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The Essential Oneness of Christ's Body

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THERE is no conviction more firmly rooted in modern ecumenical thinking than the truth witnessed to in the title of this essay. It could not be otherwise if the touchstone of all our thinking about the nature of the Church is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as witnessed to in Scriptures.

If we begin and end, in our thinking about the Church, with empirical evidence, we shall be forced in all honesty to assert the opposite: the Church as seen from without and experienced from within is not essentially one but many. It is divided into the various Protestant denominations each of which, in naming itself, gives adjectival qualification to the word "church." And apart from these Protestant denominations there are, on the one hand, the great Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches and, on the other, the plethora of Protestant sects. If these numerous denominations, churches and sects were but a witness to diversity within the unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ they would not call into question the essential oneness of Christ's Body. But in actuality, they bear witness to division more than to diversity. Truly to assert that the Church of Jesus Christ is essentially one is to fly in the teeth of evidence; it is to make an assertion which no phenomenological description of the church will support. It is indeed to make that venture of faith which risks affirmations in spite of all that would seem to call them into question. Yet to make such a claim, and to accept the risks it involves, is not to engage in a wishful kind of thinking divorced from all reality; it is rather to ground one's assertions in the revealed Word of God.

The New Testament clearly witnesses to the Church, the *ecclesia* of God, as essentially one Church. Although one does find the word for Church used there in the plural, there is nothing to suggest that in reality there is, or could be, more than one Church of Christ. "In the New Testament there are not many Churches but one Church in many places. The local congregation is the local expression of the one great universal community in heaven and on earth."¹ The essential unity of the Body of Christ, witnessed to in the use of the metaphor "body" itself, is both clearly asserted and implicitly assumed throughout the whole of the New Testament. In order to emphasize a point which will be patent to any unprejudiced reader of the scriptures it will suffice to call to mind only a few passages from the apostolic witness to the unity of the Church:

Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? [I Cor. 1:2]

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one spirit are

1. Hugh Martin: Christian Reunion, p. 44.

we all baptized into one body . . . and have all been made to drink into one spirit. [I Cor. 12:12-13]

There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. [Eph. 4:4-6]

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the Blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the Body of Christ? For we being many, are one bread and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread. [I Cor. 10:16-17]

These passages, individually and collectively, make it abundantly clear that the "ut omnes unum sint" of our Lord's "high-priestly" prayer (Jn. 17:21) has in Him become an accomplished reality. The Church which is His body is essentially one.

There is a three-fold unity ascribed to the Church in the New Testament:² (i) the unity of origin which resides in the fact that the Church is the creation of God, brought into being by His own divine act; (ii) a social unity resulting from and expressing the divine life shared in common by all its members; (iii) a unity of temper and belief, the effect of a common aim and loyalty and the pursuit of a common task. We shall consider briefly each of these aspects of unity in turn.

(i) The Body of Christ is essentially one because it has its origin in God Who is essentially one. The Church is not a human invention; it arose out of no social contract or voluntary association of like-minded men. The Church is the creation of God. In a very real sense it is the end of the ways of God with men. In creation and redemption God acted to bring into being a people of God that would find its life through participation in His own life. Israel's history, interpreted in the light of the prophetic witness to revelation, can be understood in no other terms than these. And that history had its culmination in Jesus Christ, Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, Ascension, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—these are God in action to fulfil His purpose to create a Church. It is inconceivable that the Church which is the creation and gift of God should be other than one. Unity and community, being the very essence of God's own nature, are that which He has given to men in the gift of Himself in Jesus Christ. God the Father, in Christ who is His Son, through the Holy Spirit imparts to men that unity in community which is the Love that He is.

(ii) The Body of Christ is essentially one not only because it has its origin in God's own will and act but also because it has its continuing life in Him. The Church feeds upon the one bread of life, Jesus Christ; the Church breathes the one breath of life, the Holy Spirit. To feed together in Word and Sacrament upon this divine bread which is our forgiveness and redemption and to partake together of this divine Spirit, which is our sanctification and renewal, is to feed upon and partake of unity.

