

Christian Unity and Church Union.¹

OUR problem of unity and union calls for consideration in four fields which are relatively distinct although definitely inter-related. It is important carefully to consider these in the light of the various attitudes in different denominations toward these two concepts.

Theoretically all Christians accept, at least in principle, the duty and the fact of Christian fellowship among all those "who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." Doubtless there are very many who have little awareness of this fellowship and no active consciousness of the unity of all believers in our common experience and blessed hope. Most Christians, of all communions, might well cultivate a far more lively and realistic "love toward all the saints."

Church union—certainly all will admit—may be something quite other than this spiritual oneness of all believers in Christ. There are many earnest Christians who believe that outward organic union of all believers in one all-comprehensive organised church not only is not demanded by the teachings or the spirit of the New Testament, but that it is contrary to that teaching and spirit. These insist that in whatever measure such organic union has been achieved it has tended definitely and powerfully to hinder the true understanding of the Christian experience and the vital and characteristic functioning of the Christian gospel. Still, any profession of unity in spirit and sentimental feeling which rejects every form of concrete, visible and working expression is unrealistic and deceptive. If our oneness in spiritual experience can bring us together in no visible fellowship in worship and work, we must question its actuality as experience; and it can certainly have no value as influencing the world.

In the light of the long continued claims of the Roman:

¹ At the suggestion of Dr. Rushbrooke, President of the Baptist World Alliance, we reprint the following article, which has appeared in *The Review and Expositor*, the well-known theological quarterly issued by the Faculty of the Southern Baptist Seminary. The author is Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion and Missions. British Baptists and those of the Northern Baptist Convention (U.S.A.) have accepted membership in the World Council—though the Northern Convention did so subject to drastic reservations drawn up by a special committee appointed to study the subject; Baptists of the Southern Convention (the largest organised group of our confession) have so far felt bound to stand out. This article reveals an interesting trend of thought among Southern Baptists. The topic is of the first importance to us all.—EDITOR.

Church and its history, and in the light of the institutional life and dogmatic formulations of the Orthodox Church, and especially in the light of the now very powerful and persistent tendency and desire on the part of many leaders of the Protestant Churches to effect institutional and organisational union of all Protestantism, it is especially important that clear thinking, loyal obedience and holy sentiment shall be combined in faithful facing of the issues involved in this entire matter.

1. First of all, we need to think of the field of personal and corporate experience of God in Christ Jesus wrought in men by the Holy Spirit. Members of the body of Christ's redeemed and called are separated from "the world" and constitute what Paul calls "a new humanity," and "the family of God" and "the commonwealth of the saints." To deny, reject, or neglect the fact of unity among those thus bound together in the experience and purpose of God in Christ is surely to be ignorant of the nature of Christianity. Here at least is a compelling fact of unity demanding some adequate, practical expression.

2. There is next, the field of creedal definitions and claims, involving doctrinal beliefs. For the majority of denominations these are defined in a series of formally expressed creeds. There is much difference among those who accept the historic creeds as to how many and which are authoritative in the defining of historic Christianity and the continuity of the Christian Church; and concerning both the extent and the forms of application of the authority of the creeds to modern Christian belief and practice. Among the denominations of the congregational type "Confessions of Faith" are usually preferred over creeds. The confessions are less fixed and are more easily subject to revision, and are regarded as having no external and binding authority over modern believers. However, it should be frankly admitted that confessions do have a tendency to function as creeds unless they are repeatedly adjusted to the changing intellectual atmosphere and cultural context of the developing life of human society as a whole. When subject to these adjustments confessions do allow more freedom than creeds; and by so much those who confess their faith ought to be more ready and active for freedom of fellowship than are those who must ever be conscious of being adherents of fixed creeds.

Whether they be creeds or confessions these formulations have always stated the experience and conviction of Christians in a certain cultural context, and at a given stage in development of the Christian movement in history. They have sought to relate themselves definitely to the essential elements of original Christianity and to conserve the continuity of the true Christian life and faith.

Once adopted a creed—and in less measure a confession also—tends to restrain free experience and to fix the limits and forms of thought and life.

Whether we think of creeds or confessions we have here a sphere in which we must seek clear thinking as we face the dual problem of unity and union.

3. Closely related to creedal questions, but readily distinguishable, is the sphere of ecclesiastical forms and dogmas. Here belong questions of the ministry, sacramental concepts, institutional forms and relations. Does the ministry constitute the essence of the church, or is it in any way authoritatively essential to the existence of the church? Did Jesus first create a ministry which should ever be the medium of continuity of His gospel and of His Church and His churches; so that without the ministry there would be no true church? On the other hand, is the church the first institutional creation of the Christ which then under the leadership of the Holy Spirit produces its ministry? To put it in another form, is the ministry essentially structural within the church or is it functional?

