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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

UNITY IN PRINCIPLE.

By the Rev. S. C. Steer, M.A., B.D.

(A paper read at the Conference of Old Students of St. John's Hall, Highbury, September 1937.)

THE concept of unity is one of the most puzzling with which the mind of man works. It gives rise to the problem of the One and the Many to which philosophers throughout the ages have devoted much attention. So difficult has it been to retain the idea of unity that there has always been the inclination to discard it in favour of duality, or even, plurality. Nor is this inclination yet completely rejected, for while in Europe modern philosophy has emancipated itself from the dualism of Descartes, in America many have found themselves best satisfied by asserting, not merely a duiverse, but a pluriverse, in place of the universe in which man generally supposes that he lives.

Fortunately, it is not with the bare metaphysical problem that we are concerned. We are to attempt to discover how it presents itself more fully clothed—I might perhaps say, in scarves and stoles—in the life of the Church. But at the outset I remind you of what might be called the fundamental problem of unity because the historical forms it has assumed for Christendom are not entirely unrelated to the age-long perplexities of philosophy, and because the bitterness often engendered by over emphasis on the historical approach may be softened by the realization that at bottom we are facing a riddle implicit in life itself, and one which is disclosed wherever we make a serious examination of the stuff of life. If, in the unity of life we find so great a differentiation and diversity as to lead men at times to protest against the very postulate of unity, we shall not be surprised if, in seeking unity for the Church, our greatest task is to find a means of including within that unity tendencies which seem to be contradictory and which at times have produced the fiercest hatred and antagonisms.

Unity in principle is a phrase of great comprehension, yet it demands a depth of unity which mere uniformity does not always ensure. If it is a vague and general expression it is nevertheless radical and fundamental. It represents, perhaps, the barest minimum of unity which we must procure in view of the Master's prayer that all may be one. A demand for unity in principle almost suggests that we do not look for uniformity in the more external affairs of Church life—in spite of Acts of Uniformity. By unity in principle we mean such a measure of agreement on fundamentals as would outweigh disagreement on more superficial matters, so that, in spite of considerable diversity in the latter, the ultimate relationship of all the parts would be one of unity in a whole rather than of isolated individuality. Unity in principle is demonstrated when men kneel at the Communion Table and thoughtfully observe the Lord's Supper in a manner different from that to

which they are normally accustomed, because their agreement as to
its meaning and value outweighs their disagreement concerning the
doctrine implicit in the forms whereby that value and meaning is
conveyed to, and appropriated by, the worshipper.

This illustration, which, happily, might have been drawn from
life, furnishes a clue to the true character of Christian unity, upon
which unity in principle must rest. It is a unity of spirit. It is a unity
based on personal relationship to Jesus Christ. Where that kind of
unity exists all other advance is possible ; where it is absent we are but
wasting time in discussing re-union. The fundamental requirement
for Christian unity is the basic recognition that all are one in Christ.
To be a member of the Catholic Church means, first of all, to be one
whose life finds its centre in God revealed in Christ. This essential
requirement must necessarily be stated in broad terms ; its description
will probably be considered inadequate by some ; yet I trust it will
be accepted as basic, as far as it goes. Personal attachment to Christ
there must be. We should probably be wrong to insist upon the par-
ticular road by which we have travelled to Him ; the fact that it seems
to us the only road is, perhaps, due rather to the limited range of our
vision than to any narrowness in His appeal. But, through this ex-
perience or that, Christian unity must rest, and can only rest, ultimately
on unity in Christ.

I am well aware that there are those who would point out that
unity in Christ is different from the Catholic unity we seek. There is
a sense in which this is true, but the difference is as that of the fruit from
the blossom. When the difference is so magnified as to present us
with a disjunctive relationship of " Christianity or Catholicism " and
Catholic unity looms so large that membership in the Church takes
precedence over membership in Christ we are on the way to a man-
made unity, which, even if achieved, must ultimately perish. Tradi-
tion, which is so large a factor in Catholicism, is valuable only when it
rests upon a living experience within the individual. Without this it
tends to narrow the work of the Holy Spirit and to lead to a uniformity
which is dangerously open to hypocrisy and Pharisaism. And here we
need to address ourselves first. We, too, have our tradition, and,
alas, often we give the impression that it is dearer to us than is the
root of the matter. The first step towards unity in principle must
surely be that each of us must strive to keep well before himself the
centrality of Christ and the secondary character of all else. Who can
doubt that if we were sufficiently close to Him all the unity desirable
would become possible. Any unity which does not grow out of this
primary relationship we do not seek. It is, as the prayer says, in
drawing nearer to Him that we draw nearer to one another.

