

10

The Unity of the Church

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It is inevitable that discussion about Christian unity should begin with the fact of separated denominations. Unity thus tends to be considered from the point of view of division. We ask how unity may be "achieved" or "expressed," or how "reunion" may be made. Necessary as such an approach is for some purposes it is not the most fruitful, and it is not the one taken in this chapter. Rather we shall seek first to recall the centrality of the concept of unity in the Bible, and, secondly, the unique and distinctive character of Christian unity. The third section will deal with matters suggested by these earlier inquiries.

I

It is not too much to say that the whole of the Bible sounds the note of unity or one-ness. This is because both Testaments are monotheistic in their account of God and because both Testaments

describe the mighty acts of God in calling and creating a people for his own possession. All thought about Christian unity must, therefore, be firmly grounded in the nature and the purpose of God himself. At the outset of our inquiry we must turn aside from all other concepts of unity or association, however useful some analogies may later prove to be. We can only know which analogies are serviceable when we know more about this unique unity.

1. Nothing about which the Bible speaks begins with statements about man; every declaration of scripture starts from a statement about God. So it is with unity. The first thing we have to learn is that God is ONE. Monotheism in the religion of Israel was more than a belief that God is the only God. Th. C. Vriezen has stressed that the Old Testament teaches both "God is *one* Being and God as *unique* Being." As he remarked, belief in the uniqueness of God existed whilst there was still belief that other gods existed; there was no God like Yahweh. But in the developed religion of the Hebrews, as notably in Deuteronomy, the uniqueness and the unity of God, though distinguishable, are closely related. As Vriezen put it, "The Unity indicates that God is not divided. His uniqueness means that Yahweh alone is God." ¹

It is the oneness of God that demands a total response from the whole man and from all his people. "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is *one*, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might."

It is of supreme importance when we turn to the New Testament that we never lose sight of the fact that this passionate certainty that God is one dominated the minds of the first Christians. It was partly due to the unshakableness of this conviction that the Christology of the early Church developed as it did. Whatever Jesus meant, he could not mean any division or discord within the being of the one God. The doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine about the unity of God, and it would be helpful if we could give wider currency to the term "Tri-unity."

¹ *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Newton Centre, Mass.: Charles T. Branford Company), p. 1751.

Contrary to opinions still widely expressed, the New Testament shows us very clearly that, in the words of one of the greatest living patristic scholars: "Christians were living *trinitarianly*" long before the time of councils and creeds. There is a host of passages in the New Testament in which Father, Son, and Spirit are associated together. They are associated always in the one Godhead, however, so that what is said of one may at other times be said of another and what is said of each is said of all.

It is, however, imperative to notice that Christian faith, from earliest days, was centered in a God who is both one and three. *A new concept of unity was born in this new understanding of God.* Social and family analogies used in exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity have been unpopular with most theologians, but we may be too afraid of such analogies. Certainly no other analogy is of much service. Because God is unique we cannot expect any comparison to be of much use, but at least we must say that when we think about God we must think of the supreme instance of "togetherness." This is part of what we mean when we say that God is love.

2. We shall return to this point shortly, but first we must notice the second truth on which the biblical emphasis upon unity is based. It has become almost a platitude now to say that the whole Bible is about God's covenant love and about the people of God. It is worth remembering, however, that only two or three generations ago few recognized this to be so. A young student in the nineteen-twenties noted and never forgot a lecturer's comment that the whole of the Bible was about two subjects—God and the Church. He noted it because it then seemed odd to speak of the Church in reference to the Old Testament and because it appeared to him to be obvious that while the New Testament has much to say about the Church its essential message is about the Kingdom.

Today we are all familiar with the recurrent themes that bind together books within the Testaments and the two Testaments with each other. Bible students talk about the concept of solidarity in Israel, about the prophetic insight into the universal purpose of God through the elect people, about the remnant, and about the

Son of man—a term with corporate as well as individual reference. We watch the people of God shrinking to the lonely Man on the cross, and we see New Israel being created as the Holy Spirit is given. We stand breathless at the fateful moment in the history of mankind before the gospel is taken to the Gentiles so that those who are not Abraham's kin may become Abraham's heirs. We recognize that the whole Bible is about the one people of God.