Do the physical symbols and the physical experience of baptism and the Lord's Supper *per se*, how-be-it by divine appointment and intent, actually effect some change in the participants, or is this change effected only in personal response by faith to the spiritual presence and operation of God in the participants? As to this there is, then, the further question: Are the value and the effect of the use of these physical symbols dependent on some official and special endowment and enduement in the administrator, or are the reverence of the congregation and the faith of the participants the vitalising factors? In yet other words: Are these ordinances hierarchal and ecclesiastical functions with sacramental impartation, or are they expressions of faith in simple gospel communion?

4. We have still to take account of the field of practical living and work. This involves co-operation in impress and effort of the total Christian following—or of some definite section of that following—in the tasks of proclaiming and applying the gospel to the needs of the world, and to the needs of Christians in the growth and maturing of their experience and in the various relationships into which they are brought. Where even two Christians participate in a joint experience or share a common task we have an elementary instance of unity—it may be of union—in the practical field. The co-operating individuals may be increased, even multiplied indefinitely. Do they continue to work together and share in common experience as individuals, and only as individuals; or may and do groups of such workers link together as groups? Is it essential that groups participating in common ex-

periences and undertakings participate consciously as churches, ecclesiastical organisations? Must they actually represent, and have the formal sanction of, their distinctive groups, or may they be members of a new grouping for the particular ends, without compromising their standing in their distinctive "church" groups?

These questions might be amplified and expounded almost indefinitely. What has been said is probably sufficient to get rather clearly before us the different spheres of human Christian relationships which are involved in our considerations of church union and of Christian fellowship in the "unity of the Spirit" and in the wide ministries of the gospel.

Is it not now clear that in the present state of Protestantism there is no hope of union in one institutional church, so long as we undertake to work it out in fields 2 and 3? There are many considerations, historical, psychological, traditional and prejudicial which ought definitely to show us, not only that all the different Protestant and evangelical believers generally are unprepared for any such ecclesiastical union; but also that such a union would be contrary to the very genius of Protestantism and would tend to suppress the freedom which all believers have and should have in Christ Jesus. "The divided state of Christendom" is for many reasons deplorable. One may venture to question whether it is the "shame" and the "sin" and the "disgrace" so often proclaimed and denounced. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Hubmaier, Wesley and the rest have long been acclaimed as the great heroic Christian leaders of a vitally essential movement in the life of Christianity. Are we now to change that verdict of four centuries and list them as the arch sinners of modern Christianity because they led in founding objective schisms in the Christian body? Are Roger Williams and John Clarke, Coke and Asbury devilish violators of the established ecclesiastical orders on the American continent; or are they still to be recognised as the apostles of new experience and new freedom in a continent made ready for a modern chapter in the history of the Christian gospel? Having been led into the freedom for which Christ made us free, must we in the interest of ecclesiastical union seek again a yoke of bondage, however plausibly the yoke may be padded and adorned with appealing sentiment and with plausible exhortation to a united front in the face of a needy world?

It ought to be beyond question that the polemics, the asperities, the antagonisms, the persecutions, the resentful spirit of revolt need to be transcended in the interest of a genuine Christian fellowship and of the stupendous task and the glorious challenge which face all the followers of Jesus Christ in this our day. Is there not a way to achieve unity and an ever-growing measure of co-operative sharing in the common tasks of a uni-

versal gospel for a human race that must be unified for its salvation, and for which the only hope of unification is in the redemption and the mastery of Jesus Christ in the life of mankind?

Is it perhaps possible on the basis of spiritual unity and of our fellowship in Christ, and in the interest of promoting the meaning of Christianity for the world's redemption and life, for us to unite in the fields 1 and 4? Can we approach such union in spirit and such unitedness in undertakings with the mutual and faithful understanding that our sharing in spiritual fellowship, and our co-operating in common tasks will not be aggressively used by ardent promoters of ecclesiastical union to undermine the positions and the loyalties of any group participating in the councils and the activities of working union? In this spirit, with this understanding, and with honest recognition and living up to the terms of mutual respect and true brotherhood in these two realms (1 and 4) unity and co-operation might increasingly be found. And if thereby some are led on to revision and reinterpretation of our understanding and aims in fields 2 and 3, no violence would be done to any conscience, and we might make real progress in the "Unity of the faith and in the accurate knowledge of the Son of God"; and thereby the Body of Christ might find itself "growing up in all things into Him who is its Head, and making the increase of the body unto the building of itself in love."

The effort to unite in a simple, inseparable movement the ideas and aims of both Oxford and Edinburgh, may be producing confusion and delaying progress. Thus far the World Council continues the "Conference on Life and Work," but seems to be hampered by the effort to include also "Faith and Order." Are not these two separate, even if parallel, movements? One works in our fields 2 and 3, the other in 1 and 4. Does not the genius and intent of the Christian gospel put experience and work in the forefront and call for following on in faith and order? Faith in the sense of living experience and active effort must precede "the Faith" in the sense of formulations of doctrine and forms of worship. If we have faith can we not respect and work with one another whatever our convictions and preferences concerning "the Faith"?

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