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# The question of church unity

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THE QUESTION OF CHURCH UNITY.

- J. Edward W. Mueller.

## THE QUESTION OF CHURCH UNITY.

The Ariadne thread out of the labyrinth of sectarianism is to be found in a realization of the Spirit and Purpose of Christ. The Spirit of Christ was active love and fraternity; His Purpose, to reveal the hearts of man and of God, to uplift humanity into the consciousness of God's eternal fatherhood and man's true brotherhood. As Christians of every name manifest this spirit and consummate this purpose all that is vital in church unity will be realized.

Vital unity must be voluntary and unconstrained. It should emanate from the hearts of men as spontaneously as does the perfume of a flower from the bosom of the flower. It can not be made to order nor conjured up by the fertile brains of theorists. It is a growth from within, the fruitage of a feeling of fellowship and fraternity. When the followers of Christ become imbued with the spirit of their Master their church unity will become of less importance.

An all inclusive universal church organization may be attractive to the mind of the idealist but like Moore's Utopia and Mr. Bellamy's 'Looking Backward' its attractiveness is enhanced by its remoteness. Its idealistic vagueness is its chief charm and security. Once made concrete in relation to the complex beings for which it was dreamed and its visionary character becomes a parent.

That Christians should be gathered into different denominations is inevitable to human nature as now constituted. It is human nature even sanctified human nature, that prevents church unity. So long as

the children of Adam remain what they are we may expect to find, even with a unity of purpose, a difference of opinion in the Committee on Ways and Means. Perhaps at some stage in man's development God will bring it to pass that all men shall think and believe alike but to insist that they ought to do so now is simple folly. This must be evident from the discussions presented in journals of recent date. The propositions for unity are as varied as the proposers. Each overture has met with its <sup>ie nc</sup>conscious opponent. The Chicago-Lambeth Platform was rejected because of the "Historical Episcopate", the quadrilateral of the Church of Disciples is vague if not question begging, while the proposition of the New Jersey Assembly, like every general principle, lacks unifying power and organic spirit. All really propose the unity of Jonah and the Whale, but each in turn refuse to be assimilated. Before every advance someone has raised the sign "No thoroughfare" and brought progress to a standstill. So long as any denomination will issue an ultimatum the day of church unity has not yet dawned.

Men can not be legislated into harmony. The idea that a unity of organization would create any more real unity between men is a delusion and a snare. It is another instance of the error that classification destroys the peculiarities of the individuals and that complexity is removed by the simplicity of a name. But any classification as well as organization that does not depend on the inherent qualities of the individuals is artificial and doomed to share the fate of its kind. If tomorrow all churches should coalesce and form one universal church

society there would still be the same different convictions and sentiments. This is amply illustrated by the history of the early Catholic Church and in the Established Church of England. The mangled form and torn members of the so-called body of Christ would remain. Such unity would be uncertain and tremulous at best. It is a deterioration without organic power and propelling spirit, a thing dead and formal, that hinders rather than helps the spiritual development of man.

Church unity if ever possible is yet a great way off. Our hope today is not in church unity but in greater christian unity, and our aim the attainment of that mind which was in Him who "came not to be ministered unto but to minister". A "love that runs into sacrifice and a breadth of vision that sees beyond the denominational walls of separation" finds there not a rival churchman but a brother and fellowchristian. "Conceits of creeds and pretensions of sect" hinder the progress of the gospel and betray a condition that is a reproach to the cause of Christ. The moral of Leigh Hunt's beautiful story, Abu Ben Adhem, should be engraved on the heart of every biggotted sectary until the second great command of our Lord is indeed like unto the first.

I repeat, christian unity will be realized with the spirit of Christ. "If Christ be lifted up He will draw all men unto Him" "In Him we all are one". The Christ-life generated in the human soul will manifest itself in loving fellowship as certainly as does the lilly-life implanted in the bulb develope and bud forth in beautiful purity. Churches will come into closer relations as they are lifted

upon a higher mental and spiritual plane, as the divine idea of Christ works out its righteous purpose in the hearts of men. Unity is a child of practical piety; it is the fruitage of mutual love; a gem,

"Not to be seized by man's rude sinful hand,

But is the bright crown of mutual holiness".

Christian unity is actually being realized today though as yet very imperfectly. Greater goodwill prevails between those of different persuasions. Theological and ecclesiastical differences are becoming of less and less importance. The Church is no longer considered a finality but a means to an end, wholly subordinate to the promotion of the kingdom of God. The denominational lives are at times forgotten in the Christian fellowship of the young peoples societies, the support of charitable institutions, the promotion of church extension and in aggressive rescue work. We are all coming to realize that no church has a copyright on the plan of salvation, that the absolute essentials are neither church nor forms, sacraments nor creeds true or false, but only and alone the attitude of the soul to its Father. We are all children of Him "by whom is named the whole family in heaven and earth".

Christian unity will be promoted and carried on toward perfection in the field of practical Christian endeavor. The spirit of Christ will find its most perfect expression in the purpose of Christ. Let the churches turn from making nugatory courtesies and address themselves like their Master to needy humanity and in so doing they will "make the kingdoms of this world the kingdoms of our Lord". The problems of social, political, and ecclesiastical reform look to the followers

of Christ: for an application of the Sermon on the Mount. There are the poor to be fed, the sick the halt the blind to be healed, the afflicted to be comforted, the unlovely to be loved, the lost to be saved, and a gospel of hope to be preached unto all. "Ye are the light of the world the salt of the earth". Benighted souls are wistfully looking for the light that shineth brighter than the day. Aching broken hearts are longing for the Balm of Gilead. In carrying on and consummating this work of Christ the church is fulfilling its mission and realizing the purpose of Christ, and coeval with this purpose is unity. In this Christ-like work we may find that though we bear different names we are above all Christians. God is our Father, all men are brethren, and Christ Lord of all is alder brother. We are one in origin, one in nature, one in aim and purpose, one in hope and destiny. With increasing knowledge differences decrease; friction is overcome by contact; discord vanishes in harmony.

Indeed, Christianity may be likened to a great cathedral organ. There are pipes for with their individual peculiarities for the persons, banks of keys and stops corresponding to the denominations, creeds and sentiments; but as one spirit, even the Spirit of the Most High God, breathes and throbs in them all under the sympathetic touch of Christ there rises up unto heaven most harmonious music in an anthem of loving service and devotion.

*J. Edward W. Mueller.*