

The Glorious Body of Christ: Unity and Division

R. B. Kuiper (1886-1966)

THE spiritual unity of Christ's church is an undeniable reality. It is one body, even the mystical body of Christ.

Nothing can destroy this spiritual unity. Not even the apparently hopeless division of the church into almost countless sects and denominations destroys it. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the present division of the church does greatly *obscure* its unity. And that is a sad fact. It gives rise to the question whether the church is not in sacred duty bound to put forth a concerted effort to remedy this evil.

In the main there are three attitudes to that question. They may be called *extreme denominationalism*, *extreme unionism* and *realistic idealism*.

EXTREME DENOMINATIONALISM

A great many Christians are of the opinion that the spiritual unity of believers is the only thing that matters and that their organizational unity is of little or no account. Some go so far as to regard organizational *disunity* as a virtue rather than a vice.

As might be expected, those of this persuasion do not hesitate to found new denominations for insufficient reasons. The Reverend Smith, let us say, cannot see that Scripture teaches the secret rapture of believers. Elder Jones is not only convinced that this tenet is Scriptural, but he makes it a hobby. His conscience will give him no rest unless he stirs up a rumpus. If the outcome is a split in the church, what of it? Briefly put, extreme denominationalism makes the blunder of identifying multiformity with denominationalism.

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of extreme denominationalism is the "undenominational" church. Its members will vow that they have no use for denominationalism, but the fact is that they would carry it to the nth degree, for they want every particular church, every single congregation, to be a denomination by and unto itself.

That such denominationalism is far removed from the pattern of the apostolic church is evident. In the days of the apostles there were significant differences among believers in various localities, yet all particular churches were united in one Christian church, and denominations were entirely out of the question. The fifteenth chapter of Acts tells us that certain problems which plagued the gentile churches were considered by the apostles, together with the elders of the

mother-church at Jerusalem, and that their decisions were deemed binding on all the churches. It is a very far cry from the teaching of Acts fifteen to the undenominational church.

It is just as evident that extreme denominationalism puts the spiritual unity of the Christian church under an opaque bushel and thus detracts in no small measure from its glory. And that is really sinful.

The conclusion is warranted that this attitude toward division within the church of Christ deserves unqualified condemnation.

EXTREME UNIONISM

The opposite pole from extreme denominationalism is extreme unionism. It is advocated by the Roman Catholic Church and by most modernist churches of our day.

Rome takes the position, not merely that there ought to be but one church, but that there actually is but one church. That one church is the Roman church itself. All other churches so called are said to be utterly unworthy of that name. They should repent of their departure from the true church and return to it.

The modernist plea for union, while hardly less urgent than the Roman plea, is differently motivated. Back of the latter plea lies the preposterous assumption that Rome has a monopoly on the truth; behind the modernist plea lurks the flippant notion that doctrinal differences among denominations are negligible, that doctrines, in fact, do not greatly matter. Indifference to truth is one of the most outstanding characteristics of the modernist ecumenical movement of our day. Forgetting theological dissension that is behind, the churches should merge, we are told, for a united campaign to do away with social injustice and to evangelize the world.

The folly of that sort of reasoning is both great and obvious. According to the Word of God the church of Christ is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (I Timothy 3:15). The church is custodian and defender of the truth. It follows that the truth is far too great a price for the church to pay for organizational unity. If it should attain to perfect organizational unity at that price, it would only have succeeded in destroying itself. For the church is where the truth is, and the church which sells such truths as the deity of Christ and the satisfaction of divine justice by His sacrificial and substitutionary death on the cross has been transformed into a “synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9).

More than one leader of the liberal ecumenical movement would unite the church of Christ by annihilating it.

Revelation 13 informs us that all that dwell upon the earth whose names are not written in the Lamb’s book of life will worship the beast that has risen out of the sea (Revelation 13:8). The

fulfillment of that prophecy probably has several stages, but beyond all doubt the final stage will be the religious unification of practically the entire human race under Antichrist. That the vaunting, but compromising, ecumenism of our day is contributing to the hastening of that event, must be set down as a distinct possibility.

Neither extreme denominationalism nor extreme unionism has a remedy for division within the church of Christ. The former has no interest in a remedy and would let the disease run wild. The latter offers a remedy that is more fatal by far than the disease. Must we conclude that there is no remedy? The answer of *realistic idealism* to that question remains to be presented.

In the meantime it must be remembered that the spiritual unity of Christ's church continues a reality. Existing division obscures the church's unity but does not destroy it. Extreme denominationalism accelerates division and thus obscures the church's unity more than ever, but cannot destroy it. Extreme unionism spells the destruction of the church, but will never be permitted actually to destroy either the church or its unity.

Christ Jesus, the glorious and omnipotent Head of the church, at the right hand of God, guarantees its continuity. With the continuity of the church itself is bound up the continuity of its unity. For unity is of the essence of the body of Christ.

Chapter 6 of *The Glorious Body of Christ*, published by the Banner of Truth Trust, 1967. pp. 46-49. Read Chapter 5.



ReformedLiterature.com