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978-1-107-65124-1 - The War and Unity: Being Lectures Delivered at the Local Lectures Summer Meeting of the University of Cambridge, 1918

Edited by the Rev. D. H. S. Cranage

Excerpt

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UNITY BETWEEN CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

I. A GENERAL VIEW

By the Rev. V. H. STANTON, D.D.

THE governing idea of this early morning course, which at the present as at former Summer Meetings is devoted to a subject connected with religious belief, is this year the power that Christianity has, or is fitted to have, to unite Christian denominations with one another, and also to unite races and nations, and different portions of that commonwealth of nations which we call the British Empire, and different classes within our own nation. A moment's reflection will shew that the question of unity between denominations of Christians derives special significance from being placed in connexion with all those other cases in regard to which the promotion of unity is to be considered. If it belongs to the genius of Christianity to be a uniting power, it is above all in the sphere of professed and organised Christianity, where Christians are grouped together *as* Christians, that its influence in producing union should be shewn. If it fails in this here, what hope, it may well be asked, can there be that it should be effective, when its principles and motives cannot be applied with the same directness and force? In the very assumption, then, which underlies this whole course of lectures, that Christianity can unite men, we

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 UNITY BETWEEN CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

have a special reason for considering our relations to one another as members of Christian bodies, with regard to this matter of unity.

But we are also all of us aware that the divisions among Christians are often severely commented on by those who refuse to make any definite profession of the Christian Religion, and are given by them sometimes as a ground of their own position of aloofness. It is true that strictures passed on the Christian Religion and its professors for failures in this, as well as in other respects, frequently shew little discernment, and are more or less unjust. So far as they are made to reflect on Christianity itself, allowance is not made for the nature of the human material upon which and with which the Christian Faith and Divine Grace have to work. And when Christians of the present day are treated as if they were to blame for them, sufficient account is not taken of the long and complex history, and the working of motives, partly good as well as bad, through which Christendom has been brought to its present divided condition. Still we cannot afford to disregard the hindrance to the progress of the Christian Faith and Christian Life among men created by the existing divisions among Christians. Harm is caused by them in another way of which we may be, perhaps, less conscious. They bring loss to ourselves individually within the denominations to which we severally belong. We should gain incalculably from the strengthening of our faith through a wider fellowship with those who share it, the greater volume of evidence for the reality of spiritual things which would thus be brought before us; and from the enrichment of our spiritual knowledge and life through closer acquaintance with a

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[More information](#)

V. H. STANTON

3

variety of types of Christian character and experience; and not least from that moral training which is to be obtained through common action, in proportion to the effort that has to be made in order to understand the point of view of others, and the suppression of mere egoism that is involved.

These are strong reasons for aiming at Christian unity. But further there comes to all of us at this time a powerful incentive to reflection on the subject, and to such endeavours to further it as we can make, in the signs of a movement towards it, the greater prominence which the subject has assumed in the thought of Christians, the evidence of more fervent aspirations after it, the clearer recognition of the injury caused by divisions. I remember that some 40 or more years ago, one of the most eminent and justly esteemed preachers of the day defended the existence of many denominations among Christians on the ground that through their competition a larger amount of work for the advance of the kingdom of God is accomplished. We are not so much in love with competition and its effects in any sphere now. And it should always have been perceived that, whatever its rightful place in the economic sphere might be, it had none in the promotion of purely moral and spiritual ends. The preacher to whom I have alluded did not stand alone in his view, though perhaps it was not often so frankly expressed. But at least acquiescence in the existence of separated bodies of Christians, as a thing inevitable, was commoner than it is now.

In the new attitude to this question of the duty of unity that has appeared amongst us there lies an opportunity which we must beware of neglecting. It is a move-

I—2

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[More information](#)

4 UNITY BETWEEN CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

ment of the Spirit to which it behoves us to respond energetically, or it will subside. Shakespeare had no doubt a different kind of human enterprises mainly in view when he wrote:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

But this observation is broadly true of all human progress. An advance of some kind in the relations of men to one another, or the remedying of some abuse, begins to be urged here and there, and for a time those who urge it are but little listened to. Then almost suddenly (as it seems) the minds of many, one hardly knows why, become occupied with it. If in the generation when that happens desire leads to concentrated effort, the good of which men have been granted the vision in their minds and souls will be attained. Otherwise interest in it will pass away, and the hope of securing it, at least for a long time, will be lost.

