

T H E

P R O T E S T A N T

F A I T H

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THE LORD'S SUPPER

by  
D. B. KNOX

During the war the three gladiator aeroplanes that defended so heroically the Island of Malta were nicknamed by their pilots Faith, Hope and Charity. These names come from the well known Bible passage which speaks of these three virtues of faith, hope and charity, or love, as it is better translated, the 13th chapter of St. Paul's first letter to Corinth; but the Apostle Paul associates these three virtues together in other places in his letters as well. In fact faith, hope and love makes a very good summary of the Christian life.

Hope refers to the upward look which should characterise the Christian. Christian hope is not something uncertain, as we often use the word 'hope' in ordinary conversation; but it is sure and certain, because it is based on God's promises. It covers not only our future in this life, in which God has promised that all things will work together for good to those who love Him; but it covers also the hope of eternal life. and in particular the hope of Christ's coming. This is the main ingredient of true Christian hope. We should all be very much alive to the fact that this world's on-going history, with its ups and its downs, will reach its culmination, perhaps soon, perhaps later, when Christ as Lord will come again to vindicate those who put their faith in Him and to establish righteousness. The Christian hope should undergird all our daily thinking and give us strength to persevere when things are not exactly as we would like them to be. For our future is bright, because it will be in line with God's purposes which He has made known to us in the Bible.

The second virtue, charity, or love, is the rule which should govern all our actions towards our fellows. The whole of God's law may be summed up by the one commandment to love our neighbour. Whatever falls outside the rule of love is forbidden.

Whatever falls within it it is our duty to do.

Just as love sums up our whole duty towards our neighbour, so the third virtue, faith, sums up the whole of our duty towards God. By putting our faith in Him we glorify Him, that is we make clear His character of trustworthiness and love and His all-sovereign ability to help us. Faith, just like love, is a day by day activity; there will be hundreds of opportunities every day for putting our faith in God and of showing love to our neighbours. And undergirding both faith towards God and love towards neighbour is the vivid consciousness of our hope for the future. It is this which strengthens us to persevere both in faith and love. Thus faith, hope and love are rightly famous as summarising the Christian way of life. Faith describes what our attitude should be towards God, love our attitude to our neighbour, and hope our attitude in ourselves.

Since these three virtues may be said to sum up the whole Christian life, we need to use all the aids at our disposal for strengthening our faith, deepening our love and quickening our hope. Regular prayer, and daily reading and meditating on the Word of God are, of course, primary helps; so too is the regular attendance at common worship; so too is the use of the Christian sacraments, and especially the Lord's Supper.

In the Lord's Supper which Christ instituted on the evening before His crucifixion, His saving death is depicted by the bread and the wine, the bread representing His body given for us, the wine His blood shed for us. Christ commanded that we should take and eat the bread, and drink the wine in remembrance of Him. This sacrament takes the form of a meal and in the New Testament it is spoken of as a foretaste of that Heavenly banquet which will inaugurate the reign of Christ at His coming. Of course that Heavenly banquet is a symbol not to be taken literally but it describes



in this symbolic way very vividly the joy and the fellowship which Christ's coming will mean for Christians. His coming is our hope, in the light of which our Christian life is to be lived, so the Lord's Supper, symbolic as it is in the New Testament of this Heavenly banquet of the future, is an aid to strengthen our hope, so important an element for Christian living.

Then, too, the Lord's Supper strengthens our love towards each other, because it is a fellowship meal, a love meal in which all Christians share and have fellowship together on the basis of their common salvation. To partake properly of this meal our animosities against each other must be laid aside. So also must any sense of superiority. We gather together at Christ's table in love and fellowship.

But just as faith and trust in God is the supreme worship of God, so the Lord's Supper supremely strengthens faith. It brings before our minds, through our senses of eye, ear and taste, the love of God in that He gave His Son to die for our sins; and as we receive with our hands these symbols and pledges of His love, so our hearts receive through faith the realities of which the bread and wine are signs, and we glorify God by faith and thanksgiving for His provision of forgiveness and all the other benefits of Christ's death, and we have fellowship and communion with God on the basis of the body and blood of Christ, that is, on the basis of forgiveness.

