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The Unity of the Church.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN

VICTORIA ROAD CHURCH,

ON SUNDAY, SEPT. 26th, 1880.

BY THE

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THIS is a fine picture, but is it true? Is it a dream or a reality? a divine fact or a magnificent human fiction? Has there ever been this unity in the Church? Is there anything in the Church to-day which bears the faintest resemblance to it? and is there any prospect in the near or far off future that Christ's prayer will be fulfilled—“That they all may be one?”

If we answer these questions from a superficial view of things, we shall unhesitatingly answer no! Put the question to the general world, and there will be quite a chorus of noes! Church History, which deals mainly with the froth and wreckage that the great sea of religious life flings upon the shore—with the quarrels of sects, and the wranglings of ambitious priests and papal bulls and anathemas, and religious wars and religious persecutions—will answer emphatically no! Sceptics will even treat the question with a sneer; they will make fun of us for asking it. In their eyes the boasted unity of the Church is the most solemn farce that has ever been enacted; the vainest of Christ's dreams; the maddest and most extravagant of unfulfilled prophecies. In their eyes the seamless garment of Christ is a rent and tattered rag, which for eighteen hundred years his own disciples have been tearing with hand and teeth and claw, until hardly a patch of it remains; and the Holy Catholic Church, not *one* fold with one Shepherd, but a number of hostile folds with more of the wolf than the sheep about them—hating each other more than they hate the world. To them, indeed, the question is a theme for perpetual laughter—to be answered, if it is worthy of an answer—with a fierce contemptuous jibe.

And we, who are far too much in earnest to treat the question thus lightly; we who have far too much faith in Christ to think that any of his visions will remain unfulfilled, are yet disposed to look with doubtful, sorrowful, and half hopeless eyes on the distractions and dissensions of the Church, and to conclude, that of all the promises which Christ and His Apostles uttered, there is none so far off realization, as that which pictured a Unity of Faith, Hope, and Love in one great blood-bought company.

But now let us try to look at the question this morning with other and larger eyes. Let us try to get beneath the superficial crust and feel the throbbing heart of it; and with no desire to minimize and explain away the differences and divisions of the Church, but rather with intent to bring into prominence those great underlying principles of unity which escape the casual glance, let us ask what are the real grand promising facts of the case.

The local circumstances suggest such a discussion. We are about to welcome to our hospitality the members of a sister church. From our secret hearts and in our public assemblies there arises a prayer

for their prosperity. If our desires, and hopes, and intercessions can bring down the Spirit of God on their Congress, verily they will not lack the Divine presence; with our inmost souls we say, Grace, mercy, and peace be upon all them that love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth. All thoughts of rivalry, jealousy, envyings, and differences vanish at this moment so completely, that we are ashamed even to name them. We are only anxious to kneel with these brethren at the feet of our common Father, and wish them God speed in the name of our common Lord.

Now, does not this fact of itself suggest, that there is more unity in Christ's Church than common report would show? Some of us have, at times, spoken and thought hard things of the Church of England, and we have writhed and groaned under the hard, unjust things which that Church has said of us. The bitter conflicts of centuries have left still open and rankling wounds. We are separated, and still shall be, by a multitude of questions which we cannot afford to deem unimportant. There are differences of method and administration, and ritual, and especially of sacramental views, and priestly ordination—differences which none but weak minds would try to smooth over with the plaster of a sham charity. To some of us, at least, it would be nothing less than infidelity to our convictions to attempt it. We should be dishonest to ourselves, and therefore unfaithful to our Master, if we pooh-poohed these differences away as things of no consequence. Yet, at a time like this, we put them all aside—the crust is broken through, and we touch the heart. We feel that we are brothers, though our paths have diverged—the sight of our common Father bids us be at peace; our souls kiss one another, though our lips have held aloof. These men are no more to us the members of the Church of England—they are members of the Church of Christ. The same divine Spirit works in them as in us. They are praying to the same Father, and bowing before the same cross. They are made mighty by the same faith, and rejoicing in the same hope. They are swayed by the same motives, and striving together for the same end. Their confessions are ours, their praises are ours, their creeds are for the most part ours, their sympathies are ours. With the world we have hardly anything in common; with them we have nearly everything—a hundred sacred and eternal principles make us close akin. We are as the divergent channels of one great sea—warm here and cold there; green or blue in one place, black, white, or red in another; here almost tideless, there sweeping in great tidal floods on the shore—but the same sea; feeling the pulsations of the same divine currents; swayed by the same universal tidal movement; sweetened by the same salt, and working together to keep the world fragrant and pure. They are our kinsmen in the Lord, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh—and we greet them with a holy kiss.

It is always the distinguished feature of the shallow mind, that it looks only on the surface, and therefore magnifies those differences which float on the surface. It never goes deep enough to see the underlying principles of unity.

