

# A Basket of Figs

August, 1999

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

## Spiritual Extortion

We first learned about it in grade school. With me, I think it was about the fourth grade. There were several kids in my class who had failed a couple of grades. One of them was taking the fourth grade for the third time, if I remember right. A real intellectual. He did manage to win all the arguments, though. His technique in debate was simple enough, “You want to make something out of it?” Of course I didn’t. I was the smallest kid in my class, and had no warlike spirit. I had had my arm twisted behind me, my lunch box emptied out on the ground, my face pushed into the ground enough to know not to get in the way. So I didn’t argue. I knew better.

As the years passed I learned more and more about extortion. In logical terms it is called an “appeal to force,” or the last arguments of kings. We don’t twist arms today, we send in cruise missiles. It is the manly way of winning arguments. Peter the Great of Russia, a manly man of some 6 feet 7 inches in height won a theological argument with Charles XII of Sweden in this way, and sang the *Te Deum* in St. Petersburg after the Battle of Poltava. It was clear that the Orthodox Church of Peter was superior to the Lutheranism of Charles.

**Public School Extortion.** In modern public schools children are being exposed to more subtle forms of extortion, but the principle is the same. They are being subjected to a form of emotional blackmail and extortion that goes something like this:

1. With nuclear weapons and other instruments of mass destruction, war has become unthinkable.
2. War comes because of intolerance. If we would learn to tolerate and be nice to people, we wouldn’t have war anymore and the world would be a great place to live.
3. You are intolerant if you do not treat all people the same. You must treat

- all religions and all people the same, including homosexuals.
4. Therefore in the name of "tolerance" every person must surrender his moral and intellectual personhood. If he doesn't he will be ridiculed, harassed, and re-educated until the proper "outcome" is achieved.

Intolerance, then, is the evil that brings nuclear war and world destruction. The threat of nuclear war and destruction is used as extortion to blackmail young people into abandoning their religious ideas. Accept other religions and non-Christian life-styles, or your intolerance will bring about the destruction of the world. Whew! That's heavy stuff!

Pressuring young people to abandon their faith in the Bible because of the threat of nuclear war is a very subtle form of extortion and blackmail. The various hells of humanism have replaced the very personal hell of old-fashioned Christianity.

The Reformed Church in the U. S. at its recent Synod in Bakersfield passed a resolution which affirmed that the homosexual lifestyle is unbiblical and ungodly. The R.C.U.S. did not do anything unusual, for this has been the confession of the Christian church since the days of the Apostles. The resolution reads as follows:

**"Whereas according to the Holy Bible, homosexuality, like other violations of the Seventh Commandment, is a sin and an abomination before God, the Reformed Church in the United States declares homosexuality to be unacceptable in any form. Therefore, in Christian love we call those who are involved in this sin to turn in repentance to God, who promises to forgive sinners through faith in His Son Jesus Christ. We further declare that the same is a principle of our religious faith."**

At the same Synod, the RCUS affirmed its faith that Genesis 1 is history, that the world was created in six days. Once again, this affirmation is nothing unusual, for the church has always affirmed its faith in the Genesis creation account. We will not exchange the simple words of the Bible for shaky scientific theories that change every year or so.

**Hurrah for Tolerance!** Toleration is a good word. It means that you are willing to live at peace with those who disagree with you. Christ commanded us to do this, and

to do good to all men. But tolerance cannot mean abandoning your faith or denying your faith because some people find it intolerable for you to believe that God created the world, and that homosexuality is contrary to His law. We may be forced to live in Sodom, but you won't persuade us that it is heaven.

The RCUS showed that she will not yield to blackmail on these and other issues. Humanists need to learn that their extortion will not work. The Christian is driven by a Spirit which is not of this world, for he is taught by the Spirit of God. Humanists of all ages have found out that the believer is a tough nut to crack. His faith does not originate with his own logic, will, or emotion, so no human effort can change him.

## **Tyranny of the Practical**

You know how it goes. We all do. Something like this: “We want our religion to be practical. What use does this idea have?” Americans are really turned on by the practical. Usually that means, “How can I avoid pain? How will it increase church attendance? What can I do to be happy?” or some such thing.

