

The Glorious Body of Christ: Unity and Diversity

R. B. Kuiper (1886-1966)

SOME years ago Wendell Willkie wrote a best seller entitled *One World*. It was a plea for the harmonious co-operation of all nations. Mr. Willkie's aim was most laudable, but his book suffered from oversimplification and superficial optimism. He did not reckon sufficiently with the depravity of human nature in general nor with the ungodliness of Marxian Communism in particular. Today the world is exceedingly far from being one. Scripture tells us that it will not be one until God has established the new earth.

The plight of the Christian church seems almost as sad as that of the world. To all appearances it, too, is a house divided against itself. It resembles a beautiful vase that, fallen from its perch, lies shattered in a thousand pieces. It is like a grand structure transformed by an exploding bomb into a tangled heap of wreckage.

ONE CHURCH

Unbelievable though it may seem, the church of Jesus Christ is really one.

This truth is presupposed in the Apostles' Creed, which makes mention of "a holy catholic church" in the singular and defines this church as "the" — the one and only — "communion of saints." To be sure, according to the same creed the church's unity is a matter of faith rather than sight, but that does not detract a whit from its reality.

The Word of God teaches the unity of the church unmistakably, repeatedly and emphatically. It is no exaggeration to assert that this is one of the most outstanding teachings of the New Testament. It tells us, for instance, that the church has one Head (Ephesians 1:22), one Spirit (I Corinthians 12:13), one foundation (I Corinthians 3:11), one faith and one baptism (Ephesians 4:5), and that it is one body (I Corinthians 12:12).

That being the case, the question arises why Jesus, in the seventeenth chapter of John's gospel, prayed for the unity of believers. Referring to the apostles, He said in the eleventh verse: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one as we are." And in the twenty-first verse, with the believers of succeeding ages in mind, He continued: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." Surely, if the unity of believers is a reality, it would seem superfluous to pray that it may come to pass.

Many present-day advocates of church union take it for granted that Jesus prayed in John seventeen for the organizational unity of His followers. Glibly they quote the Saviour's prayer for the unity of believers in support of the wholesale wiping out of denominational boundaries. But even he who runs may see that Jesus was thinking primarily of the *spiritual* unity of believers. He prayed that they might be one *as He and the Father are one*. No doubt, He also desired that this unity might become manifest, for He added: "That the world may believe that thou hast sent me"; but that in no way alters the fact that the unity for which He prayed was specifically spiritual.

Indisputably, the Lord prayed for the spiritual unity of His church. And so the question remains how this prayer may be reconciled with the fact that spiritually the church *is* one. A comparison may help discover the answer. The Christian is holy. Every Christian is a saint. It may even be said that in principle he is perfect. And yet, how obvious that the very best Christian needs to grow in holiness and has a long way to go before he shall have attained the goal of perfection! In much the same way the spiritual unity of all who believe in Christ is indeed a present reality, but its fullest realization and the attainment of its highest degree lie in the future. The spiritual unity of the church is both real and to be realized.

The fact remains that the church of God, far from being a tangled heap of wreckage, is even now God's own perfectly proportioned temple, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ Himself as the chief cornerstone, in whom all the building is fitly framed together and all believers are built together for a habitation of God through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:20-22). God omniscient sees it thus. So does God's child with the eye of faith.

MANY FORMS

That there is considerable variety among individual Christians and also among groups of Christians cannot be disputed. There is no good reason why anyone should care to dispute it. Uniformity among Christians is not necessarily a good. When carried to extremes, it becomes an evil. It can be shown that complete uniformity within the church would not enhance its beauty but rather detract from it.

Theologians often speak of the multiformity of the church. By and large they regard it as a good. However, few have stopped to define the term, and that has led to confusion. Sad to say, the term *multiformity* has even been used to cover a multitude of sins.

It has been made to include heresies. One instance may be cited. There are, no doubt, greater heresies than Arminianism. Pelagianism is far worse. But Arminianism, too, is error. Let no one say that the difference between the Reformed faith and Arminianism is merely one of emphasis, the former stressing the sovereignty of God, the latter the responsibility of man, and that therefore it is desirable that there be both Reformed churches and Arminian churches. Obviously, human

responsibility is a corollary of divine sovereignty. Because God is sovereign, man is responsible to Him. Therefore, precisely because of its strong emphasis on divine sovereignty the Reformed faith stresses human responsibility strongly also. But Arminianism does violence to both. Not only does it encroach upon the absolute character of God's sovereignty, it also adjusts the demands of God's law to the enfeebled powers of man. Now all doctrinal error, Arminianism too, is sin. And to make sin look respectable by casting about it the cloak of multiformity is itself sin.

Again, the term *multiformity* has often been employed to excuse schism within the church. Schism is sinful division. To leave one denomination in order to found another is an extremely serious matter, and it may be done only for compelling reasons. When division occurs in the body of Christ on some insignificant issue as, for instance, whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in the Lord's Supper, there is joy among the fallen angels. Multiformity and schism are by no means synonymous.

If churchmen could make up their minds to use the term multiformity only for permissible differences and not for sin, that would remove much misunderstanding and might well promote the unity of the church.

It is not difficult to think of permissible differences. In the interest of uniformity Rome has adopted one language, Latin, for its services of worship throughout the world; but surely there is room within the church of Christ for any number of languages. Three legitimate modes of baptism are found within the church — immersion in water, pouring on of water and sprinkling with water. What does it matter whether a minister wears a Geneva gown, a Prince Albert, a cutaway coat with striped trousers, or just an ordinary suit of clothes in the pulpit? The Scotchman has the reputation of being stolid and usually there is something stolid about his worship, while the African is more emotional and this, too, is reflected in his mode of worship; but instead of finding fault with each other for this difference, they should hold one another in high esteem.

Such multiformity does not obscure the unity of Christ's church, but rather causes it to stand out the more boldly. Unity that comes to expression in uniformity may well be, and usually is, superficial. On the other hand, unity that constitutes the background of multiformity is necessarily deep. For us to be at one with those who are like us is easy; to be at one with those who are unlike us is possible only if a profound unity underlies surface differences. Cicero, pagan though he was, made the wise observation that love surpasses friendship in that, while friendship is esteem of one for another who agrees with him, love is esteem of one for another who differs from him.

By the same token, diversity short of sin, instead of detracting from the glory of the church, enhances it. How much more beautiful is a building constructed of stones of different shapes and sizes than is a structure of blocks all of which look alike! As the human body derives its beauty from the variety of its members, so does the body of Christ. When love rises above uniformity and

embraces multiformity, the greatest of Christian virtues comes to glorious expression.

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