

Editorial . . .

Christian Unity - Why? What? How?

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Is it not important that one of our earliest considerations of unity be concerned with its purpose? Why seek it? Why be concerned when it seems to be lacking in certain areas of the Christian community? Why be disturbed about the failures which may be produced because of its partial absence in the universal Christian community? Briefly, why is genuine Christian unity so essential to the life of the Christian, individually and collectively? What then, in other words, is the real function of unity for the Church?

The primary purpose of unity as expressed in the high priestly prayer of Jesus is to bear witness to an unbelieving world, "That they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:21). Paul speaks of the purpose of unity as enabling the whole Church to perform its normal divine responsibility with effectiveness. "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles" (I Cor. 12:12, 13). Further, Paul speaks about the universal Christian community as constituting the building of God. (See I Cor. 3:9.) The figure of a building is of very practical significance and sets forth a number of implications. A building which is worthy of the name implies a capable architect. The building of God therefore will show forth the nature of God which is holiness, beauty, and strength. A building will also serve that purpose for which it was designed. In God's building the togetherness and co ordination of the Church are dependent upon the unity thereof. With somewhat the same figure of speech Paul instructs the Church at Ephesus (Eph. 2:21) concerning the necessity of unity. By such unity within the Church the Christian community is to "grow unto an holy temple in the Lord." Thus it is suggested that the purpose of our unity is to provide a suitable dwelling place for the living God. Our unity is required in order that we may provide an

adequate Christian witness. In us who are united, that building which is fitly framed together becomes the medium through which the glory of God is revealed.

Visser 't Hooft suggests in his recent book on the subject, *The Pressure of Our Common Calling*, that there are three purposes of Christian unity, namely, Witness, Service, and Fellowship. While we must recognize the place and importance of all three and of their vital relationship to the unity of the Church, yet we would suggest that the witness of the Christian community is the ultimate evidence of its essential unity.

Let us now consider the question *What?* What is this primary and essential unity for which Jesus prays, and which Paul implies must be a fundamental part of the redeemed life of the Christian community? Visser 't Hooft holds that there are four different meanings of unity: 1) The given unity of the common calling; 2) The growing unity in fulfilling the common calling; 3) The churchly unity in faith and order; and 4) The ultimate unity in Christ.¹ Our concern for the present will be with the first and second of these.

There is a unity among Christian believers which is an inherent part of the redemptive work of God. At the moment of one's passing from death unto life and becoming a child of God by faith in His Word, he is given a sense of kinship and unity with every other believing child of God. We speak of this as the unity of the Spirit. As the Scripture has said, we are made not only one *with* Christ, but also one *in* Christ. That is to say, our new relationship with Christ immediately puts us in a new relationship with all others who have thus believed in Him. This is the Christian unity which inheres in our initial salvation.

The assertion of this unity was made by the Edinburgh Conference of 1937 in its affirmation of unity.²

This unity does not consist in the agreement of our minds or the consent of our wills. It is founded in Jesus Christ Himself, who lived, died and rose again to bring us to the Father, and who through the Holy Spirit dwells in His Church. We are one because we

¹W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Pressure of Our Common Calling* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 87.

²Leonard Hodgson, *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order* (Edinburgh, 1937), p. 275.

are all the objects of the love and grace of God, and called by Him to witness in all the world to His glorious gospel. Our unity is of heart and spirit.

Further then, if unity be an inherent part of the grace of God bestowed upon the believer at the time of initial salvation, we must recognize that it has the potential of growth and expansion. As we grow in grace, so may we also grow in unity. The child of God must recognize that he has a definite and personal responsibility for this. No doubt much of the Church's disunity has resulted from the fact that Christians have too often been too little concerned about their need for normal fruitful development in the grace of Christian unity. As a result of this indifference the total witness to the world has suffered as well as the larger fellowship within the Church having been much diminished. Let this be a serious concern therefore on the part of all believers that each one's responsibility to God and man will be joyfully assumed and that each will be growing in the spirit of unity.

Finally let us suggest the question *How?* There may be a relative perfection of unity just as there is a relative perfection of grace or love. Visser 't Hooft contends that unity at its best is "a total identification of our wills with the will of God."³ The clear implication here is that the perfection of unity is dependent upon the perfection of grace. Our Lord prays that His disciples "may be perfected into one" (John 17:23).

In the chapters of John immediately preceding the seventeenth the message of Jesus is primarily, and in a sense exclusively, to His Church. Through chapter twelve John has given the record of those things which were done by Jesus before the eyes of the world. Beginning with chapter thirteen there is an exclusion of the world, and here Christ delivers His great message to the Church. One of the majors of this message is Christ's teaching concerning the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church after Christ shall have returned to the Father. It is from Christ and through the leadership of the Holy Spirit that our unity is to be preserved. Jesus teaches the Church in chapters fourteen through sixteen concerning the six-fold ministry of the Spirit: 1) He will abide in the believer as the Spirit of truth (14:16); 2) He will teach the believer all things (14:26); 3) He will testify of Christ (15:26); 4) He, through

³Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-84.

the believer will convince the world of sin (16:8); 5) He will guide the believer into all truth (13); and 6) In and through the believer He will glorify Christ (14).

Here is the divine foundation for initial and progressive unity within the Christian movement. Jesus in His teaching in these four chapters prepared the way and laid the foundation upon which the life of the Church was to be established. Among other things thus provided for the Church through the ministry of the Spirit was its essential unity. Jesus has taught the Church one of its major lessons. How well has it been learned? Having taught this great lesson, He then kneels before the Father in an anguish of spirit and prays that the work which He has come into the world to make possible shall be completed by those followers of His to whom He has committed this sacred trust. How well has His prayer been answered?