

C H R I S T I A N

U N I T Y

by

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

This week Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians have been asked to pray for Christian unity and indeed Christian unity is a subject much discussed these days because most people realise that disunity is out of keeping with God's will; but most of the talk is based on an important misunderstanding and so is directed to quite a wrong goal.

The basic mistake is a confusion between denominations and the Church of Christ. Denominations are essentially service organisations which link congregations together. However, in linking them together they also have the effect of separating congregations from other congregations linked with another service organisation or denomination. These service link-ups differ in type. Thus there is the very loose denominational structure of the Plymouth Brethren where the congregations are linked by a common outlook rather

than by any paper constitution; at the other end of the scale is the strongly centralised structure of the Roman Catholic denomination in which all ultimate control rests with the Vatican.

We give denominations the name of churches, in the same way as we call a building a church, but neither use of the word corresponds to the New Testament meaning. When Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 16:18 "I will build my church" He was not referring to an organisational structure or to a building, but rather to an assembly, or gathering of people. For the word church literally means a gathering. In the Old Testament the people of Israel were called God's church. He had gathered them into Palestine, drawing them out from Egypt through the crossing of the Red Sea and through the wilderness. He gathered them round Himself in Palestine and God's temple in Jerusalem was, as it were, the centre of this gathering, or

church, which God had made.

Jesus spoke of building His Church, that is gathering people round Himself. The way He gathers then, that is, the way He builds His church, is through the preaching of the Gospel. Thus we read in Acts 2:41 and 47 that the Lord added to Himself those who believed the Gospel. It was to this activity that He referred when He said to St. Peter "On this rock I will build my church". On that occasion Jesus had asked His disciples the question "Whom do you say that I am?" and Peter had replied "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". Jesus accepted this reply as truth which God had revealed to Peter, and He said, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:16).

The rock on which Christ's church has always been built is faith in Jesus as the Son of God. All who acknowledge this truth are added by Christ to His gathering of people around

Himself. The New Testament thinks of this gathering as primarily in Heaven and Hebrews 12 speaks of Christians while still on earth as having joined that gathering around Christ in Heaven for which the Old Testament gathering of the Israelites round God's temple on Jerusalem was a forerunner. The writer of Hebrews puts the matter in this way, "You are come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to the myriad ranks of angels and to the church of the Firstborn enrolled in Heaven, to God the judge of all and to the spirits of ~~Christ~~ and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant". Here we have a description of Christ's church. It is a heavenly church gathered round Jesus in Heaven and we are already members of it, for we have already been justified in our spirit and made perfect through forgiveness, even though in our bodies we are still waiting for our full redemption. As St. Paul says we are already sharing Christ's

the just made perfect.

heavenly throne (Ephesians 2:6).

While it is true that this heavenly church is the essential church, the holy Catholic Church of Christ, it is also true that Christ gathers His people on earth in local gatherings, or churches, in different localities and at different times. He has promised to be present where two or three are met in His name and each of these gatherings is a perfect and complete church of Christ; for He is present, and His people are present, and so nothing is lacking for completeness of the gathering or church. It is at this point that the denomination enters. The local gatherings of Christ have over the centuries become accustomed to link themselves together in various patterns of fellowship, called denominations, and although this is helpful for certain matters which affect the life of the church in the world, it has this most unfortunate conse-

quence, that Christians have come to confine their fellowship to Christians within the same denominational group. It is to overcome this feature that modern schemes of Christian unity are being promoted, which although called schemes of church union are really schemes for amalgamation of denominations, for the real church of Christ can never be divided since Christ cannot be divided and He assembles His church around Him. Amalgamation of denominations in itself will never achieve the object of true Christian unity, for it is dealing with the symptoms and not the cause of our disunity, which springs from our forgetfulness of our unity in Christ in Heaven.

However, the question arises: since the church is assembled round Christ in Heaven, and we who believe in Christ are already members of that assembly, what is the purpose of assembling in local groups from time to time here and now? Several passages in

the New Testament make the purpose clear (Ephesians 4:19, Colossians 3:16, Hebrews 10:25) namely that we meet in church for the purpose of remembering Christ, who He is, and what He has done for us and so of encouraging one another in the faith, and reminding each other of our heavenly inheritance to be entered on fully at Christ's coming. Thus we meet for fellowship and sharing of spiritual things on the basis of our common heavenly status. We do well to measure up our own church against this yardstick of the New Testament purpose of meeting together for fellowship in Christian things.

