

On Christian Unity.

Among professing Christians the importance of Christian Unity is generally admitted; and numerous schemes have been devised, from time to time, to attain its realization to a greater and more desirable extent than has hitherto existed. Such schemes have for the most part failed, from their abettors overlooking the importance of carefully considering, in the first place, wherein true scriptural unity consists.

The first object to be aimed at is to ascertain the principles on which Christian Unity is taught and enforced in the sacred writings. Truth is one, and all who gain truth are in the way of gaining unity; but the most specious forms of unity gained irrespective of the teaching of scripture, or at the sacrifice of truth, must in every case prove delusive and of no avail.

That Christian Unity is a doctrine of the last importance is plain from every part of the New Testament. This unity formed the principal topic in the solemn parting prayer which the Lord Jesus offered up for his disciples: "I pray for all who believe in me, that they may be one, as thou Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us" (John xvii. 20). In the first part of the comprehensive prayer, of which this portion is a portion, our Lord prays for his immediate disciples then around him, but afterwards prays especially for those who, through believing the Apostle's word or testimony, should become his disciples in every subsequent age: "I pray for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one, as thou Father art in me, and I in thee, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." As the subject matter of this prayer, and the end to be attained by its being answered are both so unimportantly important, it is proper to inquire with care, what is that oneness or unity which our Lord thus so earnestly prayed for on behalf of his disciples to the end of time?

Now were we to understand the unity thus prayed for as designed to consist in all the disciples of Jesus, throughout the world, being visibly united and forming one community on earth; or in any considerable number of them resident in any particular country or very large city being thus united, we should assuredly be at a loss to see how this prayer has hitherto been answered. But it formed no part of the commission which the risen Saviour gave the Apostles to execute, that they should form all those whom by the preaching of the gospel they made disciples, into one visibly connected religious community. This, accordingly, is what the Apostles, when planting churches and setting them in order, never aimed at; and so soon as there were other churches planted in addition to the first church formed at Jerusalem, believers ceased to form in all respects one community. We read afterwards, accordingly, not of one church or religious community, but of numerous distinct religious communities independent of each other; we read of the "churches of Judea," of Asia, of Macedonia, of Galatia; and of the "churches of the saints" that were planted in the different other countries and cities, in which converts were made to the Christian faith. These first churches planted by the Apostles were not left to form any order of government according to their own notions of what was most expedient for them; the order and discipline they were to observe were given to them authoritatively. They were taught that he that heareth the Apostles

heareth Christ, and he that despiseth the authority of the Apostles despiseth that of Christ, who sent them to make disciples of all nations, and to "teach them to observe all things whatsoever he had commanded." Thus while not permitted, in allegiance to their supreme Law-giver, to call any man master; or to allow any number of men to make laws for them, they were not allowed to make laws for themselves. As "not without law, but under the law to Christ," they were taught to regard supremely his authority in every step of their procedure; and acting under his authority, they had the assurance of him, their only Lord, that "whatsoever things they should bind on earth should be bound in heaven, and whatsoever they should loose on earth should be loosed in heaven."

While there was a substantial agreement among these first churches; through their thus obeying one common master, and having fellowship with each other as members of the same household of faith, we nowhere read of their being united under one earthly head or jurisdiction, so as to form one visibly connected community; they are never spoken of as one church, except in reference to their forming a part of the great church or congregation, of which the head is no longer on earth but in heaven.

But after the death of the Apostles, a material change in this state of things very early took place. One of the most disastrous effects of the working of that "mystery of iniquity" (or as it might more literally and properly have been rendered that "mystery of lawlessness") which was at work even in the time of the Apostles, which developed itself immediately after their decease, and which has so grievously corrupted the Christian profession to the present time was, that the churches ceased to regard the authority of their Supreme Law-giver, and drinking of the spirit of the "mystery of lawlessness," were induced to yield subjection to false teachers who presumed to make laws for Christ's subjects. By speaking things contrary to what the Apostles had enjoined, these false teachers corrupted the Christian profession to that degree that it became a trade in which merchandise was made of men's souls. And though solemnly warned of this source of danger, the time soon came when those professing to be disciples of Jesus became unwilling to endure "sound doctrine," and, instead of walking in the footsteps of the first assemblies, allowed themselves to be carried down the stream of corruption, which at an early period burst in upon the churches, as the Apostle Paul had foretold: and which gradually increased in its (humanly speaking) resistless power and desolating effects, till it changed the kingdom of Christ into a kingdom of the clergy, in which the fear of God was taught by the commandments of men.