(iii) The Body of Christ is one because of "the unity of temper and

2. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 69.

belief that flows from a common aim and loyalty, and the pursuit of a common task." The one Christ is the one Head of the Body which is the Church. As Head of the Body we name Him Lord. We owe a common allegiance to Him. Christians cannot together name Him Lord and Christ and be *essentially* divided in their loyalty and aim. There is one Lord and those who name Him so are, beyond all that distinguishes or seems to separate, essentially one, for none can name Him Lord save through the Spirit of God. He unites Christians together in one aim, namely to grow in the grace and knowledge of Him. He gives to them a common task, namely to render obedience to the dictates of His will for love in Church and world and to make the Gospel concerning Him known to every creature. To know these things and to do them is to partake of unity.

II

It is difficult within the brief compass of an article to take account of all the facets of a very complex subject. It will have become quite evident by now that all that is being attempted is the statement of what one believes to be the essential nature of the Church as found in the scriptural witness to revelation and to develop briefly some of its implications for present-day ecumenical thinking. Quintessentially, the "Body of Christ" in the New Testament is represented as being a fellowship of believers whom Christ has made His own through faith and love. It is a community of persons who have become conjoined to Him through the offer of Himself to them as gracious gift and their Spirit-enabled receiving of that offering. The "Body of Christ" is also, and at the same time, a community of persons united to one another through their sharing of a common faith in Him and the love which His Spirit quickens in their hearts. *Koinonia*—a fellowship of personal beings called out of self-isolation into communion with God and their fellows, genuine corporeity as over against perverse individualism, this essentially is what "Body of Christ" means. All else is secondary to this reality: how the community expresses its faith and love in worship and in conduct; how it orders its common life together; how it thinks and speaks about the meaning of its faith and life in doctrine or in creed—all of this, although it grows out of that which is primary, that which essentially is the Body of Christ, is nevertheless secondary.

The writer is not at all unaware of the difficulties that result from adopting such a point of view. It may well be asked, for example, whether there is not a great deal of doctrine already implicit in the naming of the Church's Founder and Foundation "the Christ". And the answer must be that of course there is. But to speak of doctrine, and the other realities of Christian faith and order, life and work listed above, as secondary is not to say that they are not important or that they are unnecessary. It is rather to assert that Christ's person takes priority over all our thinking and speaking about

Him.³ Where Christ is—living, personal, present Reality—there is the Church. Where He is not, the Church is not. God's primary community-creating gift to men is nothing less than Himself; man's primary community-creating response is the faith, working through love, which receives that gift.

III

If these things be true we are led by them to an understanding of that wherein the essential unity of the Church does *not* lie. (i) It does not lie in the fact that the Church is comprised of those who share in common a body of doctrinal beliefs or even of creedal confessions of faith. The common confession of faith which brings Christians of many "churches" together in the Ecumenical Movement, that Jesus Christ is God and Saviour, is not that which *constitutes* their fundamental unity. As a confession of faith it is a "symbol" which points beyond itself to the living Reality in Whom they participate in common. We, as Christians, rejoice to confess together the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, for in so doing we are giving expression to ourselves and to the world of those great acts of God which have made us what we are. But it is our communion with God Who has thus acted, and with one another in Him, that is our essential life and that creates our essential togetherness.

So also is it with doctrine. Doctrine is the attempt to think and say, coherently and consistently, what God has manifested to us concerning Himself and concerning the world which He has created and is redeeming and will perfect and fulfil. But such thought and speaking will always be, until the time of that fulfilment, subject to the fallibility of our finite nature and the fallibility that is rooted in our sin. Thus doctrine cannot be the essence of our unity in Christ.

Moreover, since it is *community* which is the reality of our common life and since it is community wherein our essential oneness lies, doctrine in and by itself cannot be the ground of the essential oneness of Christ's Body. For to be united through doctrine is to be united through the abstract and the impersonal. A certain kind of unity is achieved by those who hold in common a body of doctrine called the "truths of faith," but not *community*. Genuine community must be distinguished from a collectivity of individuals, held together by things external to themselves. Christian community is a relation among persons created by the relation which they share in common with the Person of the Christ.

