

A Basket of Figs

August, 1998

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

His Works Are True

“The works of his hands are verity and judgment; all his commandments are sure”—Ps. 111:7

The psalmist has joined together God’s works of creation and the Holy Scriptures. They tell the same story and all the parts of the story fit together. True science and true understanding of the Scripture agree. This does not mean and scientists and theologians do not disagree, for both can and do err. There is a difference between science and scientists; theology and theologians.

God’s works are verity and judgment. There is order and there is rationality in Creation. Things fit together. If a man tells me there is a dog in my yard, and there is no dog in my yard, then he has lied to me. His words should correspond with the objective reality. It would also be a lie for him to say that a dog was in my yard, but it was really a horse, for one who speaks should be able to distinguish between a horse and a dog. Otherwise, he should keep still.

Creation and Scripture must never be placed at odds with each other. “The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein.” (Ps. 111:2) Those who have no pleasure in God will have little pleasure in His works but will find many reasons to gripe and complain. When people do not like a person, they tend to find displeasure in his work. An unbelieving age finds many things to complain about, and denies that God’s works are verity and judgment. The real world does not admit contradiction. The scientist who goes against observation and reason will not long be successful. The fool bangs his head into the wall, and may pretend that it is not solid, but the bumps on his head deny his pretense.

“Behold my hands,” our Lord said. They were real hands, with real nail-prints in them. We are not called to believe some fable, some tale that did not fit what really happened, but to believe that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. In Jesus Christ the promises of God entered our world of sense, and He was seen, and touched, and handled. (I John 1)

Only a heart far from God would turn away from such great work.

Does Truth Warm You?

“But we want religion that is warm, that makes us feel good. I think that what you say is too cold.”

Personally, I thank God for all the good preachers I heard as a boy who spoke of sin, hell, and damnation. I don't remember laughing much at what they said, or feeling good about it. The only thing that impressed me was that they were telling the truth. That is all that mattered to me, and still does. I don't care whether a man is emotional or dry. I just want him to tell the truth. Of course, after World War II the hot-shot “youth” evangelists hit our town, and they really made us laugh. They could really tell funny stories. They didn't talk about hell much, though.

What should be the measure of religion? Is religion something you go down to the market and buy, like a new pair of socks? I remember that a new pair of socks made me feel good when I was a boy. They felt good on my feet. We were poor and a new pair of socks was a kind of luxury.

Those youth ministers that came to town in the early fifties were like a pair of new socks. They felt good. They were talented and dynamic speakers. A lot of young people “went forward” and made “decisions” for Christ. I don't remember many of them “lasting,” though. A few did, but most didn't. I knew them in school and there wasn't much change that I could see.

The real work of the church was done by people in the church who didn't care much about whether what they said made us feel good. They told us that wrong was wrong, and we were supposed to do right, no matter what we felt like. They said that Jesus died on the cross for sinners, and those who believed and repented of their lying, and cussing, and evil-doing would go to heaven. The rest would go to hell. They didn't talk much about politics or making money. They just talked about staying out of hell and going to heaven when we died. Not a bad message. They didn't seem to care if there were three of us listening or three hundred. I was in a lot more classes of three than I was of three hundred. I do remember kids weeping over their sins. How long has it been since you saw that?

I was not much different from the rest of the kids I knew. I now know that the Christian faith is not based upon some kind of experience, but on the promises of God. Sometimes the most solid things are ignored by young people, but they have a way of catching up to you later. I know now who the real evangelists were in my town.

I thank God for those people. Feel good? Nice warm religion? Not much from that crowd. All they cared about was keeping us out of hell. That was a good enough feeling for them. They were happy they knew the truth. I still am.

Paul vs. Peter? What about Jesus?

The line goes something like this. Jesus taught a simple gospel. It was Paul the theologian who made it complicated and messed it all up. It is amazing how such ideas get started, and even more amazing that such things could catch on.

In the first place, no “simple” preacher could have gained much of a following among the Jews. They were the best-educated and most theologically sophisticated people in the world at that time. They had the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets, the three divisions that now make up the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. They had a sophisticated theological tradition that had examined all the obscure and difficult questions. Only a cynical age like our own could have invented a story that a Paul would have given theological obscurity to the plain, simple teaching of Jesus Christ. The Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees were not country-bumpkins.

Did Paul invent the doctrine of election? Of course not. Paul certainly wrote that “it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13),” but Peter says much the same thing: “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (I Peter 1:2)

In this they were just echoing the theology of their Master: “Ye believe not because ye are not of my sheep” (John 10:26), putting the cause of their belief the election of God, not the other way around. Christ also said, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37).

