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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

by

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The recent sickness and death of Pope John XXIII held the interest and the sympathy of a large number of people who were not members of the Roman Catholic denomination, because the late Pope was a man of a Christian spirit and his imaginative action in summoning a General Council of the Roman Catholic Church to discuss Christian unity evoked a response well beyond the limits of the communion of which he was the leader.

Stimulated by the Pope's concern, many Roman Catholics are taking an increasing interest in Christian unity. For some time past there has been a regular period of prayer for Christian unity conducted amongst Roman Catholics throughout the world at this time of the year. It is worth noting that the phrase "Christian unity" is used, rather than the phrase "church unity", because Roman Catholics believe there is only one visible church which they identify with the Church of Rome and the churches in communion with it. They admit there are Christians not visibly united with this outward structure of Roman Catholicism and so they pray for Christian unity that they might be united to it, but they do not pray for church unity. For them, this already exists and their principle of unity is obedience to the Pope. Perhaps the most famous Roman Catholic definition of the church in terms of its relationship to the Pope is the bull "Unam Sanctum" of Pope Boniface VIII in 1302 which begins "There is only one Catholic Church ... outside this church there is no salvation and no remission of sins. The one and only church has one body, one head, namely Christ and His Vicar, Peter, and the successor of Peter. ... Further we declare, say, define and pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff".

This strong expression of Roman Catholic doctrine of the Church is by no means out of date. As recently as the First Vatican Council of 1870 the
same doctrine was reaffirmed. This Council stated "We teach and declare that the primacy of jurisdiction over the whole church of God was conferred upon the Apostle, St. Peter ... Whoever succeeds Peter in the Chair of Rome holds Peter's supremacy over the whole church ... Therefore it is necessary that the faithful be in agreement with the Roman Church." The Vatican Council taught further that the Pope has immediate jurisdiction over all Christians. This doctrine of the unity of the church based on direct relationship to the Pope is a clear doctrine, but it has only a very slender basis on Scripture and is full of difficulties. Its scriptural basis is said to be our Lord's words to Peter in Matthew 16 "Thou art Peter and upon this rock will I build my church", as though these words referred to Peter's primacy of jurisdiction over all the faithful. The trouble is that this interpretation is not the obvious meaning of the phrase. There are other alternative meanings which commended themselves more widely in the early church and which even the Council of Trent itself adopted, and which have no reference to Peter's primacy of jurisdiction in the church, but rather to the centrality for the church of that faith in Christ which Peter as well as all other Christians believe and which is undoubtedly the foundation rock of the Christian church.

There are also other difficulties in the papal theory of church unity. For example there is no hint of any successor to Peter, either in this verse or in any other in the New Testament, so that whatever pre-eminence Peter had, was personal to Peter himself. There is no suggestion anywhere in the Bible that he had any successors in this pre-eminence.

This slender Biblical foundation is the first difficulty in the Roman Catholic theory but there are three other practical difficulties. The first is that there are innumerable Christians throughout the world who do not acknowledge the Pope's primacy. "It is possible, of course, that a minority and even a small minority may have a monopoly of the truth such as when Athanasius stood firm in a world groaning to find itself
Arian", but if century after century the majority of Christians are found to be not within the Christian church as defined, there are strong grounds for doubting the correctness of the definition which restricts the church to the minority of Christians. Thus the facts of how God works disprove the theory, for otherwise it would mean that the Holy Spirit makes more Christians outside the Church than within it!

Then there are two further objections to the papal theory of the unity of the church, namely, that it promises security against heresy and schism but achieves security in neither field. Thus the theory provides no security against heresy; the Pope can bind error upon the Church; his jurisdiction, subject to no correction and no appeal, may be used for the protection of heretics, or for the expulsion of the orthodox. All is made to depend upon one man. He is human, and so subject to error. The Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility even if it be true, is no safeguard here, for the doctrine does not assert that the Pope is invariably infallible but he is held to be protected from error by Divine assistance only when he is defining ex cathedra some doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the universal Church. This is seldom done; and yet the papal jurisdiction, which as I say is subject to no control or appeal, is constantly at work."

"(Lacey Unity and Schism p.68) Encyclical after encyclical is issued and although there is no promise of infallibility in all these teachings, yet the faithful are required to submit willingly to the papal utterances which even, on the papal theory, may be wrong. So that the papal jurisdiction which is regarded as the indispensable organ of unity may hold down the Church either in truth or in error, and there is no way of reforming such error except when a subsequent Pope reverses decisions of his predecessor. Of such reversals we have many examples in the history of the Roman Church. But till they were reversed the Church is held in a unity of error.