### **Where's the formula?**

What people are looking for is a formula—something to do to achieve some desired result. If the result is not seen immediately, then they look for some other formula.

As I write this, I am reminded of a chap I knew years ago. He was a groceryman, and had a lovely wife and about four kids. His wife had started to junior college and had been told men were beasts in general, and husbands beasts in particular. Her professor had told her that she had to dump her husband in order to “save her soul,” but that's another story.

The chap came to a Sunday School class I was teaching, and to church a couple of times. He even volunteered to sing in the choir. About the third Sunday, after Sunday School, I asked him if he was going to stay for church. “No,” he said. “I am trying a lot of things, to see which of them will work, to get my family back together.” I was very young in the ministry then, but I knew that he was headed for spiritual failure, and my premonitions were correct.

**Bondage to the Practical.** His trouble was his bondage to the practical. He insisted that he find something that “worked.” He had a simple goal, and just needed to find the formula that would “work” to get him to the goal. When I suggested that it might very well be in God’s purpose for him never to be reunited with his wife, he almost blew a gasket. “Then, Christianity doesn’t work,” was his unspoken reply.

There were some who followed Christ for “practical” reasons. “Ye ate of the loaves and were filled,” Jesus said. It made good practical sense to follow someone who gave you a free meal. Lots of people like that. But what of those who ‘had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth’? (Hebrews 11:36-38)

**God does not promise rest on the earth.** The Lord Jesus never promised any of His people an easy time. He said that they must not seek their rest on the earth. They are the true children of Abraham and like Abraham, they “declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.” (Hebrews 11:14-16)

Such “practical” people have never really grown up in Christ. They are like school children: “What good is this going to do me in life?” And too often, the teacher is also in bondage to the “practical” and replies, “It will help you get a good job.” “It will make you happy?” “It will make you feel good about yourself.” Of course, in public school the teacher cannot say, “You learn because you are in the image of God, and are to give glory to God in all things.”

**The Purpose of Christianity.** Christianity works wonderful things for those who know what’s its purpose is: but its purpose is the one that God defines, not what we define. Jesus prayed: ‘Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world hath not known thee: but I have known thee, and these have known that thou hast sent me.

And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:24-26)

What can be more useful than to stay out of hell? What is more profitable than to know your sins are forgiven, and that you have peace with God? The carnal man minds earthly things (Romans 8:5) The enemies of the cross of Christ are said to be of this sort: “(For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)” (Philippians 3:18-19) Jesus put it another way, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

Jesus told his disciples to “Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed.” (John 6:27) It’s too bad, but many in the church still go in the way of Esau: “Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?” (Genesis 25:32)

If you do not value heavenly things, there is a sort of logic in Esau. Doesn’t it seem most prudent to save your life, even if it means casting away remote promises? What good is the soul, anyway? The here and now, the material, the concrete, and the practical—that’s what really matters. Or does it?

**An Even More Important Matter.** God will always be God. He doesn’t jump to our tune. He is not our Genie-in-the-bottle that we bring out on special occasions as a cosmic problem-solver. “Seek the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.” (Isaiah 55:6-8)

## **Never, Never, Never Hurt a Child?**

Really? My mother sure didn’t believe that. She believed that “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.” (Proverbs

22:15) Furthermore, she was right. There was a great deal of foolishness bound up in my heart, and her cure was wonderfully effective. Of course I didn't like to get spanked, for I was filled with foolishness. Maybe if some modern child "experts" had been spanked more when they were children, they would not write so much foolishness.

**We Don't Mean Abuse.** Abuse was something else. We knew kids that were abused. My parents had no patience with people who knocked their kids around. They believed that God had given children a wonderfully padded place where the rod could be applied effectively and safely. They were right in that also.

To my parents, effective discipline was an act of love. "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes. (Proverbs 13:24) In fact, it was almost a sacrament: "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell." I think my mother took that as a promise from God. I don't ever remember thinking I was going to die from a spanking.

