

FAITH, LOVE AND FELLOWSHIP

by D.B. Knox

"The Protestant Faith"

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It is natural to want to do the things which are right in God's sight. Unfortunately we do not always know by nature what these things are and as a consequence some really shocking actions have been undertaken in the service of God. Human sacrifice for example was quite common in the religions of antiquity. Mistaken zeal leads to atrocities. Sincerity based on ignorance can lead to terrible actions. Jesus warned His disciples that there would be those who thought that by killing them they were serving God, and history with its wars of religion, and persecutions, and burnings at the stake amply fulfilled this prophecy.

What is the sort of thing that we should do in order to please God? To answer this we must go to the Bible, where alone we have the mind of God. In John 6:23 Jesus was asked this question by the Jews. We read "They said therefore unto Him: What must we do that we may work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, this is the work of God that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent". This is a rather unexpected answer, that the work God looks for is our believing on Christ, and yet when you reflect on the matter you will see that faith in God, which has its focal point in faith in Christ whom He has sent, is the one fundamental action open to us in relation to God. God does not need our money: all the wealth of the universe is His. He does not need our sacrifices, as Psalm 50 reminds us. But if we are to honour Him we do so by acknowledging Him through our attitude of faith, leading to trustful obedience. Faith in God is the harmony of God. God is all sovereign.

Every atom in the universe moves within His knowledge and at His will. But how few people really believe this; and yet by doubting or disbelieving it, they rob God of His honour as Creator and sovereign Lord.

There is no event that enters our lives which is not under His control and which He is not able to turn to good if we seek Him in it. And yet how hard it is to believe this at times. But by disbelieving it we rob God of His honour as the Good Shepherd whose fatherly providence leads us in the paths of righteousness and blessing, and who protects us from evil even in the valley of the shadow of death. This then, is the work of God, to believe in Him.

God's sovereignty and love reaches its full expression in the sending of His Son to be the Saviour. Yet how hard it is at times to realize that we need a Saviour, or to realize that our sins will bring us to eternal everlasting condemnation in Hell unless they are forgiven in Christ. Now Christ came to save His people from their sins through His death and resurrection. On Calvary good overcame evil, so that He is now the Lord of all, and we look for His return when His victory over wrong will be complete and plain, and righteousness and right dealings established for ever in the world. To believe on Christ in this full sense, this is the work of God which we are called upon to undertake, and in fact God asks of us nothing else but to live our lives oriented to this great fact, that Christ is Lord. Do not yield to the temptation to by-pass Jesus, the one whom the Father has sent into the world, as though a general sort

of religion is sufficient or pleasing to God.

Our duty then towards God can be summed up in the one phrase to believe on Christ. If we ask what is our duty towards our fellow men, this may be summed up by the word love. Love includes treating our fellows as persons; that is to say we must recognise that our fellow men and women are in direct responsibility to God. They are not raw material to be used by us; nor can we invade their personal rights which they have direct from God. For example, we have no right to terminate their life even for their own advantage, and certainly not for the advantage of the state or for ourselves. Life is God's prerogative and it is only when a judge acts as the minister of God dispensing judgment before the day of judgment that termination of another's life is permissible. It is worth nothing, only a full faith in God will enable this awful duty of the judge and executioner to be discharged. It is not surprising that in this present time of weakened faith people shrink from this duty and become uncertain as to their obligation in the matter.

Love flows from a sense of God's love to us. Love seeks the welfare of our fellows, not as God has provided for our welfare. Love is the rule which should govern every action; particularly we should have love towards those who have a common faith with us. In John 13: 34 Jesus said "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another". When we add love to a common faith we get fellowship. Consequently the Christian church or fellowship is the natural outcome of Christian faith and love. If we are united together in believing in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord

so that we set our minds on things above where He is, and if as a consequence of seeing the love of God in Christ we love one another, we will have, as it were automatically, deep Christian fellowship amongst ourselves.

This conclusion is verified from another point of view: believing on Christ brings us into fellowship with God so that God Himself dwells in our hearts by faith. We call this presence of God the Holy Spirit. God through His Spirit comes into direct relationship and fellowship with our inmost beings, that is, our spirits, when we put our faith in Christ, for forgiveness removes the barrier to fellowship between ourselves and God. Now God is love, and if the Spirit of God is in our hearts, He will produce in us the disposition of love, and the fruit of love - loving acts and attitudes. As St. Paul says in Galatians 5, "The fruit of the Spirit is love". All who believe receive the Spirit of God and are therefore brought into a fellowship of the Holy Spirit - a fellowship of love towards each other expressed firstly in helping each other to a deeper faith which we share in common. This Christian fellowship is something visible for all the world to see. This is the sort of unity which shows the world that we are the disciples of Christ.

