of Christ.

We are now the sons of God, but it does not yet appear what we shall be. We know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

What is emphatically NOT true is that there is no level of righteousness that we must obtain either from ourselves or from God in order to merit the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ. This is received by faith alone, based on the perfection of Jesus Christ, as the Heidelberg Catechism states in the above quotation.

Those who deny this salvation are willingly ignorant and self-deceived. They refuse to accept the gift of eternal life, because they wish to exalt man's ability and man's free will. Hence, they think that there must be something for man to do. Instead of giving God glory, they denigrate God's gift, preferring to call Him a liar and a pretender, rather than to receive the gift of faith.

God made Christ to be sin. God did not make Christ a sinner, but counted him as a sinner, and punished him accordingly, as the Gospel says. Neither does God make us righteous in an instance, but He counts us righteous by faith, and then treats us as if we were righteous, bestowing on us all the gifts that Christ purchased for us, including complete conformity to Him in Heaven.

But Where Is Forgiveness, if Christ Paid Our Debt? The mercy of God as set forth

in the Gospel is far deeper and richer than the false doctrine that God somehow forgets about our sins and pretends they didn't happen [THERE'S a pretense for you, and it is ascribed to God by those who deny imputation.]

Jesus is God, and the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Him according to Colossians. God is not punishing another [a man Jesus] for our sins, but is taking them upon Himself. In this God can be just and the justifier of those who believe on Christ, according to Romans. His perfect justice is satisfied, so that He is not involved in any kind of chicanery or sentimental sob-sister mercy.

To accept faith itself instead of the full payment of the debt exalts good intentions over truth, well-meaning over knowledge and integrity. Arminian and Roman mercy is ingrained into the very fabric of American life. A few tears will make it all better. "I did not intend harm," brings political forgiveness and restoration. "Just do the best you can," and all will be well with God. We freely admit our bankruptcy before God, if we think of Him at all, but we are certain that he will accept a few cents on the dollar for the our debt, pledged by that sorry thing we call faith, which often is only a miserable caricature of the biblical variety. We know "it's real," because we feel it in our hearts.

I am not saved because I can weep over the crucifix, either the carved variety or an electronic one. I am saved because I believe that Jesus satisfied the justice of God to engraft me into the family of God and He ever lives in heaven ruling over all things in order to make sure that I don't go astray but finish the journey as He has planned it.

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

It's too bad that everyone doesn't believe this, but only those believe to whom it is given. Isaiah cried, "Who has believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed. The surprising thing is not how few there are who believe, but that any believe at all. Such is the mystery of God. But no one will be saved who does not believe in Christ's imputed righteousness. All other righteousnesses are filthy rags.

It's Ok to Grow Up

That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” --Ephesians 4:14

The Scriptures do not advocate perpetual childhood. Neither the state nor the church should encourage it. A great plague of childishness has been set loose in the nation because of a generation or so that refused to grow up. The child does not accept responsibility for his actions, desires immediate gratification, whimpers and cries when he doesn't get his own way, and would rather play than work. So he lives at home until his mid-thirties because he doesn't want to grow up and take responsibility for a wife and a home.

“But children are our future,” goes the lament. “We must do something to win them to our church, or our church will die.” It is a shame is the church's life and future depends upon the whims of children. Many modern evangelical churches have it backwards. Instead of having adult churches to encourage children to grow up, they have churches geared to youth, to try to keep the youth from straying. Never works, of course.

But, But, But....

"And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, 'Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.'" --Matthew 18:2,3

A few years ago I read an article in a Christian publication which affirmed that becoming as "little children" meant that we should live simply, in naiveté, in the present, and in reckless confidence. I would affirm that this is emphatically NOT what Christ meant. Further, such a view is destructive to Christianity and overthrows Biblical faith.

Not a Simple Book

The Bible is not a simple book, and the Christian life is not a simple life. Adam and Eve were created in maturity, and man's progress through this world is away from the "Garden" toward the "City" of God. We are to "occupy" (do business) until Jesus comes again, using our pounds and talents the best we can.

Many Christians are lazy in theology, in moral choices, in educating themselves so that they can serve the Lord in maturity. If the sermon goes longer than 20 minutes they get restless. If it involves difficult concepts, they complain. "We want the

simple Gospel," they whimper, as if anything Christ said was simple: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," for instance. What does "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" mean?

For the same reason they get impatient with "doctrine," as if the Bible were all on the kindergarten level.

Jesus Not Naive

Jesus knew what was in man and did not commit himself to many of those who "believed" on Him (John 2:24,25). He knew that true discipleship could not be based on whoring after signs and wonders, but upon the enlightenment of the soul. He did not judge childishly after the outward appearance. He warned His disciples against naiveté when He said, "Be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." He told the Pharisees to tell Herod, "Tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected," not exactly a naive or simple statement! (Luke 14:32)

In fact, the writer of Hebrews complains that the Hebrew Christians were "unskillful" or "without experience" (i.e. naive) in the word of righteousness (Heb. 5:13,14). Ephesians 4:11-14 tells us that the reason for the ministry gifts is that we be "no more children," but mature (perfect) men.

Christ Looked to the Future

Jesus had clear, defined goals toward which all of His life pointed. "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God," is the way the writer of Hebrews put it. The very essence of childishness is its preoccupation with the present. It is true that Jesus told us not to be anxious about what we should eat and drink, but that was because we are to be occupied in seeking the kingdom of God, a very definite future-oriented task.

No Reckless Confidence

Jesus did not live in reckless confidence. Just the contrary. He did not turn stones into bread, because that was not in the word of the Father for Him. He did not throw himself off the temple. He withdrew Himself from the multitude until it was "His time." He paid His taxes to avoid "offending them."