Christ, in turn, was merely speaking what the Pharisees and Jewish theologians knew: that it is God who ordains whatever comes to pass. They knew the Scriptures that claimed that God had created the world and all that is within it. They read the Scripture that said, “I have declared the former things from the beginning; and they went out of my mouth and I showed them; I did them suddenly, and they came to pass...I have even from the beginning declared it to thee; before it came to pass I showed it thee; lest thou shouldest say, Mine idol hath done them, and my graven image, and my molten image hath commanded them” (Is. 48:3,5). God gave His prophets prophecies concerning the future so that we might know that God brings the future to pass. He declares the “end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure” (Is. 46:10). Predestination was not something invented by Christian theologians under the influence of insane Greek humanism.

Of course, unbelief is hard to pin down and is as slippery as a serpent. Conspiracy buffs among modern theologians speculate that John, Paul, or Peter did not write the gospels and epistles at all, but they are later forgeries foisted on naïve people! They have no evidence for this, but just make it up out of “whole cloth,” as my mother used to say. Ignorant unbelief is like a round ball, and very hard to get a hold of, and does whatever is necessary to avoid reality. Whatever it takes to discredit the Gospel is the norm. These people are still looking for the historical Christ, because they do not like the One of the Gospels very well. It might be well to consider that He and His words will judge us all at the Last Day, so it is wise to make peace with Him now. (John 5:22,23 and John 12:48)

What is the Connection?

“And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he answered them, saying, Who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.” --Mark 3:32-35

The value of human connections to gain spiritual blessings was settled at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. They are of no value as far as eternal life is concerned. Israel had many advantages that way, for unto them were committed the oracles of God (Rom. 3). It is far better to come from a good family than from a bad one, unless confidence and pride in family connections keep

us from Jesus Christ. Paul knew the danger, and therefore counted it all as “dung” that he might win Christ (Gal. 3:7-9). Having Abraham as father did not gain righteousness for Israel, because they had no faith (Romans 10).

The reason is very clear. Human relationships are because of our common ancestry. We are all descended from Adam and Eve, and are therefore under the curse. We are born in sin and without ability to please God. This is what we inherit from our parents. The benefits of reputation, wealth, education, and honor are very small considered in the light of the sin and misery of our human condition. As children of Adam we are under the curse and the wrath of God abides on us, according to Scripture.

Our humanity cannot deliver us from the curse. We are helpless, except for the power of Christ in His death and resurrection. Suffering in our place, He was put to death in the flesh, ending and pretensions of human self-help and advancement, but was raised in the Spirit. Newness of life, therefore, is not by the works of the flesh, but by the power of the Spirit through the gospel.

“Ye must be born again.” An inward change must take place by the power of the Spirit. As wonderful as it was to be the human mother of Christ, or the human brother of Christ, how much greater it is to assent to His gospel, to yield obedience and love to Him, to be a member of the family of God through faith in His blood!

In other words, the only relationship to Jesus Christ that brings eternal life is a spiritual one of faith. Jesus Christ was a true human being. He was born of the Virgin Mary, of the house and lineage of David, an Israelite, a member of Adam’s family. He took this to the cross, and suffered there the death and punishment for sin that every son of Adam deserves. Human ties--even though they be blood relationships to Jesus Christ cannot profit to the kingdom of God.

This does not mean that Christ had no regard for His mother and His brother. On the contrary, He fulfilled all His obligations to them, committing His mother to the care of John even when He was on the cross. He does not abrogate the commandment for us to honor our parents. But that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and only that which is born of the Spirit can enter into the kingdom of God, as Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3).

What Weapon Against God?

“Behold, I have created the smith that bloweth the coals in the fire, and that bringeth forth an instrument for his work; and I have created the waster to destroy. No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord.” --Isaiah 54:16,17

There is no power but of God. The blacksmith is created by God and has his wisdom and strength from God. The metal that he places on the forge is God’s creation, as is the fire in the forge. The wisdom that the smith has learned is from God, so everything he makes is of the Lord.

This is the folly and vanity of sin. The sinner thinks that he has something of his own, and does not live and move and have his being in God. This leaves him prone to the greatest folly, for he thinks that his life is his own. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Men cannot even utter blasphemy without using the air that God gives them, and exercising the strength that God gives them. They could not even think the thought of blaspheme without the ability to reason that comes from God. Wicked King Belshazzar thought his thoughts were his own when he defiled the vessels of the temple and praised the gods of gold and silver, of brass and iron, of wood and stone. The truth was different, though, and Daniel the prophet spoke the truth to him, “the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified” (Dan. 5:23).

