

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A CHURCHMAN AND A DISSENTER ON ONE BAPTISM, ONE ALTAR, ONE BISHOP.

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CHURCHMAN—I have called upon you again, Mr. Marshall, hoping that it may be convenient this winter's evening to have another conversation with you on the subject of Christian Unity.

DISSENTER—I shall be very glad of some further discussion with you on this important subject; for I must confess, Mr. Clayton, that, after giving all the consideration I could to the passages of Holy Scripture which you put before me, I have still many difficulties remaining in my mind.

C.—But I suppose that you agree with me so far as to think that the unity of all Christians is a blessing most earnestly to be desired and prayed for.

D.—Yes, certainly I agree with you as far as that.

C.—And do you not also agree with me in thinking that this unity is divinely enjoined upon us?

D.—Well, I am inclined to believe in this also. At least, I believe that it would be agreeable to our Lord's will that all His disciples should be perfectly united together.

C.—If so, ought we not to do all in our power to fulfil that will?

D.—Certainly.

C.—And if so, do you not think that our Lord must have given us the means of obtaining this unity? Must He not have perfectly provided for the unity of His Church on earth by means of the precepts and the institutions which He has given us?

D.—I can hardly doubt it, I must confess.

C.—That is what I meant when I said that if we are ever to recover ourselves out of our present grievous state of division and separation, we must go back to first principles. There is, and there can be no other possible way by which we may hope to regain the precious blessing of Christian Unity than this. We must first of all humbly acknowledge and confess the evil of our present unhappy and unchristian like state of dis-union; and then we must endeavor to understand what are the essential and fundamental principles and bonds of unity which are laid down for us in the Word of God. In our last conversation I asked you to consider several of those passages which contain these first principles of unity. And, if you will allow me, I wish now to ask you to consider three very special principles, which are divinely enjoined upon all Christians.

D.—I will willingly listen to what you have to say. But I still must say that it seems to me that a unity of spirit is all that is really required of us.

C.—Is this unity of spirit then, do you think, promoted and preserved by our present state of division and separation? should we not be far more likely to live in unity of spirit if we all lived in one society, as brethren in one family?

D.—Well, perhaps, it would be so. For our present divisions, I must confess, do cause and keep up a good deal of irritation and ill-feeling amongst Christians.

C.—Yes. And the present divisions of Christendom are bringing in upon us an overwhelming flood of unbelief.

D.—I fear it is so, indeed.

C.—The very heathen are finding it a great stumbling block. They are saying to the missionaries, "Be agreed amongst yourselves before you come to teach us."

D.—So I have heard.

C.—Can a kernel be preserved in life and in growth without its shell?

D.—No, of course not.

C.—Well, then, Mr. Marshall, the precious blessing of unity of spirit cannot be preserved

without a unity of body also. The two are plainly joined together by the divine institutions of our Lord; and if we fancy that we may put them assunder we run the risk of spoiling the whole.

D.—Will you then now show me what you mean by your three chief principles of unity?

C.—Well, then, will you not at once agree with me in saying this; that it is most likely that, if we are to find the true principles and bonds of Christian Unity anywhere, we shall find them in those two great Sacraments of the Gospel which have been ordained for the use of every member of the whole church on earth by our Lord Himself?

D.—Yes; I am willing to agree with you there, because I do think that the Sacraments of Christ are certainly of divine obligation. If our Lord has enjoined anything upon all His disciples, He has certainly enjoined His Sacraments. So that of course we ought all to be united in them and by them.

C.—I think this is quite certain, Mr. Marshall; I am glad that we have this common ground. Without these Holy Sacraments of Christ there cannot be any such thing as Christian unity amongst us. If the Sacraments of Christ do not bind and keep us in unity, what else can? They, at any rate, must be of the very essence of our Christian unity upon earth. Apart from them, surely it is vain to hope to have any such thing as true Christian unity amongst us.

D.—But I don't see, Mr. Clayton, what use you can make of this for your purpose. Be cause Dissenters have these Sacraments as well as Churchmen.

C.—There I am very sorry that I am not able to agree with you; unless you can prove to me that any persons who please, or any company of people who like to form themselves into a new society, have both the liberty and the power to administer the Sacraments of Christ. I cannot believe, Mr. Marshall, that such self-assumed liberty or power is good for anything. It seems to me that it is contrary to the precepts and the institutions of Christ; and therefore I fear that all such pretended Sacraments are not true or valid ones. But the reason of my believing this will appear more clearly if you will consider the three principles and bonds of unity which I wish now to put before you.