Even on the cross His mind ticked off the prophecies to see if any of them had not yet been fulfilled. Finding that one remained unfulfilled, He cried, "I thirst!" His steps

were disciplined and ordered by the Father; it borders on blasphemy to liken His walk to the reckless running to and fro of little children.

What Did Jesus Mean?

The disciples were quarreling about who was to be the greatest in the kingdom. A little child was a perfect example to warn about such unworthy ambition. Children have much pride and self-seeking, yet they are often humble to do the meanest task that adults will often despise. This is the lesson of Christ, and the object lesson must not be pushed beyond the rest of Scripture.

Christian Maturity

The goal of the Christian is maturity, responsibility, prudence, skill, knowledge, righteousness, and thoughtfulness. In a childish, drug-obsessed age, a false message of simplicity and naiveté might be appealing, but it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It fits more the irresponsible drug culture of the "flower children" of the nineteen-sixties.

The Potter and the Clay

A related and equally unbiblical idea is that we must become clay so that the Potter can mold us and make us after His will. Sinful autonomous man wants to retain the initiative in his own hands, so he re-interprets Scripture. Poor God! He can't make us what He wants us to be until we give Him permission.

The Apostle said it much differently: In Romans 9 he says that from the lump of sinful clay God can make a vessel unto wrath or a vessel unto mercy. The initiative is His. The clay doesn't decide. The Biblical truth causes us to fear and seek knowledge and truth; not naivety and childishness.

Don't Be Suckered by Cunning Men.

The figure used in Ephesians 4:14 is dice tossed to and fro by gamblers. This is the danger of spiritual children. Because naïve and ignorant church members do not have the understanding and maturity to evaluate things they become like dice that are tossed to and fro. A great many people have been "suckered" into such religious games, simply because they refused to grow up as Christians, opting for the fun and games of children, for entertainment, and became prey to manipulators and charlatans.

Read all of Ephesians 4. It tells you how to grow up and why you should do it.

But I Meant Well

John Calvin

2 For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. –

Romans 10:2,3

Let us hence learn where our good intentions may guide us, if we yield to them. It is commonly thought a good and a very fit excuse, when he who is reprov'd pretends that he meant no harm. And this pretext is held good by many at this day, so that they apply not their minds to find out the truth of God, because they think that whatever they do amiss through ignorance, without any designed maliciousness, but with good intention, is excusable. [Those who crucified Christ] had the same defense as that in which we confidently glory. Away then with these vain evasions as to good intention; if we seek God sincerely, let us follow the way by which alone we can come to him.

For it is better, as Augustine says, even to go limping in the right way than to run with all our might out of the way. If we would be really religious, let us remember that what Lactantius teaches is true, that true religion is alone that which is connected with the word of God.

And further, since we see that they perish, who with good intention wander in darkness, let us bear in mind, that we are worthy of thousand deaths, if after having been illuminated by God, we wander knowingly and willfully from the right way. – John Calvin, on Romans 10.

This 'n That

There was a cartoon in an old New Yorker Magazine that had an old guy reminiscing: "You know, it was a long time ago, but it seemed like the present then."

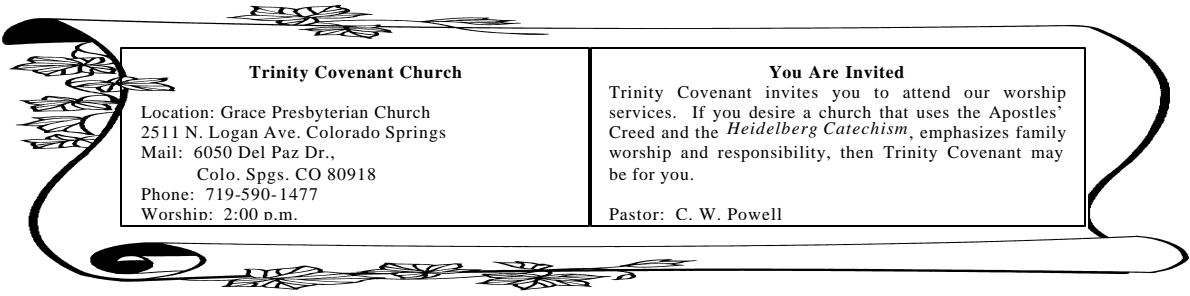
Islam has two problems in its confrontation with Christianity. In the first place, there is nothing in Islam similar to Christ's commandment, "Render unto Caesar" command. Hence, they must create a theocracy if they are to be loyal to God. They are like the Reconstructionists who must make the world into an extension of David's kingdom, ruled by them of course in the name of Christ. Both have an unhealthy desire to meddle in the lives of people to make them conform to their idea of what

morality is. The Taliban shot their victims on the soccer field. Thank God the Reconstructionists have not had their autocracy yet, and we hope they never will.

The other problem is that there is no mercy in Islam. One of the complaints that the Muslim raises against Christianity is the doctrine of mercy. Christians make forgiveness too easy, so Christians do not seek to live righteously. Not so the true Islamist. Sins and transgressions must be judged, and it is sinful to tolerate them. Christianity, therefore, when true to itself, can bear with those who are not criminals, but who come short of the glory of God. Because they have received mercy, Christians are able to show mercy and to turn the other cheek, as Christ commanded. It is true that many evil and cruel things have been done in the name of Christ by those who thought they did God's service, but their deeds did not derive from the teachings of their Master. They came from a different spirit, the spirit of the world, driven by greed and sinful desires.

While we are on the subject of mercy, beware of those who scoff at real kindness, mercy, and compassion. These things are in much too small supply in the modern world.

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