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# The Essential Oneness of Christ's Body: "A Still More Excellent Way"

WILLIAM C. MacVEAN

PROFESSOR FENNELL in his article, "The Essential Oneness of Christ's Body" (*C.J.T.*, Vol. IV, No. 1), has attempted to show where-in lies the oneness of the Church, and has tried to combine what one writer has described as the "organic" and the "contractual"<sup>1</sup> ideas of the Church in a synthesis which he hopes will supply some sort of answer to the modern ecumenical problem. The aim certainly is worthy, but this writer doubts that it can be achieved on the proposed basis.

It would have been useful if Mr. Fennell had given us some definition of terms. For example, what exactly does he mean by "necessary"; "essential"; "constitutive"? We will endeavour to show what they mean to us as we go along, but a certain ambivalence in Mr. Fennell's attitude towards the Church as "given" and "gathered" shows itself in a confusion of these terms which renders them mutually contradictory. Another problem raised by this ambivalence, and in our opinion not satisfactorily met, is the distinction between two aspects of the life of the Church, namely, its "union" and its "unity." Unity derives from union, and not vice versa.

The difficulties of Mr. Fennell's position become more apparent when he tries to deal with the subject of his article. The bases of the essential oneness he finds in expressions of oneness rather than in oneness itself, and for this reason he is compelled to deal with the Church as visible only. Thus in the Church he finds: (i) a unity of origin arising out of God's creative act in bringing the Church into being; (ii) a social unity which is the expression of the shared divine life of the members of the Church; (iii) a unity of temper and life which itself arises out of "a common aim and loyalty and the pursuit of a common task."

It is somewhat surprising therefore to discover later on that this unity is not essential, for we are told that the essential unity of the Church does *not* lie in the fact that the Church is made up of those who have a common belief, or a common aim and purpose. No doubt Christians frequently disagree as to what should be the common belief or common ethical standard, and perhaps what is common to Christians in these respects in any age may not always be what our Lord enjoined, but right belief and right conduct are essential to the unity of the Church, even though we do not believe that they create the essential oneness of the Church.

Among the factors which do not express the essential unity of the Church, Mr. Fennell lists the institutional form of the Church. We have the right

1. F. W. Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society*, p. 232 ff.

to ask whether the Church can be recognized, whether it has a recognizable form, and if so, what that form is. If the Church has no form, it is doubtful that mere humans can recognize a Church at all. Since believing and acting in certain ways are already precluded from belonging to the essential unity of the Church, it is doubtful that we can even speak of the Church.

It is our contention that the Scriptural evidence and the evidence of the life of the Church through the ages require us to accept the Church as a body which has a particular form, and that that form is given so that we will know the Church. We maintain also that the body as a living creation has been given its own characteristic modes of expression which specify it as this particular body in action. Among these we may list order, doctrine and sacraments, the rejection of which results at the very least in abnormality. If we deny that these are necessary to the recognition of the Church in the world, we assert in effect that the Church is unknowable, since we are left without any criterion.

Certain questions are raised by our contentions in the light of what Professor Fennell has written concerning the essential oneness of Christ's body. What is the Church? What are its nature and form? How are its nature and form expressed in the world?

## I

What Professor Fennell is attempting to do in his article is to state "what one believes to be the essential nature of the Church as found in the scriptural witness to revelation," and from the many illustrations he has selected St. Paul's description, "the body of Christ." The writer describes this illustration as a metaphor, but St. Paul does not limit himself to a mere figure of speech. He introduces his illustration in a long descriptive simile which begins: "For as the body is one, and hath many members . . . so also is Christ" (I Cor. 12:12). Then having explained what he means, Paul sums up: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (I Cor. 12:27).

From St. Paul's description we obtain certain suggestions as to the nature of the Church. Since it is a body, it has a certain form. Its members have certain duties, and presumably have to perform them in a certain way. There is also order in the body. This would perhaps naturally follow if there is a body at all, but Paul goes to make this clear: "And God hath set some in the Church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers. . . ." (I Cor. 12:28).

It would appear that the Church is "the visible part of Christ, that part of Himself through which he now necessarily acts."<sup>2</sup> We might illustrate this from Paul's own conversion experience. There we are told that in his vision he heard a voice which said: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" The owner of the voice identified himself as Jesus. But Paul had never persecuted Jesus, and was not doing so at that time. He was, however,

2. S. C. Carpenter, *Christianity According to St. Luke*, p. 56.

persecuting the Church, so that to persecute the Church must be the same as to persecute Christ himself. If that is so, we must of necessity consider how we can be in Christ; for if the Church is the body of Christ, the life of the Church must be the life of Christ, and the essential nature of the Church must be the essential nature of Christ.