All this—and much more—is familiar to us, if not to the world. Do we, however, always recognize that the oneness of the people of God is dependent upon the oneness of God himself? And do we always recognize that this unity—this oneness—of the people of God is as essentially characteristic of that people as the divine oneness is of God himself?

That unity is of the *essence* of the Church is illustrated by most of the language used about the Church in the New Testament. It is, of course, impossible to gain more than a slight notion of New Testament doctrine about the Church if we limit ourselves to studying references to the word *ecclesia*. Even that word, however, is significant for our present purpose. Long ago F. J. A. Hort (*The Christian Ecclesia*) demonstrated that the references in the New Testament to "churches" in no way denies the primitive understanding of the oneness of the Church. For example, he wrote: "It is important to notice that not a word in Ephesians exhibits the one Ecclesia as made up of many Ecclesiae. . . . The members which make up the one Ecclesia are not communities but individual men."

It is, however, when we turn to other outstanding New Testament descriptions of the Church that its essential unity becomes more clear. These are "the people of God," "the Body of Christ," "the community [fellowship] of the Holy Spirit." In no instance could a plural noun be substituted; it is unthinkable that we should say "peoples," or "bodies," or "fellowships."

Paul S. Minear has made an exhaustive study of "*Images of the Church in the New Testament.*" Many of these images or analogies are of slighter importance and some of them occur infrequently. A study of them, however, shows very clearly that the vast majority

have oneness or unity as a significant part of their meaning. To cite but a few, notice the following: "A letter from Christ; one loaf; the Bride of Christ, the vine or fig-tree, the flock, the Holy Temple, the holy nation. . . ." All this is no linguistic accident. It is only if we denigrate the word "Church" to mean a building, or a collection of individuals gathered for some specific purpose or on some particular occasion, that we can speak about "churches." There cannot be more than one Israel. God is one and so must be the people of God.

II

Having looked briefly at the central and fundamental importance of unity in the biblical revelation we turn to consider the *distinctive character* of unity in relation to the Church. In so doing we do not turn to other matters but look again at the truths already noticed.

1. The unity of the Church is a *participation in the unity of the triune God himself*.

While this is most plainly and movingly taught in John 17, it is also expressed in very many strands of the New Testament teaching—in far more than can be noticed here. If the Church be thought of as the company of those who are *en Christo*, then it must be remembered that this "in" is a unique use of that preposition. All spatial reference is lost; it can also be said that Christ is *in us*. We are "one in him" because we all profess a common Lord and because we share in the one baptism; we have all been buried with Christ and are risen with him; we live in him and he in us. It is "in him" that we meet; in him we *inevitably* meet.

If it is as the *koinonia* that we consider the Church, then our fellowship with each other is not merely a way in which we demonstrate or seek to deepen our participation in the Spirit; it is the very meaning of that participation. It is impossible to receive the Spirit without being brought together with others who receive him.

All this is made plain—or as plain as it can be to human eyes

in this world—in the high priestly prayer of Jesus (John 17). Here, as C. H. Dodd and others have pointed out, we are given a picture of a "triangular relationship" between the Father and the Son, the Son and the disciples, and the disciples with one another.

The unity that we are to enjoy is not only to be *comparable* with the unity between Father and Son—though that is wonderful enough. It is to be part of the same unity. "As thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, so also may they be *in us*." In that one sentence is summed up the deepest meaning of Christian unity. Of John 17, William Temple—than whom no man has better served the cause of Christian unity nor displayed a greater gift for bringing Christians to a common mind—wrote:

Before the loftiness of that hope and calling our little experience of unity and fellowship is humbled to the dust. Our friendships, our reconciliations, our unity of spirit in Church gatherings or in missionary conferences—beautiful as these are, and sometimes even wonderful in comparison with our habitual life of sectional rivalries and tensions, yet how poor and petty they are in the light of the Lord's longing.

