

WHY GO TO CHURCH?

By D.B. Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

Why go to church? When I ask people that question I get some interesting replies, for example, 'to worship God'. But in what does God's worship consist? Is it praising Him and praying to Him and listening to His Word? All these things, of course, we can and should do at home as well as in church; so - why go to church in addition to worshipping God at home? Other people answer by quoting the verse in Hebrews which commands us "let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works; not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some; but exhorting one another and so much more as you see the day approaching" (Heb. 10:24-25).

It is certainly true that God commands us to come together in fellowship but God's commands always have a reason - what is the reason? Why go to church? It is an important question because a lot of people don't go to church, and some Christians go only spasmodically. But it is not possible to be a real Christian unless you go to church. The facts prove this in the long run.

But why is this so? The reason is that going to church is the essential expression of what being a Christian is; Christianity is a relationship, a relationship with God and of necessity also a relationship with one another. Christians are those whom God has adopted as His sons and daughters, who stand in His presence, because He has forgiven them their sins. They are those who through Jesus have been brought into His presence. As St. Paul says, we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2) - a remarkable thought which refers to our present experience and not merely to the future - seated with Christ in God's presence, seated on thrones around God's throne, sharing in His sovereignty and kingdom, reigning with God and with Christ, enjoying God's presence and fellowship, with Christ. In another phrase Paul says that "our life is hid with Christ in God". He is not referring to our individual experience only, but to the experience of all Christians together. They are united in this relationship, standing as it were in the same place in the same gathering, or assembly, or church, in God's presence in fellowship with Him and with one another.

Jesus referred to this truth "Where I am, there will my servant be" (John 12:26). Now we know that Jesus is in heaven, seated on God's right hand, and that is where we who are His are also. Again in the upper room He told His disciples "I will come and receive you to myself that where I am there you may be also". In the Old Testament God brought the Children of Israel from Egypt through the Red Sea to His presence on Mt. Sinai. He said "I have borne you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exodus 19) and Christ has brought us to His presence in heaven. "I will come and receive you to myself". This promise has been fulfilled by the gift of the Spirit. We are in His presence in that His spirit is present with our spirits. He prayed before His death "Father those whom Thou hast given me I will that where I am there they may also be with me that they may behold My glory that Thou hast given Me" (John 17). This prayer has been fulfilled, and through the coming of the Holy Spirit we are in the heavenlies with Christ, in God's presence, and we are there not simply as individuals but all who are Christ's are there together in that heavenly assembly. It is this assembly which is the essential church and which gives the name 'church' to each local assembly. It is the church of the first-born which the epistle to the Hebrews refers to. "You are come to Mt. Zion, to the City of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels in festal gathering and to the church of the first-born enrolled in heaven and to God the Judge and to the spirits of men made perfect and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant." This is present reality; our present experience. Through the forgiveness of sins we are in God's presence, in the presence of Christ and of the whole heavenly company - not there only by ourselves but with all our fellow Christians enjoying the fellowship of God as we seek His face.

This is a reality of present spiritual relationship. This relationship is the essence of being a Christian. But personal relationships which are not expressed do not exist. Consequently, since we and our fellow Christians live at present in time and space, this real spiritual relationship with each other must be expressed in the here and now of time and space. It must be expressed by being in one another's company in the presence

of Christ in the material world as well as in the spiritual. This means that we must seek one another out because in seeking one another's company, we are really seeking Christ who has promised to be present in the midst where two or three are gathered in His name. Christ's people form Christ's body, and it is in His body that Jesus will be, by His Spirit, just as our spirit indwells our body. We must gather, we must 'church' ourselves, for church means nothing else than gathering. It is an exact synonym.

The Christian then, seeks the presence of God, He will do so in his own home as he prays to God through Jesus in his own heart, and in company with his spouse, and also with his children gathered, perhaps, round the breakfast or dinner table. As the psalmist reminds us, - God calls "seek my face" and we respond "Thy face, Lord, will I seek". The Christian will be constantly seeking God's face, lifting up his heart to God in prayer and thanksgiving and the Spirit which hears this will also prompt him to seek God in other people - as I say, in the family, but also beyond the family in the neighbourhood group, the household church where he can have informal, natural conversation and prayer on the things of God around His Word, seeking the face of Jesus as saviour in His Word and beyond the household group the same Spirit will draw him to seek Christ in the suburban group, that is, the local congregation and beyond that in the city group as opportunity arises. The church is the body of Christ and it is a delightful thing to see the Spirit of Jesus shining in the face of Christians, for example, as they greet one another after church service in the aisles or the pews, at the back of the church or on the pavement outside. The Christian's relationship to Jesus prompts him to seek God's face, the face of Jesus, individually, family-wise, neighbourhood-wise, congregation-wise and so on. If there is any break in this chain it is a plain indication that the true reasons for going to church have not been apprehended. There is no real wish to express and enjoy the reality of the fellowship of God. It is inconsistent to go to church if you are not seeking God's face in your private prayer daily or in your family or in the less formal group

either in your neighbourhood or at work. On the other hand, if you are simply content to be a member of a small household church you have plainly turned your membership of Christ's people into a club interested only in your small group and not seeking Christ in every opportunity of fellowship both small and large. Nor are you seeking to express the reality of your heavenly relationship to God and to one another around God's throne. It is only too possible to turn a local congregation into a club. A club is interested in itself and has a sense of exclusiveness. It is possible also for clergy or bishops to turn their ministries into clubs.