But it is to be expected that out of this spiritual unity in Christ
there will arise a general consensus of faith flowing from Him, which
can be stated sufficiently clearly to obtain agreement among all who share
the spiritual experience, and which will strengthen the bond uniting
them in Him. Further, it is now generally agreed that Our Lord,
by His words and actions during the incarnate life, and by His call to
evangelization, intended that there should be some kind of organization

of His followers—some would say into a " Church " : others would be less definite. But in some way that underlying spiritual unity is to be reflected in a visible unity of Christians in the world ; it must be evident in their faith and order—to use the technical terms. The clue to the character of this more evident unity is given in the spiritual unity : it is to be the unity of a body. Thus the unity in principle we seek must be derived from spiritual unity and expressed in organic unity. Only so may the Christian Communion be herself and perform her task.

Here, of course, we meet all the difficulties which are discussed under the headings of " Faith and Order " in any volume which deals with the re-union of the Churches. I do not propose to take you again over that well-worn track. Every relevant text in the New Testament has been interpreted and re-interpreted by writer after writer. All the pertinent patristic references have been used so frequently that even the clergy of the Church of England are becoming familiar with them. Seldom do the investigations of the writer lead him to differ in the main from the position of the school to which he belongs.

Let me, as an approach to the difficulty any unity in principle must apparently face, remind you of but two of the many problems arising from matters of faith and order—the problem of the Papacy and that of the Eucharist. We have said that Our Lord probably intended that there should be a visible and actual unity in the Church. Is it to be a unity about Himself, the invisible head, or is the earthly organism to be in fullness a copy of the heavenly ideal spiritual unity, just as, in the Jewish temple, worship was organized after the pattern shown in the Mount, with the Holy of Holies, and, above all, the Ark as representing the presence of Jehovah ? If the latter, then it should be organized about some human vice-regent on earth. The words to St. Peter have been regarded as conclusive evidence that Our Lord deliberately established such a focus of unity within the visible Church itself. The sayings of the Gospel are interpreted as " expressing a prerogative of St. Peter as the foundation of the Church and the principle of its unity." But, on the other hand, it is claimed that the words imply nothing of the sort ; that the foundation of the Church is St. Peter's faith ; that the whole Church is the body whose head is Christ ; faith in Our Lord is the principle of the Church's unity.* This wide divergence of interpretation suggests that it is doubtful whether the New Testament texts bearing on the subject will ever receive an exegesis which will command general assent, not to mention those which bear on the vexed question of the rise of the episcopacy. A similar

* Arguments on the latter side seldom give adequate attention to St. Paul's teaching concerning the Church and unity, most of which was probably written when St. Peter was still alive and active. In this there is a remarkable absence of reference to St. Peter. It is strange that if St. Peter were the visible principle of unity there should not be a single reference to him in definite teaching on Christian unity. It is even stranger that St. Peter, the centre of unity, should be placed almost on a level with St. Paul and Apollos in the condemnation of party strife at Corinth. The hypothesis of Baur is now sufficiently discredited as to be inadequate as an explanation of the silence of St. Paul concerning St. Peter's primacy, if it existed. We can only suppose that the oversight he exercised was of the mildest kind—not sufficiently strong either to deter others from withstanding him to the face, or to prevent him from submitting to their judgment.

difficulty confronts us when we turn to what is increasingly regarded as the focus of the Church's worship—the Eucharist. Who could produce an interpretation of the passages in Holy Scripture concerned with the Holy Communion which would include the chief beliefs of all Christians concerning that sacrament and yet not contain inherent contradictions? In what sense are we to take that small sentence, " This is My Body " ?