One of the mistakes of the Ecumenical Movement is to think that organisational unity between the denominations is going to bring about that unity amongst Christians which the outside world will see and recognise us as Christ's disciples. In the middle ages there was an organisational unity - one denomination only, the mediaeval Roman Church - but this outward visible organisational unity was no compulsive testimony to

bring the world to believe. Jesus said "a new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another. So shall all men know that ye are my disciples". It is this loving fellowship (and not organisational unity) which is the evidence to the world that we are the disciples of Christ. It is a mistake to identify organisational denominational unity with the Christian fellowship or church, even though denominations are called churches.

A large denomination, such as the Roman Catholic Church, which is an impressive institution, by its very size offers the individual a sense of collectivism, of being one among a great crowd of people. This collectivism may be mistaken for Christian fellowship. There is something attractive, from the outside, of being a member of a large group, but in experience it brings no real satisfaction, as we all probably know. There is no isolation quite so intense as being in a great crowd, or a large city, and yet have no fellowship. Collectivism maybe mistaken for fellowship; but the fellowship that springs from full faith in Christ and true love for our fellow disciples is something very different from this merging of the individual in the large collective group. If there is no fellowship in our church life it is probably due to a failure in faith; we don't really believe, or we believe the wrong things. It is not hard to see that the Roman church often directs its members to wrong types of faith. The Eucharistic Congress held in Melbourne to which the Pope made a special journey to attend is an example of an erroneous object of faith. The object of the Congress was to promote faith in the Mass; that is, faith in the supposed presence of Christ in the bread and

the wine at the Lord's supper. But though its promoters were doubtless sincere, it is really a form of idolatry because Christ is not present in the bread and the wine to which devotion and prayers are directed. He is seated at God's right hand in Heaven and it is there that our thoughts are to be lifted, according to the Scriptures (Col. 3:2). We are to dwell with Him in the Heavens, resting our minds in His finished work on Calvary when He died for sins once for all, and looking forward in faith and strong hope to His return when we will share with Him in His reign of righteousness in a new heaven and new earth when wrong, and sin have been corrected and banished for ever. This is God's purpose for the world, and it will be accomplished according to His complete sovereignty and power. All who have this faith and hope will find that they are united by God into a fellowship, because He will receive them into fellowship with Himself and His presence in their hearts will fill them with love for one another. Faith and love issues in Christian fellowship. If there is no love in our church relations then we need to pray for the Holy Spirit. A correct creed without love is a dead thing. Our church institutions may be flourishing in numbers and efficiency, our orthodoxy of doctrine may be immaculate, but the test of whether we are a Christian church is whether we have Christian fellowship with one another; for if there is no fellowship, it is a sign that the Holy Spirit is absent, and if Christ in His Spirit is absent then there can be no church, because the church is gathered round Him. By definition, the Christian church is those who are gathered round Christ, in a fellowship of faith and love. We must not be deceived into thinking

that the large collectivism of a flourishing institution is automatically a true Christian fellowship or church, just because it has the name. We will probably find that the church we attend partakes of the character both of an institution and of a fellowship. We should endeavour to strengthen the element of fellowship, for the institutional aspect is incidental and unimportant. It is only the fellowship which is God honouring or has eternal significance. Heaven will simply be fellowship. It will have nothing of an institutional character. It is God's purpose that we should enjoy this heavenly Christian fellowship now. Therefore the test to apply to our church life is whether it is a fellowship. The ingredients of Christian fellowship are simple: first, a full orbbed, rightly directed faith in Christ, based and built up on the ministry of the Word of God, focused on Christ's victory on Calvary and His coming - a faith which we keep in the forefront of our thoughts. Second, this faith and hope will, through the indwelling of God's Spirit in the heart, lead to a bond of love between all who hold it, and so will lead to fellowship, a fellowship through the Holy Spirit, in Christ.

How does our church stand up to this test? Let us follow the examples of the apostles in Acts 6 and give ourselves to the ministry of the Word of God and prayer, for these are the instruments which God uses to bring faith and love into being, and faith and love bring fellowship.