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THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE great Œcumenical Movement—and let us be quite frank: the manifest powerlessness of the divided Church in face of a disunited, suffering, helpless, but very critical world—has brought home to all of us the pressing necessity of seeking ways to a reunion of Christendom. Many Christian leaders of outstanding merit have devoted their earnest deliberations to this problem, but it is never useless to remind ourselves anew of some of the grounds and implications of this formidable task; and, of course, it can never be superfluous to turn afresh to the light of the Scriptures. In this spirit we shall try to regard some salient aspects of the unity of the Church as it appears in the New Testament.

The first fact which should be borne in mind is simply this: even in the times of the New Testament the unity of the Church was not a simple fact merely to be taken into account, but quite on the contrary it already constituted a major and very serious problem. The very emphasis which many New Testament authors lay on the unity of the Church is a proof that this unity could not simply be taken for granted, that it was in a real danger, that it was a problem and in a sense a goal still to be achieved. This is the background of our Lord's prayer "that they all may be one" (John xvii. 21), of the great emphasis on the unity of the Church in the First Epistle to Corinthians and in the Epistle to the Philippians and of the words about the oneness of the Body of Christ in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

If we enquire which were the specific problems and dangers to the unity, we of course meet in the first place the tremendous problem how, how far, on which ground and in which sense the Churches of the Old and of the New Covenants form a real unity. To apprehend the reality of Christ's having broken down the middle wall of partition between Israel and the Gentiles, to grasp all implications of this reality was a very intricate and difficult task. This is the background of all the familiar divergencies of Jews and Gentiles, of Judaists and Hellenists, of Jerusalem and Antioch, of James, Peter and Paul, of the differences on the specific significance of circumcision, baptism and

faith as paths leading to the participation in the People of God of the Last Age. How serious was this difficulty, how real the danger to the unity of the Church a mere glimpse into the Epistle to the Galatians and into the Book of Acts will show us, and the subsequent history of the Church proves clearly that the problem was not in fact mastered so thoroughly that no sectarian separatism could have arisen and persisted in the early Church. And there are indications that there were other differences above this overwhelming problem of Jews and Gentiles. The two very clearly differentiated traditions about our Lord's Resurrection, the "Galilee" tradition of Mark and Matthew and the "Jerusalem" tradition of Luke and John, suggest that there may have been various currents and types of piety and of theology even among Christians of Jewish and Palestinian origin. Another aspect of this problem are the divisions within the Church in Corinth. At the first sight they may seem to have been mere personal cliques, but on further examination it would appear that Paul, Apollos and Peter must have represented various and not easily reconcilable types of presenting the Christian message and of doing the Christian work. If we add that not only important passages of St. James's Epistle (ii. 1-9; v. 1-7), but also St. Paul's order for the Lord's Table (1 Cor. xi. 17-21) and of course his Epistle to Philemon suggest the presence of considerable social and economic tensions within the early Churches (differences between rich and poor, free and slave), we do not by any means exhaust all the New Testament indications of disunities in the early Church but merely draw attention to the most salient points.

The main question to be asked is: how does the New Testament meet this challenge? How does it try to solve the intricate problems implied in the very real dangers to the unity of the Church? By what means does it propose to re-establish this unity, or perhaps: on what grounds does it dare to maintain that this unity does in fact persist in spite of all appearances?

One of the traditional and in fact classic ways of answering these questions is the insistence that the Church was from the very first bound together by the ties of one single Order of Ministry entrusted by our Lord to the Apostles and subsequently given over by an uninterrupted succession to other bearers of this clearly defined official authority. In other words, the unity of the Church is being sought here in the unity of an

organised office, in the constitutional unity, in the ministry endowed with clear-cut and legally defined authority. It certainly is quite obvious that the authority especially of the Apostles as witnesses of our Lord's life and teaching and particularly of His Resurrection has been enormous and that it was a very important factor working for unity in times of crisis. But this authority was certainly not as absolute and not as unquestionably united to their persons as the theory of the unity residing in the Order of Ministry would seem to require. It certainly is not without a deep significance that the very term "apostle" is not used within the limits of the New Testament in a clear-cut and unambiguous way. It sometimes designates Christian missionaries in general, in other passages witnesses of the Resurrection, in others still The Twelve (or The Eleven), but usually The Twelve plus St. Paul. The position of St. Paul appears in a sense anomalous and it indicates that things were not so clearly defined as later ages have imagined. And besides The Twelve there were The Seven whose function apparently was much more important than that of mere auxiliaries in the work of social welfare. In the Book of Acts we meet the Elders, whose relation to the Apostles does not seem to be presented uniformly; in the Epistle to the Philippians again we find Bishops and Deacons without any mention of Elders. It would seem that the "constitutional" arrangements in the earliest Churches were still quite fluid and not in any way uniform and that therefore the real basis and means of the unity of the Church cannot be found on this field.

