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SALVATION

By D.B. Knox

The Protestant Faith

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Jesus made Himself the centre of religion. This is the opposite to what a prophet does, who points away from himself to God; but Jesus directed the hearer to Himself. Thus, He said "Come unto me all you who are **weary and** heavy laden and I will give you rest". And again, "I am the light of the world, he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life", or again, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink". And on the evening before His crucifixion He told His disciples "I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father but by Me".

The Apostles also made Jesus the centre. They preached Him as Lord and King. Thus St. Peter told the religious leaders in Jerusalem "There is no other name given among men whereby we must be saved but the name of Jesus", and St. Paul told the Jews of Asia Minor "Be it known unto you brethren that through this man is proclaimed unto you remission of sins and by Him everyone that believes is justified from all things".

These examples could be multiplied many times, but it is clear that the New Testament teaches emphatically that Jesus is the centre of true religion and that there is no way to God except through Him. The reason is simple; God was in Christ; God gave His only begotten Son; so that Christ's death and resurrection is the God-given way by which sinners may return to the presence of their Heavenly Father. To by-pass Jesus Christ is to by-pass God Himself and it is an absolute contradiction to think that we can come to God when we deliberately by-pass Christ. We must remember that we can only come to God by way of forgiveness; in ourselves we deserve nothing but God's condemnation. Only through forgiveness can we be received into God's presence, and that forgiveness is extended to us only on the grounds of Christ's perfect life and death. That is why there is no other way to God but by Christ.

There are two tendencies, always with us, which divert the centre of religion from Christ. Against these we must constantly be on our guard. The first is the tendency to interpose religious rites and ceremonies between ourselves and Christ, so that instead of putting our faith directly in Christ we do so only indirectly, the proper performance of the ceremony becoming the principal object of our faith and attention. The second tendency is moralism, that is to say, the relying for salvation on our own efforts and the uprightness of our conscience and our acts of charity and so on. Both tendencies to trust in religious ceremonies and to trust in our moral life, rather than to trust in the forgiveness of Christ, are to be found within protestantism, as well as within Roman Catholicism. The latter, however, has provided some classical examples of false reliance on religious ceremonies for salvation. For example, there is the Roman Catholic teaching about the scapular. The scapular was originally a religious habit, a garment, but is nowadays a small piece of cloth about two inches square suspended round the neck by strings (though in recent years a medal may take the place of the cloth). Roman Catholics believe that in the thirteenth century the Virgin Mary appeared to a certain Simon Stock in a vision and said as she gave him the scapular. "Receive the scapular; he that dies in it shall not suffer eternal fire; it is the sign of salvation, a safeguard in danger, the covenant of peace and everlasting alliance". These words promise the wearer of the scapular salvation from hell, not merely from purgatory, but there is no word about faith in Christ, so that the attention of the worshipper is effectually diverted from Christ to the supposed virtue of wearing this religious object.

The Sacraments have been misused in the same way. They were given for the purpose of concen-

trating our faith in Christ's death. Thus Baptism speaks of the washing away of our sins and the Lord's Supper of the covenant or promise that God makes to us of forgiveness through Christ's death. The mistake comes when we regard the services themselves as something to trust in, as though because we have taken part in baptism or the Lord's Supper we have received some benefit by that very act. But we should look through these services to God's promises in Christ and so put our faith in God. Just as with a telescope, if you merely look at the glass in the telescope you will see nothing, except perhaps your own eye reflected in it, but if you look through the glass you will see the distant object more vividly, so the Sacraments are meant to focus our attention on Christ and His death and to increase our faith in Him; but they may be misused to distract our attention from Christ by focussing it on the Sacraments themselves.

A third illustration of religious rites distracting from Christ is the practice of praying to the saints, and especially to the Virgin Mary. There is the well-known statement of St. Alphonsus Liguori, one of the great doctors of the Roman Catholic Church, which describes a vision in which Brother Leo saw two ladders to Heaven. At the top of the red ladder stood our Lord Jesus Christ, at the top of the white ladder the Virgin Mary. Those who tried to ascend the ladder to Christ invariably failed, but those who climbed the white ladder over which the Virgin Mary presided "soon gained the top" (Glories of Mary p.176, Dublin 1841). Could there be a clearer illustration of how prayers to the saints distract from the centrality of Christ in religion? Jesus said "No man comes to the Father but by me", for "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself".

