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Some Theological Pressures Towards Christian Unity

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THE ORIGIN, the inspiration and the strength of ecumenical thinking lies in the biblical theology of Christian unity. Nevertheless it is true that many who support the Ecumenical Movement do so for reasons which are plainly non-theological. The origin of their concern is to be found in their vision of the needs of the world, and of the dangers which the world presents to a disunited Church. There is nothing wrong with their thinking, so far as it goes, provided that those whose ideas spring solely from this source recognise the fact that their thinking is non-theological, and represents what is basically a counsel of expediency. The real strength of the Ecumenical Movement, however, and indeed its only hope of true success, is to be found in the biblical theology of Christian unity which constitutes its groundwork.

Since this essay is concerned with some features of the theology of Christian unity it will be of help here to make an elementary distinction between the theology of Christian unity and the theology of ecclesiastical reunion. The former is the pure science, and the latter is a department of the applied science which arises from it. The first deals with the spiritual realities which constitute the Church's true nature, the second seeks to apply these to the healing of the Church's divisions. It is of primary importance in ecumenical thinking that the theology of ecclesiastical reunion should be both inspired and governed by the theology of Christian unity. And it is of like importance that the theology of Christian unity be derived from the biblical doctrine of the Church. I propose, therefore, to examine the five great New Testament metaphors which depict the Church's basic nature, and I shall seek to relate them to the concept of Christian unity. These metaphors occur most frequently in the epistles of St. Paul, and it is significant that Paul's great missionary and evangelistic fervour should be accompanied by an intense desire for unity amongst true followers of Jesus. In this connexion it is worth noting that a great deal of the most convinced and inspiring leadership in the Ecumenical Movement today comes from missionary thinkers and their "young churches." Those who are most fully engaged in the primary Christian activities are usually best able to "hear the word of the Lord."

The metaphors to which I refer do not appear in any ordered sequence in the New Testament, and nowhere do we find any suggestion that, viewed

collectively, they represent any logical progression of thought. Nevertheless, when seen together, they do arrange themselves quite naturally into a logical sequence, and it is in this sequence that we shall study them here. This sequence suggests a progressive element in the nature of the Church's relationship to God, and this in itself is not without value. Here then are the metaphors, arranged in the sequence which appears to be logical: (1) The Church is as one espoused, or engaged, or betrothed to Christ, as a chaste virgin (II Cor. 2:2-4); (2) The Church is the Bride of Christ (an image suggested in many passages, e.g., Ephes. 5: 30-31, and echoed in Rev. 21:2); (3) The Church is "one flesh" with Christ (Ephes. 5: 29-32); (4) The Church is the Body of Christ, of which he is the head (Ephes. 1:22-23); (5) The Church is to be a holy temple for the habitation of God through the Spirit (Ephes. 2:21-22).

When the metaphors are arranged in this order, the sequence of their ideas suggests that the relationship between God and his Church is a progressive one and, inasmuch as all these metaphors are simultaneously applicable to the Church, we may deduce that the activity of development is a permanently contemporary element in the life of the Church. This is an important thought, for it means that we are involved in such a development ourselves.

The nature of the progression is clear. In the first place there is the image of betrothal. The Church is to be as a chaste virgin, betrothed to Christ. In the second place the Church is to be as Christ's Bride. The fundamental idea of the previous metaphor has now been carried forward to its logical development, represented by the act of marriage. In the third place, the Church is described as being "one flesh" with Christ. The term "one flesh" refers to the state of integration and unity which is achieved in a true marriage. In the fourth place the Church is described as the Body of Christ, and it is only when the "one flesh" relationship has been achieved that we can begin to think in these terms. In the final metaphor, the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ is illuminated by the vision of that Body actually constituting a temple. We simply note that a temple exists for the worship of God, and for the manifestation of his praise.

Now the assumptions which underlie biblical metaphors must be considered no less carefully than the metaphors themselves, and the assumption upon which each of these metaphors is founded is a striking one. Each metaphor assumes, as a necessary and definitive fact, that the Church is a unity. The unity of the Church is assumed as a fact in the use of symbols which depict it successively as a *fiancée*, as a bride, as a marriage partner, as a body, as a temple. In each case the symbol employed is capable neither of division nor of multiplication. These metaphors, considered individually, and in their ordered sequence, represent the Church as one unit, and therefore account for one Church only, other than which there is none. Let us examine each of these metaphors in turn, and see what each one implies for the theology of Christian unity.

(1) The first metaphor, that of the Church as a chaste *fiancée*, is of immediate importance in this connexion. The betrothal of two people is an act in which the conditions of a marriage contract are recognized, affirmed and accepted. This act of recognition, affirmation and acceptance, required by God of his people, is an act which, immediately upon its performance, creates a measure of unity amongst them. This fact reveals the basic relevance of this metaphor to the theology of Christian unity, for in it we see implied those preliminary conditions which God imposes upon our possible relationship to him, a relationship which, in its full maturity, attains to the unity of one body, the body of Christ.

