

We are in a similar situation. The Bible has many unique attributes. When we come to really trust the message, we will then trust the message giver and our faith will be strengthened.

Evidence exists to encourage us to trust God's Word. Among a range of resources available that attempt to bring all the evidence together, I have found two especially helpful; one is Brother Alan Hayward's book *God's Truth*, the other is the more recent *The Evidence—You Decide* preaching material.¹ Whenever and however our faith

is challenged, we should prayerfully look at the evidence God has given us in His message. This will encourage us to realise that we are not on our own, however great the challenges may be.

-
1. *God's Truth* is available from Printland Publishers, www.printlandpublishers.com. *The Evidence—You Decide* is available from Sister (Mrs) Janet Howe, 13 Twentywell Road, Sheffield, S17 4PU, or on www.theevidence.org.uk.

Faith and works in daily life: ecclesial life*

Trevor Hughes

FAITH AND WORKS in ecclesial life are expressed through the Word, works and worship, which unite each member in the family of God. It is important, therefore, to express our faith in fellowship, and "our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jno. 1:3).

Unless we focus upon the place we have as a brother or sister in God's family, our faith will not result in works done to the glory of our heavenly Father. Our relationship with Him has only been made possible through Jesus Christ, who is head of the ecclesia as the husband is head of the wife, in the Lord (Eph. 5:23). Faithful works performed in the ecclesia and in honour of God are done in observance of those principles God has provided for us in His Word. This sets a general pattern in which, in broad terms, we see the brethren involved more in the **words** of worship, whereby we are brought into fellowship with God through the Word, exhortation and prayer (Tit. 1:9), and the sisters more in the **works** of the ecclesia expressed in welfare, edification and development of each individual and family within their sphere of influence (2:1-5).

The family meal

An inestimable blessing in family life is the joy of sharing the family meal together. The table spread with food to sustain life and health is surely recognised by those who love God as His expression of love in supplying their every need.

The meal is partaken with thanksgiving as a good gift "coming down from the Father of lights with Whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas. 1:17).

We may not readily perceive attendance at the Breaking of Bread as faith expressed in works. Yet it is so. Special arrangements in Eastern custom could be ratified by sharing a meal together, which was regarded as a 'covenant of salt', bringing the participants together in an inseparable union. That is why Jesus expressed his endearment to the disciples at the institution of the Last Supper in the words, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Lk. 22:15). Willingly to absent ourselves from the Lord's table is an act of faithlessness, a rejection of the blessings through Jesus Christ given by God's grace for our salvation.

In our meetings

The family bond is strengthened the more we meet together and remind ourselves of the ties that bind us in fellowship with our Father. An expression of faith in works is our mutual edification by God's Word. Bible classes take varying forms according to the ecclesia to which we belong. It should be paramount that the class be a forum for *learning* God's words.

Mutual encouragement is best achieved within a family framework, providing encouragement for

* Quotations from the ESV.

each member according to his or her individual development in the Word. It would be unthinkable in a family for children to absent themselves from school. Do we see the same necessity to educate ourselves in God's wisdom that we may "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" day by day (2 Pet. 3:18)? The works of faith flow from edification in the Word of God; it is the constant renewing of our minds that will induce works pleasing to Him. Writing to the Galatians Paul said, "Now the works of the flesh are evident", and he listed those works of darkness that will debar us from the Kingdom of God. He then went on to say, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (5:19-23).

These are the works of faith that find their practical expression in our everyday life. Are these the works encouraged in our ecclesial meetings together? If they are not, there is need for heart-searching. We need to amend our ways and to find means to unite the ecclesia in love and good works through prayer to our Father, Whose children we are by His grace.

Doing good

Paul said in his exhortation to the Galatians, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (6:10). It is good that we observe in this advice a priority directed to "the household of faith". Works of faith in the ecclesia apply to us all, with only some differing emphasis according to our gender. The practical outworking of Paul's advice demonstrates that both spiritual and material blessings are included. They must flow as a willing act of service "as to the Lord".

Preaching

Undoubtedly, a priority must be given to works of faith that bring eternal life to those who have not yet espoused the saving name of Jesus Christ. Preaching the gospel is an activity that calls for individual and ecclesial effort. It is easy to suppose that, providing a regular message is being proclaimed by our ecclesia, this goes forth as a work of faith and God will bring those He appoints to hear and respond to the call.