Though under the corrupted form of the Christian profession which was subsequently thrown over whole nations, an appearance of outward uniformity and of unity was attained through compulsory subjection to human authority; it cannot be necessary to point out that this was a kind of unity altogether different from that for which our Lord prayed in behalf of his disciples in every age. This spurious so-called unity assumed, however, so imposing an appearance in connection with the exclusive claims of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, that it has long formed, and still forms, what may be regarded the stronghold of that corrupt system. While claiming to be the one Holy Catholic Church, and denouncing all beyond its pale as schismatics and heretics, the adherents of

this so-called church, notwithstanding their numerous serious differences among themselves both in doctrine and discipline, uniformly waive the consideration of all such internal differences in order to act in concert and with power against all other religious bodies. Being in subjection to one earthly head, they are like a disciplined army under a single commander; and the whole act as one man in maintaining and advancing the interests of their own body. But the whole system has no better foundation than the fallacy of confounding their ecclesiastical corrupt body, which they dignify with the name of the Holy Catholic Church, with the "one body" of the redeemed in heaven and in earth. Their attempt to unite Christians as one visibly connected one; under an earthly rule, is accordingly unscriptural in principle as it has proved intolerant and pernicious in its results.

Though at the Reformation the specious show of external unity which had previously existed was greatly interfered with, and in a manner irremediably destroyed, it was not succeeded among Protestants by a return to first principles and the realization of scriptural unity. So far from this taking place, the Reformed churches, instead of being modelled on the Apostolic churches, had systems of ecclesiastical polity planned for them, adapted to the corrupted form of the Christian profession then prevailing—a profession which embraced the population of whole nations or countries. As we are taught in the book of Acts that, "God has now visited the nations to take out of them a people for his name," and that it is the people thus called out from among the nations by the preaching of the Gospel, who were designed to form God's "holy nation" and "peculiar people" under the new covenant; the inference seems unavoidable, that all national systems of the Christian profession are so radically unscriptural as to be irreconcilable with the realization of true Christian Unity.

But even among those professing Christians who subsequent to the Reformation have seen the duty and importance of separating believers from unbelievers, as the Apostles did, and of aiming at scriptural purity of communion, great backwardness has been manifested to return to the great principles of Christian union, as taught by the Apostles and exemplified in the New Testament. Thus has it continued, to a great extent, to the present time; and the attempt to realize greater unity by means of systems of ecclesiastical polity of man's device, by means of associations of churches and evangelicall alliances have failed through overlooking the importance of resorting to first principles. A fertile source of misconception and error has been the inveterate idea of which many find it impossible to divest themselves, that Christians ought to be under some kind of organization which will connect them visibly as one religious community. A principal object aimed at has been to organize large and powerful religious bodies; and it has been usual to estimate the prosperity and influence of different religious communities by the number and worldly position of their respective adherents. Now as the real or supposed interests of these various religious denominational bodies are not unfrequently found to clash with each other, experience has shown that the result of their respective efforts to advance their own interests has often been the very opposite of harmonious co-operation and Christian Unity; viz, the engendering of unbecomly jealousy, of unconcealed rivalry and bitter contention. "Christian societies, regarding each other with the jealousies

of rival empires,"—says the late Robert Hall—"each aiming to raise itself on the ruins of all others; making extravagant boasts of superior purity, generally in exact proportion to their departure from it, and scarcely deigning to acknowledge the possibility of obtaining salvation out of their pale, is the odious and disgusting spectacle which modern Christianity presents. The bond of charity which unites the followers of Christ, in distinction from the world, is dissolved, and the very term by which it was wont to be denoted, exclusively employed to express predilection for a sect. The evils which result from this state of division are incalculable; it supplies infidels with their most plausible topics of invective; it hardens the conscience of the irreligious, weakens the hands of the good, impedes the efficacy of prayer; and is probably the principal obstruction to that ample effusion of the spirit which is essential to the renovation of the world."

