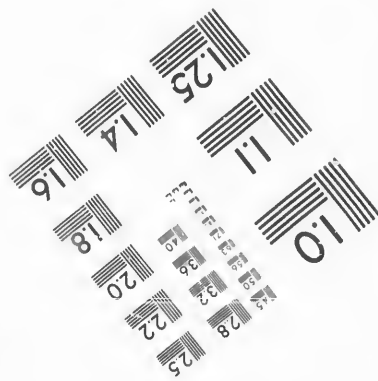
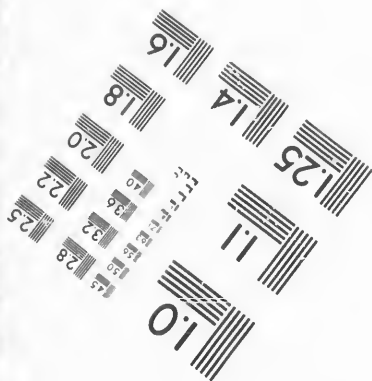
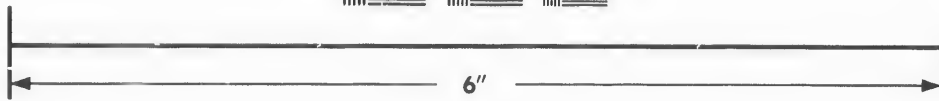
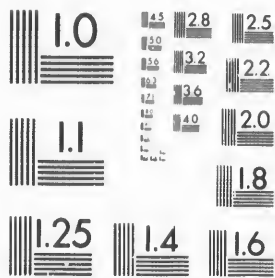


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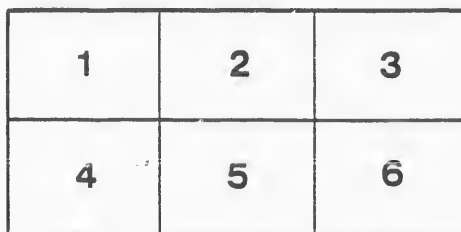
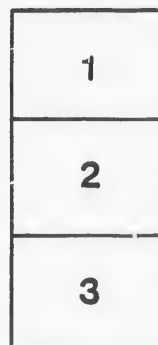
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# CHRISTIAN UNITY.

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A S E R M O N,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

CONGREGATIONAL UNION OF EASTERN CANADA,

AT STANSTEAD, SEPTEMBER 21, 1842.

AND PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST;