We see then that in the Lord's Supper Christ has given us a service which brings before us very vividly the great central truths of the Gospel. When we partake in that service in a right spirit, His Spirit will strengthen us in faith, hope and love, the three great ingredients of the Christian life. There are, however, two grave errors about the Lord's Supper which have developed in Christian theology. The first is to turn the service from being a sign or sacrament through which God speaks

to us, into a sacrifice, which we offer to God; thus the service is turned topsy turvy. Instead of depicting a movement from God to man, in which God offers to us the forgiveness of our sins through the death of Christ, to be received by us through faith, this error turns the Lord's Supper into a movement from man to God, in which we are said to offer to God a sacrifice for the forgiveness of our own sins, as though that sacrifice had not been already completed by Christ Himself on Calvary and there offered to God by Him once for all. This is the fundamental error of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass, although the error is not confined to Roman Catholicism. Thus the Council of Trent in Session 22, chapter 9, defined the Lord's Supper as "a true and proper sacrifice offered to God ... a propitiatory sacrifice offered for the living and the dead", and it is said to bring its blessings independently of the moral worthiness of the celebrating priest or of the members of the congregation (Ott p.413). The New Testament, however, states that Christ made one sacrifice for sin on Calvary and that this does not need to be repeated, because by this one sacrifice He has perfected for ever the children of God.

The second grave error with regard to the Lord's Supper is the mistake of taking literally the realistic symbolic language which our Lord used when He instituted the service. We often in daily life use realistic language in a metaphorical sense; for example, we may say of a photograph "This is my friend" when we really mean "this is a picture of my friend". So too at the Lord's Supper Jesus said of the bread "This is my body" and of the wine "This is my blood". It is a mistake to take this realistic language literally, as though the bread were changed from bread into Christ's body, or the wine into Christ's blood, though this is what the doctrine of transubstantiation maintains. We should remember that the Passover service of which the Lord's Supper was a part, uses realistic language but uses it quite obviously symbolically. Thus at the Passover



service the head of the family, taking the bread, says "This is the bread of affliction which our forefathers ate in Egypt". We may assume that Jesus and the disciples would have used such words often. But now the bread of the Lord's Supper was to represent, not the delivery of the Children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, through the Red Sea, but the delivery of all mankind from the bondage of sin through the death of Christ on Calvary. None of those present who had heard the words of the Passover Service would have thought that the bread was literally changed into the bread eaten so many hundred years ago in the land of Egypt, but rather took it to mean quite naturally "this represents that bread which our forefathers ate in Egypt". As I say, the disciples in all probability had only just heard those Passover words, so that when our Lord said of the bread He gave them at the Lord's Supper "This is my body" they would naturally take it to mean "This stands for my body", which is also the natural meaning of the phrase. Jesus had used similar realistic language a year or so before by the Lake of Galilee when He had taught His disciples that unless they ate the flesh of the Son of Man and drank His blood they would have no life in them. However, on that occasion as the narrative in John chapter 6 shows, Jesus made quite clear that the language, though realistic, was metaphorical; for he went on to explain that eating His flesh and drinking His blood was the same thing as believing in Him. (See John 6:35.) So, too, in the Lord's Supper our Lord invites us to eat His flesh and drink His blood, that is to say, to put our faith in Him and in His death and to appropriate for ourselves the benefits of that death. The Lord's Supper is (i) a God given way to strengthen our faith and to glorify God by believing and receiving with thanksgiving His provision of forgiveness, (ii) a fellowship meal, because we are not isolated Christians, but must love one another, and in the Lord's Supper we have fellowship with God and with each other on the basis of forgiveness in Christ, which is the most profound basis for any fellowship or communion, and (iii) we look forward to sitting down with Christ in His future Kingdom, remembering His promise that we are to eat and drink at His table in His kingdom. Thus through this service we grow in faith, love and hope.

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