A shallow mind will tell you that there is nothing in common between an oak tree and a rose bush ; between the fall of an apple and the movements of a planet ; between an aristocrat and a working man ; and between a Romish Church and a protestant conventicle. He is deceived by appearances, these things *look* so different, they wear such different garments, and put on such a different face, and speak with such different language, that he concludes at once, as a thing which no sane man will dispute, that they are as far apart as the poles—that they are opposed to each other as light and darkness, and that there is not a single point where they can touch and throb together. Yet the deep thinker finds that they have perhaps nine points in common, and only in the tenth part are divergent and hostile.

If he is a botanist, he will prove to you that the oak tree and the rose bush—and things far more unlike—are allied in the closest kinship ; formed on the same plan, growing by the same laws, and yielding their fruit and foliage on the same eternal principles. If he is an astronomer, he will show you that the fall of an apple to the ground is essentially the same movement as the revolution of planets in their orbits. If he is a moral philosopher, he will discover that the same sentiments, hopes, and passions throb under the broad cloth of the aristocrat as under the corduroy of the workman. And if he is a clear thinking and large-hearted theologian, he will find the same sentiments of reverent aspiration, faith, and love, underlying the pageantry of the Romish Church, breathing and living under the weight of its smothering formality, which he will find in the plainest Primitive Methodist or Friends Meeting House. It is only the superficial mind that makes the surface differences of infinite importance, the careful and devout mind looks deeper, looks further, and rejoices in the hidden principles of unity.

It were well that we should look with that clearer and more discerning spirit upon the Church of to-day, For verily, if we look in this spirit, we shall find that these words of Paul are not a satire and not a fictitious dream, but a deep and solemn reality—“ There is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism ; one God and Father of all.” For

I. The whole Church, no matter how divided, acknowledges one Lord. Christ is the only master. At His feet all Christians of every name gather. By His cross all of every name are attracted ; and to all of them, no matter what their professions, He is “ the chief among ten thousand and the altogether lovely.” There is not a Christian soul anywhere who does not acknowledge Christ as supreme—the only ultimate source of authority—the only potentate whose will is to be implicitly obeyed. Even those who kiss the pope’s feet, and trust him as the infallible guide, do it only because they think he his Christ’s vicegerent, and that in honouring the representative, they are worshipping the king. When they kneel at the altar of the virgin, it is only with the hope that she will lay their petitions at the great master’s feet—she is nothing to them in herself, they only revere her because they think she commands Christ’s ear, and has continual access to His presence. Of course we know that all this is a poor

vain superstition; a miserable mockery indeed to suppose that either pope or virgin is needed to remind Christ of His Church, and press upon Him the claims of the contrite sinner or the struggling saint; a strange travesty of Faith to think that Christ is so far off, and so hard of hearing, as to need either a representative on earth, or an advocate to refresh His memory in heaven. We brush all that aside as a diseased excrescence which has grown on the healthy tree of Christian life, and corrupted it. But when we have brushed all that aside, we find that there is a large substratum of living devotion left. *They* are as anxious as we are to know what is Christ's will. His commands are paramount, if they can only find what His commandments are. They would defy both Pope and virgin if they had reason to suspect that Pope and virgin did not speak in the name of Christ. There runs through all their worship a sort of groping like that of Job, "O that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come even to His seat." Under all the froth of their superstitions there flows a deep devotion to Him; and if we want to find expressions of passionate love and implicit trust—if we want to find souls kneeling in an ecstasy of rapture and joy before the Cross of Jesus, and adoring Him as their present life and their future Judge and King, we have no need to go to Protestant writers. We may find strains that melt our very souls in Thomas à Kempis and Francis Xavier, and John Henry Newman, and a host of lesser saints and leaders of the Romish Church. All through the Christian world, then, there goes up the same testimony from innumerable lips. He is the King. His name is above every name, and in spite of all divisions and heresies, Paul's words are deeply, solemnly true, "There is one Lord."

II. And in the same way, and without any stretch of imagination, we may rightly contend that there is "One Faith." It would be indeed ridiculous to make that assertion if Faith meant what the multitude of Church doctors have tried to make it mean. The Faith of the Church is usually defined as the sum of its creeds, confessions, and formulas. It includes all that the sometimes misguided Fathers of the Church have laid down as necessary to salvation, all the articles of the Athanasian and other creeds expressed often in abstruse metaphysical language, which nobody in earth or heaven can understand, and each with its damnatory clause attached. It includes all the decrees of the great councils in which Bishops vied with each other in spinning subtleties and fine wire-drawn distinctions, and religiously anathematizing every body who had either the courage or the common sense to differ from them. O, if "the Faith" of the Church means that, or anything like that, it would be the most solemn and monstrous of jokes to declare with Paul that there is "One Faith." The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England contain six hundred and seventy distinct propositions, the Westminster confession and catechism about ten times that number, and the decrees of the Council of Trent a number which I believe no man has yet found time to number. One staggers at the multiplicity of doctrines and conditions. No wonder that the Faith is

not fit to be discussed by the illiterate mind, and that infallible Church doctors are needed to keep us from going astray, and to lead us into all truth. If the Faith means this, there are about as many faiths as there are theologians, and distraction and disunion everywhere, with no prospect of anything else. But, thank God, this was not what Paul and his Master meant by Faith. With them it was an infinitely simpler thing. It embraced only three or four propositions at the most. Christ expressed it in two words, "Follow me." Paul put it in one short sentence, "If thou shalt believe in thine heart, and confess with thy lips, that Jesus is the Christ, and that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

