

A.D. 1662 - Uniformity or Unity ?

THE year 1662 stands out in the religious annals of this country. The passing of the Act of Uniformity, and the consequent wholesale eviction of clergymen from their livings, and of schoolmasters and the fellows of colleges from the enjoyment of their scholastic privileges, has made an indelible impression on the imagination of the English people. The only parallel is that of the Disruption, in Scotland, where, in 1843, four hundred and seventy ministers of the Established Church vacated their charges as a protest against the domination of the Civil Courts in spiritual matters. The eviction was not by any means the first that had taken place in England. Indeed, for a century and more, ever since the suppression of the monasteries by Henry VIII., one party after another had inflicted the same penalty on those who differed from them in religion. Mary, on her succession, ordered the expulsion of all the married clergy. James I., on whom the hopes of toleration, both of Papist and Puritan, were placed in vain, declared of the latter, "I will make them conform or I will herry them out of the land," and, in pursuance of his threat, three hundred Puritan clergymen were deprived of their livings. Cromwell's ejectors, on the other hand, turned out many Episcopalians. There had been no monopoly of eviction since the Reformation. What then has caused this particular event to lay hold on the imagination of the Church?

The causes are doubtless complex. Not only was the number of individuals involved larger than in any previous eviction,—the total is generally placed at 2,000—but so strong a hold had the principles of the Reformation taken upon the people that the numbers effected by the ejection of their pastors probably reached to one third of the whole community. Moreover, by their refusal to conform where the inducements were so great, those who did leave their benefices in obedience to the dictates of conscience proved themselves to be men of strong conviction and sterling worth. The very cream of the clergy were driven into Dissent; the Church of England could ill afford to lose men like Richard Baxter and John Owen.

Two hundred and fifty years have passed since the fateful "Black Bartholomew's Day," 24th August, 1662, and there has been much celebration up and down the land of this decisive breach between Episcopacy and Nonconformity, which latter may be said to have finally set out upon its career from that date. It is needless to add anything to what has been said so well by many eminent men on the general question, but the main issue on that memorable day is one which deeply affects us even now. Then the blow was struck which shattered beyond all hope of recovery the solidarity of the Church of Christ in England, for, although many congregations of Separatists already existed, the great bulk of the people held for a national Church, each party, however, desiring to impose upon the nation the type which it favoured. Men sought *Uniformity* under the mistaken impression that thus they could command *Unity*; and possibly an examination of the relation between these two ideas in the light of the events of 1662 may help us in our thinking on some of the problems which engage the attention of the Christian Church to-day.

The ideal which dominated the minds of men in the Middle Ages was that of a Universal Church under Papal domination. When this ideal was shattered by the Reformation, the conception of uniformity did not fall with it. The Sovereign became the Head of the Church, and his or her religion was held to be binding upon the people of the realm, any deviation therefrom being regarded as a political offence. Thus Mary, on her elevation to the throne, at once rescinded all the Protestant legislation of Edward VI., and imposed Romanism upon the realm with an iron hand. She sent for Cardinal Pole that he might receive England once more "into the unity of our Mother the Holy Church." Elizabeth in turn rescinded the legislation of Mary and restored that of Edward. She passed the Act of Supremacy, which vested in the Crown the control of the Church. Without herself possessing any real religious sense, she regarded the differences which separated Christians as trifles, sought a *via media* which should unite all moderate men, and imposed it upon the nation. Her own indifference to spiritual things did not prevent her from exacting absolute conformity, and she firmly refused any suggestions from her Parliament for the regulation of religion. The religious practice of the people must conform to her will.

The ideal, however, seemed to be uniformity of worship rather than unity of doctrine. Even Laud acknowledged the right to full freedom of thought, especially among the learned,

while he rigidly enforced uniformity of worship. Nor was this ideal confined to Episcopalians. With equal zeal the Presbyterians demanded the universal adoption of Presbyterian forms of worship. Thus when Pym, in the early stages of the Civil War, sought the alliance of the Scots, the price demanded was the imposition of Presbyterianism on England and Ireland. And when Charles I. was a prisoner in the hands of the Scots at Newcastle, one of the terms which they, in conjunction with the English Parliament, sought to impose upon him, was the establishment of the Presbyterian worship.

And the Act of Uniformity was not by any means the first of its kind. A century earlier a similiar act made the first Prayer Book of Edward VI. compulsory, and "An Act for the Uniformity of Common Prayer, and Service in the Church, and Administration of the Sacraments," passed *Primo Elizabethæ*, stands at the head of the Book of Common Prayer to-day. It is indeed the revival of an Act of the Parliament "holden in the fifth and sixth years of our said late Sovereign Lord King Edward the Sixth." Uniformity was the almost universal conception of the age.

What was the result of this measure? There is no need to speak here of the growth of the great Nonconformist denominations, the Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, and Quakers, even under the repressive policy of Clarendon. The Act of Uniformity was the charter of Nonconformity. The great schism, about the sinfulness of which we have so often heard, was the result of Prelatic intolerance. The members of the Royalist Parliament of Charles II., rather than the King himself, who would have tolerated Puritans in order to secure a like toleration for Papists, were the great schismatics.

But even within the Church of England what results have been secured? How different is the form of worship in most of its churches to-day from that imposed by Elizabeth in the Act under which they now exist! If Laud, High-Churchman as he was (but no Papist) were to return to England to-day, with what amazement would he look round the churches of our land! Nowhere has the Act of Uniformity proved more futile than in the Church, the worship of which it was intended to regulate. Nowhere is the absolute failure of the ideal of Uniformity so amply demonstrated. And, indeed, uniformity in the Church of Christ is an absolute impossibility. The more virile the Church, the more impossible does it become. As "there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit," so "there are diversities of ministrations, and the same Lord."