A little reflection on such a supposition calls into question our commitment to faith by works. We are reminded of the foundation principle that we are justified by faith (Rom. 5:1). When our faith is weak we readily slip into views in which we

try to justify ourselves. That is when our works fail to bring forth fruit to God's glory. Abraham was justified by faith when he was prepared to offer up Isaac (how difficult an act was that!), and Paul was justified by faith by his work of preaching. As he said, "For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16). Effective preaching has never been easy and, I suggest, has never been done without inconvenience or pain.

Instructing the young

Yet preaching is not confined to campaigns, special efforts and seminars, etc., which active ecclesias will engage in from time to time. Effective preaching can be achieved through family life principles. Is it not a sad reflection that (in the UK, at least) fewer of our own children are embracing the Truth as it is in Jesus? I would suggest that those works of faith best suited to our sisters can be of special help to reverse this trend.

Teaching of children from an early age was commended by the Apostle Paul as he wrote to Timothy: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelled first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well" (2 Tim. 1:5). Economic pressures placed upon families today often result in both parents being in full-time employment, but it is still more usual for children to share more family time with their mother. This is precious time when God's Word can be implanted in young fertile minds. The extension of this practice is carried through into our Sunday Schools and Youth Groups. Those who devote their energies to instructing the children and young people are expressing their faith that God will continue to bless future generations until our Lord comes.

Another of the problems that seem particularly to affect our age is that of commitment. This is central to our theme of faith and works, but the world and its education systems seem to apply a force that strongly opposes it. Comparative religion is encouraged, so a subjective view of religion is taken in its diverse forms; strongly held faith as from one source—the one true God—is discouraged. This mindset is implanted in our young people, and it can be difficult to engender a sense of commitment to the ecclesia when they are baptized. Do we emphasise sufficiently our unique relationship with our Father and His Son? Do we show our faith in works sufficiently for those new in the Truth to observe our own commitment? It would be unthinkable in any

responsible family to acquiesce to children not turning up at meal times, or disappearing without assurance that they are with responsible relatives or friends. Do our faith and works extend to such care for the children of God, those young in faith for whom we are responsible as an ecclesia?

Meeting welfare needs

These thoughts lead naturally to those works of faith expressed in love towards those whose welfare needs assistance. We receive beautiful glimpses of the outpouring of selves for others in the first century: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well" (Rom. 16:1,2). Then there was that indefatigable messenger and bearer of gifts from the ecclesia at Philippi: "I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow" (Phil. 2:25-27).

Such sentiments open our hearts to minister to those in need. In every ecclesia there will be someone who is in need of help, encouragement or care. How can we help in faith unless we know the brother or sister, as we would a close family relative? This highlights the exhortation, found especially in the Pastoral Epistles, to engender hospitality (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8). Yet, as in the natural family, so in the ecclesia, there is an etiquette to be observed in our dealings with each other. God provides the guidelines: "Do not

rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:1).

Recently, an older brother from our ecclesia has spent five months in hospital. It is encouraging that the ecclesias in the area have combined to ensure that he has had regular visits, and thus good works have been carried out in faith. During his stay in hospital, our brother's Bible and his daily Bible reading have drawn attention from nurses and hospital staff, as well as patients and visitors. Our brother has been surprised that no-one had heard of Christadelphians. This led me to reflect on whether the fault lies in deaf ears to the message, or whether we have failed to let our light shine before others to bring many children to God's glory.

The ecclesia at the centre

When the people of Israel travelled on the wilderness journey they made encampments in which the twelve tribes were set out foursquare, with the tent of meeting at the very centre. This, surely, was to indicate that God's meetingplace and His presence should be at the very centre of the people's lives. It was also intended that the light of God's presence should shine forth from that centre to the world in which they travelled as a witness to Him.

As individuals we need to reflect upon whether the ecclesia is at the centre of our lives; whether our ecclesial witness is truly effective and proclaiming in word and works the things concerning the Name of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden . . . In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father Who is in heaven" (Mt. 5:14-16).

The ways in which love is expressed between brethren and sisters are many and varied. It may be on the grand scale of organising gatherings of the Brotherhood or setting up homes for the elderly. It may be in countless thoughtful acts of giving: the phone call or letter to the infirm or lonely; helping with practical tasks and providing financial support; giving lifts to the meeting; offering a sympathetic ear to the one who is burdened with care. In all these things we are reflecting the love of the Father Who has called us to be part of His family in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is both truth and love that bind men and women in fellowship with the Lord Jesus and with each other. In him "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps. 85:10). Through his sacrifice many have been brought together as one, that it may be written: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4-6).

Michael Lewis, "The whole body fitly joined together" (Eph. 4:16)",
Testimony, May 1998, p. 181