What a marvellous scattering of decrees, and formulas, and great dust heaps of propositions there is there! All the great mountains of pamphlets and folios, and wind bags which doctors have piled up between Christ and the believing soul are burst and dispersed, and there is left an uplifted Cross, an Almighty Saviour risen from the dead, and a company which no man can number, bowing before Him and confessing simply thou art Christ the Son of the living God. Thou hast subdued sin for us, and conquered death; Thou hast the keys of heaven; Thou art our only hope, and life, and joy. Now that is the Faith reduced to its first beautiful heavenly simplicity, and reading it in that way, we shall not be far wrong in saying that the Faith of the Church is *one*. It has many opinions; it has an infinite number of dogmas, some of them of little worth, and some of great worth. God forbid that I should speak slightly of them. But it has only one Faith; for all the members of the Church are alike in this. They recognise Christ as the one being whom it is good to follow; the one beauty without stain; the one power without weakness; the one love which knows no change; the one truth without the shadow of a lie. They all alike grant that He is the one source of salvation, and the fount of life; that He has given death its death-blow, and opened the gates of immortality; that He is the judge whom God hath appointed, and that on His smile or on His frown depend the issues of eternity for every struggling human soul.

That is the faith which unites all that bear the Christian name; the faith before whose immense importance all minor distinctions vanish away, and we clasp hands of brotherhood with all those who are moved, exalted, and inspired by it, and exclaim with Paul, "There is one Lord and one Faith."

III. Dare we go on to say "There is one Baptism," remembering how that word has been bandied about, and the thing squabbled over, and fought over until the life blood has been wrenched out of it, and nothing left but a tattered rag held up before the nations as the symbol of the Church's fury and distraction. Administered in at least ten distinct ways, defined in more than a hundred ways, treated by one large section of the Church as a piece of divine magic and thaumaturgy which works an instantaneous miraculous change, rejected in toto by another section of believers as the mother of untold abuses; here regarded as the essential condition of salvation,

then passed slightly over as of but infinitesimal consequence—here preached and declaimed about as though it were the principal gate of heaven—there almost forgotten, because men have grown weary of the useless fight, and turned themselves to higher truths. Who shall dare to say in face of all this that there is “One Baptism.”

Yet, perhaps if we knew what was in Paul’s mind we should venture to say it. For I question if he was thinking of the water and the Baptismal font at all. He was thinking rather of the thing that lay beneath the sign. He was thinking of that Divine Spirit which bathed a man’s whole nature, and washed the old, stained, corrupted life out of him, and made him a new creature in Christ Jesus. He was thinking that there was no heavenly life for any man, and no heavenly emotions, no heavenly joy, until he was brought into living communion with Jesus, through the operation of that spirit. And if that was what he meant by Baptism, we may use his words now, and say “there is one Baptism.”

For the whole Church of Christ clings to this—amid the fight over font and baptism, and dipping and pouring, and infants and adults, there is one spot of holy ground where the Church drops its weapons, and cries agreed. *All* unite in the confession, that the new life is not man’s work, and not a process of natural growth—but born of the will of God, and by the Baptism of the Spirit. *When* it comes, and *how*, voices differ, and differ endlessly. But that it does come all alike confess. All alike confess that the poor, weak, sin weighted soul cannot rise heavenward until the Spirit of God touches it, and endows it with heavenly wings; and that it can never be fit for God’s presence, until the Spirit has washed it in the divine fountain of truth, and purity, and grace—that is the “one Baptism.” And so it is not a vain thing to say, as we look over a divided Church, there is “one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism.” And it is good to think of these things: thank God, we are getting to think of them more. We are looking with clearer eyes and, I trust, devouter minds, beneath the diverse surface of Church life, and rejoicing in the deeper life of faith, and hope, and reverence, in which we all share. There are many errors, which not only disfigure the face but make the very heart of the Church diseased, and we strive to be free from them, so far as we know them we hate them, and would hold no parley with them, and we pray God in His mercy to deliver the whole Church from them. We *dare* not regard them as trivial things. But meanwhile we glory in the thought that there is a deep current of true Godly devotion and life underneath. We are learning a diviner charity. We are making heaven bigger, and Christ’s love more. We are consigning the damnatory clauses of our creed to the moles and bats. We are trusting less in Church doctors and councils, and more in the simplicity of our master. Instead of fashioning anathemas, as of old, we are preparing greetings for all that love the Lord Jesus Christ; and our warmest and holiest greetings to day are for the brethren who are coming into the midst of us, to consult and pray about the things of God, and who are of like faith and hope with ourselves.







