

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Christian Unity.¹

BY THE REV. JOHN KELMAN, D.D., EDINBURGH.

IN the Constitution of this Association, under the heading 'General Aims,' the first statement made refers to 'the consciousness of underlying unity,' beneath our differences; the second, to practical problems in which co-operation is possible; the third, to the discussions of doctrinal and ecclesiastical topics in which we may differ. A later article divides the procedure of the ordinary meetings into one part for devotional purposes, and one for discussions. It is that very admirable and suggestive order of thoughts which I have taken as the guiding line in the following paper.

That the underlying unity beneath our differences is there, I have long held as one of my profound convictions. Where men are at once intellectually honest and spiritually earnest, they may express themselves so differently as even to seem to contradict each other, but they mean the same thing. Christian men are all turning their eyes towards the Mountain of the Lord. Standing, because they have dwelt, at different points of the region, the mountain they look towards must seem to have several different shapes and proportions and colours; yet it is the same mountain, and the very differences that appear in their descriptions are due to the honesty and earnestness of their common vision of it, and their loyalty to that vision. At a time like this, our aim should surely be, not to emphasize the differences and to record new testimonies as to where we stand among them, but to find every means available by which we may become reconciling and constructive men, who interpret apparently conflicting voices in a common tongue.

Now, as our Constitution shows, the first and most obvious field on which we may find our unity is that of action. Even such (so to speak) negative basis of unity as that required for combating some common evil will serve this end. M. Zola, in his brilliant and terrible account of the Franco-Prussian War, speaking of a company of artillerymen, says, 'That beloved creature, the gun, grouped

a little family around her, whose members were closely united by the bonds of a common occupation.' There is, unfortunately, no lack of common evils, calling for united action in those who would oppose them; and, amid the depressing and discouraging feelings that the strength and persistence of these evils often bring, it is good to remember that at least in this one respect we may find some soul of goodness in them, that they bring us nearer to one another while we seek to face them.

When we turn from the field of action to that of thought, we find ourselves at once on far more difficult and more important ground. More important, because for what is worthy of the name of Christian Unity we must not have to depend on anything casual. Common circumstances or exigencies of any kind—common sorrows, calamities or dangers—unite us but for an occasion; and we long for a deeper and more permanent bond of union. But this ground is difficult, for while action is comparatively simple, thought is infinitely complex; and this must necessarily be still more the case in religious than in secular matters, where the keenness and importance of convictions are necessarily less. Even among those who hold a common creed, there will still, while the intellect retains its right of freedom, be differences of interpretation. And in the knowledge of divine things, no less than in the investigation of the facts of the world, so long as the mind of man is alive and not dead, there will be progress, involving, as all movement does, diversity of view. We cannot possibly escape from this. Our birth and heredity involve it, our education emphasizes it, our circumstances and our duties continually reinforce it. On this field every attempt at enforcing uniformity either from without or from within has failed, and ought to fail. There is no hope of uniformity among living thinkers, and there is no reason for desiring it.

But when we turn from the field of thought and theory to that of religious experience, we come upon the real ground of unity. 'The unity of Protestant theology in a common peaceful task far removed from the noise of ecclesiastical party

¹ A short address delivered at the Devotional Meeting of the Christian Unity Association of Scotland, October 8, 1907.

strife, will at last be attained if we devote our attention to that which is usually expressly conceded by the one opponent to the other. Our opponents do not deny our personal Christianity. Well, then, let the endeavour be made on both sides to describe what we understand by personal Christianity. Christians are fully agreed as to its general meaning. It is a communion of the soul with the living God through the mediation of Christ. Herein is really included all that belongs to the characteristic life of Christendom—revelation and faith, conversion and the comfort of forgiveness, the joy of faith and the service of love, lonely communion with God, and life in Christian fellowship. All this is, then, only truly Christian when it is experienced as communion with the living God through the mediation of Christ.¹ It might be feared that the inwardness of this region of experience, its essentially subjective elements, might still continue to keep us isolated. Every man's experience, as much as every man's thought, is his own. Yet, as Herrmann goes on to point out, the bond is really objective. There is an objective source and centre of our manifold subjective experience. In communion with the one living Christ, we have a direct contact with a unifying fact at the centre. 'We are Christians because, in the human Jesus, we have met with a fact whose content is incomparably richer than that of any feelings which arise within ourselves.' Each for himself, we know, recognizes and is very sure of God. Yet our Christianity does not dissolve in subjective conditions. It points back to history, and it finds its unifying and perpetuating bond in the actual and eternal personality of Jesus Christ, whom each Christian deals with, loves, obeys, and trusts; and through whom each derives his conception of, and finds his communion with, God. The region in which this ideal of Christian unity will have by far the best chance of effectively and worthily realizing itself will therefore be neither that of action nor of theory, but that of experience. This devotional meeting, in which we together seek and find communion with God through Christ, will ever be the central point, and the most vital point, of all our endeavour. Here, perhaps more than in any other part of our work

¹ Herrmann, *Communion with God*.

together, we find the value of our fellowship with one another. The Communion of Christians is an agency and a power at the very heart and centre of our religious life. Here, as elsewhere, we find ourselves by way of the world. Private religious experience is never complete—can never fully understand its own meaning even—until it is taken out into the open and shared with other Christians. This communion supplies some elements necessary even to the most intimate and private experience. It remains one's own after having passed through the fellowship of others, but it is better every way for that passage—healthier, more balanced, and more fitted to become practically effective in the days to come.

The central unity of experience, as we have seen, is not a merely subjective matter. Its subjective elements lay hold on, and are held together by, the commanding objective facts of God and Jesus Christ. But, if that be so, then there ought to be a reaction of experience upon theory, so that our unity of experience should ultimately be found to modify and possibly to remove our divergences of creed. Of course, since the facts of God's revelation to Man, and especially the fact of Christ, are facts in human history, they are necessarily subject to the difficulties and questions that beset all facts in history—questions of criticism and questions of interpretation. Yet in three ways especially, in spite of all such remaining complications, the definite insistence on religious experience as the essential ground of religious unity, ought to react on our doctrinal and theoretical relations with one another:—1. It should banish from the creed of us all everything that would lead us to question *à priori* the genuineness of the religious experience of others who profess to hold actual communion with God through Christ. 2. It should set a type and method for our discussion, utilizing the elements contributed by experience, and testing dogma by experience rather than experience by dogma. 3. It should help us, in this way, towards a standard which would enable us more clearly to distinguish among the doctrines of our faith, those to which we ascribe absolute value from those whose value is merely relative and provisional.