

THE APOSTOLIC IDEAL OF CHRISTIAN UNITY  
AND UNION.—EPH. 4:1-16.

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Christian unity is clearly an apostolic ideal. More, it was set out by our Saviour before the apostles were commissioned. In setting it out, He revealed also the interest of the Father in this matter.

If any part of the New Testament could be rightly called a tract on a definite subject (which is doubtful), the letter to the Ephesians would probably be the first so designated. It is almost a tract on Christian union. The whole letter easily arranges itself around the idea of gathering "together in one all things in Christ." Certainly the idea of the pre-eminence of Christ, also a Christian cosmogony, may be included in the apostle's argument, but he is probably too practical to make these the main things.

The first chapter after the salutation sets forth the idea in this way. From a close examination of the text in verses 7-10, it would seem clear that "the redemption through His blood," the "forgiveness of sins," the "riches of His grace wherein He hath abounded," and the "revelation of the mystery of His will which He hath made known unto us" were all in order "that in the dispensation of the fullness of times, he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth."

The second chapter draws a little nearer to the heart of the idea and declares the ground and sphere of this oneness. Verses 14 and 15 declare that "He is our peace, who hath made both (Jew and Gentile) one, and hath broken down the fragment-making wall of partition between us, having abolished in His flesh the (source of) enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances, making in Himself of the twain, (Jew and Gen-

tile) one new mankind, so making peace." It is clear that Christ Himself is the end of division, so defining the ground and sphere of the great re-union. "Ye who were sometime afar off," both afar from God and afar from each other by the differences arising out of racial, religious, commercial and political considerations, are "made nigh by the blood of Christ." We are not simply made nigh to God in the sense of individual salvation, though this is included, but we are also made nigh to each other. Conceive of God in Christ Jesus as the hub of a wheel and all believers as spokes. It is evident that the nearer the approach to the hub, the nearer also is the approach to each other, until, as stated in the first chapter, we are "made one in Christ Jesus."

The third chapter continues the same argument, emphasizing the unity of experience among believers as the bond, and, humanly speaking, the source of the oneness. Even the Gentiles are to know the "unsearchable riches of Christ." All men are to "see what is the fellowship of the mystery." It is a part of the eternal purpose of God that "Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith," to the end that both Jews and Gentiles "should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel." This is further declared to be an essential ground of the supreme glory of God "in the church throughout all ages," the word church here being used representatively as one would say "man."

In the fourth chapter we come to some very clear and definite statements concerning the apostolic ideal of Christian unity and union. In view of the widespread demand for Christian union, which demand arises from necessities of our work, from the condition of the work at large and from the expressed will of the Father, it behooves us to lay aside all prejudgments and give ourselves to a real study of this great matter. So long as men have consciences upon the question of scripture teaching, it is clear that our study must be along very sane and scriptural lines.

The ideal is stated in verses 1-3. "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, call you on to the calling wherewith ye were called." Paul would lead the way in this great enterprise and call the Ephesian brethren and all the faithful in Christ Jesus to follow on in this high "vocation." The way of approach as well as the method of procedure is indicated in the second verse as "lowliness and meekness . . . forbearing one another in love." The ideal is declared in verse three to be, first, unity of the spirit, and this primary, essential thing later eventuates in union. No united plan or declaration or activities in any large way is really possible until this "unity of the spirit" is attained. Here would seem to be a very clear word concerning efforts that have sometimes been urged to arrive at harmony, comity and adjustment by compromise upon grounds of economy and courtesy.

Any movement that has for its ideal the destruction of the lines of division among mankind that have arisen out of race, caste, or religion and the essential spiritual unity of so widely divergent elements, must have back of it a tremendous dynamic. Economic adjustment and agreement as in the case of international politics cannot and will not lead to ultimate peace, but on the contrary, will always lead to friction. The dynamic back of this great movement must be at least as great as the movement. Considerations of economy, of courtesy, of a desire to stand well in the eyes of the world, while not to be despised, are in no sense of the word sufficient causes to produce the mighty result that is aimed at in view of the sources of disagreement.

The apostle here seems to say that the dynamic has at least three component parts, namely, an ideal, a will and a motive.

The dynamic ideal is set forth in verses 4 and 5. Here are comprehended first unity and then union. Unity, the spiritual term is contemplated in the "one body," "the one spirit" and the "one hope of your calling." The

“one body” is the mystic body of Christ that is being built and shall finally be fitly framed together out of the results of both progressive and ultimate judgment. The “one spirit” is the animating spirit of Jesus Christ which drives His people to heroic endeavors and leads them on to high conquest. The “one hope of your calling” is the reconciling Christ, aside from whom there is no hope in “your calling,” either from heaven’s point of view or ours.