We should not, however, be content to speak about "our Lord's longing," as though this were a *totally* unanswered prayer. In Temple's own thought there was a strange dichotomy, so that he could say—quite inconsistently with much of his own finest teaching—"I believe in the Holy Catholic Church and sincerely regret that it does not at present exist." Rather, we must agree with what Temple himself said at the opening service of the Edinburgh Conference, 1937:

The unity of the Church, on which our faith and hope rest, is grounded in the unity of God and the uniqueness of His redeeming act in Jesus Christ. The "one body and the one spirit" correspond to the "one God and Father of all." The unity of the Church of God is a perpetual fact; our task is not to create it but to exhibit it.²

² For comment and quotations from Temple see P. Hartill, *The Unity of God* (London: Mowbray & Company, Ltd., 1952), pp. 149 ff.

In so far as we have our access to the one Father in the one Lord through the one Spirit, we are thereby brought into relation with all who share that privilege. However far away from them we feel ourselves to be, however far from us they think they are, we cannot in reality escape from each other. To be redeemed is to be brought into the redeemed family; to be in Christ is to be members of the one Body, to receive the Holy Spirit is to be made sharers in the *koinonia* of the Spirit.

Even if we are together in enmity, we are together. That is why there is something peculiarly sinful about divisions in Christendom. As civil war is more horrible than conflict between nations and family hatreds are more diabolical than strife between strangers, so—but more—disunity among Christians is grievous, shameful, and destructive.

It is this truth which is, at long last, beginning to disturb and to humble many Christians in many denominations. We have for some time sought to find a way of coming together; we are now beginning to find that we *are together* precisely because we are Christians at all. Now we see the true shame and scandal of our divisions. They are no longer to be thought of as divisions between rival parties or separated associations; they are divisions in God's one family, and that is why no other word for them is possible than "sinful."

2. If unity is thus part of the very meaning of Christian life itself, and therefore one of the primary meanings of the Church's existence, it is also part of the meaning of the Church's *mission*.

In the first section of this chapter we saw that the biblical story is about the oneness of God and the oneness of his purpose to create one people; now we notice that Christian unity is *in itself* the purpose for which the Church is created.

God creates the Church for himself—in order that he may possess a people of his own who glorify him. But God's love is extended to all mankind and the method of his love is reconciliation. It is quite insufficient, though it is necessary, to think of the Church as commissioned by God to *offer* his reconciling love to all men.

The Church is to be the evidence of the truth of the gospel; it is to be the gospel manifested. The Church is itself that to which the gospel invites all men.

If anything is clear in the New Testament it is surely that the love of the brethren for each other in the one Body, the *koinonia* of those who share in the Spirit, the oneness of the people of God, is to be *the* evangelical witness and power. This is so plain that it is almost unbelievable that we Christians could ever forget it. The fact that we would perhaps find it difficult to say that the one supreme need for every human being is to "come to Church" shows how the word "Church" has been stripped of most of its meaning. The fact that we should be embarrassed if we found ourselves saying, "If you want to know what the gospel is, and to be sure that it is true, look at us and come with us," shows how far we are from the basic facts of New Testament religion.

Above all, the fact that we think of unity as something that we need to "achieve" for this or that good, practical reason, shows how far we have wandered from the real meaning of Christian unity. There is one God and there is one Church; these two facts are inseparable. That "all may be one" can never be for Christians a slogan comparable to other ambitions. The unity of which we now speak is grounded in God himself and in his revealed purpose for mankind. It is in oneness alone that the Church can exist; it is in oneness alone that the Church can witness; it is to that oneness that God invites all mankind. All the really difficult problems in the way of what we call "Christian unity" are problems about *division*. Without stretching the analogy too far, we may say that just as the difficulties that faced those who formulated Trinitarian dogma was to describe the "Three" within the "One," so the difficulty that faces Christendom today is to see how the many can be reconciled with the one. The only use of that similitude is to remind us that with the Church, as with God himself, the basic fact is unity. If we start from there we may begin to see both our present divergences and our future way more clearly.

III

In the closing section of this chapter a few implications that follow from what has been said call for mention. If most of these are negative in character they may at least serve to clear the ground for constructive thinking.

