



The unity of the body of Christ

When we speak of the unity of the body of Christ we are thinking not of Christ's physical body, the body formed in the virgin's womb, the body that was crucified on the accursed tree and laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, the body that was raised on the third day and after forty days ascended to heaven, and in which Jesus will again return to this earth in power and glory. That body is an integral part of Jesus' person as the Son of God incarnate and glorified, the body of Christ's glory. When we speak of the unity of Christ's body we are rather thinking in terms of the apostle's word,

'There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye were called in one hope of your calling.'

(Ephesians 4:4)

I cannot but suspect that this subject does not loom very high in the thought of a great many of us. I fear that we have paid too little attention to the implications for faith, for privilege, for obligation, and for practice of this precious tenet, *'there is one body'*. Or, as the same apostle puts it in another Epistle, *'For we, being many, are one bread, one body'* (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Personally I am not enamoured of the world-wide movement in the professing church at the present time called the ecumenical movement, organized as the World Council of Churches. This movement claims to find its basis in, and to derive its impetus from, this truth. This ecumenical movement is to be criticized, not because the tenet upon which it bases its plea and its organization is a falsehood, but because its conception of what underlies that unity is false. The truth that there is one body must never be disassociated from what follows in that same word of the apostle: *'One Lord, one faith, one baptism'*. Unless there is unity of confession respecting the testimony of Christ, unless there is oneness of faith respecting Christ and the revealed counsel of God which finds its embodiment in him, unless there is an appreciation of the unity that exists between the incarnate Word on the one hand, and the inscripturated Word as the deposit of the revelation that finds its embodiment in the incarnated Word on the other, then the apparent unity that may result is not the unity of the body of Christ. We may not forget that our Lord said,

'To this end was I born, and for this purpose am I come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth heareth my voice.'

(John 18:37)

Now the question is: What is this unity? It is to the effect that, if we belong to Christ, we do not belong to him in isolation. If we belong to him, our union is not only with Christ but also, through him, with a great multitude who are likewise in union with Christ. We are brought into a fellowship of closely-knit unity which surpasses any other kind of unity that exists in the sphere of human relationship.

The Scripture uses various similitudes to express this unity. We are cemented together like the stones of a building: *'builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit'* (Ephesians 2:22); organically knit together as the branches of a tree — *'I am the vine, ye are the branches'* (John 15:5); vitally grown together like the members in the human body — *'For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body, even so Christ. For in one Spirit we are all baptized into one body'* (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13). For this reason we cannot for one moment of our life be independent the one of the other, and in no moment of our life may we behave as if we were isolated units.

It is with some of the implications of this unity that we now proceed to deal.

1. Sanctification

We are no doubt familiar with the notion of sanctification as the progressive transformation by which the people of God are more and more brought to conformity with the image of Christ. It is that of which Paul speaks when he writes,

'We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Spirit of the Lord.'

(2 Corinthians 3:18)

But what we need to understand in relation to our topic is that this process or progression is never to be conceived of as an affair that concerns merely the individual believer; it applies to the church in its unity and completeness. In reality the progression, as it applies to the growth of the individual, can only take place in the fellowship of the church as the body of Christ. Believers have never existed as independent units, either in the eternal counsel by which they were elected to salvation, or in the once-for-all accomplishment in the death and resurrection of Christ, or in the application of redemption. The application begins with the effectual call, and it is into the fellowship of God's Son that they are called. Sanctification is a process but it moves to a consummation. And the consummation will not be realized for the individual until the whole body of Christ is complete and presented in its totality faultless and without blemish.

This demonstrates the necessity of cultivating and promoting the sanctification of the whole body, and that means the sanctification of the discrete individuals in their fellowship within the unity of the body of Christ. *'If one member suffers, all the other members suffer with it, if one member is honoured all the others rejoice with it'* (1 Corinthians 12:26). If an individual is indifferent to the sanctification of others, and does not seek to promote their advancement in faith, in love, in knowledge, and in hope, this neglect impedes his own progression in at least two respects. His lack of concern for others is itself a vice that interferes with his own growth in grace. And the absence of the ministry which he might and should have afforded to others, an absence resulting in the impoverishment of others to the extent of his failure, reacts upon himself because these others in turn are not able to minister to him to the full extent of their encouragement, support, instruction, edification, and exhortation. We can perceive therefore the almost numberless respects in which intercommunication within the fellowship of those who are the called of Jesus Christ is brought to bear upon the progressive sanctification of the people of God.

How eloquent in this regard are the words of the apostle *'And he (i.e. Christ) gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists, and some; pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ; from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.'*

(Ephesians 4:11-16.

In like manner cf. Colossians 2:19; Romans 12:4ff; 1 Corinthians 12:12ff).