Verse 5 contemplates unity developing into union. It is set over against unity, the spiritual term, not as in any way opposed to it, but as distinct from it. They can be viewed either as cause and effect, or as tree and fruit. He, the supreme authority before whom all matters are to be laid and by whose word all controversy is to be silenced, is the “one Lord.” The common bond of union and fellowship is the “one faith.” Nothing but the most agile and enormous intellectual acrobatics can make anything except ordinary baptism in water out of this verse. It is here, as in the Great Commission, given to us as the organizing rite. The wearing of a pin does not make one a mason. To wear a uniform does not make one a soldier. The wearing of pins and uniforms is simply a declarative act and in times of stress and necessity, a sign of fellowship. If the “one Lord” rules and the “one faith” animates, the “one baptism” should in all conscience be worn as the sign manual of this unity—so making possible union.

The dynamic will which is ever desiring and seeking and urging this mighty consummation is the will of God. The “one God and Father of all,” verse 6, seeing that He is above all and through all and in all, cannot rest with His people discordantly divided. As polytheism philosophically means many religions, so the “one God and Father of us all” philosophically means one religion. When at His will the new-born church followed her Lord in the flesh, there was no division. Christian union did

not appear as a problem until Christian unity had been shattered by the introduction of heresy. The fact that He launched His church upon the world without this problem is clearly indicative of His will with reference to the matter involved.

In verses 7-10 a dynamic motive is mentioned. The grace of God in Christ Jesus is everywhere in the New Testament held out to us as the ultimate motive in Christian life and service. This grace is given "unto every one of us according to the measure of the gift of the Messiah." This resident grace within us makes ready and prepares for the indwelling Christ. "Christ in you" is the heart of Christianity. His descent for our redemption, His rising for our justification and His ascent for our governance are a three-fold prophecy of humanity's long steep path to glory. This prophecy, held ever in the warm matrix of heavenly love, will form in human lives a dynamic which should prove sufficient, even for the great task of Christian union through unity.

So great a dynamic will demand an agency of corresponding greatness. This is indicated in verse 11. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers—in short all the mighty enginery and organization of the church of Christ on earth would seem to be designed to promote spiritual oneness in Christ Jesus. Here is an agency whose marvelous history and performances would indicate a greatness commensurate with the greatness and power working through it. To take one or more of the elements of this great agency and make it, or them, means of divisive discord is clearly a perversion of the will and purpose of the Supreme Governor, and open to the charge of treason.

The mediate goal set down in verse 12 is highly indicative of the method of Christian union. This goal can be expressed in the one word, unity. If saints are "perfected unto the work of the ministry" of the manifold graces of our Lord and unto the building up of the body

of Christ, it is clear that perfected saints will find the problems of union already solved in spiritual unity.

The ultimate goal is set down and amplified in verses 13-19, inclusive, together with some results that may be expected to follow. "Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith" points certainly on to that time and condition set forth in the later verse, when the "whole body fitly joined and compacted by that which every joint supplieth" will cause the body "to grow into the building up of itself in love." It is worthy of particular note that this unity of faith is an attainment. In the production or growing of it, the ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers is vitally involved and necessary. It is also worthy of note that this unity of the faith is absolutely and decisively precedent to, and a condition of, the further development of union. In the factors named, whose ministry will enable us to attain unto this glorious consummation, are clearly indicated, not only the lines along which the attainment is possible, but the method of the attainment also. None of these factors is legislative.

The heart of every genuine Christian man, when once he faces intelligently the great matter of this union, must thrill in response to the splendid prospect that is involved in it, and naturally and freely run out along lines of desire and prayer and effort for its attainment, but let us not forget that it is "an attainment." Also let us hold clearly in mind the fact that so long as men have consciences on Scripture interpretation, their consciences will produce divisions, until the "unity of the faith" and of the spirit is found and adopted as the basis and sphere of union which all believers so much desire. This is not a hopeless outlook. The drift in the theological thinking of the world is clearly toward it. It will involve sacrifice and suffering on the part of some that are as great as ever crowned the life of physical martyrs in the days of Nero, the Huguenots or Smithfield. But in this case,

the sacrifices will not be in the realm of principle and morals, but in the realm of prejudices and the birthright of schismatic inheritance. The suffering will not be in the realm of conscience and the soul but in the realm of vanity and opinions: feelings may be hurt, but faith never.

We would now suggest in closing that the principal step for the Christian world looking toward Christian unity and union is to differentiate between our consciences and our opinions, and then carry both conscience and opinion wholly and intelligently to the altar of the "one Lord" whom we cannot serve best except according to His own word, and there submit the spirit and the faith to the arbitrament of His instruction. He will not lead us apart. The apostolic ideal of Christian unity and union is still attainable along apostolic lines of faith and devotion.