Similarly the papal jurisdiction, regarded as the principle of unity of the church, is no security against schism. This is clearly illustrated when there
successor of Peter. This has happened not infrequently, for it is possible to count over 30 such anti-popes. Now in such cases the papal theory provides no authority for adjudicating between the rival claimants and so of deciding where the true church is. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this is the state of things at the end of the great schism; then three rival popes claimed the chair of St. Peter. Now on the Roman theory it is necessary to be in communion with the Pope to be a member of the church, but how could the faithful of that time distinguish between the claimants? Each had been elected by a body of Cardinals, and yet two were no Popes at all and they together with the Cardinals who elected them must by definition be schismatical, so there was no salvation for faithful to be obtained through adhering to their communion. But which those two were, it was impossible to tell. Thus for over 40 years it was quite impossible to know where the church was. This is admitted by the Catholic Encyclopedia vol.13 p.541 which says it was "wellnigh impossible for the simple faithful to arrive at the truth" as to who was the true pope; that is, on the papal theory, it was impossible for the faithful to know where the true church was. It is a strange doctrine which finishes up so that the Christian believer cannot know where the church, the body of Christ, of which he is a member is to be found. To take an example. As you know the late pope took the name of John XXIII. But there was an earlier Pope John XXIII who called the Council of Constance, which was one of the more famous Councils of the Middle Ages, and up till the beginning of this century he was listed on the list of popes, yet now 600 years later he is said to have been rc pope. So that all the faithful (and they were at the time the majority) who were in communion with the first Pope John XXIII, thinking that they were in this way members of the church, are found after 600 years not to have been members of the church at all but to have been all the time in formal schism. Thus we see that the theory that the church is one because of its union with the pope, although a simple theory, has a very slender base in Scripture and breaks down in several different ways in practice.

If we turn to the theory of the unity of the church which finds favour in the ecumenical movement it will be found that this too is inadequate. The ecumenical
theory falls into a similar mistake of placing the unity of the church in a visible structure and organisation. As we know, there are today several denominational structures. The Orthodox church regards its denomination as the only church, the Roman Catholics regard their denomination under the leadership of the Pope as the only church, the Ecumenical Movement regards all the denominations as parts of the church and seeks to form a united church by uniting the denominations. But the truth is that the unity of the church is not expressed in the outward denominational structure. If we go back to the first century we will find that there was no denominational structure at all. With the passage of time various competing structures grew up. By the end of the Middle Ages these were almost all suppressed except two, the Roman Catholic in the West and the Orthodox in the East. At the time of the Reformation various denominational structures came into existence once more and so we have the present situation of parallel denominations. It is a mistake to identify the denomination with the church, and to think that church unity is achieved by denominational union.

We use the word ‘church’, of course, in several different ways, sometimes of a building, and sometimes of a denomination, but it is important for us to realise that neither of these is the essential meaning of the word. In the New Testament the word church is used in two senses only. Firstly it is used of all the people of God, all believers redeemed by Christ, in whatever country or in whatever century they lived. All are parts, limbs, or organs of Christ’s body, all together make up the one body; and they have indissoluble unity as a consequence of their union with Christ. It is because believers are united to Christ that they are one with each other. In this sense the Church can only be one, because Christ cannot have two bodies. He cannot be divided. If a man is a Christian he is a member of Christ and so a member of this church, which is primarily a supernatural heavenly entity. Its principle of unity is invisible, for it is the individual’s relationship to Christ, which is a matter of the heart.
The New Testament also uses the word church in a second sense, for the local assembly of Christians meeting together for common worship whether in a city or in a home. In this way there may be a church within a church, the church which meets in a home being an expression of the larger church throughout the city, and both are visible expressions of the whole church, the one people of God.

Thus in the New Testament the word church is used for the whole people of God as well as for a fragment of that people, the local group. One thing is clear, the whole is not an aggregation of the parts as though the larger were made up by adding together all the lesser. On the contrary the whole is prior to the parts which take its name, both in thought and in expression and time. That of the union of the Church of the New Testament is this: in every particular group of Christians meeting together for common worship there is one church, which is manifested by the presence of its members when its members meet together in their local circumstances. The one body is present when some members are assembled; for the simple reason that the church is not divided. It cannot be divided because it is the one body of Christ, where two or three Christians are met in Christ's name, He also is present, and where Christ is with His people, there is the church. The church is present perfectly (and not partially) wherever Christ, its head, is meeting together with His people, however small the group is. The church's unity is irrefragable because its true principle of unity is not obedience to a human being, but to Christ. This principle of unity through real relationship to Christ is essentially invisible, but it expresses itself visibly in a true baptism.

So it is right to say that the Church cannot be united for it cannot be divided. It is one church. But it is possible that its unity may be greatly obscured by bickerings and lack of fellowship among its members. What we need to pray then is that the bodies of churches for that phrase really means the union of denominations, which is not essential thing; nor is Christian unity in the sense of broken off parts of the body being joined to a visible church an expression to a visible human head, who may sometimes have petitions amongst whom it is impossible to distinguish; but rather we should pray that Christians should express their unity in the way that is most dear to the heart of God, that is to say, in love and fellowship together. This is true Christian fellowship. Our denominations are often barriers to Christian fellowship. Christian fellowship should overlap these carriers. But a more serious barrier is erected in our own hearts by the devil who tempts us to criticise our fellow Christians, and to refrain from loving them as we ought and when he tempts us to prefer to base our fellowship in the church on something else than sharing our common salvation and hope in Christ. This is the form of Christian disunity which dishonours God. There is tremendous scope for improvement here. We should all pray that we might express to our fellow Christians in whatever denomination God's providence has placed them, the true Christian unity of love which springs from a realisation that we are brethren, saved by the one Lord Jesus Christ.