The Christian minister's task is plain. He is to serve the church, that is to say, the community of Christ's people whether in the home or in the neighbourhood house church or in the local congregation or in any larger group which opportunity might provide, that through the ministry of the Word of God they might know Jesus and express their relationship to Jesus. He is to enable God's people to seek God's face and to find Him in His Word, to find Him in the Lord Jesus Christ who is God with us. Thus the ministry must be Bible based, leading to the Lord Jesus Christ; not only to the Christ of the past but also to the Christ of the present and equally importantly to the Christ of the future, the coming Lord in whom is our hope and who consequently controls all our present activities and values.

The ministers task is to enable Christ to be seen in the group, each member reflecting the character of Jesus, and building one another up till they all come to the fullness of the stature of Christ.

The minister preaches the Word of God, for God is only known in His Word, but sermons full of biblical knowledge which do not lead on so that Christ may be seen, are as sterile as moralizing sermons. The worshipper has come to church to seek the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

II

The last statement in the Bible about human achievement is found in Revelation 22:6, where the bliss of eternity is described in the simple phrase "they shall see God's face." That means we will be in relationship and fellowship with God in a personal way; we will be in His presence, speaking with Him, face to face. This is the final conclusion for humanity, the culmination of the human story which began in Genesis 1 in the Garden of Eden in any purposeful activity. It is the final result which shows what was the purpose of all activity that went before; so we may say that God's purpose in creating man and the purpose of the present life that He has given us to live, is that it would culminate in the full fellowship in heaven when we will see God face to face and He will dwell in us and we with Him (Rev. 21 & 22). Since this fellowship with God is the ultimate objective in God giving us life in the first place it should be our objective in the way we live our present day life. We should seek God's face now. In Psalm 27:8 we read "Seek ye my face" and our response is "Thy face, Lord, will I seek". This command is also the greatest privilege; that we should be invited, indeed commanded, to seek the face of God, to seek His presence and fellowship even now while we wait for the coming of Christ with that friendship and fellowship which will be deepened and completed when we shall see Him as He is. It has been God's purpose that His people should seek His face, for those who seek Him will find Him. He reveals Himself to those who seek.

In the Old Testament the whole people of God assembled at Sinai. There, God spoke to them face to face; and later at Jerusalem the whole people of Israel used to meet at stated times to seek God's presence in His temple. For God is related to us not only individually but He is also related to us in the group - where 2 or 3 are met together in His name, Christ has promised to be present and the word 'church' reminds us that we stand in God's heavenly presence in a group, because the word 'church' means a group or gathering.

Yet, at the same time, we are individuals and God speaks to us in our inner personality. For the Israelites there was the 'tent of meeting' outside the Israelite camp and "everyone who sought the Lord went out to the tent of meeting" (Exodus 33:7). Those who seek Him will always find Him and this encounter does not leave us as we were before. Fellowship with God through His Spirit transforms. You may remember how this was shown outwardly in the case of Moses - whenever he came from communing with God, his face shone. It is through the Spirit of God that we meet with God, and this was the individual Israelite experience. The Spirit of God and the presence of God are the same. Thus the psalmist prayed "cast me not from your presence. Take not your Spirit from me" (Ps. 51). In the New Covenant, our knowledge of God has deepened, for God has revealed Himself fully through Jesus, the Son of God, and the Spirit is now given to all God's people. St. Paul wrote in II Cor. 4:6 "God has shone in our hearts to give the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ". As we have fellowship with Jesus His glory shines in us; just as the glory of God shone in Moses as the result of speaking with God face to face, so too it is the Christian's experience. In II Cor. 3:18 St. Paul applied the passage about Moses to the Christian. As we look into the face of Jesus in fellowship with Him we are transformed into the glory of Christ, that is, Christ's character shines out in us. His Spirit is seen through us and this is the glory of God.

God gives us His glory in that He gives us Himself. This relationship is our glory. His Spirit indwells us and our lives shine as a result of this indwelling Spirit. In John 17 Jesus said that he had given to His disciples the glory that God had given Him and this was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God was poured out on all believers. The Spirit of God is the glory of God.

The Scripture commands us to seek this glory, to seek God's face. Romans 2 reminds us that those who through patience in well-doing seek for glory, will receive eternal life.

We seek this glory in Christ who is the glory of God. As we wait for His return we should seek His presence through prayer. We need a regular time for prayer, we should let no day go by without prayer. The same applies to reading of God's Word, we need a regular time and a regular scheme. This is God's command, "seek ye my face" and our reply should be "thy face, Lord, will I seek", seeking Him now as well as looking forward to the day when He will come in the glory of His kingly rule. We should seek Him not only in our private prayer but seek in the Christian group. We should seek Him in all our natural groupings, in our own home with our spouse, praying together to Him; with our family reading His word together and praying over it; we should seek him in a Christian group drawn from our place of work or from our neighbourhood, and we should seek Him in the local congregation. If we are the leader of our family, we will take our family with us to church to seek Christ's face together and because both family and church are relationships reflecting the relationship of ourselves and Christ and the relationship of the family will be reflected in the Church and the relationship in Church will be reflected back into the family.

What is your reason for going to church? Is it to seek the face of Jesus in anticipation of His return, as Advent reminds us? For if this is your motivation for church-going, then you will seek Him firstly in your own private prayers and then in your family and in your friendship groupings as well as in the Sunday congregation. The purpose of life and its culmination is to see the face of God, to be in His presence, friendship and fellowship; a present experience and a future fulfilment. Has that got a grip of you? Are you waiting for the Saviour from heaven or are we so absorbed in the ephemeral things of the world and of material possessions that we have forgotten all about it. The command is clear 'seek ye my face' and our reply should be "Thy face, Lord, will I seek".

13/7/75 28/75

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Is broadcast every Sunday at
8.20 p.m. over Radio 2 CH

Copies of these weekly broadcasts may be
obtained (\$3 per year - posted) by writing
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York Street, Sydney. 2000