What then are we to say to these things? Are we to say that the disciples of Jesus are not really one; and that our Lord's solemn prayer in their behalf has not been answered? To entertain such a notion even for a moment is most painful and seems little short of blasphemy, whether we consider the glorious character of him who prayed, whether we consider the importance of the prayer itself, or the greatness of the object to be attained by it, we cannot for a moment doubt that the prayer was heard and answered; and that all the true followers of Jesus are, in the designed meaning of the expression, truly "one."

The important question thus naturally arises for consideration: wherein does the oneness or unity for which our Lord prayed on behalf of his disciples consist? In order to the avoidance of the common error of conceiving of, or of representing this unity to consist in things which are not essential to it, and in order to the subject being viewed with clearness and satisfaction in the light of the scripture, it is desirable to consider Christ's disciples in a two fold point of view.

First, as the mystical body of the Redeemer. Second, as those who have made a scriptural profession of the name of Christ; and in the judgment of man are to be accounted as Christ's true followers.

While these two views are closely connected, they are in some respects materially different; and it aids greatly in clearing our notions of the whole subject, to consider Christian unity, first, in reference to the one, and secondly, in reference to the other.

First of all then, let us view Christian Unity in reference to the mystical body of Christ. By this designation is meant that "one body" which will eventually be redeemed out of every kindred, and people, and tongue; that "general assembly and church of the first-born whose names are written in heaven," which will at last be congregated around the Saviour in glory. Of the vast multitude that will compose this general assembly, some have already died in the faith, others are now on earth, and some it may be are not yet born; but this difference in their states of being and in the situations they now occupy, affects in no degree their spiritual unity as the "one body" of Christ. As respects those of them who are at present on earth, whatever differences may exist in regard to hereditary descent, to nation, to sex, or to condition in life, all such distinctions are done away with, when viewed in the light of their spiritual oneness. In the "one body" of the redeemed, there is neither Jew nor Greek, Barbarian, Scythian, bond, nor free, male nor female; for all are

one in Christ Jesus, who is all and in all.

Among all the members of the mystical body of Christ, there is a real unity or oneness, by their partaking of that Spirit by which Christ dwells in his people, and they in him. We find accordingly our Lord saying: "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." This the evangelist adds, "spake he of the Spirit which they that believe on him should receive. To every member of Christ's "one body," without a single exception, the Spirit, we are thus taught, is imparted, and in unison with this declaration, we find the Apostle Paul stating: "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of his." It is thus by their personal participation of the Spirit that the union of the members of Christ's "one body" with their head is constituted; for "he that is joined to the Lord," we are taught, "is one spirit." This is true of the whole collective body of true believers. By whatever name they are known among men, they are all infallibly known to the good and great Shepherd to be part of his "one flock" (John x. 16). As the Lord Jesus lived by the Father, so do they live by him. By being all made "to drink into one Spirit," and being all animated by the same Spirit, they have all become members of Christ's "one body," of his flesh, and of his bones.

It appears to be this life giving, life-supporting union between Christ and the members of his body, by the gift and indwelling of the Spirit, that our Lord more especially refers to in his prayer in behalf of his disciples, "that they might be one." He prays for a union of the same kind with that which he himself had with the Father: "that they all may be one, as thou Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." Again he says: "And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one." To the same effect in the preceding context we find him saying: "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever. Even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him; but ye know him, for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless, I will come unto you, yet a little while and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me, because I live ye shall live also. At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you."

This language is in entire accordance with the prayer that his disciples "might all be one," as thou Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us. Thus through the indwelling of the Spirit in every believer, as the Lord Jesus lived by the Father, so do the members of his mystical body live by him. All who become the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus are all one in him, in as much as he that is "joined to the Lord is one Spirit." And being all baptized into one Spirit, and all animated and led by the same Spirit, the members of Christ's "one body" are constituted members of Christ their head, and members one of another.

Such is the oneness, it would appear, for which our Lord prayed in behalf of his disciples, a oneness invisible to mortal eye, but distinctly seen by the omniscient, who seeth not as man seeth, but discerns things invisible as they really are, and as they will eventually appear. Such is the unity of Christ's "one flock"—a spiritual unity, arising from a union with him their head, which is vital, real, and