These conditions may be summarized as follows. The Church must be separated from other possible "suitors," namely "false gods." The Church must possess love and loyalty to Christ, to whom she is betrothed. The Church must be faithful to the covenant of betrothal. And we may also suggest that, as the Church fulfils these conditions, she will be united in a forward-looking and expectant hope concerning the "marriage day." In so far, then, as the Church is willing to fulfil the requirements of God, as these are suggested by the metaphor of betrothal, the Church will be characterized by a spirit of dedication, affection, loyalty, hope and expectation. These are unifying virtues and, when they are the common possession of all Christian people, the measure of unity which they create will be considerable.

One further point may be made concerning the implications of this metaphor. The unifying virtues which it implies have the focal point of their activity in Christ. The Church is betrothed to him. Her love and her loyalty, her hope, her expectation and her spirit of dedication are all directed to him. Such an attitude to the person of Christ is known as piety, and we cannot but conclude that such a piety must be a fundamental and necessary element in the life of all churches striving for unity. Such a piety is the very soul of many small conservative congregations, even of congregations which are sectarian and reactionary in outlook, and which are opposed to the Ecumenical Movement. Yet the Church of God, of which they are a part, needs their piety, and deprived of it will be the poorer.

(2) The second metaphor, that of the Church as the Bride of Christ, has a similar relevance to the theology of Christian unity. The ideas implicit in this metaphor may be analysed as follows. The word "bride" is used of the female party in the marriage contract, chiefly in relation to the events of the marriage day itself. A woman is really only a bride within the period of the wedding ceremonies and celebrations; thereafter she is not the bride but the wife. Therefore the word "bride" is a term which signifies to us the actions performed by a woman during the ceremonies and celebrations of her wedding. It is a term which denotes action. The nature of the action which it denotes is determined by the nature of the estate of marriage.

Concerning the estate of marriage, we may say that it is characterized by three essential features. (i) It is a covenanted relationship in which each partner assumes permanent responsibility for the care and welfare of the other, and for faithfulness together. (ii) It is a shared life in which that

which belongs to each is available to either. (iii) It is a life dedicated to fruitfulness. (A childless marriage can, of course, be abundantly fruitful.) Consequently the act required of a bride is a threefold one. She is to enter into a permanent and responsible covenant; she is to share her whole life with her partner; she is to offer herself to a life of fruitfulness. It is clear, then, that when the Church is described as being the Bride of Christ, the Church is thought of as a body of people actively engaged in the performance of this same threefold act. It is in this act that the bride reciprocates the love of the one who has been her suitor. It is in a similar threefold act that the Church, as Christ's Bride, reciprocates the love of her Lord. The Church, therefore, is a body of people which reciprocates God's love by gladly entering into a covenanted relationship with him; by sharing its life and talents with him; and by embarking upon a life dedicated to fruitfulness.

In relating this metaphor to the subject of Christian unity one immediately is faced by this question: "How can a divided Church do any of these things adequately?" A divided Church can only pledge itself to God in a piecemeal way; a divided Church can only share its life with God in a piecemeal way; a divided Church cannot bear fruit an hundredfold. If the Church is truly to be the Bride of Christ, rising up and saying "I will" to the plighted troth of God, it must unquestionably be a united church, acting with deliberate conviction.

(3) In the third metaphor we have the concept of the Church as being "one flesh" with Christ. The "one flesh" relationship is the creation of a true marriage, and the implications of this metaphor are impressive. If such a relationship is to be achieved, a unified personality is required of each party. A husband or wife whose personality is not unified by his or her love for the other cannot truly attain to the "one-flesh" relationship. For such a relationship to exist between God and his Church requires of the Church a unified personality.

One other observation may be made concerning the the relevance of this metaphor to our subject. The unity achieved between man and woman in a happy marriage is one of diverse and sovereign personalities. What this implies for the relationship of God and his Church is plain: this also is a unity of diverse entities, for in it the Holy and eternal God is united with a redeemed but still sinful fellowship of people. The diversity which exists between Christ and his Church needs to be recognized if the miracle of Calvary is to be in the smallest degree comprehended.

(4) The third metaphor, it must be noted, depicts the relationship of the Church with Christ. It does not depict the relationship of believer with believer. It is the fourth metaphor which portrays for us the nature of the mutual relationship of individual Christians and church groups within the family of God. In this metaphor of the "Body of Christ" we have the great theological fact which will be the basis of any true Church unity. The significance of this concept may be seen most clearly when we firmly differentiate it from the previous one which portrays the Church as being "one flesh" with Christ. The unity of the Church with Christ is, as we have seen, one

of diversity. But the unity of Christian people with each other is the same sort of unity as that possessed by a single living body, for the Church is the Body of Christ.