I. In the first place a number of *alternatives* to full organic unity are found to be unsatisfactory.

A. Firstly we must reject two attempts which are made to account for disunity by denying its existence. On the one hand, there is the view—characteristic of Rome—that the one Church exists in the Roman communion and that all other Christians—“the separated brethren”—have fallen away. I do not propose to discuss that view. On the other hand, there are those who deny that there is any significant division because “all Christians are one in spirit.”

This concept of “spiritual” as distinct from visible and “organizational” unity is a most misleading and disastrous one. It is misleading because it uses the term “spiritual” in a totally nontheological sense. It implies that some characteristic of human beings—for example, their shared ideas, their particular interpretation of religious experience, or even their faith—is the all-important matter. We should be wise never to use the term “spiritual” save in reference to the Holy Spirit and his work. It is because there is one Spirit that there is one Body; it is not through any merit or quality of our own—not even our faith—that we are made one; it is through him alone. This notion of “spiritual unity” is disastrous because it leads to complacency about our divisions.

The term “organic” (used about unity) is often a cause of perplexity. It is as an analogy that belongs to the “Body” concept of the Church. Its whole point is that the members of the one body cannot be separated; a dismembered limb or bodily organ is dead. If we were in fact separated from the whole Body of Christ we should not be Christians at all. This is part of what Methodists mean when they say—as British Methodists do in their official statement: “The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its

place in the Holy Catholic Church, which is the Body of Christ.” It is the very nature of the Church on earth to be visible; it is, therefore, characteristic of unity that it should be visible. If we think of the Church as the people or family of God it follows that unity must be, not only a vague so-called “spiritual” association but a full, active, and manifest family life.

At this point we are reminded of a slogan often used in defense of Christian divisions: “Unity but not uniformity.” Of course the members of a body differ, otherwise there would be no body; of course the members of a family are different from each other otherwise there would not be a family. Of course within the one Church there will be variety of many kinds. But a family that cannot eat together, that cannot manifest love for each other in concrete actions, and that takes the greatest pains to see that its members do not meet on the more important occasions of their common life is no family.

We may indeed hazard the guess that it is only in a united family that rich variety among the members can fully exist. In our different denominations we are so afraid of losing what we like to call “our special emphases,” and we are so on guard lest we should be guilty of looking too like some of our Christian brethren, that the life of each denomination is restricted and impoverished. The Roman is almost afraid of his own doctrine of justification by grace alone lest he should be guilty of Protestantism; the Methodist is held back from liturgical richness and from discovering, for example, the meaning of confession and absolution for fear that he might be mistaken for a “Catholic” or an “Anglican.” In the fully realized life of the people of God, in unimpeded organic existence in the body of Christ, we should begin to discover the endless variety of unity.

B. The second kind of false alternative to true unity that must be mentioned is the attempt to base unity upon some one or other limited foundation.

There is, for example, the notion of *confessional churches*. Whether in the more sectarian form, as in the splinter groups of

Plymouth Brethren, or in the concept of Pan-Methodism, Pan-Lutheranism, et cetera, this is an ideal which must be rejected as totally inadequate. That there should be close association between Christians of like mind is desirable, though a firm limit should be put to such association. We must never, however, confuse the togetherness of those who are associated because they have similar historical origins and share similar convictions and religious experiences with the oneness of the people of God. In fact, the larger such a group becomes the more easy it is for its members to ignore other Christians.

On the other hand, we must also reject the notion of *national churches* as an alternative to the full unity of Christendom. That all Christians in one place should be recognized as members of the one Christ is indeed highly necessary, but there is all the difference between speaking of the Church in England, Africa, or Germany and in speaking of the Church of any particular country. Christians belong to a heavenly kingdom; accidents of birth or dwelling place are no more revelant to the unity in Christ than are peculiarities of temperament. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we should not behave here as though there were separate "heavens" for denominations or nations.