(ii) The essential unity of Christ's Body does not reside in the fact that Christians are bound by the same ethical standards and ideals or seek to achieve similar goals in secular society. There can be no doubt that Christians in general do have identical ethical standards, ideals and aims and therefore experience a desire and a sense of obligation to join with Christians of other

3. Cf. F. W. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ*: "The Church is a body united in the acknowledgment of a living *Person*; every sect is a body united in the acknowledgment of a certain *Notion*."

"churches" in giving united witness to them in the world. Some find in this kind of co-operative togetherness the limit of the unity churches should seek in the ecumenical movement. But whatever of good can be said for this kind of unity, and much that is good can be said for it, it is not to be equated with the essential unity of Christ's Body. The latter is more than the mutual pursuit of aims and ends shared in common. It is personal participation in a personal Reality Who transcends all morally conceived aims and ends and Who indeed is the source of them. It is possible for Christians, as individuals or as a group, to differ in their understanding of how they ought to act in this or that concrete situation and yet to know themselves bound together with those with whom they differ in the transcendent community of faith and love which is Christ's Body.

(iii) The essential unity of Christ's Body is not to be found in the fact that all Christians worship God in a like manner through the use of a common order of service. No attempt is being made here to call into question the vital importance for Christian faith and life of an ordered service of public—and private—prayer. Doubtless there are ways of worship which serve more adequately than others to receive and express the Being of God and His meaning for our lives. How much there is that Christians can learn from one another and from the great traditions of the Church in this regard! All that we affirm here is that it is not in such ordering of our prayer and praise that our unity in Christ's Body resides. In fact a great diversity of order is quite consistent with that unity.

Of course the structure of Christian worship must be such as to offer God in Christ to men through the means of grace He has provided—through proclaimed Word and enacted Sacrament. For unless Christ is known and received there is no building up of His Body or participation in His life. But we must not confuse means with ends. Our essential unity is found in our personal relatedness to Him, and to one another in Him, on the basis of His own self-offering in Word and Sacrament.

(iv) Finally, the essential unity of Christ's Body does not lie in the organizational structure, the institutional form, of the Church. It is true that some kind of structure is necessary for the communal life of the Church, both for the creating and the sustaining of that life and the ordering of the social relations within which it will find expression. But the test for the validity of the organizational structure of the Church is its adequacy to perform the functions of the Church. The institutional structure derives from the functions and the functions derive from the Church's essential nature as a community, a *koinonia*, a fellowship of persons sharing a new life of faith and love in union with Him Who is the Christ.

IV

On the basis of the foregoing analysis of the essential oneness of Christ's Body we shall now attempt to show some of its implications for present-day ecumenical thinking and practice, particularly at points where most serious

disagreements tend to arise. Doubtless some assertions that are made will run counter to the strong convictions of some of our readers; our aim is not controversy but frank discussion within the unity of faith and love.

Firstly, if the essential unity of the Church arises out of God's action, not ours, if the Body which is one is something He creates through His gifts to us of Christ and His Holy Spirit, there can be no thought of our *achieving* the essential unity of the Church. It is ours to *receive* a unity that is already given; it is ours to seek to manifest a unity that already exists; it is ours to will to enter more fully into union with Him Who is the source and content of our togetherness.

Secondly, since the essential nature of Christ's Body is personal communion in faith and love, Church order cannot be regarded as of the essence of that Body, nor can it ever become itself an article of faith. The ministry of the Church is a functional ministry. It serves the constituting and building up of the community of faith and love. Thus the question of the proper ordering of the ministry must be answered in terms of its adequacy to perform that service. It is true that the ministry is necessary for the perpetuation and edification of the Church. Peter and his confession are the rock on which Christ builds His Church. The ministry is God's gift to the Church. He calls men and equips them with charismatic gifts for that vocation. And the believing community, recognizing that call, sets them apart and ordains them for that service. The ministry has been called into being by God in Christ to proclaim the Word and to administer the Sacraments whereby the same God in Christ gives Himself to His people, that in receiving Him they may become members of His Body. The essence of the ministry is representative service, of God before men, and of the believing community before God. The writer is among those who believe that episcopacy is the way of ordering the ministry of the Church that most adequately renders that representative service. It thus belongs to the *bene esse* of the Church. But neither episcopacy, nor any other form of ministerial order, is that which constitutes, or necessarily preserves, the essential unity of the Church of Christ. It serves to constitute Christ's Body, but it is not itself the constitutive element.