BY

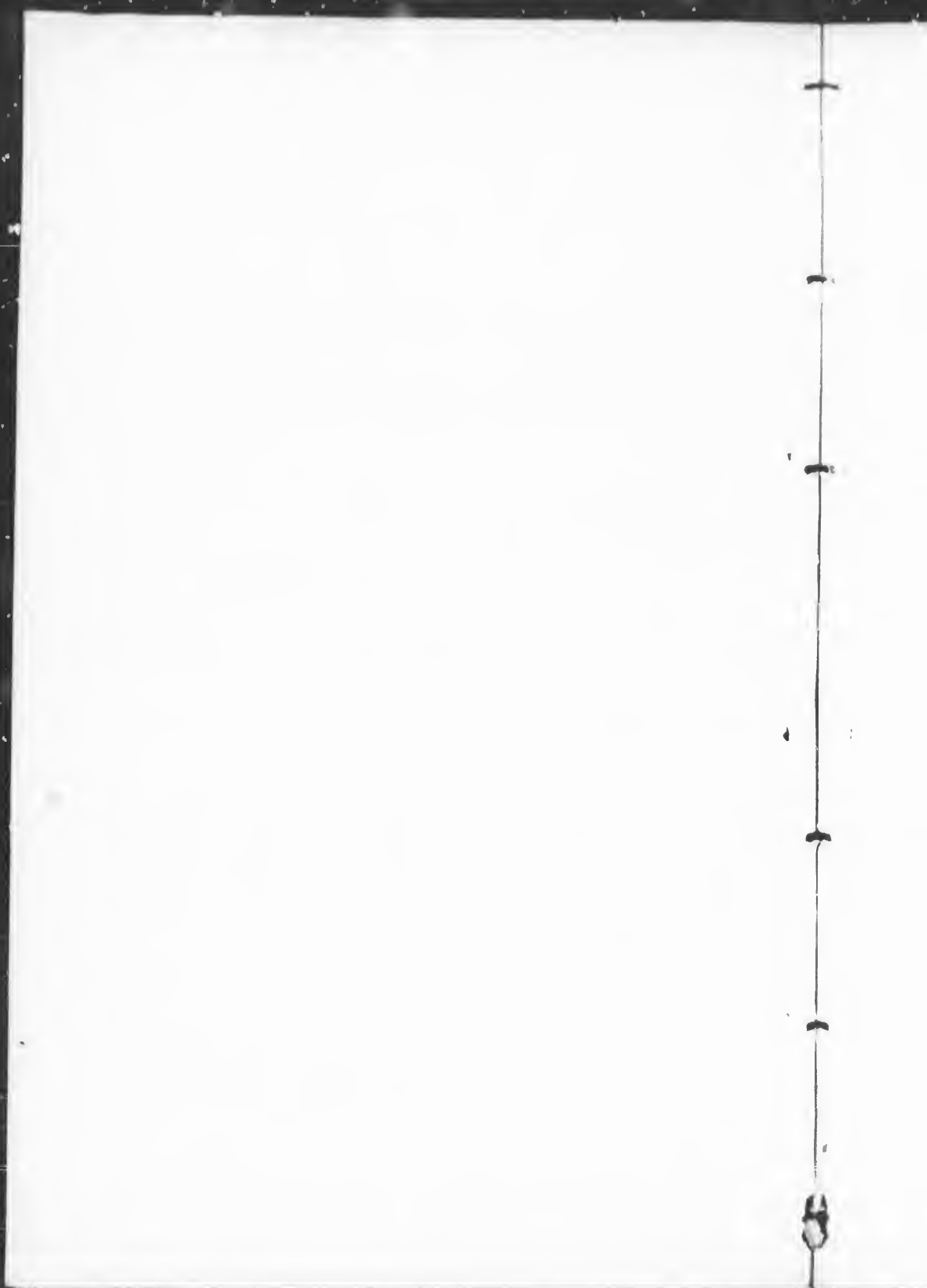
THE REV. T. ATKINSON.

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1842.



## CHRISTIAN UNITY.

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THE subject to which we invite your attention is—*The unity and prosperity of the Church dependent upon the spirituality of its members* :—and as the foundation of the remarks we have to offer, we take the ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, and part of the thirty-first verse : “*Then had the Churches rest;—and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.*”

When our Lord was about to leave his Disciples, he commissioned them to preach the Gospel,—as a witness to all nations that he was the long promised Messiah, and that men might believe and be saved :—and the history of their labors, and the specimens of their exhortations and letters preserved in this volume, shew how constantly and distinctly they kept this glorious object in view. We see it on the first page of these records, in the first sermon that was preached in Jerusalem :—“*Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified,*

both Lord and Christ.—Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost," (Acts ii. 36. 38.) And we see it at the very close of the age of miracles, and on the last page of divine inspiration :—" And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." (Rev. xxii. 17.) And we learn from the same history that when men believed the message of salvation, they immediately separated themselves from their unbelieving and idolatrous countrymen ;—abandoned their former sinful practices, and voluntarily united themselves together, as the followers of Christ,—the people of God. Such communities were soon formed, not only in Jerusalem, but in Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and many other places, so that, even at this early period, churches existed " throughout all Judæa, and Galilee, and Samaria, and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied."

The primary design in forming such Churches evidently was,—to separate believers from an ungodly world ; that their own advantage might be secured, the conversion of sinners be promoted, and the divine glory manifested, as the ultimate end of all.

We remark—

First, That the members of these churches possessed a decidedly *christian* or *spiritual* character.



Secondly, That this spiritual character formed *the bond of union*. From whence it follows :

Thirdly, That as this character is *matured*, the union will become more compact and enlarged. And,

Fourthly, That the advancement of the church in spirituality and unity, will proportionately increase her prosperity and usefulness.