For similar reasons we must reject the idea of *federation* as a substitute for organic unity. That separated denominations should work together is obviously much better than that they should work in opposition or indifference to each other. Even secular organizations work together; such co-operation reflects no credit upon those who are made one in Christ and gives no glory to the Lord. The most powerful argument in favor of federal churches was made by P. T. Forsyth in *The Church and the Sacraments*. I have recently reread his arguments. They do not seem to me to be substantiated even by his own premises, and it is impossible to doubt that had that prophetic thinker, so far ahead of his times, lived to encounter both modern biblical scholarship and the ecumenical movement he would have reversed his judgment.

Indeed, one of Forsyth's own illustrations shows us the limita-

tions in the federal idea. Pointing out that many visitors to Cambridge, having seen the colleges, ask to be shown "the University," he said, "You cannot show the University—which yet is Cambridge. Who can deny the University?" This he applied to the denominations. The Church is not a University, however. Actual—to some degree—as may be the oneness of the University of Cambridge, the oneness of the Church is a very different matter. It is proper that a student should be asked which college he wishes to enter, but we should never lose our sense of shame that a convert to Christianity has to ask, "Which church should I join?" Both the suggestion of alternatives and the impression that one "joins" a church as one enters a college or joins a club are the bitter result of the sin of the Church.

2. Such are some of the negative conclusions to which our inquiry has led. A few positive ones must be very briefly suggested.

A. The greatest of all errors about Christian unity is to imagine that we can see *in advance* what the one Church would be like in its complete manifestation. To believe in the triune God it is not necessary to know precisely what he is like. We begin to know him better and to know more about him as *we live in him*. It is only in the one Church that men and women will discover more fully what the one Church is. Only a united Church can hope for an adequate theology. This is the venture of faith to which God calls us—to go out not knowing whither we go, but to go out together with him.

B. Secondly, important as it is to be sure what is necessary for the Church to "be the Church"—and with that subject this chapter does not deal—it is no less urgent to recognize that the Church militant is the Church of pardoned *sinner*s. Visser t'Hooft in a too little known book, *The Renewal of the Church*, pointed out that it is only when the Church is aware of its perpetual need for renewal and knows how that renewal may be found that it is able to hold together the two apparently opposite convictions that the Church must be *one* and that it must be *holy*. Though we should hesitate to admit the fact, we are often so afraid of being contaminated by some of our fellow Christians that we hold back from them. There

is no reason to expect that the one Church, in its earthly part, would be free from sin; there is every reason to hope that together we should grow in sanctity. The notion that first each denomination must become purified and then we may come together is to be rejected.

C. In conclusion it must be noted that unity is primarily a matter for each local "church" and, indeed, for each individual Christian. Necessarily our minds are now much occupied with the healing of denominational divisions, but it will be as each denomination and each "society" within it grows in the unity about which we have been thinking that each will make a contribution toward the wider unity. Our Methodist emphasis upon fellowship could enable us to make this fact very plain.

If unity is to be found in the small or large group it must exist in the heart of each individual. This is part of the uniqueness of Christian unity that it is a most personal, even private matter. We find unity only in Christ through the Holy Spirit and, though God's purpose is for all mankind, the entrance gate is personal faith. Of each as well as of all it is true—to quote William Temple again—that "The true quality of unity is the consequence of the *doxa*, the glory, which is the quality of life of the new creation in Christ." "When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world" (II Cor. 5:17 N.E.B.). "You are all one person in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 N.E.B.).

We must pray and work that we may "attain the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:13).

11

The Church and Modern Man

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It is very proper that this institute be devoted to the study of the nature of the Church. In that direction we have necessarily delved into the questions of history and doctrine and sought to find those marks of the people of God which ought to be our *raison d'être*.

Implicit in all our discussion have been the persistent, if not always stated, questions: What is the nature of the self-understanding of the modern world? How does the man of the mid-century locate himself in relation to the Church? In what ways does the Church need to frame its witness to God in Christ in order to speak to man's condition? Such questions have been behind most of our papers and all our conversations. Of course, any theologizing today, done without reference to the apologetic imperative, is likely to be mere diletantism.

The observation that we live in a *new* time with immense new problems is commonplace. This period has been described as the "post-Christian era," as "the time of the world come of age," or,