

Editorial

THE UNITY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

A WORLD which has shrunk into a neighbourhood through the conquest of space achieved by modern technical development, yet knows the bitterness of disunity in its life. This failure, written in letters of blood and fire twice in a generation, to achieve a common pattern of life based upon a common understanding of the meaning of human existence, might be expected to have predisposed men to search anxiously for the secret of one-ness with their neighbours. Probably there are few who are unaware of the urgent need for world unity, but certainly there are only few prepared for the drastic adjustments necessary in thought and practice if that unity is to come in this generation. Yet there is set in the world as in a paradox a body which despite its outward aspect of disunity, bears the divine secret of unity. "I believe in one Church" is an article of faith to the Christian which he dare not and will not abandon, even though the divinely created unity of the people of God is distorted into a caricature of competing ecclesiastical allegiances.

The longing in the heart of man to overcome the tragedy of divisiveness is matched by the age-long purpose of God, once hidden in the secret divine counsels but now revealed in the Gospel, "to sum up all things in Christ". There is and can be but one Christ—the Word made flesh—the concrete embodiment of all worthy human ideals—the representative Man in whom all men can find the meaning of their lives and a true oneness with each other. Christ is the beginning and the end, the very centre and meaning of history, so that He is the revelation of unity. By His creative action, one Church was set in the full stream of human history, and the necessary oneness of this Church derives its significance from this fact and not from any practical convenience which may be supposed to result from a unified organization. The Church has its unity only from its Lord and departs from that unity just in so far as it fails to bring itself resolutely into obedience to Him, having as its aim "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Unity then is of Christ. It is His creative act in history, made visible in the earthly life of the Church. Where He is there is oneness—the one Church which is His and which acknowledges His supreme lordship. We do not have to create unity, nor is it merely the result of a physical proximity or an instinctive gregariousness. It is created by Him in and between His people as their responsible personal existence is lived out in obedience to Him. What we have to do by disciplined obedience is to remove the human barriers to the activity of the one Spirit so that He may express Himself as the living principle of the one Body. This is a responsibility quite other than the drawing of ecclesiastical blue-prints or the laborious attempt to sew together the torn fragments of the seamless robe.

This oneness is to be after the pattern of the perfect oneness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "That they may be one, even as we are one." No other unity matters beside this perfect unity of one eternal purpose expressed in the mutual dependence of the Persons in the Godhead and revealed in time in the divine work of redemption. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself," so that the Cross is the fullest expression of the divine unity that we can know. "The Father gave the Son to be the Saviour of the world"; "Lo, I come to do thy will"; "When He the Spirit of truth is come . . . He shall not speak of Himself . . . He shall glorify Me : for He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you." Through this one divine action there came into existence a community whose members were at one with each other because of their common relationship to the one Lord. "All one in Christ Jesus" was the secret of their inner life in which as by anticipation they shared already in that divine life which by promise was to be more fully theirs hereafter. "I in them and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one."

The unity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost is expressed once for all in time by the Word made flesh, crucified and risen, and the unity which is given to the Church in its creation must also find its visible form. In the primitive days this unity was known by an evident loyalty—"The multitude that believed were of one heart and of one mind"—and by a readiness so to order the structure of daily life that the mutual dependence of the members upon each other was a living reality—"Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common." Sharing in the common life of the earthly Body of Christ, owning a common allegiance and dependent upon a common salvation, the primitive community knew the meaning of oneness in the whole range of its life.

The seal and pledge of the common life of the Divine society, ever renewing the reality of its unity, was and is the Supper of the Lord. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ? Seeing that we, who are many, are one bread, one body, for we all partake of the one bread." The significance of a loaf in which many share, of a cup which many drink, cannot well be mistaken. There is no higher safeguard of the unity of the Spirit than the bond of peace which participation in thy heavenly feast offers.

To our shame, there have been spots in our feasts of charity. The one Church manifests not a whole but a broken life in the world, and the glory of the one Christ is obscured. Yet the paradox remains that even this broken life bears a witness to the one common life wherein alone men can find full salvation; and even in her divided state, the Church is graciously allowed to be the body to witness to the world of the meaning of unity. The way forward for us all is by a recovery within each separated communion of the richest meaning of the one bread and the one cup as the divinely appointed means whereby men of faith know themselves to be in Christ and can testify to the all-sufficiency of the one Christ.

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