There are, of course, other descriptions of the Church in the New Testament. It is the "vine and the branches" (St. John 15), the "sheepfold" (St. John 10), "a building of God" (II Cor. 5:1), and so on. Now even if we allow that these are all metaphors—although we see no compelling reason why description of the Church should require this figure of speech—we can at least draw some conclusions from the type of metaphor used. In each case the Church is a union achieved, not by the activity or desire of the members, but by a character or condition given. It is a union entered by incorporation, by grafting, and the active agent is God himself. The Gospel goes further and makes it clear that Baptism is the means of incorporation into the Church. "Except a man be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (St. John 3:5). This is the act of incorporation, which not only witnesses to our decision, but also grants what we desire. Only then are we "in Christ," "new creatures" (II Cor. 5:17).

This appears to be what Professor Fennell is saying in his first section, although it is surprising that no mention is made of the means whereby we come to share in the oneness of Christ's body. This omission may have arisen from a desire to avoid a reference to sacraments as beyond the particular concern of the article, but an attempt to describe "the essential nature of the Church as found in the scriptural witness to revelation" cannot avoid the sacramental if it is to be true to its terms of reference. Besides, if Christ is "God's primary community-creating gift to men," we must surely be able to see this community, and there must be some way of entering it.

It is possible to agree that "Where Christ is . . . there is the Church"; this has been the doctrine of the Church from the beginning. But we believe that it is not only safer, but also true, to say that this power belongs to the Church simply because Christ is where the Church is, and we believe that the Church was made visible so that we would know where Christ is. We are also warned in Scripture not to believe "if any man" says to us, "lo, here is Christ, or there" (St. Matthew 24:23).

God met man's need by making himself visible in his supreme revelation of himself in the Incarnation, and this need of man is not less evident with respect to the Church. To say that "it is *community* which is the reality of our common life" is to say nothing at all about the essential oneness of the Church, because community is the expression of our oneness, not our oneness itself. This raises the question of priorities, the difference between "union" and "unity."

Union is the condition of the life in Christ which is shared by all those who are members of the Church, that is to say, of those who are incorpo-

rated into the body of Christ. Christ's body is forever an integrated whole, which is neither increased nor diminished in its wholeness by the addition of members or by the refusal of people to accept incorporation. Union is the objective state of the Church, so that even when we are totally unconscious of other people as members of the Church, our union with them still exists.

Unity on the other hand is the expression here in the world of the union we have in the body of Christ. It is expressed in many different ways, so that time and space are not necessarily deterrents to unity. But because unity is in large measure subjective, it is open to the liabilities of sin—to the insistence upon personal opinion, the refusal to accept doctrine, order and discipline, or even the neglect of prayer and of those acts of charity which are in many cases the only way in which our unity can be expressed.

## II

In what then does the essential oneness of the Church consist? It consists in our union with Christ. It was for this that Jesus prayed "that they all may be one; as thou Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us" (St. John 17:21). Presumably St. Paul meant the same thing when he wrote to the Romans: "So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Romans 12:5).

The union we have in Christ must be a union of personal being. The characteristic which separates humanity from other created things is personality, by which man is conscious not only of himself, but also of other persons and of his relation to them. This characteristic man has received from the Creator who himself is Personal Being, and who created man "in his own image." Our being therefore must be similar to the being of God, even though derivative. Man from the beginning stood in a special relationship to God, a relationship both essential and moral, so that he could speak of God as Father, and see God's purpose for himself as sonship.

It was to restore this image, which contained the similitude of sonship, that the eternal Son took manhood in the Incarnation. Our derivative sonship was thus taken into the generated Sonship of Christ, and was offered by the Son to the Father, once for all in the flesh, but eternally in the spirit. The various acts of the earthly life of Christ were the historical facets of the single eternal act of redemption by which man was made fit again for the life with God for which he was created, and as we share the personal being of the historical manhood of Christ, so also we can share the personal being of the redeemed and glorified manhood of Christ.

The meaning of Christmas does not seem so difficult for people to understand as the meaning of Easter and the Ascension. For God to come into the world seems possible; that a man should rise from the dead and ascend into heaven is not so easy to accept. But we must assert that the manhood of Christ, which he took in the Incarnation, went into the tomb and also came out of the grave on the first Easter. That same manhood, now glorified, ascended into heaven and there eternally intercedes for us. The

Ascension of Christ did not signify the end of the humanity of Christ any more than our death signifies the end of our humanity. "The heavens have prepared a throne, the clouds His Ascension. *The Angels marvel, beholding a man exalted over them.* The Father awaiteth Him, Whom as co-eternal He hath in His bosom."<sup>3</sup> Stephen, when he was being stoned, saw "Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). It was as a man that he recognized him.