Now the unity possessed by a single body is not a unity of diversity. It is a unity of homogeneity. Therefore the unity of Christian people is not such that it can be symbolized by the unity of two marriage partners. It is such that it can only adequately be expressed by the symbol of a single body. Christians, therefore, must recognize that they are homogeneously one with all others who, by baptism and the Holy Ghost, are united with God. The churches of the world must likewise recognize that, within the mind and purpose of God, they too are homogeneously one.

It is only when this homogeneity is acknowledged that one can profitably, or even accurately, discuss the diversity of Christendom. There can of course be no doubt that the churches of the world represent a wide diversity of ecclesiastical structures and theological thought-patterns, born of a great diversity of activity and enthusiasm within the fellowship of believers. This undeniable fact prompts many people to speak of Christian unity as being essentially a unity of diversity. But this, I feel, is misleading. Even in its diversity, Christian unity must theologically be a homogeneous unity. Indeed the human body homogeneously unites, integrates and harmonizes a multitude of diverse elements. This is the fact which St. Paul is emphasizing when he says "There is one body, and one spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephes. 4:4ff.).

Of course the nature of the Body of Christ determines the number of the differentiated elements of which it is composed, and also dictates the nature of their respective functions and the conditions of their inter-relationship. That is why the truths embodied in this concept of the Church are fundamental to any schemes of ecclesiastical reunion. No doubt one good thing which emerges from the period of the Church's divisions will be a theology of the Church wrought from a self-knowledge of which it would have been incapable apart from (what one has faith will prove to be) its temporary fragmentation and the intense spiritual and intellectual struggle out of which, pray God, it will grow into unity. This surely must be the will of God, if the metaphor of the Church as constituting the Body of Christ finds its origin in his mind, as we faithfully believe it does. For not only does the nature of the Body of Christ determine the number and the nature of its component elements, but it also provides them with the sphere in which they may grow and work together in creative harmony.

(5) The fifth and last metaphor depicting the biblical concept of the Church is that of a holy temple, built for the habitation of God through the Spirit.

First we must note that the fellowship of the redeemed has an intended design, the design of a temple. The Christian Church is not intended by its builder and maker to be a formless polyglot of accidental Christian groups

huddled together like the hovels of a spiritual shanty town. It is intended to be built together into a purposeful and beautiful design. We must note, however, that the metaphor does not depict the Church as a finished temple; the Church is described as a building which is growing into a temple. The building, "fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephes. 2:21). The verb itself and its tense (groweth) argue that the Church is not a finished creation, and that the completion of the building will be the result of one thing only—growth. At present we constitute a "habitation" for God through the Spirit. We do not yet constitute a finished temple.

The picture of the Church which is presented to us here is bristling with significance. For any structure to be growing towards its perfection argues the existence of a foundation already laid and plans in accordance with which the work of building is being carried forward. We know indeed that the foundation is Jesus Christ himself. The full plans are known only to God, but we believe that in Holy Scripture we have been presented with basic specifications and a glimpse of the working model. Upon the spiritual foundation of the character, spirit and work of Jesus Christ, the Church of today has grown out of the working model which sprang into undying life on the first Whitsunday.

Each of the varied traditions which have subsequently grown up within the Church contains features of the temple which exist in the mind of the Maker. Each tradition also contains its own peculiar inadequacies. As we bring the study of these virtues and inadequacies into the sphere of the theology of Christian unity, the world-wide Church will be admitted into a deeper self-knowledge than she has ever before enjoyed. This self-knowledge will furnish us with the working drawings from which the labour of building the temple can go forward.

Having sought thus briefly to relate the implications of these five metaphors to the theology of Christian unity, one is more aware than ever of the impact which this theology must inevitably make upon the spirituality of our day. By their profoundly intimate and radically personal character these metaphors relate the whole concept of Christian unity directly to the love which the individual Christian bears for Christ. For "he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen?" (I John 4:20).

A concern for Christian unity which is theological in its origin must present a challenge which is spiritual in its nature. Where this challenge is squarely met, it rouses Christian people to work and pray, and the labour demanded by this challenge involves the same degree of sacrifice, and love, and discipline, and piety as is demanded by worship, evangelism, pastoral work, or any other Christian activity, for the Christian life is in itself a profound unity, expressing in its multifarious activities the nature of the relationship which exists between Christ and his Church.

The great proclamation of the Bible is that unity can be achieved, but

only at a price. That price will not be—indeed, in the very nature of the case cannot be—the surrender of any dogma of the faith. The price will be that of the Cross. As we are prepared, both as individuals and as denominations, to follow the Crucified and share his burden, so the Church will grow towards unity; for unity, is, as we have seen, the fruit of growth. And this brings us to the basic element in the challenge which the theology of Christian unity brings to the Church today. Unity can only come from growth. Growth can only come from life. Life can only come from God, as we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ. And so the cause of Christian unity takes its life, as all else that is Christian takes its life, from the death and resurrection of Jesus our Lord, by whose stripes we are healed.