Didn't it hurt? Of course it hurt. My folks never said anything stupid like, "This hurts me more than it hurts you." The infliction of the pain was one-sided. I was the one that hurt, and it was intended to be that way. They knew that if I was allowed to nurture foolishness, they would have a great deal of pain in the future. "The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame." (Proverbs 29:15)

**Aspirin Theology.** These days are days of aspirin theology, and druggy discipline. "Never, never, never hurt a child" might well be the death-knell of our age. We avoid pain at all cost. We want soothing and pleasant sermons. We want air-conditioned churches and padded pews. We want simple theology that requires little effort, and even no painful self-examination. Fifteen minute sermons are about right, if there are catchy sound-bites and funny stories. Even sad stories will do, for sometimes it is fun to be sad or even scared, like a ride at the fair. But no hard, painful stuff. We want "smooth" things. (Isaiah 30:10)

We want aspirin, bumper-sticker theology, no matter how little sense it makes. This week this writer saw a car with two bumper stickers: "Never, never, never hurt a

child” and “A woman’s right to choose.” Think about it. We will not even think of hurting a child, unless he hasn’t been born yet, and might cause us some pain: then we will rip him limb from limb. Makes sense, doesn’t it, to a compassionate people?

“They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.” (Isaiah 6:14)

Take an aspirin, and it will feel better in the morning. It will, won’t it?

## Not Like Us

These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes. Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver. –Psalm 50:21-2

God is not like us. We do not punish sin; we recoil against it, because we are sinners, and to punish sin is to accuse ourselves. This is the reason that law enforcement becomes lax when men turn from God and lose their moral core.

God shows himself not to be like us, because he punishes sin. Governments are armed with the sword to punish crimes according to Romans 13. This power is from God alone, and is called a “strange work.” (Is. 28:21). It is called “strange” because it seems so to us. Because of the idolatry that is natural to our own hearts, we conceive of God as like something in our experience, but God is not like anything that He made. “All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him? (Isaiah 40: 17, 18.)

**God’s “Strange” Work.** This “strangeness” is from man’s perspective, not God’s. Because of the uniqueness of God, we can only learn of Him as He has revealed Himself. We can only grasp a piece of knowledge at a time, and then it will only be understood imperfectly.

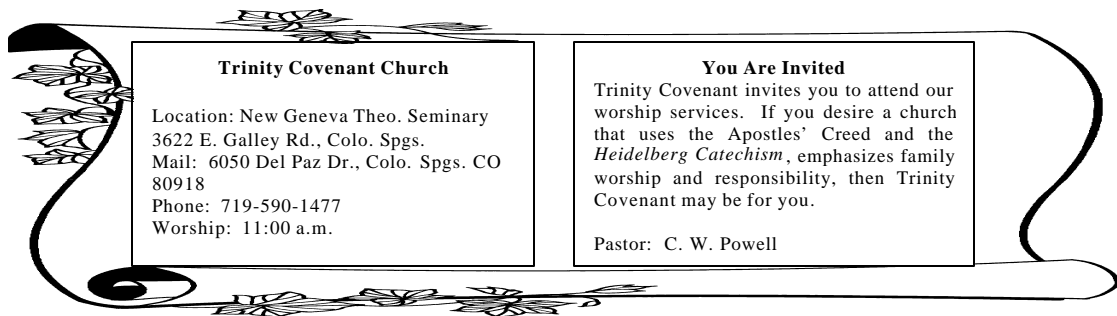
Although there is nothing that perfectly and entirely images God, yet from creation as interpreted by Scripture, we can gain some knowledge. He is like a Father; He is like

a Shepherd; He is like a Husband; He is like a King; He is like a Judge; He is like a Head; He is like a Vine, and so forth. None of these figures exhaust the Being of God which is known only to Himself, but they do give the humble soul some idea of His nature. The proper regard for God is not curiosity, but reverent fear and worship.

**The Fullness of Christ.** The final revelation of God concerning Himself was in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1,2). Because the fullness of God is in Jesus bodily, we are forbidden to seek to know God apart from Jesus Christ. ‘For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principalities and power....’ (Colossians 2:9, 10)

The requirement that we seek God only in Jesus Christ does not restrict us at all, but leads us out into the glories of God’s grace for us. Jesus Christ is the “true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world,” (John 1:9) and the Creator and Sustainer of all things, because Jesus Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.” (Colossians 1:15-17)

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