



CHRISTIANITY TODAY

PUBLISHED FORTNIGHTLY

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THE TREND IN BRITAIN

The Spiritual Situation Today

FRANK COLQUHOUN

The Church of England

TALBOT MOHAN

The Church of Scotland

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The Free Churches

F. P. COPLAND SIMMONS

FIRST IN A SERIES

The Christian Witness in Israel

MISSIONARY CONCERNS

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★ "A nation's strength," the *London Times* recently editorialized, "can be measured in many ways. There can be moral strength, material strength, social strength, financial strength, strength of will and purpose. . . . The outside world . . . does not put British stock very high in some of these at present." Britain can still have "a high place in the world," added *The Times*, but "there will have to be a resurgence of national will, a toughness in thinking and effort. . . ." What is to be said, moreover, of Britain's spiritual strength today? For an authoritative answer, CHRISTIANITY TODAY presents the views of a competent corps of evangelical writers enlisted by our London office on Wine Office Court (just off Fleet Street).

★ The first of four essays on modern Israel, by Editor Carl F. H. Henry, begins this issue (page 22) coincidentally with news reports of an Orthodox Jewish clash with Christian believers in Jerusalem (page 25). The initial essay will be concluded in the August 28 issue (next to appear).

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Basic Christian Doctrines: 15.

The Covenant of Works

Whatever else the statesmen and economists of today may report to us, they cannot say, "We have walked to and fro, through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still and is at rest." The earth is not sitting still; it is not at rest. Recent years have been marked by constant change, accompanied by turmoil and confusion. Many foundations have been destroyed; and the question is asked anxiously, What can the righteous do? What of the future?

As we look out on the world, we can hardly fail to see that the great problem which confronts us is that of *authority* and *obedience*. It faces us at every level: personal, domestic, social, religious. Is man an autonomous anarchist? Or is he a responsible being; and if responsible, to whom?

The Bible has a simple but comprehensive answer to this question. Briefly stated it is this: Man was created by God and in the image of God; and the duty which God requires of man is "obedience to his revealed will." The authority of God, implied in his Creatorship, has as its correlate the obedience of man; and God's will is revealed in the Bible.

That this is so is the Bible's constant claim. It is plainly set forth in the account of the creation of man. Five imperatives are at once laid upon man (Gen. 1:28); and three times the word "commanded" is used of God's dealings with Adam and Eve. The story is briefly and simply told. God commanded; Adam and Eve disobeyed; the penalty or sanction attached to the command was invoked, and the guilty pair, under sentence of death, were driven forth from the presence of God.

The relationship established in Eden has been properly called the covenant of works. That it promised life as the reward of obedience is not immediately stated. But it is made abundantly clear elsewhere, notably in Deuteronomy (6:5; 10:12 f.; 30:15-20). The First Psalm is a poetical expounding of this covenant; and it has its counterpart in Romans 2:7-9. The penalty of disobedience is shown in the mournful cadence in Genesis 5, "and he died," and in the terrible judgment of the Flood which destroyed "the old world of unrighteousness." The consistent teaching of the Bible is that "the wages of sin is death."

The covenant was made with Adam in a state of innocence; and almost his first recorded act was the breaking of it; and human history from that day to this is a tragic record of man's failure to keep it. Consequently, in the plan and purpose of God, the covenant of works was immediately followed by the covenant of grace. This covenant is first set forth cryptically in the words of the protevangel (Gen. 3:15) which promised Eve ultimate triumph over the enemy of her race. In this covenant the emphasis is on faith. This is made clear in the wonderful words that are said of Abram: "And he believed in the LORD, and he accounted it to him for righteousness" (15:6), to which Paul appeals to show that Abraham was justified by faith and not by the works of the law. He also appeals to the words of the prophet, "the just shall live by faith" (Hab. 2:4). The New Testament abounds in statements which justify Luther's challenge to Rome—"justification by faith alone." John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Romans 2:8 are a few of them.