In this same connection, one can agree with those who cherish a ministry in apostolic succession as "unity expressed in the dimension of time," that is, with those who find in such a ministry a *symbol* for the continuity of the Church down through history from apostolic times. But to make it the *sine qua non* of the Church, as that which constitutes its nature, its unity, its continuity, is to substitute servant for Master and to attempt to build the Church on another foundation than that which is laid *in Christ*.

The foregoing must not be taken to mean that Christians can be indifferent to the whole question of Church order. The historical life of the Church necessitates some kind of ordering of its visible, corporate being. And there are undoubtedly ways of ordering the Church's life which are more consonant with its essential nature and purpose than are others. Much

can be learned from Scripture and tradition concerning these. All that we are contending for is that such ordering, though necessary to the Church, is not the primary element which constitutes it. It is the basic error of Roman Catholic Christianity that it makes Church order a matter of faith upon which man's eternal salvation depends, rather than regarding it from the point of view of function, asking in what way does the ordering of the ministry best serve to create, build up and give expression to that which alone is essential to man's salvation—his relation by faith to God in Christ and his life in love for the brethren.

Finally, there is the question of the "Table Fellowship." A verse from Scripture, with peculiar and disturbing relevance, comes to mind as we attempt to think of this question in relation to what has been said concerning the essential oneness of Christ's Body: "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (I Cor. 11:29). Commenting on the passage from which this verse is taken, Robert Nelson has written:

The purpose of the Lord's Supper, according to Paul, is twofold: attention is centred upon the sacrificial suffering and death of Jesus, but also on the fellowship of the faithful brethren who are united in Christ. When the Corinthians turned the supper into an occasion for gluttony and revelry, the wealthy ignoring the hunger of the poorer, they saw neither the sacrificed body of the Lord nor the loving fellowship of the *ecclesia*. As Paul demanded of them in verse 22: "Do you despise the Church of God?"⁴

Our manner of celebrating the Sacrament today is not such as to tempt us to failure to discern Christ and the loving fellowship of the *ecclesia* through gluttony and revelry. But have we not our own way, in our divided churches, of eating and drinking at the Eucharist "without discerning the Body"? If the Church of Christ is as we have understood it to be, we fail to discern the Body whenever we refuse to act upon the truth that all who believe in and love the Lord Jesus Christ are essentially one in Him and exclude from fellowship at His Table fellow-members of the *ecclesia* of God. "Fellowship at the Lord's Table," Professor Hettlinger has written, "is more than a personal experience; it is a liturgical expression of the unity of the Church."⁵ Amen, we say. So let it be!

V

In conclusion we note for our comfort and inspiration that there is a paradoxical way of speaking about the essential oneness of Christ's Body in the New Testament. We find it in the Epistle to the Ephesians. There it is said quite categorically that the Body of Christ is one: "There is one Body and one Spirit." On the other hand it speaks about the Body *becoming* one in all its perfection: "Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the

4. J. Robert Nelson, *The Realm of Redemption*, p. 74.

5. E. R. Fairweather and R. F. Hettlinger, *Episcopacy and Reunion*, p. 112.

knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Thus to the unity we have been given and are given through faith and love we must add the unity we shall be given in the *eschaton*. Ecumenical thought and action take place within the tension of these two kinds of unity—which yet are one. Our ecumenical task is to seek through faith and love to give ever fuller expression within the Church and to the world of that unity in Christ which is a present reality. We are kept in our labours from impatience, disillusionment or despair by hope for that perfect unity in Christ which yet shall be.