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THE CHURCH HAS NO MISSION
OR BUSINESS EXCEPT
FELLOWSHIP

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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We celebrated last Tuesday the 450th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation Movement. The basic principle of the Reformation is that the Gospel or Good News which Christians proclaim is that God saves freely all who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord. Salvation is restoration of sinners to fellowship with God through the complete forgiveness of their sins. The ground of this forgiveness is the death of Jesus on the cross, where He bore our sins, paid our penalty, became a curse for us and nailed, as it were, to the cross the accusations that were against us as sinners. Jesus rose on the third day as a triumphant vindication of the completeness of His sacrificial death. There is no barrier between those who are sorry for their sins and the God who they have offended by their disobedience, for God forgives them freely and blots out from His sight completely their offences through Jesus Christ if they will turn to God through Him.

This is the great Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. Our acceptance by God as His children, or our justification as it is called, rests solely on the merit of Christ and not in any way on our own life or merit, for God accepts sinners by forgiving them. God adopts us as His sons and daughters and we are brought into fellowship with Him in the same way as a family is a fellowship. We are not isolated individuals in our fellowship with God but members of a community or fellowship. This community is God's church or gathering, since the word church always means "gathering" in the Bible. We have a picture of this gathering round Christ in heaven in the book of the Revelation where we read of an innumerable multitude of people from every nation and language gathered round the throne of God and of the Lamb clothed in white with palms of triumph in their hands. We are already members of this heavenly gathering or church. We have come,

says the writer of the Hebrews, in ch. 12, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the church of the first born sons enrolled in heaven. We are members of this church, for although we still wait for the redemption of our bodies, our spirits are already in God's presence - they are the spirits of justified men made perfect through regeneration. We are even now, says St. Paul, seated with Christ in the heavenlies and we are to make this relationship a vivid one in our thoughts by setting our minds on things above where Christ is, not on things on the earth. For as the apostle reminds us, the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

While we wait for the completion of God's purposes for the world in the return of Jesus our Lord, we have fellowship with each other. The Lord's supper is a fellowship meal. After all, meals are simply activities of fellowship.

If you merely wanted to satisfy your hunger you could go directly to the refrigerator, but we wait for one another and have a meal together, using the occasion of hunger as opportunity for fellowship. A meal then, as a community activity, in distinction from individual eating from the fridge, is essentially and primarily a fellowship activity. So too, the Lord's supper, or more accurately translated in modern English, the Lord's dinner, because this is what supper meant in 16th century English, is primarily a fellowship activity, for a meal is fellowship. We have fellowship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we have fellowship with one another. But it is Christian fellowship, based on the forgiveness of our sins through the death of Christ. The bread and the wine have been designated by Christ as symbols of His sacrifice through which we have been brought into sonship with God. The Lord's supper is a fellowship in our Christian hope, because it is an anticipation of the heavenly

banquet which is the way the Bible speaks of the inauguration of Christ's eternal kingdom at His second coming. As St. Paul says, as often as we eat the Lord's dinner we proclaim His sacrificial death, till He come. If nowadays church life is languishing, it is because our faith in our salvation is weakening. It should be obvious that we cannot have fellowship or share a faith in which we only slightly believe, and which is peripheral to our ordinary way of thinking or acting; we need to deepen our faith in the Gospel as this is plainly taught in the New Testament. Faith will lead on the one hand to an enlivened hope as we apprehend God's promises for the future, and on the other to deepened love, for as we understand the love of God in saving us, our love for Him and for one another will grow; and faith, hope and love are the ingredients of Christian fellowship.

You sometimes hear it asked, what is the church doing? and the answer is, of course,

that the church has not got any task to do. It has something to be, namely to be a fellowship. But a fellowship is an end in itself, not a means to an end, so that the church is not a means to do things. A church is an assembly, a gathering of Christians who love the Saviour and look for His return and who have fellowship with Him and with one another on this basis. This is a daily fellowship in our own hearts and homes and a weekly fellowship in a larger group which is a microcosm of that heavenly gathering around Christ, of which we have all been made members by His grace and from which we will never be plucked because He has prayed for us that we might be one with Him and with His Father. This is the meaning of our Lord's prayer for unity in John 17.

Nowadays there is a common phrase about the "mission of the church". This slogan gains its popularity because it appears to be a way of quickening into life our dull and weak

congregations by challenging them to be up and doing things for Christ. But the phrase "the mission of the church" contains two basic errors: it misunderstands the meaning of the word church, and secondly, it misunderstands the function of the church. The word church is used in modern English in different ways. Take for example the phrases "he is going into the church", "he is going to the church", "he is going to church". The first refers to a profession, going into the church; the second to a building, going to the church; the third to a gathering, going to church - and this gathering could be held in the open air or in a building, and the phrase would still be true. It is this last meaning of the word which is the New Testament meaning. Church means gathering. As we have seen, the gathering is for the purpose of fellowship, and fellowship and friendship is an end in itself and not a means to something else. But in the phrase, "the mission of the church", the church has none of

these three meanings but a fourth one again, meaning a denomination, or the denominations regarded as acting together. A denomination is not a church, although it is called a church, such as "Church of England", "Roman Catholic Church", "Presbyterian Church"; but a denomination is simply a structure holding together for certain purposes the various churches or gatherings for fellowship which take place in different localities and which themselves are reflections of the heavenly gathering of Christ of which we are at present members and which is the real fundamental church. A denomination may undertake certain activities, but these are not obligatory as is suggested by the phrase, the mission of the church.

Of course, all Christians as individuals have obligations to witness and serve God according to their circumstances, and they may join together in a society to fulfil these obligations; obligations which will sometimes coincide and which

will sometimes differ from one another according as the Spirit of God lays some need on each of His children's hearts; but to suggest that every member of the denomination or even of a congregation has the obligation to join together to achieve a common specific objective, so that you can speak of a mission of the church, is a misunderstanding of the way God leads His people. And to attempt to revive our flagging churches by challenging the churches to do this or do that is a blind alley. We must revive our churches by challenging them, not to do, but to be, to be a fellowship by a reviving of our faith which will lead to a revival of love, for love flows out from the knowledge of God's goodness. As our faith in Christ's death for us becomes once more strong; as we look for Christ's return as the final solution of the world's problems, then our fellowship together on the basis of this faith will become strong once more as it was in the early days of the Gospel. But there is no substitute for faith; and

faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ preached faithfully.

If then we wish to see a revival of our church life, let us see to it that we read the Bible and meditate on it for ourselves in order to strengthen our own faith, that we preach it and expound it in our family in order to strengthen the whole fellowship of the family in the things of Christ, and that we urge our ministers to preach God's Word faithfully in order that the whole fellowship of our local church might be based on our common faith and common hope and that we make time for prayer. Then as our faith and fellowship revives Christians will be strengthened to undertake either singly or together the various missions in the community and overseas which the Spirit of God will lead them to.

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