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CHRISTIANITY IS FELLOWSHIP

D.B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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The Christian church is frequently criticised because of its numerous denominations. Of course, there is in fact only one Christian church. It is made up of all who love God in Jesus Christ. It cannot be divided, because the Lord Jesus Christ Who is its Head cannot be divided. It is essentially a Heavenly organism; but it expresses itself visibly and locally wherever Christians gather together to worship God in Jesus Christ. The true unifying bond between these local gatherings or congregations or churches which binds them together is not the visible organizational superstructure or denomination, so much as the invisible unifying bond provided by a common faith in Christ and a common acceptance of His lordship, and a common sharing of the Holy Spirit and a common hope for the future.

Christianity is fellowship. It is firstly fellowship with God, our heavenly Father, through His Spirit speaking and having fellowship with our spirits, which is hard to describe if it has not been experienced but which is the basic feature of the Christian life. Fellowship with God must, of course, be based on the forgiveness of sins, for an unforgiven, unrepentant, self-willed sinner can have no fellowship with God till his heart has been changed through repentance and his sins forgiven through the death of Christ on Calvary. God has promised to have fellowship with all who come to Him through Christ.

It follows naturally that those who have been accepted into the family of God and are His sons and daughters, having fellowship with Him through His Spirit, have at the same time a relationship with each other and so they should have fellowship one with another.

So the Christian Church is not only a fellowship with God, but is also a fellowship between Christians. It is here, of course, that denominational differences are so unfortunate, because Christian congregations in which the one Heavenly Church of God expresses itself, link themselves up in various groupings for one reason or another, and we have allowed these groupings or denominations to become exclusive and to limit our fellowship, so that nowadays many Christians seldom have fellowship as Christians outside their own denomination. This is wrong. It is also foolish; for our agreement as Christians is much wider than our differences as members of a denomination.

These denominational differences have no firm basis in the Bible. The differences between the Protestant denominations are all on matters which the Bible has no clear teaching. This is not surprising because all the Protestant denominations accept the Bible as the sole ground of authority in matters of religion; so

that what the Bible clearly teaches, they are naturally enough all united on. But there are a lot of things on which the Bible does not speak. We may assume that these things are not important enough for the Holy Spirit, the Author of Scripture, to have given us authoritative directions about. It follows that we ought not to erect these things into barriers against Christian fellowship with each other. The differences between the Protestant denominations are about such things as the form for a church service, or who should be baptised, whether children or grown ups, or how the Church should be governed, whether by bishops or presbyters or in some other way. On none of these matters has the Bible clear teaching. This is not accidental; for Scripture, both in what it says and in what it is silent is the result of God's direct control. We ought not, therefore, to allow our views on these secondary matters, which God has left free, to cut us off from fellowship with each other, since it is our plain duty to have fellowship if we have a common Saviour and King in Jesus Christ.

Nowadays efforts are being made by negotiations, to combine the denominations and this in itself would be a good thing for it would reduce the temptation for separateness. But there is a quicker and more effective method to achieve the same results. This is that we should determine not to erect into barriers of fellowship matters about which God has given no direction in Scripture, but which He has left open. That is, we should regard the Bible not only as sufficient for doctrine, as all protestants do, but also as sufficient for fellowship, so that what is not clearly found there is not to be set up as a barrier against fellowship.

We must not allow the denominations to restrict our Christian duty of fellowship, but if we are to achieve this supra-denominational fellowship we will need a spirit of love, which is the gift of God and which comes through prayer. So we should pray for one another, not only within our denominations but across the denominational barriers which we have erected and for which, as I say, there is no real authority in Scripture. One of the most difficult barriers to cross is the Roman Catholic barrier. This is because the Roman Catholic denomination does not accept Scripture as a sufficient guide for doctrine but adds to it its own tradition. The consequence is that Roman Catholicism keeps on growing further and further away from the type of Christianity made know to us in the New Testament. As an illustration of this I quote from what Karl Adam, the well-known Roman Catholic theologian says in his book "The Spirit of Catholicism" p.2: "We Catholics acknowledge readily, without any shame, nay with pride, that Catholicism cannot be identified simply and wholly with primitive