Since these two covenants are often contrasted rather sharply as works *versus* faith, it is important to remember that the basic requirement of both is exactly the same. They both require *obedience* to the revealed will of God. This is made especially clear in the life of Abraham. Abraham is Paul's great example of salvation by faith. But no mere man was ever more severely tried and tested in the school of obedience (Gen. 22:18; 26:5). In the great faith chapter in Hebrews we read that when Abraham was called to go forth to the unknown country he "obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went." This whole chapter should not be called "the faith chapter" but the chapter of "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16:26). For of all its examples of faith it can be said, "They climbed the steep ascent of heaven through peril, toil, and pain."

By the covenant of grace the Christian is not offered faith as an easy substitute for works of righteousness. It offers him an unmerited and unearned righteousness, the righteousness of Christ received by faith, which challenges him and demands that he walk worthy of his high calling, that he learn to say as Paul did, "the love of Christ constraineth us" (II

Cor. 5:14). The fact that he is not under the law as a basis of works-salvation does not set before the Christian a lower standard than that of the Mosaic law, but a far higher one; and this for at least four reasons: (1) Being made free from the curse and bondage of the law as a covenant of works, he ceases to be a servant (slave) and becomes a son, a member of the household of God. (2) He has set before him the perfect pattern of obedience in the person and work of Christ. (3) He is given the strongest motive for loving and obedient service, gratitude to Him who died that he might live. (4) He has received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to illumine, sanctify, and energize him for the willing and obedient service of God. When Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, "As I have loved you that ye also love one another," he set them a standard of obedience that surpassed the commandment of the Law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Little wonder then that Paul answers the question, "Do we then make void the law through faith?" with the emphatic words, "God forbid: yea, we establish the law." And the great Catechisms of Protestantism—Luther, Heidelberg, Westminster—devote much space to delineation of the meaning of the Decalogue as setting forth what Tyndale called "the obedience of the Christian man."

Since then it is clear that the Gospel does not abrogate the moral law as a standard of life and conduct but raises it to a higher level both by example and precept, it is not surprising that various efforts have been made from New Testament times until now, by carnally-minded Christians—and none are wholly dead unto sin—to set aside the covenant of works as of obligation to the Christian, or to modify its demands. Space will permit only brief discussion of the most important of them.

¶ *Antinomianism*. This heresy was met with already by Paul. Stating the antithesis between faith and works in the most absolute fashion, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Paul gave it the conclusive answer, "God forbid. How shall we that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" The whole

teaching of the New Testament is that justification has as its objective sanctification, redemption from all iniquity. A faith which does not bring forth fruit unto righteousness is not a living faith. The bandit who comes secretly to the priest for confession and absolution only that he may with a quieted conscience return to his life of thievery and violence is like the Jews of old who made the Temple "a den of robbers," a refuge against the consequences of their evil deeds.

¶ *Perfectionism.* This is the opposite extreme. It not merely recognizes the duty of man to do the will of God, but insists that he is able to do it. It has its familiar illustration in the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not as other men and took pride in his good works. And the lesson of the parable is that all self-righteousness is an offence in the sight of God. This teaching must either lower the standard of obedience, or minimize the corruption of man and his consequent inability to obey God perfectly. This is illustrated most clearly in the doctrine of the church of Rome. It teaches that baptism removes the guilt and corruption of man's nature and that prevent grace is given him to enable him to do the will of God. The extreme form of this teaching is supererogation, that man can do not merely all that God requires but more, that by special acts of obedience (celibacy, poverty, austerity) he can lay up additional merit, which the Church can administer, for the benefit of sinful members of the body of Christ. This teaching makes the super righteousness of the saints (the few) the means of saving sinners (the many) from the torments of purgatory. It has no warrant in Scripture.

Perfectionism is taught in various forms in Christian churches today. It is biblical and sound when it recognizes and stresses the demands of Scripture for perfect obedience to the will of God. It is mistaken and dangerous when it fails to recognize that "no mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them, in thought, word, and deed." The Apostle Paul confessed that he had not "already attained." But he said, "I press to the mark to the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Anyone who thinks he has *attained* deceives himself. Everyone who does not *press toward the mark*, fails to realize the obligation of his high calling.