Here, I think, we approach the deepest cleavage in Christianity. This is not to say that the Papacy and the Eucharist are necessarily the first questions for consideration in seeking unity ; they have been mentioned because in them is illustrated the radical division with which any approach to unity ultimately must reckon, and because they are examples of the hopelessness of trying to reach unity by further examination of the sources for Christianity. If, without discussing the various senses which have been given to the terms, I say that the fundamental difference lies between Catholic and Protestant you will understand what I mean. That difference lies near to us because it exists within our own Communion. During the summer there appeared in *The Times* a letter urging upon us the need for intercommunion with a view to unity with " those of our own blood and language who use and acknowledge the authority of the same Bible and use the same hymns of praise and devotion." The principle behind the letter was that we should seek unity first with those nearest to us ethnologically and spiritually, through intercommunion, without regard to the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion. This principle, if fully applied, seems to demand that there should at least be unity with those who share our Communion and are already members of the same Church. Does such unity exist? Can it be said that there is unity in principle throughout the Church of England, or is a diversity which makes it impossible for the people of one parish to worship at the church of a neighbouring parish so wide as to be incompatible with unity in principle? Diversity there must be ; difference of emphasis there will be ; but where is the point at which this diversity and these differences become so wide that unity in principle is lost? True, there is organic unity in the Church of England. Does it grow out of the cohesion of parts in a whole, or is it the mere survival of structure in which the life-blood no longer passes through all to each? If, to-day, our own Communion, in spite of the opposed interpretations of some of the central elements of Christianity found within it, can be said to be united in principle there can be no insoluble problem ahead ; all things are possible. It remains but to extend the area of that unity whose chief manifestation seems to be a constant and lively disagreement about matters which deeply affect the daily life of the Church : for almost all the various emphases of the different Churches may be found, at least in germ, in some part of the Anglican Communion. The principle upon which unity will then rest will be that so often suggested in connection with the episcopacy—namely, that we must accept the office *de facto* without being concerned to describe the nature of its authority or to define its origins. It is hoped that, after this step has been taken, under the further guidance of the Holy Spirit the Church as a whole will arrive

at the true formulation of the basis upon which episcopacy rests. If, in a similar way, we could observe the Holy Communion without saying what we mean by it, there would doubtless be a large measure of peace. Would there be unity in principle or would it be unity without principles ? Any such attempt would call for some nice adjustments in practice. In theory it would mean that we regard apparent unity as more important than the maintenance of what our fathers held as essential truth in the presentation of Christianity. We should approach one another, as Herbert Kelly says, by remarking, " We will agree to treat that as true—though we do not think it is—if you agree to treat this as true—though we know you do not believe it."* In fact, the Church of England is happily in much too healthy a position, I hope, to seek this kind of unity. She is inclined, as the late beloved Canon Streeter used to say, to regard herself as Primitive and Apostolic rather in the sense that there is always a row going on somewhere than in the sense that she is all with one accord in one place. But, nevertheless, there is the danger that what has been called the " bridge " Church may become a bridge whose centre piece is not an arc but an angle, of impossibly steep approach. Is it not a fact that at one end of the structure are those who may justly be described as more united in principle with certain non-Anglicans than with some sections of their own Communion, while at the other are those, who, except for a matter of Church government, are largely at one with the most exclusive group in Christendom ? What kind of unity in principle can exist between the two ? It is here that we reach a division deeper than some of the technicalities which divide Church from Church, and which, if ignored, must make any unity attained depend largely upon the adhesive properties of whitewash. This is not to disparage movement towards re-union found on the surface, but to assert that such movement may ultimately produce a deeper division if it works for solidification on each side of the central fissure. Any approach to ultimate unity in principle must keep well in view the tendencies existing at present in the Church of England. These create a problem which may be connected with something deeper than matters of faith and order, something which, as I tried to hint at the outset, is implicit in life and which manifests itself in life's highest product—the mind of man.

We have seen in recent years the beginning of the application of psychology to the divisions which make havoc of human personality. Problems with which medicine and morals have long grappled are being met by a recognition of the enormous part which the mental structure of the individual plays in governing his life. It may be that the healing of what Swete called " the wounds in the body of Christ " will be made much easier when we begin to recognize the part which the mind of man, from its very nature, has played in producing them. In this connection the statement of the psychologist, Dr. William Brown, concerning war may, with slight changes in wording, be applied to the problem of Christian unity ; he says, " Not until the whole world has reached a much higher level of culture and individual self-knowledge

* Herbert Kelly : *The Church and Religious Unity* : p. 212.

and a much deeper sense of neighbourly sympathy will there be any real hope of progressive disarmament, or will pacification be anything but a surface phenomenon."

