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HEAVEN IS PEOPLE

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Going to church on Sundays plays a prominent part in the religious life of Christians. But I wonder whether we have reflected enough on why we go.

The usefulness of church going like the usefulness of every other activity is to be tested by how it fits the object God has for our lives. Just as when a building is being erected the workmen constantly consult the architect's plans to see that what they are doing is in conformity with the ultimate purpose and design for the building, so all our activities ought to be constantly reviewed in the light of what God says in the Bible are His purposes for us. Work done by anyone on a building which is out of conformity to the plan is so much work lost; in fact it may get in the way. So too with our daily activities and objectives.

In the Scriptures God has made known His plan and purpose and final objective for mankind which He is bringing to pass.

It may be summed up in one word, fellowship. God has made us for fellowship. Heaven is fellowship with God and with one another in God's presence. Fellowship is something worthwhile for its own sake. It is not undertaken as a means to something else. This is true also of fellowship in the present life, as well as the heavenly fellowship.

Personal fellowship is an end in itself; not merely a means to some other objective. It is a good thing in its own right. In fact it is very distasteful when people under cover of friendship and fellowship have some other ulterior objective which they are driving at and hope to attain so that for this purpose they cultivate a friendship or fellowship. We instinctively recognise the obnoxiousness of this use of fellowship. Friendship and fellowship are ends in themselves and not means to other activities.

So too with the Christian fellowship. We come to church

to have fellowship with God and to have fellowship with one another on the basis of our relationship to Christ our Saviour and Lord. This fellowship is an end in itself and it is not simply a means by which certain objectives can be obtained. It is perfectly true that this fellowship may serve as the basis for common action; the whole group may unite together in some activity, or sections of the group on the basis of their knowing one another may unite to meet some need such as sending out a missionary through a missionary society, or running a school or hospital or youth group, or whatever it may be. These activities are based on fellowship and are extensions of fellowship, but the fellowship is complete in itself apart from these and it is not brought into being to achieve these desirable objectives. In other words, the church as a fellowship has no task except to be a fellowship.

We often hear it said

that the church's task is this, or the church's task is that. This is loose talk. Christians, either all of them, or some of them, either singly or in association, may be called to this or that task, but the church, as an assembly or fellowship, has no other object than to have fellowship together in the things of Christ.

If going to church is an expression of fellowship with other Christians in the neighbourhood it seems a fairly senseless activity if we are not already having fellowship in the smaller groups of which we are members during the rest of the week. For example, if a Christian father does not have Christian fellowship with his family round the meal table day by day, or a Christian mother does not have fellowship with the young children growing up in the home day by day as she instructs them and leads them in prayer, what is the purpose of seeking to have Christian fellowship with persons less closely related, in church on

Sundays?

Or, if the Christian workman or businessman does not seek out his fellow Christians at his place of work from Monday to Friday to have some Christian fellowship with them it appears to be a contradiction to seek to have fellowship with persons less closely associated with us on Sundays.

If we lament the weakness of our church life we may trace the cause to a failure of fellowship, and the source of this may be traced to a failure of Christian fellowship in the smaller or more intimate groupings in which Christians find themselves in week days. And the reason for this failure of fellowship in the home or at work is traceable in turn to a lack of faith; a lack of vigorous apprehension of the reality of God's sovereignty and of Christ's Lordship and of the reality of the forgiveness of sins and the hope of Christ's return and eternal life, while this failure of faith in turn

must be traced to a failure of teaching, for how can they believe unless they hear?

The Christian church is a fellowship and it is a reflection of the heavenly fellowship. This fact is the standard to test certain theories and activities connected with the church. For example, as to how a denominational organisation should be structured. It is plain that central organisation can only be justified if it is a strengthening of church fellowship and this means that centralised authority must be very carefully used so as not to impair the responsibility and reality of the local fellowship.

To take an example - imagine a situation, perhaps in a new housing estate, or anywhere, where there happen to be, say, eight well instructed Christian homes in which the parents lead their children in daily worship and in Christian instruction, and where the fathers are members of Christ-

ian cells in their places of work during the week. On Sunday these families come together and form a Christian congregation. But what if the denomination using the power of centralised authority sends as their minister a man in whom they have no confidence with regard to his theological opinions. The only result will be that the fellowship that meets in connection with that denomination is immediately destroyed and the families dispersed, no longer meeting together in that denomination. They may, of course, re-group, but as far as the denomination is concerned it has done all in its power to disperse the fellowship because improper consideration has been given to the relationship of the centralised denomination and the purpose of local fellowship. For what responsible Christian father would bring his worshipping family to sit under a minister on Sundays in whose teaching he has no confidence, or whose bossiness rides roughshod over all. Yet denominations, seeking efficiency without

knowledge, are creating just this sort of situation. No wonder our church life limps.

The same concept of fellowship as the essence of Christian association in church may be applied to assess the Roman Catholic view of the church. As is wellknown, Roman Catholic theology defines the church not in terms of fellowship, but in terms of visible structure of the hierarchy. For Roman Catholics, the church is essentially a visible body and its visibility is due to the fact that it is formed round the hierarchy of which the Pope is the head. The Pope and the bishops form the church, the priests are the representatives of the bishops and the people are directed by the priests. This theory leaves little room if any for Christian fellowship, any fellowship that exists is accidental; so that the Roman Catholic goes to church not primarily to have fellowship but to assist the priest as he offers the mass for the propitiation of sins. Thus church

going is not an end in itself, i.e. it is not fellowship, but is a means to something else, namely the offering of a good work to God in the sacrifice of the mass.

However, we go to church on earth because we are already in spirit members of the church in heaven, and we know that Heaven will be fellowship. The vision of Rev. 21:3 sums up God's purposes for His people "God shall dwell with them and they shall be his people and God Himself shall be with them and be their God and he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more..." We already begin to experience this fellowship with God through our faith in Christ. As St. John says "Our fellowship is with the Father and with His son Jesus Christ (I John 1:3). Real life is meeting and Heaven is people.

Since fellowship is God's purpose for us now and for ever, it is the test by which our actions are judged. Christ said

in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25) that He will base His judgment on whether men and women have experienced fellowship by sharing with those in want, by helping the prisoner, the sick, the stranger, the fatherless. These are the test cases of fellowship. If fellowship is expressed in these situations it will be expressed in every other relationship.

Fellowship is the test not only of church activity but of every activity. Fellowship must be based on righteousness - that is right relationships - while self-centredness and selfishness, mankind's characteristic sin, destroys fellowship. But the presence of the Spirit of God in our hearts is the antidote to selfishness and so we can only experience full fellowship whether in marriage or in the family, or in church or in the community, if we are God centred and are in fellowship with Him, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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