• I.—The members of these churches possessed a decidedly *christian* or *spiritual* character. It was, beyond all doubt, the intention of Christ that it should be so.—They are described in his intercessory prayer as those who had received the message of God ;—as those who believed that Christ came from the Father, and had been sent by the Father :—as those who had been *given* to him by the gracious appointment of God :—as those who were separated from the world. *Faith in the divine mission of Christ*, is here distinctly exhibited as their prominent characteristic :—a faith which produced obedience to His commands, and separation from an unbelieving and unregenerate world. In perfect accordance with this sentiment, is the language in which these churches were addressed by all the inspired writers ;—language which shews that a firm conviction existed in their minds, of the decidedly *christian* character of the persons addressed. And this conviction was not the offspring of unscriptural charity, but the result of *testimony* upon which they could depend. There were manifestations of *christian* consistency, and fruits of righteousness, in these

churches, which were evidently the effects of divine influence. And therefore, while they held in abhorrence the language of flattery ;—while they knew full well the danger of delusion in matters connected with the soul and eternity ;—while they reproved them for their inadequate views of divine truth, and for their imperfect conduct as professed followers of Christ and citizens of heaven, and continually urged them onward to higher degrees of christian knowledge, and to greater attainments in the divine life,—they could yet unhesitatingly designate them, “ the called of Jesus Christ,”—“ the beloved of God,”—“ sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,”—(holy ones :) “ the workmanship of God, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.” A change so great had passed upon them, that they could be appealed to as subjects of the *new creation*, in which the manifestations of divine wisdom, and goodness, and power, were as evident as when God said—“ let there be light, and there was light.” They were “ born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God.” They were “ washed, and sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.” They “ walked *in the fear of God.*” This was their governing principle. “ They were exemplary for a holy, heavenly conversation :—they lived so as that all who conversed with them might say, surely the fear of God reigns in this people.” It may seem strange that any difference of opinion should ever have

existed upon a point so clearly stated, and so easy of proof as—"who are members of the church?" They are distinguished, by repentance; by godly sorrow for sin;—by faith in Jesus Christ;—by firm attachment to the truth;—by superiority to the world;—by purity; by heavenly mindedness. Christians! As you desire the prosperity of the church, cherish that spirituality in your own heart!—Labour and pray for its increase in the community to which you belong!

II. This spiritual character formed the bond of union. Their fellowship was the result of their accredited conversion to Christ. They were led, by the force of truth;—by the power of conscience;—by the sacred influence of the message of reconciliation;—by the renewing power of the Spirit of God; and by the working of gratitude and love; to "give themselves first to the Lord, and then to each other, according to His will." As faith in Christ was the bond which united them all to HIM, as the common Head, so was it the invisible, but powerful tie that bound them to each other. It is not by submission to any external forms, nor by coming into any social compact agreed on by any number of individuals, that we can become entitled to a place in the church of Christ. We are members of His visible body, and become related to each other, by a common relation to GOD! Individuals may, indeed, obtain entrance into a church of Christ, who do *not* in truth possess this christian character, who are *not* related to God, by a living faith in Christ;

—but if so, they are united to his church, only as the lifeless graft remains upon the tree until the pruning knife removes it, and it is cast away as dead and worthless. If we have assumed, on just grounds, the name we bear, and the position we hold in the church of Christ, we have received His truth with submission and gratitude. We have been redeemed by His blood, and sanctified by His Spirit. We are *us* ; and He hath introduced us “ to the general assembly and church of the first-born which are written in heaven ; and constituted us “ fellow citizens of the saints, and of the household of God.” ALL who, in the judgement of charity, have repented of sin ; have “ fled for refuge to the hope set before” them in the gospel ; are living by faith on the Son of God, and looking for his second coming ; ARE OUR BRETHEREN ! By the love of God, and the grac. of Christ, and the work of the Spirit, strong and indissoluble bonds have been created. Look upon that far distant band of worshippers ! They belong to another nation ; speak another language ; live under another climate ; and wear another hue. But they have been drawn by a divine power, around the cross of Christ ; they are looking to Jesus for salvation ; they are united to Christ by a living faith ; they are renewed by His Spirit ; adopted into His family ; made “ heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ.” Oh, then, we are ONE :—animated by one spirit ; arrayed in the same spotless garment ; and with one heart can sing that one song,—“ unto Him that