But if we must give up the idea of Uniformity, must we equally abandon the hope of Unity? In these latter days there have been great yearnings after the unity of the Christian Church. The ideal of her Lord, "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us," has laid hold on the imagination of many earnest Christians. The grave social problems of our land, and the overwhelming task presented by our Foreign Missionary work, have brought enthusiasts face to face with the urgent necessity of presenting a united front to the forces of heathenism at home and abroad. Notable advances have been made in the direction of union, as, for example, in the amalgamation of the General and Particular Baptists, the formation of the United Methodist Church and of the United Free Church of Scotland. It is well that, where differences are not vital, the union should be complete. But much more than this has been achieved; for there can be unity of spirit where concrete union is yet very far from possible. This has been remarkably illustrated during the last few years, first in the Commissions preparatory to the World Missionary Conference, and since then in the Annual Conferences of the great Missionary Societies. There, members of widely different communions, from the High Church of England through the whole range of the denominations to Baptists or Quakers, have met and wrought, in perfect fellowship, without any sense, even the most remote, of strain or mutual suspicion. A common task and common aims have held them in perfect accord. There, even conformity of worship is achieved; for all unite with equal devotion, now in extempore prayer, again in the beautiful phrases of Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer or in the recital of the great creeds of Christendom.

The phrase "organic unity" has often been used in connection with the Church as indicating something impossible of attainment. But surely organic unity is the one thing which the Church enjoys. The conferences which have just been referred to are composed of men and women who are "in Christ." Each meets his brother there in a unity which is organic and therefore perfect. The necessity of the day is that the Church should realize in practice the unity which already obtains in Christ Jesus. That hard words or sneers should be for ever banished in the realization of common interests and profound agreements.

For the real basis of Unity is not Uniformity but Liberty. When the early Church met in its first Council at Jerusalem, the question under debate had a close resemblance to that which is a main issue in the present day. The necessity of the

sacraments of Judaism to salvation was the subject of dispute. The conclusion of the Council was that there should be liberty. The only necessary condition imposed upon converts from among the Gentiles was the renunciation of idols and of the obscene rites which accompanied idol worship. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit an unholy schism was averted. It is difficult for the Free Churchman who has reached the full consciousness of salvation through simple faith in Jesus Christ to believe that sacraments can have any efficacy—to believe otherwise, indeed, than that they may be a grave hindrance to the Gospel. Yet surely we may say of the Sacramentarians what St. Peter was compelled to admit in regard to the Gentiles, "God, which knoweth the heart, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith." It is for them to reconcile sacramentarianism with salvation by faith. It is for us to prove to them by consecrated lives that we have been "saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in like manner as they."

The one great service which the Act of Uniformity rendered to the Church of Christ was that it drove out into the wilderness a large number of godly and consecrated men who there came to recognize that religious liberty was essential to the well being of the Church—that a Free Church in a Free State was the grand ideal towards which the Church of Christ must ever advance. It may be that, before long, we shall see the whole Church of Christ in this land emancipated from the bonds of the State. The present negotiations between the two great Presbyterian churches in Scotland may have this interesting result; whereas the conflict between the laws of the State and the Canon law of the Church of England, which are equally binding on all true Churchmen, may well make the present bondage of the Church to the State intolerable to men of tender conscience. The emancipation of the Church from the State might obviate one evil from which the Church has suffered from the days of Constantine, viz. the baneful influence of politics on the spiritual life of the community. In any case, a great step would have been taken, towards that liberty which is the absolute essential of unity.

But when we speak of unity we do not necessarily think of the merging of the various denominations in one administrative body. The Church of Christ profits by the witness of every denomination that has a message of its own for the World. If our own distinctive practice of Believers' Baptism, with its

assertion of the necessity of conversion and of a new life to be lived in the power of the Spirit of God, were discontinued, how great would be the impoverishment of the Church! Whilst holding the principles which we profess with no less strenuous grasp, surely we may enter with greater zeal into the corporate life of the Church of Christ; our outlook may well be wider than it is, and our judgment of those who differ from us tenderer. In any case, strife should cease. In Sir Thomas More's "Utopia" it was "lawfull for everie man to favoure and folow what religion he would, and that he mighte do the best he could to bring other to his opinion, so that he did it peaceablie, gentle, quietly, and soberlie, without hastie and contentious rebuking and invehing against other. If he could not by faire and gentle speeche induce them unto his opinion yet he should use no kind of violence, and refraine from displeasaunte and seditious woordes. To him that would vehemently and ferventlye in this cause strive and contende was decreed banishment or bondage."

While it is unlikely that we shall ever reach the ideal of the gentle Sir Thomas, in which the whole community worship together in the morning and each goes his several way in the afternoon, there is no saying how far the principles of liberty and toleration might carry us. The one condition of salvation in the New Testament is faith. The Church is a company of believers, and men who have a common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, not necessarily a common creed, are united in Him.*

On the other hand, the only uniformity imposed by the New Testament is that of conformity to the image of God's Son, and it would be well if the past centuries should have sufficed for the endeavour after a uniformity which Christ has never imposed, and that the Church should henceforth give "diligence to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."

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* Since this article was in print the writer has read Principal Forsyth's last volume, *Faith, Freedom and The Future*, in the closing chapter of which the whole question of the Unity of the Christian Church, and the contribution of the Free Churches towards it, is admirably discussed.