Christianity, nor even with the Gospel of Christ, in the same way that the great oak cannot be identified with the tiny acorn. There is no mechanical identity, but an organic identity. And we go further and say that thousands of years hence Catholicism will probably be even richer, more luxuriant, more manifold in dogma, morals, law and worship than the Catholicism of the present day. A religious historian of the fifth millennium A.D. will without difficulty discover in Catholicism conceptions and forms and practices which derive from India, China and Japan, and he will have to recognize a far more obvious 'complex of opposites.'" Against this statement of Karl Adam's Protestants reply that developments which obscure the Gospel and which are copied from the natural religious of paganism are false developments, and that it is wrong to regard Apostolic Christianity and the Apostolic Gospel as merely embryonic Christianity rather than the fulness of Christian truth.

Yet even though we recognise the great difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations, yet the area of agreement between them is very large and ought not to be lost sight of. For example, in reading through a Roman Catholic text book such as "Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma" by Ludwig Ott the protestant theologian constantly finds himself giving whole-hearted approval to what he is reading. Thus, in the basic doctrine of God, there is no real difference between Protestants and Roman Catholics. For example, both affirm equally God's sovereignty in this world's affairs, teaching with the Bible that nothing happens in life by chance, apart from God's control. This is a doctrine of very great strength and comfort, to know that all that happens to us as Christians happens because God sees it for the best, and that if it were not so, He would have prevented it entering our lives. You will remember the story of Joseph in Genesis, how after he had been sold by his brothers as a slave he was able to tell them many years later "It was not you who sent me here but God. You meant it for evil but God meant it for good". Or recall the faith of Job, who after having suffered a series of stunning misfortunes was able to say because of his faith in God's loving sovereignty "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord". Here we have examples of how Old Testament Christians rested in the knowledge that God is sovereign. Not only in the basic doctrine of God, but also in the central Christian doctrine of Atonement - that is the doctrine that the Son of God became man in order to die for our sins on the cross and that having made there a satisfaction for sins He rose again the third day and now reigns from Heaven over the affairs of the world awaiting the time of His return - here too we find that the agreement between Roman Catholics and Protestant is complete.

Again in the doctrine of Holy Scripture the Roman Catholic teaching could not be more clear in its affirmation that God is the Author of the words of Scripture, so that these may be relied upon implicitly as a guide in matters of religion.

It is in the doctrine of the application of salvation and in the doctrine of man that Protestants and Roman Catholics are divided. These doctrines are, of course, most important and affect our whole eternal welfare, for they control our views of how we believe we may reach Heaven. Perhaps most importantly Roman Catholics deny that Christ's death is the exclusive ground of our salvation. Ott states this explicitly on page 185. Roman Catholics cannot allow Christ's death to be the exclusive ground of our salvation, otherwise there would be no room for their doctrines of good works or of the merits of the saints. But the Bible knows of no other ground of salvation but the death of Christ. Verses like Romans 5:10 occur over and over again in Scripture "When we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son", or Colossians 1:20 "It hath pleased the Father through Christ to reconcile all things unto Himself making peace through the blood of His cross". In speaking of salvation, Scripture never mentions any other ground than the death of Christ, for as St. Peter told the Jewish leaders in Acts 4:12 "There is no other name under Heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" but the name of Jesus.

Secondly, the Scripture affirms we may obtain God's salvation directly, through faith and prayer. It comes by way of gift and not as compensation for our own good works. The Roman Catholics, however, teach that it comes to us indirectly through membership of the church and through our diligently receiving the church's ministrations and it comes by way of merit. This teaching not only obscures the simplicity of the Gospel but distorts the purpose of membership of the church. The church is for fellowship, and membership of the Christian congregation is a consequence of our salvation, rather than a means to it.

Christianity is fellowship, fellowship with God on the basis of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, and consequently fellowship with all who with us are God's children in Christ. We must not limit this fellowship to within denominational groupings; yet if we are to have Christian fellowship with all who acknowledge our common Saviour and Lord, it will only come through love, which in turn is the gift of God, through prayer. So, as the Scripture commands, Let us pray for each other.

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