The second tendency which distracts from the centrality of Christ is moralism; that is to say,

the belief that we can come into God's presence in our own right, that we can pray to God apart from Christ's intercession. The error is a common one; it springs from too slight an estimate of the seriousness of sin, as though we could avoid sin easily, and is forgetful of the terrible hold that sin has over our nature right to its core. The error is also based on too slight an estimate of God's holiness as our Judge, as though God will judge us by balancing our goodness against our badness. But this is not what is revealed in Scripture; God is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, any iniquity, and will condemn all wickedness. Thus, we can only be saved through forgiveness, for through forgiveness our sins are blotted out from God's sight, and forgiveness can only come through Jesus Christ Who died for our sins. It is because we need to be saved that we need Jesus Christ for there is no salvation in any other Name. If we could get along without forgiveness, then we might be able to get along by our own efforts, but if, as the Bible affirms, we need to be forgiven before we can stand in the presence of a Holy God, then none of us can be saved except through Jesus Christ.

Moralism is an error that springs up particularly easily in Protestantism, and interestingly enough in modern Roman Catholicism. Up till one hundred years ago the Roman Catholic Church taught emphatically that it was not possible to be saved apart from membership of that Church. This at least safeguarded the concept that salvation is through forgiveness, even though forgiveness in Roman doctrine could only be obtained through the church sacraments. But in 1854 Pope Pius IX declared that the necessity of membership of the Roman Church was not required of those who were incurably ignorant of its character. As a consequence, modern Roman Catholics teach that Protestants and even pagans may be saved by their own moral efforts.

This is clearly taught in the Constitution of the Church § 16, of the second Vatican Council; it is also affirmed in the little pamphlet circulated amongst Roman Catholics in Sydney, entitled "Is anybody Sure of Going to Heaven?" by the Reverend R.J. Miller of the Redemptionist Fathers, which states on page 18 "The Catholic Church teaches that everyone will be judged by God on the basis of his fidelity to conscience throughout life....Anyone who sincerely believes he must be a Lutheran, or a Methodist or a Baptist in order to be saved is bound to practice such a religion so long as he is convinced that it is God's command. Only thus can he ever save his immortal soul". I may add that this sounds strangely in a church which burnt so many thousands of people because they were convinced that they ought to be Protestants, that is, while in fact they were doing what this pamphlet says was the only way in which they could save their immortal souls! This is not an isolated quotation. In Hans Kung's book "That the World May Believe" which has been very highly commended in the Roman Catholic Church we read on page 5 that "A Protestant can be in God's grace and can win eternal life if he lives according to his conscience and keeps God's commandments". You will notice that there is here no mention of forgiveness, but only of moral effort, as leading to salvation. The fact is, of course, that no-one can keep God's commandments as they should be kept, yet this is not Kung's meaning. He sincerely wishes it to be understood that a Protestant can keep God's commandments and so can come to Heaven even though not a member of the Roman Church; and on page 83 he extends the same concept to pagans who have never heard of Christ. If a pagan lives a good life he also will be saved. Kung's words are "If a pagan surrenders himself in faith in some obscure but real way to the one True God in Jesus Christ of Whom he is perhaps only dimly aware under one hundred concealing veils, and if he then shows forth this faith in works of love, then he may be saved". The

Redemptionist pamphlet sums up on page 20 "Anyone... can be saved by being obedient to what his conscience tells him is the will of God". All this sounds fine, but what authority have we for speaking like this on God's behalf?

We may well ask what has become of the first of the ten commandments, "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have none other gods but Me". In this new teaching it does not seem to matter who you have as your God. There may be one hundred "concealing veils" of different pagan deities but we are saved by our works. This teaching has returned to de facto pelagianism, that is to say to the doctrine that a man is able to do the will of God by following his conscience and so save himself. But there are two facts which make this comforting doctrine untrue, and so a stumbling block to those who seek the way to God. The first unpleasant fact is that we cannot do God's will perfectly, and the second is that unless we do God's will perfectly we must be judged as sinners, for as St. James says, even if you abstain from adultery, you are condemned if you commit a murder, so too you are condemned if you break any of God's laws, even though you keep the rest (James 2:10,11). But of course, we are all the time breaking God's laws, if only by losing our temper, disguising the truth, or being selfish. The conclusion is that there is no way of salvation except by the acknowledgement of our sin and the seeking of God's forgiveness. Moral effort in the future, can never cover the past. The Christian doctrine of salvation always has been salvation through forgiveness, and not through good works. Salvation is through forgiveness and this requires on our part repentance from our sins and the acknowledgement of Christ as Lord and Saviour. There is no other way and we must not turn aside from Christ either by over-confidence in our own works, or by reliance on some religious activities

which tradition suggests are ways of salvation, for Jesus Christ alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and He is able and has promised to save all who come to God by Him.

So at the beginning of the New Year, ask yourself 'Is Jesus the centre of my life and of my hope?'.
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