loved us, and washed us from our sins in his blood, and hath made us unto our God kings and priests, unto Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever." There may be different forms of worship, and various systems of ecclesiastical polity ;—but there is an enlightened and real agreement in the fundamental doctrine of the atonement made for sin by the sacrifice of Christ ;—the same views of Jehovah's right to reign over us, and of our obligations to obey. There is therefore a foundation for a real union,—a security for a holy fellowship. There are many subjects,—but one kingdom, and one spiritual sovereign. There are many children,—but one Father, and one home. There are many stones ; and their size and shape may vary ;—but all are built upon one foundation, and shall constitute one temple. There are many branches ;—but all draw from one root their life and fruitfulness. There are many members, but one body ;—

" All join in Christ their Living Head  
And of His grace partake."

But, if the possession of this Christian or Spiritual character form the bond of union, then it follows conclusively :

III. That as this character is *matured*, the union will become more compact, and enlarged.

The desirableness of unity among the followers of Christ, for their own sake, and for the sake of the world, is so universally admitted, that we shall occupy no time in dwelling upon it. So lovely is unity in

itself, so frequently did our Lord insist upon it, and so great are the advantages that result from it, that it is no uncommon thing to hear *those* extolling and advocating it, who are the most successful promoters of divisions and strife. The question therefore, is *not*,—"Is a more intimate, and enlarged, and effective union among the disciples of Christ desirable"? but, "*How* may a greater degree of unity be secured"? Now we assert, most deliberately and confidently, that **IT CAN BE SECURED ONLY BY THE PREDOMINANCE OF REAL PIETY!** Disunion is not an accidental thing :—it springs from the corruption of the heart : and therefore no external appliances can eradicate the evil. The wisdom and power of man may produce *uniformity*, but not *union*. There may be combinations of party ; but there will not be a conjunction of souls, until the fire of divine love has consumed much of the dross of selfishness, and melted and consolidated the materials that sin has separated and scattered. Take only those who are students of the word of God,—who profess to "walk by the same rule, and to mind the same thing" ;—and you will find christian unity to be only in proportion to the influence which the truth has actually exerted upon them in the production of a new, and divine, and spiritual character. I know that it may often *appear* to be far otherwise. Multitudes may have been associated by various considerations, and the absence of open divisions and contentions, and a known agreement in various, but still only circum-

stantial, matters ; may have led many to imagine that *there* is unity. Indifference to real religion,—spiritual torpor and death, have allowed the ill compacted mass to remain unbroken ; just as the frost has sometimes bound materials the most incongruous and unsightly, into a solid and well-shapen mass. But let them escape from the frigid zone ;—in plain words, let them no longer be indifferent ;—let them be fairly roused from their slumbers, and begin to think, and speak, and act, with freedom and vigour ; and you will find so many points of difference, and even of collision, between men ; aye, and *good* men too ;—you will find *all* prepared to *yield* so little, and to *demand* so much ; so much in love with their own opinions, and so jealous that others will not love them too ;—that if you expect to bind men together with any other bond than that which the “new creation” furnishes, you will be the subject of repeated disappointment and vexation. The principle of selfishness is too powerful to be eradicated by any other remedy than the gospel of Christ : and yet it must be eradicated, or at least subdued and controlled, before there can be substantial and enlarged union. It has been said, that “selfishness is the last feeling that yields to the power of the gospel.” But it may be said with equal truth, that it is the *first* feeling with which the gospel comes in contact ; and as that selfishness is opposed to “the mind that was in Christ,” it maintains a constant warfare with the principles and motives by which the christian,

—the spiritual character is formed ; and, therefore, it is subdu'd, just in the degree in which the gospel of Christ exerts its benign influence upon us ; in other words,—in proportion as we lay aside our earthly, and assume our heavenly, character. It needs, then, no lengthened argument to shew, that *as the christian character is matured, the spirit of unity and love will be more enlarged and influential.* For what is that character ? It consists in the renunciation of self-righteousness, and the humble, grateful reception of the righteousness of Christ ! The subjugation of self-love, by supreme love to God ; and by the love of benevolence towards our fellow-men, and the love of complacency towards our fellow christians, for His sake ! Our own will is renounced, that the will of God may be consulted and obeyed. We find our joy, not in gratifying self, but in pleasing God. We reckon that we are not our own, but Christ's :—bound by every principle of justice and gratitude, to do His will, and promote His glory.

