

Christian Unity

“TILL WE ALL ATTAIN unto the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of the Christ.” (Ephesians iv, 13.)

The unity of the Church, on which our faith and hope is set, is grounded in the unity of God and the uniqueness of His redeeming act in Jesus Christ. The “one body and one spirit” correspond to the “one God and Father of all.” The unity of the Church of God is a perpetual fact; our task is not to create it but to exhibit it. Where Christ is in men’s hearts, there is the Church: where His Spirit is active, there is His Body. The Church is not an association of men, each of whom has chosen Christ as his Lord; it is a fellowship of men, each of whom Christ has united with Himself. The Christian faith and life are not a discovery or invention of men; they are not an emergent phase of the historical process; they are the gift of God. That is true not only of their historical origin, but quite equally of the re-birth to that faith and life of each individual Christian. Our unity in dependence for our faith upon the unique act of the one God is a perpetual and unalterable fact. If we are Christians, that is due to the activity of the Holy Spirit; and because He is one, those in whom He is active are one fellowship in Him—“the fellowship of the Holy Ghost.”

But there is no human heart possessed wholly and utterly by the Holy Spirit; and most of us, “who have the first-fruits of the Spirit,” are still governed also by self-will. Our surrender is not absolute; our allegiance is not complete. Consequently the historical form and outward manifestation of the Church is never worthy of its true nature. What marks it as the Church is the activity within it of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. But in the Church as an actual society in history this is not the only power at work; the various forms of human selfishness, blindness and sloth are also characteristic of those who by the activity of the Spirit are united to Christ. It is as though a lantern were covered with a dark veil. It is truly a lantern, because the light burns in it; yet the world sees the light but dimly and may be more conscious of the veil that hides it than of the flame which is its source. So the world may see the sin

of Christians more clearly than the holiness of the Church, and the divisions which that sin has caused more clearly than the unity which endures in spite of them.

When that happens, and in whatever degree it happens, the witness of the Church is weakened. How can it call men to worship of the one God if it is calling to rival shrines? How can it claim to bridge the divisions in human society—divisions between Greek and barbarian, bond and free, between white and black, Aryan and non-Aryan, employer and employed—if when men are drawn into it they find that another division has been added to the old ones—a division of Catholic from Evangelical, or Episcopalian from Presbyterian or Independent? A Church divided in its manifestation to the world cannot render its due service to God or to man, and for the impotence which our sin has brought upon the Church through divisions in its outward aspect we should be covered with shame and driven to repentance.

We do not escape from sin by denying the consequences of our sin, and we cannot heal the breaches in the Church's outward unity by regarding them as unimportant. To those who made the breaches, the matters involved seemed worthy to die for; it may well be that in the heat of conflict, such as tormented the sixteenth century, men so zealously upheld what seemed to them neglected truths that they became blind to supplementary truths which were dear to their opponents. It is seldom that in any human contention all the truth is on one side. We may look back with a calmer wisdom and see how here or there a division which occurred could have been avoided by a more conciliatory temper and a more synthetic habit of mind. But it does not follow that we should now take all the divisions as they stand and merely agree to co-operate while still maintaining separate organizations. For in practice those separate organizations are bound to become competitors, however much we wish to co-operate; and the separation will hinder the free interchange of thought and experience which should be a chief means of the process whereby the Body of Christ "builds itself up in love."

So we come to the second great evil of our divisions. The first is that they obscure our witness to the one Gospel; the second is that through the division each party to it loses some spiritual treasure, and none perfectly represents the balance of truth, so that this balance of truth is not presented to the world at all. God be thanked—we have left behind the habit of supposing that our own tradition is perfectly true and the whole of truth, and are looking to see what parts of the "unsearchable riches of Christ" we have missed while others have them; and so we are learning increasingly one from

another. This mutual appreciation is the way alike of humility and of charity; and it is leading us to perpetually fuller fellowship.

In part our progress is due to the pressure of the needs of the world. It is not the task of the Church to solve political problems or to devise contrivances for mitigating the effects of human sin. But it is the Church's task to proclaim that the most oppressive evils under which the world groans are the fruit of sin; that only by eradication of that sin can these other evils be averted; and that the only Redeemer from sin is Jesus Christ, "Very God of Very God begotten; Not made, being of one substance with the Father; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was made Man." To Him, the Conqueror of death and sin—to Him, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world—we call the world that its sins may be removed, that its divisions may be healed, and that it may find fellowship in Him.

