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THE LOVE OF GOD

by  
D. B. KNOX

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

That God is love is one of the two basic doctrines of the Christian Faith. The other is that God is light that He is absolutely righteous and with Him is no darkness at all.

Let us consider for a moment the great truth that God is Love. It is sometimes thought that the love of God is a doctrine of the New Testament, in contrast to the doctrine of the Old Testament. But this is a fatal misunderstanding; it can only be made by people who are not really acquainted with the teaching of the Old Testament, for the love of God is taught clearly throughout the Bible. This is to be expected because the whole of the Bible is God's revelation to us, and it would be surprising if such a basic doctrine as the love of God were absent from any part of that revelation. Take, for example, the earliest chapters of Genesis, and the story of the

Garden of Eden. There God's love and provision for man's need is pictured in the statement that God has planted in the garden where man was to live every tree that was pleasant to the sight and good for food. Nothing was lacking for man's enjoyment or for his needs. Pleasant to the sight, good for food, sums up the desires and enjoyments of our natural life. There is nothing niggardly or begrudging in God's provision for our enjoyment.

Take another Old Testament passage, Psalm 38, which says "Thou shalt make them to drink of the river of thy pleasures". The river of thy pleasures suggests amplitude in God's provision of happiness in his creation. Or Psalm 16 "In thy presence is fulness of joy, at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore". God is love and He delights to endow us with benefits.

As St. Paul told the pag-

ans of Asia Minor who had gathered to hear him preach, God's character of love is seen in the fruitful seasons by which He fills our hearts with joy and gladness. (Acts 14) But our nature is more than physical, and God has not only provided us with physical enjoyment but with the deeper joys of the spirit, in friendship and fellowship. Again turning to the early chapters of Genesis we are reminded that the fellowship of marriage and the home is God's gift. God made men and women to share their lives together. However, the deepest and most satisfying of all fellowship is the spiritual fellowship which God calls us into with Himself, a fellowship which the Bible speaks of as eternal life. In the Old Testament we read how God called Abraham to be His friend, and in Christ we all become the friends of God. We may all have fellowship with Him. Death cannot interrupt fellowship with God, for God is the source of life. To

know God, said our Lord, is eternal life, and if we have really entered into a relationship with God, death cannot interrupt it. It is an indication of the love of God that He confers this great privilege of His fellowship on all who will respond to His invitation. Our fellowship with God is always based on forgiveness. We cannot hope to qualify in fellowship with Him, by our own merits. Any attempt to make the quality of our lives the basis of this relationship brings fellowship to an end. Our fellowship with God is always based on forgiveness and it is God Himself who has provided the ground of this forgiveness. As we read in John 3.16 "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The love of God is a doctrine very clearly revealed throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the



New, and as we realise His love and experience His fellowship the proper response on our part is that of thankfulness. To be thankful to God as we enjoy His gifts is a way of hallowing His name which is the first petition of the Lord's prayer. By being thankful, we acknowledge that God is the author of our happiness, and so we honour Him.

A thankful attitude is the antidote and corrective for a selfish use of God's gifts. Selfishness is the great temptation. But real thankfulness excludes selfishness, we need to cultivate thankfulness. To take God's gifts for granted as though they were our right and to use them for our own ends is so very easy but very obnoxious, yet we are always falling into this temptation and in Romans 1 St. Paul says that unthankfulness is the prime sin of mankind nowadays. But recognition that God is the giver of all we have and enjoy

and that these gifts spring from his unchanging character of love, will lead to thankfulness, and as St. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:30, an attitude of thankfulness enables us to use all God's gifts in a holy way. Interestingly enough, thankfulness as we use and enjoy God's gifts actually increases the enjoyment and pleasure which they bring us.

The love of God is one of the basic truths about his character, and it is most important that this doctrine should not be obscured. It is always possible to forget the love of God and none of us are aware of His love as vividly as we should be, but Protestants maintain that Roman Catholic doctrine officially obscures this truth in many ways. Naturally enough, none of these Roman Catholic doctrines which Protestants object to as obscuring the love of God are to be found in the Bible, because the Bible is a

unity and one of its basic teachings is the love of God. But when we go beyond the Bible for our doctrines as the Roman Catholic Church does in its doctrine of tradition, it is not surprising if this leads to doctrines which are in contradiction to basic Bible truths. Take for example the doctrine of purgatory. There is not a word about purgatory in Scripture yet it is a doctrine which gravely obscures the love of God and which extinguishes, if it is really believed the joy of the Christian life. Thus Archbishop Sheehan, formerly Roman Catholic coadjutor of Sydney, in his book on Catholic doctrine which is used for teaching children in Roman Catholic Schools, writes on page 293 "The severest pain of purgatory exceeds the most violent known on earth and even the slightest torture of purgatory is worse than all the sufferings one can endure in this world". How can any child or adult who believes that this is the fate of the ordinary



Christian at death and also likely to be his own lot have any real sense of fellowship with God now or have peace in the prospect of death. But St. Paul on the contrary taught that the fellowship with God graciously confers on us in this life continues at an even deeper level after death saying that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, and that to depart and be with Christ was far better.

Another Roman Catholic doctrine that obscures the love of God is the doctrine of prayer to Mary; for example in the vision of La Salette of the Virgin Mary holding back Christ's vengeful arm. The Virgin Mary is regarded as the merciful one, while God is someone who has to be persuaded as it were by the prayers of the saints. But in the Bible there is no suggestion that our prayers to God need to be supplemented by prayers to the saints. A third practice

which obscures God's love is the compulsory celibacy of the priesthood. Now I know that many sincere men accept this obligation which the church lays on them but their willingness does not make imposition of compulsory celibacy right: In 1 Timothy 4:1-5 St. Paul condemns it. St. Paul wrote: Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits its doctrines of demons, through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is to be received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." Those are the words of St. Paul in them he explicitly says that fellowship in marriage, and the gift of food are provided by God for us to

use with thanksgiving. Compulsory asceticism is not according to the mind of God who in his love has provided us with many good things. To compel people to forego the use of God's gifts if they are to fulfil their desire to serve God in the ministry contradicts God's essential character of goodness. Compulsory celibacy was not required of the clergy for the first 1,000 years of the Church's history. Of course, we must be all willing to forego any of God's gifts, even life itself, in the service of others. But to impose a compulsory abnegation of God's gifts as an absolute condition to serving Him in the ministry is not in accordance with the mind of God, for it contradicts Scripture, and obscures the basic truth that God is love.

God is love and God is light. On the basis of these two truths, He invites us into fellowship; and our fellowship is through His Son, Jesus Christ.

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