When we ask what are the specific factors in human nature which make unity in the Church so difficult, two tendencies, with which most men are familiar, appear. On the one hand there is a longing for freedom ; an impatience with all that is formal, disciplinary, restrictive ; a desire for what we call the full life of the Spirit. The whole history of mankind may be seen as a struggle in this direction. In the life of the Church the strife about circumcision was, perhaps, the earliest manifestation of this tendency, but it occurs frequently. Obvious examples are seen in the actions of the Covenanters who perished in the Scottish persecutions, and in the efforts of the Puritans. In their struggles we see the one tendency dominant. But, on the other hand, there is also in human nature a strange, inconsistent craving for authority of some kind, for certainty, for finality, for law and order. We see it in Israel's demand for a king, and it persists until this very day when the rise of dictatorships is an amazing revelation of the readiness of humanity to be fettered, and its longing, in the aftermath of the war, for some centre of stability—some evident and ultimate authority. One of the Anglican delegates to Malines touched on the difficulty which these opposed tendencies present in our Communion, when he described members of the Church of England as of two different mentalities. He said, " One is inclined to define increasingly in order to get clearness of doctrine : the other wishes to define as little as possible in order to leave to truth the whole of its content."*

When we discount the force of environment and upbringing it is the relative strength of those two impulses in the mind which largely divides men into the two groups I have called Protestant and Catholic. In some the urge to freedom is predominant ; in others the first consideration is order, definition, finality. One tends to be dynamic : the other static. If time permitted, we might review the leading problems of faith and order which Church unity must consider and show how each of the opposed viewpoints could be ranged under the headings of these two characteristics of the mind. That one will ever eliminate the other is unlikely as long as humanity lasts, although the enthusiasts on each side of the fence will doubtless insist that the dogmas enforced by their impulse represent the truth. But the fact that in places where one tendency has most evidently displayed itself, the other raises its head suggests that the unity we seek cannot rest on the suppression of either. The Quakers, I suppose, were, originally, among the freest of religious bodies ; a group in which the life of the spirit was at a maximum, while organization and definition barely existed. Yet here the tendency towards authority and law asserted itself, as these quotations from the recent biography of Elizabeth Fry indicate :

" The elders and overseers of the Society of Friends were rather apt to find fault. Their minute interference with the daily life and habits of members in the early nineteenth century was only comparable to the

* *The Malines Conversations* : p. 38.

tyrannical directorship sometimes practised by priests of the Roman Church."[*]
"Quakerism, in its inception, had been a great breakaway of the spirit into freedom from the bondage of outward forms. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it had made new and straiter forms of its own."[†]

The truth is forced upon us that these two opposed tendencies are in a sense complementary—they are polar extremities of the human mind, rather than unrelated and isolated oppositions. They establish tensions not only in human nature but objectively. Any synthesis, any unity in principle in the Church, must be such that it gives a place to both and provides opportunity for interplay between them. There must be a finality, a certainty about the Church which transcends human government in any form which we have seen ; yet there must be also a freedom, and a vitality brought by the breath of God which energizes her throughout, because she is at last one in Him who created and redeemed her.

Evangelical Churchmen have generally been associated with the definite evangelistic work of the Church, but the authorities of the Church seem to-day to pass over Evangelicals for the most part in this work. For example, in " The Diocesan Series," which is designed for the education of Christians and for the winning of those " not yet committed to Christian discipleship," there are to be books by members of other schools, but no Evangelical writer is mentioned. We are not, however, surprised when we read the names of the Council responsible for the production of the series. This does not prevent us welcoming the volume by the Rev. H. A. Jones, Secretary of the Archbishops' Evangelistic Committee, on *Evangelism and the Laity* (Student Christian Movement, 2s. 6d. net). Mr. Jones shows himself as a helpful guide to the special problems which the Church has to face to-day in endeavouring to win the great mass of indifferent or hostile people to the service of Christ. His aim is to arouse the laity of the Church to a sense of their duty as actual sharers in the work of evangelism. To that end he gives valuable suggestions as to the practical methods to be adopted and the purpose which must be kept constantly in view. The need of education is emphasized, as so much of the opposition to Christianity is due to ignorance. The true secret of Evangelism lies in the personality of Christian people, and the power which example has to prove the reality of the Faith. On some points of practical proceeding some will disagree with Mr. Jones's views, but the book deserves careful study.

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[*] Janet Whitney : *Elizabeth Fry*, p. 258.

[†] Ibid, p. 306.