

## God's Option

Michael Jenkins

Genesis 17:4

February 28, 2021 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

Genesis 17:4: "This is my covenant with you."

Many of the people who say they don't believe in God, only really object to his fan club. Although I do believe in God, I can see their point.

Whether it's strident religious moralists or representatives of orthodoxy, there are lots of Christians only too ready to declare what you must do, what you must not do, what you have to believe and what cannot believe in order to wear the label "real Christians." My beef with this crowd goes back to Abraham, father of all three of the great monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Indeed, it goes back to our text today from Genesis.

Most of the people who are most ready to tell us what it means to be a real Christian (or a real Jew or a real Muslim, for that matter) ignore the founding principle of all of these faiths: Our faith is not primarily about us. Our faith doesn't rely on us for its efficacy. It doesn't rely on us for its endurance. And it certainly doesn't rely on us for its terms of inclusion.

The Covenant God made with Abram, when Abram fell on his face before God, one year shy of his 100th birthday, that Covenant was one-sided. Indeed, it was as unilateral, as it is unbreakable. It doesn't provide for an option on the human side at all. The only option that can be exercised in God's covenant with us, is God's option.

I'm going to wait a couple of beats here for that shocking reality to sink in. Okay?

Tick.

Tick.

God's covenant is unconditional. And all of the many obligations that come with it — the commandments and the laws and the precepts and the principles laid down in our faith over the centuries — are expressions of the singular unconditional obligation under which we live as people unconditionally claimed by God.

We belong to God. God made us. God set us in this creation. And God established his eternal covenant with us.

Our relationship with God is unconditional from start to finish. Faith in God isn't about what we do or don't do or believe or don't believe as a condition to belong. We belong. As God said to Abram, "This is my covenant with you."

Years ago I was at dinner one evening in Durham, England, with a group of English men and women. Now, there's nobody in the world more club-ish than our English cousins. They love clubs of all sorts. And as one wise Englishman said to me one day, the primary function of a club is the enjoyment it gives its members to keep others out. I'm not sure I realized that truth until dinner that night.

As we began eating, gradually I became aware that my eating habits had gained the attention of an elderly matron at the table. She presented an imperious and authoritative presence in our group, pronouncing upon every subject we discussed from Shakespeare to fluorescent lighting in the meeting room. She also had established herself already in our little group as the guardian of propriety. After a few minutes of observing me, she could contain herself no longer.

She said something to the effect that I lacked a proper understanding of how one uses one's fork and knife.

I looked down at my fork, held in my right hand, and I saw nothing amiss with my dining strategy. It was the proper strategy I had been taught from childhood by my grandmother and mother. During the salad and soup courses, I had received no unsolicited guidance, apparently navigating the spoons and forks flawlessly, as I have done since childhood. So, I, mistakenly, believed I was proceeding with the cutlery in the following course in an appropriate manner. But when the rather overcooked joint of mutton arrived with the peas and the potatoes, clearly I had transgressed.

A quick perusal of my dining companions, all English, revealed that they held their forks upside down (at least to my American way of thinking) in their left hands, their knives in their right hands, and used the two in concert in an ingenious manner to load up the upside down forks for the inevitable journey to their mouths. I, of course, had stumbled blindly into the realm of comparative cultural relativism.

"I should have thought that someone of your age would have been taught better," the matron said, "but Americans are classless."

Her message was clear, equally disconcerting to me and comforting to her: "Either you don't know how to behave, or you reject the right way to behave, so you don't belong."

On a rather larger scale, much the same dynamic is at work within certain varieties of Christianity. And, it reverses the basic pattern of the gospel. Perhaps you've noticed the biblical pattern of the gospel in Saint Paul's writings.

For Paul, and you'll see this in Romans, everything turns on "*therefore*" but in a way that demolishes the exclusionary clause in every club and must surely dismay the guardians of the membership rolls.

I wish that our Romans reading today in chapter four had gone on for just one more verse to chapter five verse one, because it is in the next verse we find Paul saying “*therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through Christ.*” Our peace with God isn’t actualized by anything we do or don’t do. We simply access the awareness of what God has done by trusting God to have done it.

Paul redefines faith or trust in such a way that we realize that even our faith (which we think comes from us) is also given to us by Christ. Christ has faith for us.

And, then, as though Paul just keeps unwrapping the implications of the unconditional covenant God has made with us, a few chapters later says, “For God concluded them all to unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.” Then he breaks into one of the most awesome doxologies in all the Bible: “*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways beyond finding out.*” And, when this doxology concludes with the words “*for of him and through him and to him are all things, to whom be the glory forever, amen.*” Paul then says, “*I beseech you therefore, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to ... God.*”

Now, I know I’m getting deep into the weeds of Bible study today much more than usual in a sermon, but sometimes it’s necessary to see the inner connections of scripture in the most elegant and surprising matters of our faith.

Christianity is the story of what God does, not us. Christianity is about what God has done for us, not what we will do for God.

Belonging to God is not something you or I have control over. We belong to God by virtue of God’s will and God’s actions. We can’t opt out of the covenant. And, we can’t opt others out either.

The Christian faith isn’t a club; it is more like a simple awareness we share that “God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son.”

Therefore ...

Amen.