It is into the glorified manhood of Christ that we are incorporated, not merely by our acceptance of the mighty acts of God in Christ, not simply by an intellectual assent to any creed or statement of belief, but by the acceptance of God's Grace in a sacramental act appointed for this purpose, namely Baptism. It is then that we become *new* creatures, *fili in Filio*. And it is because we are so incorporated that we become essentially one in the Church.

In the second section of his article, Professor Fennell represents the essential nature of the Body of Christ as (i) "a community of persons united to one another through their sharing of a common faith in Him and the love which His spirit quickens in their hearts," and (ii) "*Koinonia*—a fellowship of personal beings called out of self-isolation into communion with God and their fellows, genuine corporeity as over against perverse individualism."

It is difficult to tell what is meant by "a common faith." Presumably, acceptance of a common creed is not meant, because elsewhere the writer states that the essential unity of the Church does not lie "in a body of doctrinal beliefs or even of creedal confessions of faith." But the act of faith is personal to each individual. It is an experience which in itself cannot be shared with anyone else except by expression of some sort, creedal or otherwise. The faith could hardly be made common in any other way.

Similarly, *Koinonia* is the *expression* of the essential life of the Church: it is not that life itself. Through their fellowship the members of the Body express the new life that is in them. If priorities can be assigned, then both the sharing of a common faith and fellowship must be secondary to being, and are therefore on the same level as worship-forms, doctrine, creed and ministry. The very Scriptures are in this sense secondary, because they express the meaning for various people of the revelation of God in Christ.

No one doubts that many people in all parts of the Church on earth, and in other groups of Christian people, have made a response to the revelation of God in Christ, and if this were sufficient, then the fellowship of all these people would be assured. But apart from those who do not think that incorporation into Christ is necessary, there remains the fact that those who are in Christ have not yet realized the full sanctification of Christ. They are in the process of becoming *de facto* what they already are *de jure*, and sin frequently prevents the unity we so ardently desire.

3. Orthodox Church Office for Ascension Day; cf. Ps. 8:5; Hebr. 2:7, 9.

## III

We still have to notice some of those things which Professor Fennell says are secondary but not unnecessary. Even if we accepted "community" and "*Koinonia*" as descriptive of the essential nature of the Church we should expect them to have some concrete structural form and expression in the world. If we went further and really accepted the Church as a body we should expect it to have some of the characteristics of all natural bodies, for the Church is not a collection of individual particles held together by some external force, but the "Body of Christ," the union of all those who are incorporated into the living Son of God. It is therefore the continuing incarnate life of Jesus who is *a man*.

To speak of things as secondary but not unnecessary is to make a distinction between the essential and the necessary so nice as to be inconceivable. Can a body be a body without a form into which the parts are organized, and is this form essential to the existence of the body? Or again, if a body lives will it not act in a manner consistent with its particular nature as a body? If, as Professor Fennell says, "The Church is the creation of God," are we to suppose that in this one instance God created something which has no form or order or distinctive mode of action?

We are told for example, that "Church order cannot be regarded as of the essence" of the Church, and that it cannot become "an article of faith." Ministry itself is of the essence of the Church because it is a characteristic of the life of Christ, and therefore of the life of the Church. *The* ministry is indeed "God's gift to the Church," but we have never heard of a gift of God which either did not have a characteristic order of its own, or did not produce effects of a particular order. If the ministry "has been called into being by God in Christ," we may be sure that the being into which it has been called will have a certain order. As far as we can discover, the Church never thought otherwise.

When Mr. Fennell writes that "it (ministerial order) serves to constitute Christ's Body, but it is not itself the constitutive element," one wonders just what he means. A body is usually made up of several constitutive elements, many of which are rather more than of the *bene esse* of the body. If the ministry serves to constitute Christ's Body, it is certainly *a* constitutive element, and no body can be said to exist, or at least to exist in its fulness, if it lacks any of its constitutive elements.

If, as Professor J. K. S. Reid says, "The biblical record concerning the ministry leads . . . to ambiguous conclusions,"<sup>4</sup> this does not of itself dispose of the apostolic ministry as it existed, and still exists, in the Church Catholic. What is more important is that by the time the Church had decided what was Catholic Scripture, it had also been operating for some time under what we would call the Catholic Ministry. And just as there was some

4. J. K. S. Reid, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Ministry*, Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Paper, No. 4 (1955), p. 30.

doubt in the early days as to what should constitute Scripture, so also we may expect to find some confusion in the language used concerning the ministry. We are not, however, among those who find the Scriptures so very obscure and ambiguous concerning the ministry, nor can we see why it should be supposed that the early Church was so unaware that it should "submit everywhere, without a single surviving protest, to the imposition of novel claims to authority by ambitious individuals."<sup>5</sup>

Certainly the ministry of the Church is functional, because ministry is the function of the body. The body is made so that it can perform its functions, and it has the parts in their proper order in its form necessary to those functions. If the ministry is "necessary for the perpetuation and edification of the Church," in what way can that ministry which the Church has always considered essential be said to be only of the *bene esse* of the Church?