That proclamation, that invitation, we are bound as a Church to make. And the world answers: "Have you found that fellowship yourselves? Why do your voices sound so various? When we pass from words to action, to what are you calling us? Is it to one family, gathered round one Holy Table, where your Lord is Himself the host who welcomes all His guests? You know that it is not so. When we answer your united call, we have to choose for ourselves to which Table we will go, for you are yourselves divided in your act of deepest fellowship, and by your own traditions hinder us from a unity which we are ready to enjoy."

What is our answer to that retort? Is it not true that Christians who have lately been converted in heathen lands, and even the ordinary lay-folk who are rather detached from our denominational preoccupations, are more ready to come together in face of the resurgence of paganism than are the leaders of ecclesiastical organizations, intent upon the maintenance of their tradition and upon keeping their organization in being and in working order? If it is true that in its deepest nature the Church is always one, it is also true that today it is the so-called "Churches" rather than any forces of the secular world which prevent that unity from being manifest and effective.

Here is matter for deep penitence. I speak as a member of one of those Churches which still maintain barriers against completeness of union at the Table of the Lord. I believe from my heart that we of that tradition are trustees for an element of truth concerning the nature of the Church which requires that exclusiveness as a consequence, until this element of truth be incorporated with others into a fuller and worthier conception of the Church than any of us hold

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today. But I know that our division at this point is the greatest of all scandals in the face of the world; I know that we can only consent to it or maintain it without the guilt of unfaithfulness to the unity of the Gospel and of God Himself, if it is a source to us of spiritual pain, and if we are striving to the utmost to remove the occasions which now bind us, as we think, to that perpetuation of disunion. It should be horrible to us to speak or think of any fellow Christians as "not in communion with us." God grant that we may feel the pain of it, and under that impulsion strive the more earnestly to remove all that now hinders us from receiving together the One Body of the One Lord, that in Him we may become One Body—the organ and vehicle of the One Spirit.

While there is much on our side for which we must repent, there is also much wrought by God for which we should give thanks. The record of the last ten years, since the former Conference on Faith and Order met at Lausanne, has been a time of progressive unification. That period can fitly be called, in the title of the Report presented on that subject, "a decade of objective progress in Church Unity." The consummated unions are chiefly, as is natural, between Churches of similar polity; but there is also a growth of understanding and appreciation among Christians of deeply sundered traditions. We shall speak of these things later in our Conference; but let us here at the outset take note of them and give thanks to God; for we enter on this second World Conference with great encouragement from what God has done for us since the first.

Moreover, side by side with progress in the specific task entrusted in part to us, we must rejoice in, and give thanks for, the perpetual growth of other manifestations of the *Una Sancta* despite its divisions. The sister Conference at Oxford has profoundly impressed the world; and it has approved a method whereby, if we are also led to approve it, the *Una Sancta* will be provided with a more permanent and more effectual means of declaring itself and its judgment than at any time for four hundred, perhaps for eight hundred years. We deeply lament the absence from this collaboration of the great Church of Rome—the Church which more than any other has known how to speak to the nations so that the nations hear. But the occurrences of the two World Conferences in one Summer is itself a manifestation of the *Una Sancta*, the holy fellowship of those who worship God in Jesus Christ and look to Him as the only Saviour of the world.

In this world movement of Churches towards fuller unity and more potent witness we have our own allotted task. In what spirit do we approach it? How shall we seek to express in this enterprise

the graces of faith, of hope and of love? Of these love is the greatest, but in part at least it is rooted in faith and sustained by hope. Love, for us who are assembled here, means chiefly two things—an ardent longing for closer fellowship, and a readiness both to share our own spiritual treasures and to participate in those of others. Ten years ago our main concern was to state our several traditions in such a way that others should understand them truly; and that must still be our aim. But the divisions which we seek to overcome are due to the fact that our traditions are just what they are and none other; division cannot be healed by the reiterated statement of them. We are here as representatives of our Churches; true, but unless our Churches are ready to learn one from another as well as to teach one another, the divisions will remain. Therefore our loyalty to our own Churches, which have sent us here, will not best be expressed in a rigid insistence by each upon his own tradition. Our Churches sent us here to confer about our differences with a view to overcoming them. As representatives of those Churches each of us must be as ready to learn from others where his own tradition is erroneous or defective as to show to others its truth and strength. We meet as fellow pupils in a school of mutual discipleship. The Churches desire, through us, to learn from one another. That is the humility of love as it must be active among us here.