But does the unity of the Church according to the witness of the New Testament repose on a doctrinal foundation, on the unity of dogmatics? If we start from the idea of a dogmatic edifice of more or less strict definitions and clear-cut formulas our answer can again hardly be in the affirmative. It is notorious that various strata of the New Testament tradition do not use the same terms as expressions of the basic realities of faith. The concept of Justification by Faith does not appear outside the Pauline (or post-Pauline) books, the term Kingdom of God is very rare outside the Synoptic Gospels and appears only once in the Gospel according to St. John, and there are clear differences—which is not the same thing as contradictions—between the Christologies of the various strata of the New Testament. This certainly means that we cannot assume that the unity of

the Church according to the New Testament is guaranteed by any terminological uniformity. But the problem is deeper still. If we consider even the basic problem of unity in the New Testament, that of Jews and Gentiles, we find that it was not really solved by any absolutely clear and final doctrinal decision. I cannot go thoroughly over the beaten ground of the exposition of Acts xv and of its relation to Gal. ii; but so much at least seems clear, that the vital questions presented to the Apostles were not all of them finally and unequivocally settled. It certainly was settled that the Gentiles were not to be forced to accept circumcision. But what about the born and circumcised Jews? Were they to regard themselves as free from all obligations of the Law also? Or was it rather understood that they would furthermore preserve some at least of the ceremonial prescriptions? It seems that the "Apostles' Council" reached a kind of compromise which on purpose left open some practically important questions. Further conflicts like that at Antioch on the occasion of St. Peter's visit there were thus made possible, but the unity of the Church was thus preserved in the spirit of mutual charity and tolerance even while real and rather troublesome differences of principle and practice were extant. St. Paul, it is true, seems to have stood rather aloof from this compromise and to have preferred to transfer his future activity to fields outside the area where the so-called "Apostles' Decree" embodying this compromise had been proclaimed. But even St. Paul did not because of that break his connection with Antioch or Jerusalem. Even in his eyes the underlying unity of the Church remained intact.

What is the significance of this "agreement to differ"? It would seem that all parties were above all constrained by their vivid sense that the Church in spite of all appearances *was* one, because there is one Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. It was something very simple, but very strong. The Church *is* one because there is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one Baptism, one Table of the Lord. There may be very real differences among us men, very hard to overcome; we may not be able to see clearly or to show in ready terms *how* we are really one—but we belong together and we cannot finally go apart because we belong to the one Lord. The unity of the Church is grounded on the transcendent order and it may be impossible for us at the moment to translate it into generally intelligible forms—but in spite of this the unity *is* there and if we can do no other, we may perhaps

for a time go out of one another's way rather than finally cut the bond which holds us together. And in any case we are constrained by the bond of duty of mutual charity.

This implies no sentimentality and no underrating the importance of strenuous theological thinking. If it should appear that the difference of our formulas is in very reality an expression of our different attitudes towards the one Lord; if, in other words, it should appear that we do *not* have the same relation of obedience and hope and implicit trust to Him; if some of us should put their ultimate trust or a part of it in other grounds of hope than Him—then it apparently would mean that we were *not* one in the Lord and that the bond between us *had* been cut. And in this case even the differences of words and formulas, even seemingly minute differences, might acquire essential significance; they might become grounds of disunity within the Church, or rather means to ascertain that the unity has been broken. This is the meaning of the stiff attitude of St. Paul manifested in his Epistle to the Galatians; according to his insight the negation of “justification by faith, without works” implied lack of real trust in the all-sufficiency of Christ, it implied worship of other divinities (perhaps of the divinity of self), and therefore was to be met only by a clear and fighting *Nol* Doctrine *is* important for the unity of the Church according to the New Testament. But the pure doctrine, which is the requisite of the one Church, is a much more dynamic concept than most of the orthodox theologies of old and recent times have suspected.

Let us not prolong unduly this paper by lengthy applications to our present tasks. But it is perhaps useful to add that we do not plead for a weak underrating of the importance of dogmatic thinking nor do we suppose that all will be well if only we throw aside all doctrinal ballast and indulge in speaking vaguely about charity. And we do not believe either that the way to the unity of the Church can be found by reducing the Christian doctrine to a low common denominator, that is by closing our eyes to those points in which the various Christian denominations and schools of theology do really differ. It seems to us that the way of hope lies rather in every one of us trying anew to understand the Christian truth more profoundly, exactly in the light of his own particular doctrinal tradition, but without pride, without intolerant contempt for others, without putting all his hope in ready-made formulas, but rather hoping—perhaps against

hope—that the more deeply he penetrates into the meaning of the ultimate truth of the Word according to his own light and according to his own spiritual guides, the more he will be able to apprehend at the end of his way the living Christ who always remains above our understanding and the more likely he will be to find himself one with those who have arrived at the same goal perhaps from the opposite direction. We must, in other words, approach our tasks without intellectual and theological defeatism, but also without pride, with a humble readiness to learn and to revise our ways and habits of thought, however glorified by a long tradition; and so we may at least in some moments find ourselves one with brethren from other, perhaps very remote and even hostile denominations and schools of thought. This is the way in which we theologians can in a humble but real way contribute in the light of the New Testament to the goal of a re-united Church.

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