¶ *Dispensationalism.* This popular

teaching is characterized by the dividing of biblical history into a series of distinct and contrasted dispensations. The most important are: *promise, law, and grace.* It teaches that the dispensation of promise was introduced by the Abrahamic covenant, the sole requirement of which was faith, that obedience was not required until at Sinai Israel "rashly accepted the law" (Scofield). The fallacy of this teaching can be shown in several ways. (1) Abraham's faith was proved by his obedience when he was called upon to offer up Isaac (Gen. 22:1-18), and the blessings promised him and his seed were given "because thou hast obeyed my voice" (cf. 26:5). (2) Dispensationalists admit that the promise to Abraham was conditional when they tell us that to be or to remain in the land was a *condition* of blessing. (3) Refusal to accept the law at Sinai with its promise of blessing would have been an act of disobedience, which would have been dealt with as severely as was the refusal to go up to possess the land (Num. 14:26-38).

¶ *Barthianism.* The primary emphasis in the crisis theology, of which Karl Barth is the most distinguished representative, is placed on the transcendence of God. This was the natural reaction to the immanentism of the old liberalism. It holds the separation between God and man to be utter and absolute. God must break through to man, if man is to know God redemptively. This breakthrough or "crisis" is an act of revelation and it is made in and through the Scriptures. But according to Barth the Bible is not a divine and infallible book but a very human and fallible book. It is not the Word of God: it contains it. It is only as God speaks through it to the human soul that the written word becomes God's Word to the individual man; only if the word "finds" him is it God's Word for him. Let us illustrate from the Decalogue. Suppose the command, Honor thy father and thy mother, does not "find" the adolescent of today, what power has Barthianism to require him to obey it? The great peril in Barthianism is its subjectivism. If man's knowledge of God and His will comes only through the Bible, then only a fully dependable Bible can give man the clear and certain knowledge which he needs. But the Barthian must first decide for himself what the will of God for him is before he is under any obligation to accept it. Thus every man makes for himself his own "covenant of works" and does that which is right in his own eyes.

¶ *Existentialism.* Like Barthianism, existentialism, despite its great popularity, is a relatively new teaching. It is traced back to Kierkegaard who in revolt against the spiritual coldness and lethargy of the Danish State Church, placed the emphasis on personal decision as against what has been aptly called the "spectator attitude" toward life.

This has developed into a tendency to reject the authority of all external standards and codes. It involves such familiar ideas as that of the sophists that "man is the measure of all things." It may be atheistic or theistic.

An extreme form of it is found in the attempt of Bultmann to demythologize the Bible. Since the supernatural does not appeal to the "scientific" man of today, does not *find* him, it is treated as myth and eliminated, which means of course the denial and rejection of any divine authority or sanction in the Bible or elsewhere.

Centuries ago in a time of distress in Israel, a prophet of the Lord promised the people deliverance from Shishak. But he added these impressive words in the name of the Lord: "Nevertheless, they shall be his servants; that they may know my service, and the service of the kingdoms of the countries." Freedom is a great word today, a word to conjure with. The Bible speaks in terms of service—service to God, servitude to man. It pictures the glory of the one, the misery of the other. Let us hope and pray that the trials through which men are passing today in their struggles for self-expression and for liberty, may lead them to submit themselves in loving obedience to Him of whom alone it can be said that His service is perfect freedom.

¶ *Bibliography:* *The Westminster Confession and Catechisms*; H. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*; general works on systematic theology, such as those of C. Hodge, A. A. Hodge, A. H. Strong. Of recent works: C. F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*; *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (ed. by the same); *Scofield Reference Bible*; O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*; A. Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*; monographs in the Modern Thinkers series: A. D. R. Polman, *Barth*; S. U. Zuidema, *Kierkegaard*; *Sartre*; H. Ridderbos, *Bultmann*.

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