D.—Which then is the first one?

C.—You can easily tell yourself. It is, and it must be, of absolute necessity, the Holy Sacrament of Baptism.

D.—Why do you say so positively that this must be the first principle and bond of Christian unity?

C.—Because Christ Himself has made it to be so.

D.—How do you prove this?

C.—Can any man admit himself, at his own pleasure, into any society?

D.—No, of course not. He must be admitted by some officer of the society who has received authority to admit new members.

C.—That is quite certain. And therefore the Divine Head of the Church has Himself made the Sacrament of Baptism to be the means of admission into His Church, and has committed the administration of it to the ministers of His Church to the end of the world. This He did, you will remember, just before He ascended to the throne of His kingdom. By virtue of the new power which was then given unto Him to be "Head over all things, to the Church, which is His body" (compare St. Matth. xxviii. 18 and 19, with Eph. i. 22); our Lord then commanded, not (mark) the general body of His disciples, but only the eleven whom He had chosen out of that body, all who should believe, in all nations, in all ages, even to the end; promising to be Himself with them in this ministration "always." So, on the Day of Pentecost the Church was begun, by the first

administration of this Sacrament to all who believe, at the command of St. Peter. By this means each person baptized was visibly marked and made a member of the body or Church of Christ. And so the Lord added others also daily to the Church (Acts ii. 47).

D.—Were all who believe then baptized?

C.—We read of none who were not. The Apostles, we may be certain, never forgot the final commission which the Lord gave them. And they would then understand that saying of our Lord's, that none could "enter" into the new kingdom of God, that is, into the Church of Christ, except by this one entrance, viz.: by means of this baptism, "by water and the Holy Ghost." (St. John iii. 5.) For as St. Paul writes, "By one spirit are we all baptized into one body." (1 Cor. xii. 13.) And in another verse he writes to those of the Corinthians who had been baptized, "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular"; telling them all, you see, that they were made in their baptism members of the body of Christ, which is His Church, (because "in particular," means, one by one, or individually). And in his Epistle to the Ephesians also, St. Paul places this "one baptism" in his list of seven of the most fundamental articles of Christian unity. So that as this holy Sacrament never changes its essential nature, it is, you see, a divinely constituted means and bond of union for all nations and for all times.

D.—What do you say then is its essential nature?

C.—In few words it is strictly this: In it the Holy Spirit grants us the gift of membership in the one body of Christ.

D.—By the body of Christ you mean, I suppose, the visible Church of Christ upon earth, consisting of both bad and good members?

C.—Yes; this body of Christ is certainly what you say. Because the Sacrament of Baptism, which alone is the door of entrance into it, marks us all outwardly and visibly, and forms us therefore at once into a visible society. Just as at Corinth, the Corinthians who were baptized were formed at once into a new visible society or brotherhood in that city, which was "the Church" at Corinth. So that it is quite an incorrect and very unscriptural way of speaking, to speak of an invisible church. For no such church exists on earth. The faithful members of the church do not yet form any distinct body, as yet they are known only to God.

But yet, Mr. Marshall, we should not confine our idea of "the body of Christ" only to that which is outward and visible. The Church of Christ has an inward and spiritual constitution in Christ, as well as an outward and visible constitution in this world. He, the Lord Incarnate, you know, is now our second Adam. The inward and spiritual gift of our baptism is chiefly to be thought of as this: that it makes us verily and indeed, (not in a mere figure only,) members of our new Divine Head, members of the second Adam. Thus it is that the body of Christ is really and essentially constituted. He Himself is the Divine Head of the body, and we who are baptized are the members of the body. Thus you see, Mr. Marshall, the special gift of Christian baptism is infinitely great. And thus it is that our baptism is of necessity our first divinely ordained means and bond of union. By our baptism we are all made members of one body, whether we are New Zealanders, or Hottentots, or Hindoos, or Americans, or Englishmen. Thus the Church of Christ is designed to unite all mankind into one new brotherhood, the family of the second Adam. So that if we have a properly instructed Christian faith, we shall certainly enter this bond of union far above all earthly bonds of unity. To be a member of this or that human family, association, kingdom, or nation, is as nothing in comparison of that membership in the one body of Christ which is given us in baptism.