

Notes on the Paradisal Trees

And out of the ground the Lord God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. — Genesis 2:9

Rowland S. Ward

WHEN the trees in the Garden are discussed the Reformed everywhere reject the idea that the tree of life had the inherent ability through God's provision to preserve man's life if he ate of it from time to time. Turretin writes: '...it cannot thence be rightly inferred that there was a physical power in this tree of so great efficacy that it could (its fruit being once tasted) rescue even sinful man from mortality. These words [Genesis 3:22] denote only the cause of his ejection from paradise on account of sin (by which, as by his own fault, he had cut himself off from that life, which was the thing signified). Thus he ought no longer to have any right to its sacrament.'

While Rollock and Ball do not refer to the tree of life, Polanus, in his *Syntagma*, regards both trees as sacramental, one of life, the other of death, and is followed by Ames and Wollebius, Ussher, Leigh and most other Puritans, as also Turretin. Bucanus speaks only of the tree of life as sacramental, representing that which, by the promise of God, would be his if he continued obedient to God's commands.

Leigh (1633): 'The two Sacraments of this Covenant were the Tree of knowledge, respecting the Law, *do this*, and the tree of life respecting the promise, *Live*.'*

Strong (d. 1654): 'In the Covenant God made with *Adam* there was a Life promised, of which the Tree of life was a Seal; and there was a Death threatened, which was sealed by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In the threatening, *Thou shalt die*, the Promise is implied, *This do and thou shalt live*; and therefore the one is called the *Sacrament of Life*, and the other the *Sacrament of Death*.'

* Turretin says that Christ is called the tree of life [in Revelation] because he restores that life to us the promise of which this tree sealed to our first parents.

In Cocceius (1648) two sacraments of the covenant of works are identified: (a) paradise itself as a pledge of the heavenly city and (b) the tree of life as a pledge of eternal life. Witsius included also the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and added the sabbath as a pledge of the blessed rest with God in the heavenly city. It has been said that later the usual position was to omit the tree of knowledge of good and evil if only because a sacrament consists of the use of natural things to represent spiritual benefits, and the use of

the tree of knowledge of good and evil was forbidden.

God & Adam (2003), pp. 114-5. This is a reproduction of chapter 16 entitled, "The significance of the trees in paradise."

Geerhardus Vos

On the tree of life:

... It appears from Gen. 3.22, that man before his fall had not eaten of it, while yet nothing is recorded concerning any prohibition which seems to point to the understanding that the use of the tree was reserved for the future, quite in agreement with the eschatological significance attributed to it later. The tree was associated with the higher, the unchangeable, the eternal life to be secured by obedience throughout his probation. Anticipating the result by a present enjoyment of the fruit would have been out of keeping with its sacramental character. After man should have been made sure of the attainment of the highest life, the tree would appropriately have been the sacramental means for communicating the highest life. After the fall God attributes to man the inclination of snatching the fruit against the divine purpose. But this very desire implies the understanding that it somehow was the specific life-sacrament for the time after the probation. According to Rev. 2.7 it is to 'him that overcometh' that God promises to give of the tree of life in the midst of his paradise. The effort to obtain the fruit after the fall would have meant a desperate attempt to steal the fruit where the title to it had been lost [cp. Gen. 3.22].

On the tree of the knowledge of good and evil:

[T]he tree is called the tree of 'knowledge of good and evil', because it is the God-appointed instrument to lead man through probation to that state of religious and moral maturity wherewith his highest blessedness is connected. ... To attain to a knowledge of good and evil is not necessarily an undesirable and culpable thing. It could happen in a good way, in case man stood in probation, no less than in an evil way, in case man fell. The name is neutral as to its import. That this is so frequently overlooked is due to the prohibitive form which the probation-test assumed. Because man was forbidden to eat of the tree associated with the knowledge of good and evil, it has been rashly assumed that the knowledge of good and evil was forbidden him. Obviously there is in this a confusion of thought. The prohibitive form of the test has quite a different cause, as will be presently shown.

If now we enquire how the maturity designated as 'knowledge of good and evil' was to be attained, either in a desirable or in an undesirable sense, regard must be had first of all to

the exact form of the phrase in Hebrew. The phrase is not 'knowledge of the good and the evil'. It reads, literally translated: 'knowledge of good-and-evil', i.e., of good and evil as correlated, mutually conditioned conceptions. Man was to attain something he had not attained before. He was to learn the good in its clear opposition to the evil, and the evil in its clear opposition to the good. Thus it will become plain how he could attain to this by taking either fork of the probation-choice. Had he stood, then the contrast between good and evil would have been vividly present to his mind: the good and evil he would have known from the new illumination his mind would have received through the crisis of temptation in which the two collided. On the other hand, had he fallen, then the contrast of evil with good would have even more vividly impressed itself upon him, because the remembered experience of choosing the evil and the continuous experience of doing the evil, in contrast with his memory of the good, would have shown most sharply how different the two are. The perception of difference in which the maturity consisted related to the one pivotal point, whether man would make his choice for the sake of God and of God alone. ...

From the true conception of the purpose of the tree we must distinguish the interpretation placed upon it by the tempter according to Gen. 3.5. This carries a twofold implication: first that the tree has in itself, magically, the power of conferring knowledge of good and evil. This lowers the plane of the whole transaction from the religious and moral to the pagan-magical sphere. And secondly, Satan explains the prohibition from the motive of envy. ... Again, the divine statement in Gen. 3.22 alludes to this deceitful representation of the tempter. It is ironical.

Selections from *Biblical Theology* (1948), pp. 27-33.



ReformedLiterature.com