In the passage quoted above, God comforts Isaiah. “Do not be afraid of the enemy,” says the Lord. “They do not have anything that I have not given them. I have made the smith. He belongs to me. He cannot make any instrument that will be successful against you.” What a great comfort! The Hand behind all things that happen in the world is the Hand of God. His purposes are good and kindly toward his people, and not even their enemies are able to change that. The smith may not know that. The heart of the smith may be filled with envy and hatred. He may fancy that he is forging an instrument that will be the ruin of the church, but he is wrong. Instead, it will be an instrument for his own destruction and damnation. The godly will survive, for all things work for their good, according to the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:28).

When we truly believe this, the peace of God rules our hearts and our minds. We can rejoice in tribulation and bear hard times patiently, for we know that all things come to us from our Heavenly Father. How could it be otherwise, seeing He is the creator of all things?

On the other hand, what could be more terrifying to the ungodly? Where will he hide from God? With what means will he try to raise a defense against God?

Our Faithful, Wonderful God!

It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. -Lamentations 3:22,23

It looked hopeless. The Babylonians had been ruthless in their destruction of Jerusalem, the wall, the temple. King Zedekiah had been captured and brought before Babylon's king Nebuchadnezzar. After Zedekiah's sons had been slain before his eyes, his eyes had been put out and he was bound in chains to be taken to Babylon. The palaces and houses had been put to the fire and only the poor of the land were permitted to remain. It wasn't fun at all.

In his agony and despair Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations. Everything was gone. He wrote, "[Jerusalem] weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies." (Lam. 1:2).

Jeremiah's heart was bruised almost beyond repair. He cried out, "Mine eyes do fail with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth, for the destruction of the daughter of my people; because the children and the sucklings swoon in the streets of the city" (Lam. 2:11).

When there is nothing else that remains the righteous can find hope in the attributes of God. Although desolation and misery were all around, Jeremiah yet clings to the goodness and mercy of God. He knows that the desolation and misery had come from God, using Babylon as an instrument. Jeremiah knows that Israel richly deserved it: "Jerusalem hath grievously sinned; therefore she is removed.... (Lam. 1:8). Jeremiah is no modern crybaby, blaming God, and whining. His tears are the tears of an honest and godly man. But he is willing to kiss the hand that bears the rod, knowing that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, that His hands are stretched out in mercy.

Every single day bears witness to the mercy and love of God. The sun rises anew and a new day begins. So also are the mercies of God; they also are new every

morning. Sin can be renounced; justice and truth can be sought afresh, for God is faithful.

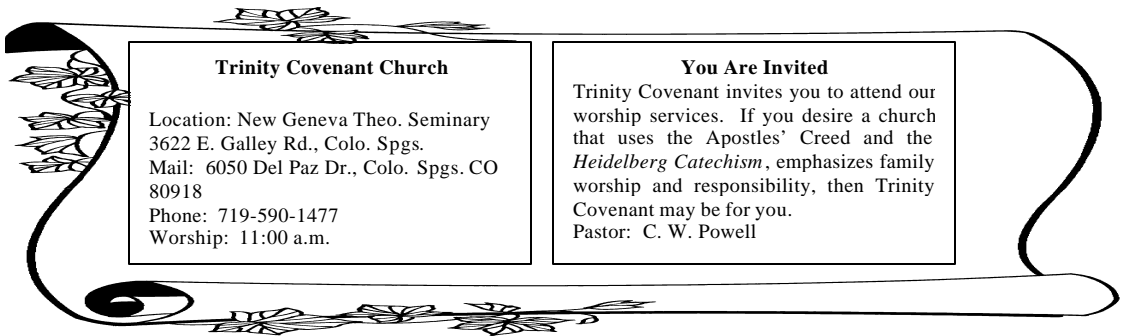
Faithful to what? What is Jeremiah referring to? “The Lord will not cast off forever: But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.... Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heaven....” (Lam. 3:31-33, 40-41)

God’s promises do not fail, because it is impossible for Him to lie. When everything looks completely hopeless on the earth, there is a way upward, to the throne of mercy and grace. This mercy and grace is in Jesus Christ and in the promise God had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was impossible for God utterly to cast off Israel, for the promise was that Christ would come and take away sins, and the whole world would be blessed in Him, the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16).

Their hope was the same as ours: forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus Christ. They believed in Christ yet to come; we believe in Christ who has come. The way of hope was repentance and faith. It has always been the same. In days of trouble, when hope seems to fail, it is well to remember the faithfulness of God. “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord” is the way the Apostle Paul puts it (I Cor. 1:9). Amen and Amen.

Absolutely Free of Charge

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 free duplicated as long as duly credited. We do not solicit funds, nor will we give or sell our mailing list to anyone.



Trinity Covenant Church

Location: New Geneva Theo. Seminary
3622 E. Galley Rd., Colo. Spgs.
Mail: 6050 Del Paz Dr., Colo. Spgs. CO
80918
Phone: 719-590-1477
Worship: 11:00 a.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