The functions of the ministry belong to the Church because it is the body of Christ, but no created body either prescribes its own functions or decides what part of itself will carry any particular function. The New Testament evidence is that Jesus chose the Apostles and commissioned them. There is sufficient evidence also that the Apostles exercised *episcopē* in the Church, and that they felt able to pass this ministry on. The Church also continued the apostolic practice of granting to certain men *episcopē*, which has meant in all ages at least the right and the power to hand the ministry on to those who are called, and who have convinced the Church that they are called, to the ministry.

There is only one ministry to which God can call a man, and that is to the ministry of the Church which is God's ministry. But not everyone who is called to the ministry fully realizes his call, because many do not recognize the Church, take no part in its life, and are therefore not known by those whose business it is to "try the spirits, whether they are of God" (I John 4:1).

Those of us who "cherish a ministry in apostolic succession" and "make it a *sine qua non* of the Church" are bound to do so because we see in it the given order of the Body. "Let all respect the deacons as representing Jesus Christ, the Bishops as a type of the Father, and the presbyters as God's high council and the Apostolic College. Apart from these no Church deserves the name."<sup>6</sup> It is necessary to contend that ministerial order, while not *the* primary element which constitutes the Church, is nevertheless *a* constitutive element. It is even more important today to insist that the ministry is only *one* of the necessary elements because of the tendency in discussions on the subject of unity to put the apostolic ministry on trial, as if, were it found guilty of insufficient biblical evidence, or too sufficient rejection by reformed Christian groups, the whole Catholic idea of the Church would stand condemned.

5. R. T. Halliday, "The Doctrine of The Ministry," *Church Quarterly Review*, 1958, p. 16.

6. Ignatius of Antioch, *To The Trallians*, 3.



We come now to the last matter on which we wish to offer some comment—the Eucharist. There is no evidence either from scripture or from the life of the Church that the Eucharist was ever a means to unity. It has always been the chief act of worship of the Church re-presenting the sacrifice of Calvary in the offering by the Body of itself to God through Jesus Christ. “If ye then are the body and members of Christ, the mystery of yourselves is laid upon the table of the Lord, the mystery of yourselves ye receive.”<sup>7</sup>

What Professor Fennell is interested in is the separation between Christians at the Lord’s Table. He writes: “If the Church of Christ is as we have understood it to be, we fail to discern the Body whenever we refuse to act upon the truth that all who believe in and love the Lord Jesus Christ are essentially one in Him and exclude from fellowship at His table fellow-members of the *ecclesia* of God.” We have already shown that we cannot accept “all who believe in and love the Lord Jesus Christ” as an adequate description of the Church. Separation at the Lord’s Table arises from the same causes which prevent fellowship at other levels.

Even the modern practice known as intercommunion—the word itself almost defeats the object it seeks to promote—emphasizes the disunity of the people who take part. Acts of intercommunion are special occasions: not the result of natural activity by the Church. They require special invitations to people, who do not normally consider themselves one, to act in this particular instance as if they were not divided. In some cases intercommunion may require a formal act of schism on the part of the person participating, because the Church, to which he believes he belongs, does not allow those who are not of the Church to assist at the Eucharist. And after what is called communion they go their own ways not actually united, and without any greater sense of unity. Whatever this may be, it is not the offering of the Eucharist.

It is the Church—made up of those who are in Christ by incorporation, by acceptance of sound doctrine, by fellowship and communion with the Bishop—that is able to offer the Eucharist. For the Eucharist to be an effective act of union and unity in the Church, it is necessary that the constituted unity of the Church should be present not only at, but also in, the offering. It is simply this which is lacking among groups of Christians. “Shall two walk together except they have agreed?” (Amos 3:3). Can people who are in fact disunited make the offering of unity and eat the Bread of Unity?

#### IV

The search for unity will be hard and long, and while we would be unfaithful to our profession of faith if we left any stone unturned in our efforts to effect unity, nevertheless we believe that the way of unity is set for us. Our oneness can only be in Christ as he is in the Father.

7. Augustine of Hippo, *Tr. in Joan*, xxvi, 17.

This essential oneness will be shown in the world by unity of faith, doctrine, practice and order among those who are in Christ. James was not wrong when he said that "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20), nor did he limit himself to works of charity. He saw quite clearly that a verbal profession of faith could be made comprehensible to others only by a total acceptance of and commitment to the requirements of the faith professed.

We believe that when all Christians reach this state we shall have come to the condition mentioned by the writer to the Ephesians; we shall have come to the "unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" which will finally bring us "unto a perfect man" (Ephesians 4).