

A Basket of Figs

October, 2000

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

Hate Crimes?

Romans 13:8 Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

It is love to fulfill the law. The person who steals, who murders, who commits adultery hates his victim. Governments are ordained of God [Romans 11], and are supposed to provide an atmosphere where the law of God is not easily ignored.

Hatred is given a legal pass when open transgressions against the law of God are ignored. Where is love when live-born babies are left to die, or when full-term babies are ripped apart from the womb? Where is love when rich old men corrupt the laws in order to dump the wives of their youth? Where is love when fortunes are made by a few because of sweetheart deals with big government at the expense of taxpayers? Where is love when the means of self-protection from the lawless are removed, and the righteous are left to the mercy of the bureaucratic state?

Humanist governments try to mask their hatred when they pass “hate crime legislation.” Even worse, they often give privileged status to those who live in open and arrogant rebellion against the law of God, adding to the misery of the righteous.

Easy Believism?

It was bound to happen. Evangelism and Evangelicalism generally taught the same message to Americans, a message that came to permeate American society. American Christianity, especially in the Second Great Awakening, and in the revivals that followed, emphasized that the way to Christ is by faith. The message was preached in country churches, in city cathedrals, in brush arbors, on street corners, and was carried from house to house. America was defined by revivalism. The message was democratic and egalitarian, and fit America perfectly.

In the excitement of revivalism, however, the sturdy Calvinism of the Reformation was an embarrassment. How could the egalitarianism of America be squared with the predestinarianism of the Reformation? New England Theology led the way in attempting the integration. The result was Unitarianism, which came to dominate the universities. On the popular level it was free will arminianism. Man had a free will, it was thought, and every man had the ability to choose to be a Christian. Charles Finney and others believed that if the “sale” were made properly, every man and woman would become a Christian, especially children whose wills were still impressionable. American evangelicalism had no doubt that only God could save a man, but there was also no doubt that man must make the first move. It was man’s free choice that triggered the power of God so that he could be a Christian. Thus the advertising agent became the mover and shaker in evangelism.

I remember my family, lined up on the front pew of an evangelical church, along with a cousin who was staying with us at the time. The minister went down the line, asking each of us, “Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God?” Upon our affirmation we were immediately hustled off to a back room, made to put on robes, and were dunked in the baptistery.

And so millions heard this Gospel, walked the sawdust trail, and professed Christianity. But as this writer frequently heard as a boy, very often it didn’t “take.” There were “lapsed” Christians everywhere. The formula had been followed; the words had been uttered, but very many lived far from Christianity, even abandoning the church. Many professed strange doctrines and cults, and denied Christ in works and in doctrine. At Wednesday night prayer meetings, prayers were offered frequently for Mr. _____ or Mrs. _____ who had been saved years ago, but were now “walking afar off.” And, of course, there were frequent prayers for another revival. A corollary of this was criticism that the church for not “paying the price” for revival.

In the years that followed, huge numbers of people abandoned traditional churches for glamorous and “lively” churches that made Christianity “alive and relevant.” The bar was lowered, and fewer and fewer demands were made upon the lives and the doctrines of those who attended.

What was to be thought of such things? Controversies arose among evangelicalism. Were such lapsed people true Christians? Hadn’t they accepted Christ and confessed

Him openly? On one side were the “Arminians.” “Of course they aren’t Christians. The will is free, and people can walk away from Christ if they want to. If they don’t live holy lives they will be lost. These people were saved, as God promised, but they have lost their salvation.” In some of these circles, people were saved several times, sometimes baptized several times, hoping to get it right, or until they gave up, saying, “I tried to be a Christian, but I can’t live the life.”

On the other side were the “Calvinists.” They agreed with the Arminians on free-will, and agreed that such people were really saved, but insisted that such were still saved, no matter what the fruits in their lives. Most did not realize that only a tiny remnant of the Reformation remained in their theology, and that their view of faith was as shallow as the “Arminians.” I suppose that few issues have caused such an emotional debate in evangelical circles than the debate between the “once saved always saved” people, and those who think people can lose their salvation.

I heard a new phrase in my late teens. There was a shift in the thinking of some of the more serious evangelicals. The evils of those who “lapsed” from the faith would be cured if we warned people of the dangers of “easy believism.” People needed to be told to repent. It wasn’t easy to go to heaven, and people needed to be told to make a greater effort. It seemed attractive, for certainly there were many warnings in Scripture, and even James had said, “Faith without works is dead.” The message was that “easy” believism does not save. You still hear the phrase today.