None will question, that in proportion as this christian or spiritual character is perfected, will be the diminution of our earthly-mindedness, of our selfishness and carnality ; the expansion of our benevolence ; and the increase of that patience, and humility, and love, which the Saviour so frequently enjoins upon his disciples. And when every member of the church shall be striving with all diligence, and constancy, and prayer, to possess and manifest the spirit of Christ ; to



glorify God ; and to promote the best interests of his fellow-men, it will not be necessary to *urge* them to *unity* ;—for while all are pressing on to God,—actuated by the same desires, moving onward towards one object ;—there will necessarily and spontaneously arise a glorious unity. Brought within the attracting and concentrating influence of the cross of Christ, jealousies and divisions shall cease, and it shall be said —“ See how these Christians love one another.” Oh ! did we all live near to God ; did we aright “ walk with God,” and imitate God, and serve God,—our humility, and love, and joy would increase ; and there would soon be nothing we should not willingly *do*, or suffer, or sacrifice for Christ, and for “ his body’s sake, the church.” Now, if such were the members of a church, would there not be order, harmony, and love ? There would be no place for divisions and strife ! The spirit of Christ would control every other spirit ; and its fruits,—forgiveness, gentleness, peace, and love, would flourish and abound ! Such a church would present a living exhibition of the virtues enjoined by the Apostle :—they would “ add to their faith, virtue ; and to virtue, knowledge ; and to knowledge, temperance ; and to temperance, patience ; and to patience, godliness ; and to godliness, brotherly kindness ; and to brotherly kindness, LOVE” : and “ these things would not only be in them, but would abound” :—enriching themselves ; blessing the world ; and glorifying God.

And the same maturity of the christian character which would secure this more *compact* union of the members of any given community, would effect a more *enlarged* union of believers. We stay not to describe the causes of disunion: but *this* we assert;—love to Christ; devotion to His service, compassion for the souls of men; the expectation of heaven's perfect unity, will never divide the friends of the Redeemer, and alienate their hearts from each other: *these* do but bind them together as one body; and jealousies can disunite them only as they are unmindful of their obligations to Christ, to each other, and to the world. Why, then, should we not expect, and labour for, a more enlarged union? Love to the Saviour; devotedness to His cause; compassion for the souls of men, may gain such an ascendancy in the hearts of christians, as entirely to subdue all those unhallowed influences that would produce envyings, and jealousies, and discord. Yes! and far as we may *now* appear to be from such a state, we believe, on the authority of the Word of Truth, that the time *shall* come when this glory shall be seen resting upon the church. And if any are ready to ask with doubt, "How can these things be?" we reply. "By the out-pouring of the spirit;—the spirit of holiness, peace, and love!" Only let all the members of the church submit to be "led by the Spirit," until they come under the full and unclouded beams of "the Sun of Righteousness," and there shall remain no icy barriers, no chilling prejudices,

no benumbing and sickening jealousies. Every soul, melted into love, shall pour forth such a stream of holy energy, as to sweep away all the divisions, and discords, by which the church has been so long weakened and degraded. Let not this be thought impossible, or a blessing too great to be expected. Different denominations may yet remain,—but “the fellowship of kindred minds,” may be made more intimate and visible. There may be *unity*, and yet *diversity* ;—just as there is a diversity of colors in the rainbow, but all blending and melting into one arch of glory. It is not necessary that we value our distinctive principles less, or love those of our own denomination less ;—but **WE MUST LOVE CHRIST AND HIS CAUSE MORE !** Then shall we “love one another, with a pure heart, *fervently* ;” and with mutual sympathy, and united prayer, labor to secure the great common object,—the glory of God, the prosperity of the church, and the conversion of the world.

IV. The advancement of the church in spirituality, and unity, will proportionately increase her prosperity and usefulness.