The expression in Ephesians 4:13 — *'the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'* — is no doubt one difficult of interpretation. But if we may venture the interpretation which the various expressions of the apostle would appear to support, it is to the effect that the church as the body of Christ is being filled with that fulness of wisdom, of righteousness, of grace, of truth, of power, and of virtue which dwells in its plenitude in Christ. Hence the stature of Christ's fulness unto which believers are to attain in the unity and fellowship of the church is the stature of being filled with all the grace and virtue, truth and wisdom, righteousness and holiness, which have their abiding home in Christ as the first begotten from the dead and the head of the body. The transformation which the process of sanctification has in view is nothing less than conformity to the image of God's Son,

a conformity attained not through external imitative assimilation but through an impartation of the fulness of grace in Christ, an impartation which flows, mystically and spiritually, through an organism that subsists and operates on an immensely higher plane than that of any form of organic or animate life with which we are acquainted in the phenomenal realm.

2. Communion

When we speak of communion among believers we must remember the basis of this communion. That basis is communion with Christ. It is into the fellowship of Christ that believers were called. It will help us to gain some insight into the meaning of this communion if we think in terms of property. By God's effectual call we have come to have property in Christ, communal participation of Christ in all the completeness that is his in his mediatorial capacity. Christ came into the world to have property in his people. And this property was all on the debit side, property in the sin and misery and death, yes, in the damnation that sin had brought upon them. But now they come to have property in him, and that is so inclusive that they are complete in him. And it is just because they are complete in him that they come to have property in one another. All that they are in respect of their identity as members of his body is that which is constituted by the completeness, the fulness, that is in him. All that fulness is theirs, and since each possesses that fulness, it is common property. Surely it is something like this that the apostle has in mind when he says,

'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, one body. For we all partake of the one bread.'

(1 Corinthians 10:16, 17)

So intimate is this fellowship, this mutual property, that all that belongs to one belongs to all others, and all that belongs to all the others belongs to each particular person who is a member of the body of Christ. We share one another's gifts; we bear one another's burdens. There is mutual participation in sorrow and joy, in loss and gain, in adversity and prosperity. How lamentably far short we come in the practical outworking of this great truth! How frequently do jealousy and envy, strife and vainglory, bickering and quarrelling mar the unity of the body of Christ! These are the contradiction of communion, for communion is participation. And if one member is honoured, all the others should rejoice with it. Are we really aware that all the defects in the members of the body of Christ are defects of the whole body, and we have property in these defects?

3. Forbearance

Forbearance is not a pleasing term and certainly not a pleasing duty. It is not pleasing for two reasons. It is easier to give way to irritation and impatience, and to the isolation and segregation which impatience prompts. To exercise forbearance means that we must live with those who show faults which we do not like, and it requires exacting effort. And again, it is not pleasing because forbearance implies that, if we must exercise it in relation to others, we must recognize that others have to exercise it in relation to us. And this requires humility. *'Forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'* (Ephesians 4:1, 2). How opposed to the unity of the body of Christ is the aloofness, the isolationism, which is characteristic of Christ's people!

4. Love

It is questionable if any demand arising from the claims of God's holiness and love has been subjected to as much abuse as the commandment to love, and particularly as this demand bears upon the relations of the people of God to one another within the body of Christ. No greater travesties have been perpetrated within the church of Christ than those committed in the name of love. One of the well-known Scottish preachers of a previous generation is reported by his biographer to have given the advice to a young minister, or at least to a youthful candidate for the ministry, 'Rather let error live than love die'. That is the type of travesty which destroys both truth and love.

The love that is the bond of perfectness is a love begotten of the love of God to us, and the love begotten is first of all love to God. Love to God is also love of the truth, and love of the truth engenders faithfulness to the truth. And love that sacrifices truth is not love. So we must always remember that the love that is the bond of perfectness, the love that covers a multitude of sins, the love that provides the atmosphere of the edification of the body of Christ is a love that constrains jealousy for the truth and speaks the truth in love. For that reason there is a severity to love, a severity that love of God and of his truth dictates. It is a love that reproves and rebukes. *'Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful'* (Proverbs 27:6).

But while love is often severe, it is never disruptive. It is never disintegrating or segregative. We are always drawn to those we love. How could it be otherwise if we have an appreciation of the bond that unites us to the saints in the unity of the body of Christ! It was the blood of Christ that secured this unity — it is therefore the bond of a common redemption. It was by the Holy Spirit that the people of God were baptized into one body. It is the bond of divine sanctification. It is by the headship of Christ that it is maintained.

The apostle could write, *'We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and the love which ye have to all the saints.'*

(Colossians 1:3, 4; cf. also Ephesians 4:13-16; Colossians 3:12-14)

'Put on therefore as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, forbearing one another and forgiving one another. If any man has a quarrel against any, even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity which is the bond of perfectness.'

(Colossians 3:12ff)

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