But what is the alternative to an “easy believism”? a “hard” believism? Are true Christians those who have built their faith up, worked hard at it, until their faith was hard and tough enough to get the attention of God? Did Christ really mean to say, “Blessed are the tough, for they shall inherit the earth?” and “Blessed are the strong in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”? Is the message of the Gospel this: that men are saved when they join enough of their sincerity and tenacity to the work of the Holy Spirit? What is enough sincerity? How much tenacity is enough?

The problem is that those on both sides of the debate were operating on a wrong view of faith, essentially a humanistic one. They both thought that faith is an ability within the natural strength of any man. Because faith was taught to be a natural power, anyone could exercise it, and if they did so sufficiently, God would add His strength. Men looked to faith itself, rather than to the proper object of faith, Jesus Christ.

It is true that the energy to lay hold on God is faith—but not just any sort of faith. The Apostle Paul put it distinctly in Ephesians 2:8-10: *“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.”* It is faith which is the gift of God—a supernatural power by the Holy Spirit, who calls a man by the Gospel to Jesus Christ, who is the only Savior of men. Faith is the first manifestation of new life in Jesus Christ, a fruit of the Spirit, not of the flesh.

Humanist doctrine perverts the teaching of the Bible and teaches me to look to my faith. This leads either to self-satisfaction and complacency, or to disillusionment and despair. The Biblical doctrine teaches me to look to Christ in the Gospel and to lay hold on Him, and to have no confidence in the flesh. Christ alone is my salvation. The perversion that trusts in faith even exists in some small pseudo-reformed circles, where the purity of doctrine (faith) is taught to be the mark of regeneration.

The promises of the Gospel are not self-help formulas, but are to those who are without strength. It comes to those who are dead in sins, to those who are the poor of the earth. It breathes life and vigor into the dead bones, into the weak and needy. The energy that does this is not natural. It is the vigor that flows to the branches from the Vine, from Jesus Christ, the Savior of the Church.

“Come unto me,” says the blessed Savior, “and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest for your souls.” Come, not to your faith; but to Christ, where the bankrupt finds riches, the weak find strength, and the needy find mercy. Christ is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption. “I believe, help thou my unbelief,” was the prayer of the father in Mark 9:24.

“Easy Believism” or “Hard Believism”? It’s just a humanist quarrel, after all. Biblical faith brings no human power, because it is the gift of God, the work of the Holy Spirit. It is powerful enough to storm the gates of hell, save a man from the wrath of God, unite him to Jesus Christ, and bring him safe through to glory. Hallelujah!!

Our Business Is with God!

Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. Job 1:20, 21

9 Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die. 10 But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips. Job 2:9, 10

Our Lord Jesus commended Job for his patience. How was Job patient? Job was anything but tranquil in spirit. He cursed the day he was born. He longed for death. He challenged God make a way for him to lay his complaint before Him so that Job could know the reason for his sufferings. He defended his integrity before his friends. Where was patience in all of this?

The story of Job can be told in a few words. He was a wealthy, honorable man of old times. He had a good reputation and a large family, a godly man who prayed for his children and did many good deeds. But it was all taken away in a few strokes.

One day when the angels presented themselves before the Lord, Satan came also, and slandered Job. Slander is what Satan does best, and Satan accused Job of being a materialist, serving God simply because of the possessions and other blessings that God gave him. To show that Job's faith was natural, God permitted Satan to take away everything. In one day, the Sabeans stole Job's oxen and asses and killed the servants who were with them. Then fire came from heaven and burned up the sheep with the servants. The Chaldeans came, stole the camels and killed the servants; finally, a wind from the wilderness killed all of Job's sons and daughters.

Job was no Stoic. He knew the difference between triumph and disaster, between blessing and cursing. He tore his clothes; shaved his head; fell upon the ground. But in a most unusual response, he did not break forth in a speech of hatred for the Sabeans and Chaldeans; he did not curse the government for not having made adequate disaster relief from thunder and lightning; and he did not swear at the hurricane. He did not even accuse the devil or blame the devil. There is no dualism in Job's world: all things, both good and evil, come from God.

Job knew where his business was: it was with God. “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” In all of Job’s speeches that follow, he never wavers from this. Nor is this fundamental doctrine ever challenged anywhere in the book of Job. Job was singled-minded in this.

Job had a high view of God, and was not at all confused about God’s attributes. He never wavered. Things did not happen by chance, nor were things ruled by blind fate. Job did not believe that “whatever will be will be.” He knew that all things came from God, and he wanted to talk to God about the reasons for his sufferings.

Job’s friends never doubted any of these things either. Most of the things they knew about God were true, that He was the judge of the earth, that nothing is hid from Him, that He is sovereign in the affairs of the universe. They had a high view of God.