By the prosperity of the church, we do not mean merely, or even chiefly, the enlargement of her boundaries,—the increase of her numbers ;—for this might be effected when real prosperity was not enjoyed ; just as acre after acre might be added to a garden without increasing either its beauty or fruitfulness. The true prosperity of the church consists in the growth of her

members in knowledge and love, in holiness, harmony, and joy. To say, then, that the advancement of the church in spirituality, will proportionately increase her prosperity, may seem like asserting the truism,—that if *each member* is in a prosperous state, the *whole body* will enjoy prosperity. But this is not all; for each individual would both *receive* and *impart* a hallowed and elevating influence from this confluence of spirituality. And who can estimate the influence which such a body of christians would have on each other in multiplying and perfecting “the fruits of the Spirit”? And then, that Sacred Spirit,—the Spirit of peace and love, who retires with grief from the scenes of strife and divisions,—would dwell among such christians, to increase their light and love; to strengthen every grace; to give them power in prayer; and to make them mighty in the conversion of the world! But, strong as the temptation is, we must not enlarge upon this part of our subject; but hasten to observe,

That such an improvement in the spirituality of the church would immeasurably increase her *usefulness*.

We have said, that the design of Christ in the formation of churches was,—to separate believers from an ungodly world,—that their own advantage might be secured;—the conversion of sinners be promoted;—and the Divine Glory manifested as the ultimate end of all. It is lamentable to think how often the first part only of the Saviour’s design has

been regarded by his professed disciples. Individuals, who have been awakened to some sense of their guilt and danger, have sought admission to the church, simply that they might derive instruction, or comfort, from those ordinances, an attendance upon which constitutes the external mark of discipleship, without any deep and controlling conviction that *every member* of the church must form part of that agency by which the world is to be converted, and the highest purposes of the divine mind are to be accomplished. Others have imagined that if partakers of salvation themselves, they were fully qualified to convert others. They have undertaken the work, and accomplished little; and instead of entering upon deep, anxious, prayerful inquiry, as to the cause of their partial or total failure, they have resolved their want of success into divine sovereignty;—whereas such an enquiry would have shewn them that it was rather to be attributed to the want of *elevated piety*. Now, it will be readily admitted that such members of our churches, —to become what they ought to be,—“our helpers in Christ Jesus”;—“lights in the world”;—“the salt of the earth,”—must become more “alive unto God”:—more sensible of their solemn obligations to Christ,—to the church,—and to the world:—in other words, must have a *more decidedly christian or spiritual character*. Nor can it be questioned, that if *all* the members of our churches were as spiritual, and as united, as some few even now are, there would

be a large increase to the prosperity and usefulness of the church.

But alas ! How little prepared have any been for enlarged and continued usefulness ! we do not remember as we ought, the misery of our former state, when *we* also were " children of wrath, even as others." We do not estimate as we ought, our obligations to Him who died to save us from this state, and to raise us to His glory. If we did,—love to Christ, and pity for the souls of others, would impel us more diligently to seek the salvation of the lost. The maxim of our life would more evidently be,—" none of us liveth to himself, and none of us dieth to himself, but if we live, we live to the Lord, or if we die, we die unto the Lord, so that whether we live or die we are the Lord's " And if this were the state of our minds and hearts, could we *refrain* from labor ? Or, could we labor in vain ? No ! The humility, and energy, and prayerfulness, with which we should then go forward, would ensure large success. The promised blessing from on high would not be withheld, and the world would be compelled to feel and to acknowledge the power of this increased spirituality, and enlarged unity.

Then, if such would be the effect of the increased spirituality and unity of any given church,—what would be the results of the same degree of spirituality and unity in any *section* of the church of Christ ? And what the hallowed and glorious fruits of the same

