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KNOWING GOD

By

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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It is always interesting to learn what makes a person tick, to discover the experiences a person values and the objects and ambitions of his life. We are given a glimpse into the life of the apostle Paul in a passage of autobiographical writing in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians. He lists the status symbols of his time on which he used to pride himself, mostly a matter of birth and membership of the inner group of his community.

We Australians have different status symbols, but they are equally unreal. But St. Paul tells his friends at Philippi that he now has a new object in life, compared with which the former are absolute dross, and even garbage. His new object is to know Christ. It is an experience which he describes as "surpassing excellence".

Knowing people is the greatest pleasure in life - I mean, knowing them as friends in fellowship with them. Personal fellowship, personal communication, personal relationship provide the basic joys of life, but it must be a fellowship in which the person does not think of his own interests but rather of those with whom he is in fellowship, then it can be a very happy experience indeed. Literally a honeymoon.

Sometimes a great undertaking which because of its immensity and

importance draws us away from selfishness, creates the joys of fellowship. The allied invasion of Normandy provided such an occasion and those who took part in it commented afterwards, how sad it was that the spirit of fellowship experienced and enjoyed during these months seemed to evaporate as soon as the operation was completed. The reason was simple. During those months everyone sank their own interests and helped one another spontaneously in order to accomplish the joint objective. When it was over we all turned to our own objectives once again and the fellowship subsided to a normal level. However, from this we can glimpse what joy and satisfaction true fellowship can provide. Heaven will be wonderful, because it will be perfect fellowship.

The Christian religion is nothing else than a religion of fellowship. The one purpose of the Christian Church is to be a fellowship in which we share personal relationships one with the other and with our divine Master. This fellowship is brought into being by the Gospel which tells us that through Christ our sins may be forgiven, and calls on us to repent, i.e., change our mind and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord. The joy of true human fellowship is real and we may experience some of its flavour from time to time. But fellowship with God in Christ is deeper and more satisfying and more joyful than even personal fellowship between men and women. This

fellowship with Christ and with one another is God's purpose for us, we may begin to experience it now and death will certainly not terminate it but only usher us into a fuller realization of deeper joy. It is the possibility of this fellowship that St. Paul makes the object of his life, and for which he gives up every other worldly ambition and possession. In Philippians 3:10 he tells us that his aim is "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings.....". It is true, of course, that in this life we only know in part, we see as through a glass darkly, but the time will come when we will know God as fully as we are known by Him, for then we will see Christ as He is. We will have fellowship with Him face to face. In the letter, Paul speaks of our present fellowship with Christ as absence from Christ, compared with the fellowship we will enjoy after death. Nevertheless, we do enter into personal fellowship with God through Christ now, we are able to speak with Him and to address Him as Father and to know Him as a person. Let us look for a moment at how this is possible.

To know a person, to have fellowship with a person is always on the basis of intellectual notions. We have fellowship with our friends by their speaking to us and by our responding. It is not necessary that we should communicate with words, but at least with gestures and expressions of

our eyes. We only have fellowship when a person begins to speak to us till he speaks, there is no fellowship. If we are to enter into personal fellowship with God in Christ, He must speak to us and we to Him in response; Jesus says God does this, speaking to us through the words of the Bible. In Matthew 22:31 Jesus asked the religious leaders of his day "have you never read what was spoken to you by God?" He was referring to the Book of Genesis written some fifteen hundred years before, Jesus said that this written text is the contemporary word of God spoken to the reader. "Have you never read what was spoken to you by God?" In the same way the Epistle to the Hebrews in quoting a psalm from the Old Testament says that these words are the words spoken by the Holy Spirit to the reader. "The Holy Spirit says", note the present tense not merely "said to you" but "says to you!" God speaks to us by the scriptures. Thus He enters into a personal relationship with us - He speaks to us and we respond to Him.

This has always been the centre of true religion. God spoke to Abraham, to Moses, to the disciples in Galilee; all had personal fellowship with God and this still remains our privilege. God enters into fellowship with us through His word and we on our own part respond personally to God through faith and obedience. Faith is personal, and obedience is personal. So that when God speaks to us and we turn

to Him with faith and obedience and prayer, we enter into a personal fellowship which is real if still dim, as seeing through a glass darkly, but full of joy, the first fruit of the joy of the fuller, deeper fellowship of Heaven, when we will see God face to face.

Thus, as Christians, we begin to experience eternal life now, for eternal life is nothing else than fellowship with God, knowing God, as Jesus said in his prayer of John 17, "this is life eternal, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent".

In the book of Revelation 3:20 our saviour calls on us to open the door as He knocks, and He makes the promise that if we do He will come in and sup with us and we with Him. Now a meal is of course, a basic act of fellowship, so that by this imagery Jesus tells us that if we open our lives to Him in faith and obedience, this will lead to a real relationship of mutual personal fellowship, He with us and we with Him. Christians find that this is true.

You will see then how basic to the Christian religion is the concept of the Word of God, through which we have fellowship with God. Hearing or reading God's word, as we read the Bible regularly, and as we hear His Word preached faithfully is the basis of fellowship with God. Fellowship

is impossible in the absence of intellectual notions exchanged between those who are having fellowship. God must speak to us if we are to know Him. Theologians and denominations which abandon the idea that the Bible is God's Word (and if God's Word, it must of course, be infallible) make the Christian religion impossible for those who accept their teaching. In the place of personal fellowship with God through His Word which is the Christian religion, a Moralism is substituted and Jesus becomes an example outside ourselves whom we may strive to imitate - "the man for others" is a modern phrase. But this is not the Christian religion. It is true that Jesus is our example but He is firstly a saviour and friend because he is our Lord in whom we have faith and whom we obey. We are in relationship with Him, not merely admiring Him from the outside. According to His promise "I will come in and sup with Him and he with Me", He gives us His Holy Spirit when we hear His word, and through His Spirit he is present in our spirits and we are in fellowship with Him. A real experience and a real joy. This fellowship does not remain simply individualistic, between ourselves and Christ, but all who are Christ's have fellowship with one another as we have fellowship with Him, and this is the Christian Church. God speaks to us through His Spirit by His Word and we in return speak to Him through prayer, prompted and taught by the same Spirit

St. Paul describes this as the "surpassing excellence" of the knowledge of Christ. He made it his one aim for which everything else that the world had to offer him counted as garbage. How do we stand with regard to relationship with God? Have we responded to the Gospel, received His forgiveness of sins and been brought into His presence, so that, taught by the Holy Spirit, we say to Him "Father!" This is the Christian religion.

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