There is no reason requiring congregations to be linked with each other organizationally; and in the early centuries they were not linked in this way, though patterns of fellowship developed such as Novatian, Donatist and Catholic. On the other hand there is little harm in denominational groupings so long as we avoid the temptation of making them

a centre of loyalty and of substituting a worldly minded anxiety to promote the interests of the denomination for the heavenly mindedness and peace in God which should characterise every Christian. The root error of the modern movements towards union and amalgamation of the denominations is the failure to recognise that the unity amongst the congregations ought to be firmly based on the recognition of their unity in Christ's heavenly church. This is a unity of love and of acceptance of each other, rather than of unity of constitutions and content.

It is a grave mistake to identify the one Holy Catholic Church which Christ is assembling around His throne in Heaven with any of the denominations or with a union of the various denominational structures; and yet this grave mistake is very widespread. Thus the Roman Catholic denomination identifies herself with this one Holy Catholic Church of Christ and naturally

enough as a consequence the Roman Catholic Church expects unity to come through the other denominations joining it. As a Roman Catholic spokesman was reported in Monday's morning paper to have stated at a Christian Unity Symposium held in Sydney last Sunday, "From the Roman Catholic Church's point of view, unity is the absorption of other denominations by the Roman Catholic Church". Roman Catholics base the claim that their denomination is the one Church of Christ on their interpretation of our Lord's words to Peter, "Thou art Peter and on this rock I will build my church. However, as Dr. Kendrick, formerly Roman Catholic Archbishop of St. Louis, told the first Vatican Council, the majority of early Christian writers understood the words 'on this rock' to refer to the faith that Peter had just professed, namely faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Now on the Roman Catholic principle that the Scriptures are ~~not~~ only to be

interpreted in accordance with the Fathers, Roman Catholics themselves are bound to follow this majority interpretation, that the rock was faith in Christ. This interpretation is also the most natural one and it was endorsed by the Council of Trent (Session 3). Not Peter, but Peter's faith in Christ is the rock on which Christ's church is built, and all who share this faith and believe the Gospel are built by Christ into His church. For on that solid rock of faith in Him He builds His church.

Although other denominations reject the Roman Catholic claim to be the one church, they have not in recent years been alert to the mistake of identifying the Church of Christ with a denomination. They therefore are directing their efforts to unifying the denominations as though that would unify the church. But Christ's Church by its nature is and must always be one. We cannot unify the church, though we can and should break down

barriers to fellowship amongst Christians and so strengthen the unity of heart and mind of its members. Here is a fruitful field to direct our efforts and perhaps the first thing to give our attention to is the isolation that strict denominationalism creates between Christian and Christian. However, if we are to extend our Christian fellowship beyond our denominational barriers, it can only be on the basis of the heavenly heritage and hope we share, for this alone transcends denominations. If we were more aware of our heavenly status, we would be more alive to our real kinship with other Christians, no matter what denomination they were linked with.

When the Ecumenical Movement began 120 years ago with the foundation of the Evangelical Alliance, it had this correct objective of uniting Christians on the basis of their common faith, but in the last 50 years the Ecumenical Movement has taken a false turn by concentrating on the uniting

of denominations as though this, even when achieved, would of itself advance Christian unity.

At this time of the year we are thinking of the Ascension of Christ into Heaven. It is therefore particularly appropriate that we should remember that in Christ we are already citizens of Heaven. We and all our true Christian brothers are in our spirits at the present moment united by Christ around His Heavenly throne and so in a very real way united together. So long as we are aware of these great facts we will have a basis for fellowship within our local congregations and also across the barriers of denominational association. Deepening our heavenly mindedness is the true way of strengthening our Christian unity.

Our Lord has gone into Heaven to prepare a place for us and for all our fellow Christians. Do we believe it? if so pray in this week

of prayer for Christian unity
the words of the old prayer,
that we may in heart and mind
thither ascend and with Him
continually dwell.

[Christ certainly wills this
Church to have a
visible unity, but is this
unity organized? what
was the visible unity in A.D. 150?]

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