It will be sustained by hope. Hope springs from the experience of the last ten years. But even were it otherwise, hope should be strong in us because the goal which we seek is set before us by God Himself. The hope which arises from that knowledge is altogether independent of empirical signs of its fulfilment. Even if our cause were suffering defeat on every side, we should still serve it because that is God's call to us, and we should still know that through our loyal service He was accomplishing His purpose even though we could not see the evidence of this. But in His mercy He gives us not only the supreme ground of hope, which is His call, but also the manifest tokens of His working in the Churches that are spread throughout the world.

Let us never forget that, though the purpose of our meeting is to consider the causes of our divisions, yet what makes possible our meeting is our unity. We could not seek union if we did not already possess unity. Those who have nothing in common do not deplore their estrangement. It is because we are one in allegiance to one Lord that we seek and hope for the way of manifesting that unity in our witness to Him before the world.

Thus our hope is based upon our common faith. This faith is not only the assent of our minds to doctrinal propositions; it is the com-

mitment of our whole selves into the hands of a faithful Creator and merciful Redeemer. If the word be thus understood we are already one in faith, but also alas!—and this, perhaps, is the more relevant to our purpose—one in the weakness and incompleteness of our faith. We are one in faith, because to commit ourselves to Him is the deepest desire of our hearts; we are one in the weakness of our faith, because in all of us that desire is overlaid with prejudice and pride and obstinacy and self-contentment. “Lord, we believe; help Thou our unbelief.”

Meanwhile our witness is enfeebled: the true proportion and balance of truth is hidden from the world because we cannot unite in presenting the parts enshrined in our several traditions. We still wait in hope and faith for the movement of the Spirit which shall bring us all to a perfect man—the “one man in Christ Jesus” grown to full maturity—who shall be the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Our faith must be more than the trust which leads us to rely on Him; it must be the deeper faith which leads us to wait for Him. It is not we who can heal the wounds in His Body. We confer and deliberate, and that is right. But it is not by contrivance or adjustment that we can unite the Church of God. It is only by coming closer to Him that we can come nearer to one another. And we cannot by ourselves come closer to Him. If we have any fellowship with Him, it is not by our aspiration but by His self-giving; if our fellowship with Him, and in Him with one another, is to be deepened, it will not be by our effort but by His constraining power. “The love of Christ constraineth us.” To that we come back. Because He died for all, all are one in His death. Not by skill in argument, not even by mutual love that spans like a bridge the gulf between us—for the gulf though bridged is not closed by any love of ours—but by the filling of our hearts with His love and the nurture of our minds with His truth, the hope may be fulfilled. It is not by understanding one another, but by more fully understanding Him, that we are led towards our goal. We can help each other here, and learn one from another how to understand Him better. But it is towards Him that our eyes must be directed. Our discussion of our differences is a necessary preliminary; but it is preliminary and no more. Only when God has drawn us closer to Himself shall we be truly united together; and then our task will be not to consummate our endeavour but to register His achievement.

O Blessed Jesu, Love and Truth of God incarnate, cleanse us from all that hinders or distorts our vision of Thee. So fill us with trust in Thee that we cease from our striving and rest in Thee. Thou Light

of the world, so shine in our hearts that the rays of Thy brightness, now known to us in our separation, may be gathered into the pure radiance of Thy glory manifested through us in our unity in Thee. Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, wash our spirits clean from sin. By the mystery of Thy Holy Incarnation, by Thine Agony and Bloody Sweat, by Thy Cross and Passion, by Thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension, and by the Coming of the Holy Ghost, unite us with Thyself and in Thyself one with another, that we may be one with and in Thee as Thou art one with the Father, that the world may believe that Thou art its Saviour, God-blessed for ever.

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