spirituality and unity throughout *all* the *universal church*? Once the church possessed this character! All the Disciples were “of one accord,”—“of one mind,”—nothing to divide their efforts; or weaken their influence, or quench the spirit of prayer; “and **THE LORD ADDED TO THE CHURCH DAILY** those who were saved.” And is the hope unwarranted, that she shall yet again put on her beautiful garments of peace and love? Whatever storms she has first to pass through, we believe that the church of God is to appear more fair and glorious than she has yet been seen. When that time shall come, if denominational differences remain, they will not prevent the full flow of christian affection, or the manifestation of real unity. Perhaps they will add beauty to that unity, just as the varied foliage adds to the beauty of the fairest scene. “The garden of the Lord,” may in this respect resemble the face of nature—which in its variety and harmony, gives more abundant proof of the workmanship of a divine hand. Christians of different denominations will labor with no unholy rivalry, nor any longer expend upon each other, the energies which ought to be employed against the common foe. Animated with love to Christ;—impressed with the solemnity and nearness of eternity;—fired with zeal for the glory of God;—*all* will unite in the glorious work of evangelizing the world; each rejoicing in and strengthened by, the success of all. Infidelity would be put to shame:—the God of peace and love would

give more proofs of his gracious approval, in the rich blessings attending the efforts of his united people ; and the voice would be heard " in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever."

We close with a few brief remarks :

1. The influence of elevated holiness can scarcely be duly estimated.

We point to the examples of exalted piety which are recorded in the Sacred Volume, and often have the careless and the prejudiced been compelled to confess that there is a reality in religion : and to admire its purifying and elevating influence upon human character. But if such be the effect of a decidedly christian or spiritual character,—of *entire devotion* to the service of Christ, when seen at such a distance ;—what would be the effect of an equal degree of holiness, when brought near in the lives of those with whom they converse ? And if the light of an individual christian is often the means of enlightening those who are in darkness, and winning them from the paths of error ;—what would be the effect of the concentrated light of the universal church, if all its members shone " as lights in the world" ? Let us not forget, that as individuals, and as churches, we are responsible, not only for the influence which we actually do exert ; but for the beneficial influence *we might exert*, were our standard of piety more exalted ;—our christian life more vigorous and fruitful.



2. We remark, That peace and unity are *natural* to the religion of Christ ; and therefore, ought to form the very element in which the members of His church shall move ;—the distinguishing characteristic by which they shall be known.

Jesus,—the head of the church—is “ the Prince of Peace.” He came to restore peace between God and man ;—and gave peace to the subjects of his kingdom. How unnatural, then, that there should be strifes and divisions among the subjects of that kingdom which “ is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” ! They are regarded by Him as one flock ;—one family ;—one temple ;—one body, animated by the same indwelling spirit. The church is (or ought to be) the type of heaven ; in its devotedness to God, its unity, and love : and therefore, the language of Robert Hall is neither too severe nor too strong :—“ Christian societies, regarding each other with the jealousies of rival empires, each aiming to raise itself on the ruins of all others, and scarcely deigning to acknowledge the possibility of salvation out of their pale ;—is the odious and disgusting spectacle which modern Christianity presents.”

If there has been any of this spirit in *us*, let us deeply humble ourselves before God ; and henceforth “ keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

3. As unity itself is a means of extending religion,  
 THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST SHOULD SEEK TO REALIZE  
 A MORE PERFECT, ENLARGED, AND APPARENT UNION.

The harmony of the visible creation was doubtless designed to convince men of the being and unity of God ! And the language of the Saviour himself leads us to conclude that the unity of the church, was intended to prove, and to manifest, the *new creation*. "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee; that they also may be one in us, *that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.* And the glory which thou gavest me. I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one. I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one, and *that the world may know that thou hast sent me,* and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me." Let this union be realized,—and the glorious spectacle would act with resistless power upon the world ! It would take from unbelievers their favorite objections :—It would silence, if not convince, the sceptic ;—and remove the great stumbling-block out of the way of the serious enquirer : while it would give new lustre to the christian character ; new energy to the church's efforts, and new prevalency to her prayers.

If our usefulness has been diminished for want of this union, let us now be humbled ; and while we seek to make manifest the degree of unity which actually exists,—let us labour to render that unity more compact and more enlarged. I rejoice in the union of the churches of our own denomination in this Province ; believing it will be the means of increasing our usefulness, and promoting the cause of simple, scriptural christianity.

I rejoice too that there is nothing, either in our principles, or our general practices, which would tend to exclude from our communion, the followers of Christ, who may differ in the *circumstantials* of religion. May our liberty and peace, our harmony and love, be increased and perpetuated : and the Spirit of peace and love descend and dwell among us ; that the glory of the Lord may be seen upon us !