The modern humanistic world cannot stand the message of the book of Job. It is much too God-centered. Even Satan must appear before God to get permission to do his devilish work. God’s government of the world is absolute, leaving no room for chance or blind fate. Not only did God show His authority over Job’s possessions and his family, but He also claimed absolute authority over Job’s health and life. It was going to get worse for Job.

At another time when the angels appeared before God, Satan came again. God again spoke of His servant Job, commending his faith. “Job is one that fears God, and abhors evil? and still he holds to his integrity, although you moved me against him, to destroy him without cause.” (Job 2:3) Notice, Satan is only the servant of the Lord: it is God who moved against Job. Even though Job did not know what was going on in heaven, he had no doubt that his business was with God. He was much smarter than present-day churchmen, politicians, and many people in the pews.

“Of course Job serves you,” was the reply of Satan. “All a man has, he will give for his life. Job will prove to be a materialist after all, and will give up everything spiritual for his health and his life,” is the slander of the devil. In order to refute this slander, God permitted the devil to bring boils upon Job, but did not permit him to kill Job. Terrible sores afflicted Job from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. He took a broken piece of pottery to scrape himself and set down in the ash heap. His wife urged him to curse God and die [she was no dualist either!]

Ultimately, Job's faith triumphed over the very harsh trial sent upon him by God, through the agency of the devil, as God knew it would. Job never wavered in his desire to lay his case before the Almighty to find the reason for his sufferings. He realized that the truisms that his pedantic friends mouthed in complacency were not applicable to him. He knew that what his friends said was true, but that the application they made did not apply to him. Job would not fall into their basic humanism and try to find the cause of everything that happens on earth within creation itself. The causes of all things, both good and evil, are in heaven. Job would hold this to the end, and would make his case with God. He knew that His business was with God.

One end note: After many long speeches, in which Job expressed his desire to confront God to find the reason for his sufferings, God finally speaks to Job from the whirlwind [Yes, God has His way even in the whirlwind—Nahum 1:3!]. After affirming His sovereignty over all things, even in those places where man does and cannot go, God gives Job a chance to speak.

Job's patience wins even here. "Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:4-6) Job takes his own advice, and is silent in the presence of God, for His wisdom and power are sufficient for men. When the time comes where he has opportunity to speak and make his case before the Lord, he has too much God-given wisdom to do so.

Words, Words, Words

Many years ago, my wife's father was admitted to a hospital. He was diagnosed and treated for acute indigestion, and before the night was over he had passed away. He did not have indigestion, but was having a heart attack. When the doctors missed the diagnosis, they also missed the treatment.

Good words are like a hearty and good medicine, a well of life, according to Proverbs 10:11. The wise man is not talking about mindless chattering, though. According to I Corinthians 14 words must be understood if they are to accomplish their purpose.

The good words must fit the situation. We are not to sing songs to those of a heavy heart, or we will be like those who take away a garment in cold weather, *and as* acid upon soda. (Prov. 25:20) To miss the diagnosis is like the man who answers before he hears: it is a folly and shame to him according to Proverbs 18:13. Job's friends missed the diagnosis, so they had no cure.

The Pharisees were blind leaders of the blind. They thought they knew the Scriptures, and they thought they knew the diseases, but their mouthing of the law simply added more misery to the blind people they pretended to help. Wrong words, misunderstood, or misapplied add to the sum total of human misery. We have all known the sting of words that do not fit the situation, words that do not cure.

"He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good: and whoso trusteth in the LORD, happy is he." Proverbs 16:20

Reformation Conference

Two mission pastors will be special speakers at the annual Reformation Conference at Trinity Covenant Church this year. Rev. Dorman Savage, missionary to the Front Range, and Rev. Gene Sawtelle, home missionary at Greeley, Colo., will be speaking at 2:30 and 4:30 respectively on October 29. A meal will be served between services.

We will send *A Basket of Figs* free of charge to anyone who requests it. We will be glad to send it to your friends and relatives. It is our desire that these little papers be used of the Lord to bear witness of the truth as it is in Christ. Our only request is that they be read: you do not even have to agree with everything! Unless otherwise indicated, all articles are written by Pastor Powell, and they may be freely duplicated as long as duly credited. We do not solicit funds, nor will we give or sell our mailing list to anyone.

All readers of this publication are invited to visit our website: www.tcrc.faithweb.com.

Trinity Covenant Church

Location: Citadel Christian Center
3704 E. Uintah., Colorado Springs.
Mail: 6050 Del Paz Dr.,
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Phone: 719-590-1477
Worship: 2:30 p.m.

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