Before we attempt to consider any of the problems presented by the actual state of Christendom in connexion with the subject now before us, let us go back in thought to the position of believers in Jesus Christ of the first generation, when His own brief earthly life had ended. They form a fellowship bound together by faith in their common Lord, by the confident hopes with which that faith has inspired them, and the new view of life and its duties which they have acquired. Soon indeed instances occur in which the bonds between different members of the body become strained, owing especially to differences of origin and character in the elements of

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[More information](#)

V. H. STANTON

5

which it was composed. We have an example at a very early point in the narrative of the book of *Acts* in the dissatisfaction felt by believers from among Hellenistic Jews, who were visiting, or had again taken up their abode at, Jerusalem, because a fair share of the alms was not assigned to their poor by the Palestinian believers, who had the advantage of being more permanently established in the city, and were probably the majority. But the chiefs among the brethren, the Apostles, take wise measures to remove the grievance and prevent a breach.

A few years later a far more serious difference arises. Jewish believers in Jesus had continued to observe the Mosaic Law. When converts from among the Gentiles began to come in the question presented itself, "Is observance of that Law to be required of them?" Only on condition that it was would many among the Jewish believers associate with them. In their eyes still all men who did not conform to the chief precepts of this Law were unclean. It is possible that there were Jews of liberal tendencies, men who had long lived among Gentiles, to whom this difficulty may have seemed capable of settlement by some compromise. But in the case of most Jews, not merely in Palestine, but probably also in the Jewish settlements scattered through the Græco-Roman world, religious scruples, ingrained through the instruction they had received and the habits they had formed from childhood, were deeply offended by the very notion of joining in common meals with Gentiles, unless they had fulfilled the same conditions as full proselytes to Judaism, the so-called "proselytes of righteousness." On behalf, however, of Gentiles who had adopted the Faith of Christ, it was felt that the demand for the fulfilment of this condition

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[More information](#)

6 UNITY BETWEEN CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

of fellowship must be resisted at once and to the uttermost. So St Paul held. To concede it would have caused intolerable interference with Gentile liberty, and hindrance to the progress of the preaching of the Gospel and its acceptance in the world. And further—upon this consideration St Paul insisted above all—the requirement that Gentiles should keep the Jewish Law might be taken to imply, and would certainly encourage, an entirely mistaken view of what was morally and spiritually of chief importance; it would put the emphasis wrongly in regard to that which was essential in order that man might be in a right relation to God and in the way of salvation.

But the point in the history of this early controversy to which I desire in connexion with our present subject to draw attention is the fact that it is not suggested from any side that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians should form two separate bodies that would exist side by side in the many cities where both classes were to be found, keeping to their respective spheres, endeavouring to behave amicably to one another, “agreeing to differ” as the saying is. This would have been the plan, we may (I think) suppose, which would have seemed the best to that worldly wisdom, which is so often seen to be folly when long and broad views of history are taken. And we can imagine that not a few of the ecclesiastical leaders of recent centuries might have proposed it, if they had been there to do so. For never, perhaps, have there been more natural reasons for separation than might have been found in those national and racial differences, and in those incompatibilities due to previous training and associations between Christians of Jewish and Gentile origin.

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[More information](#)

V. H. STANTON

7

Yet it is assumed all through that they *must* combine. And St Paul is not only sure himself that to this end Jewish prejudices must be overcome, but he is able to persuade the elder Apostles of this, as also James who presided over the believers at Jerusalem, though they had been slower than he to perceive what vital principles were at stake. Believers of both classes must join in the Christian Agapæ, or love-feasts, and must partake of the same Eucharist, because the many are one loaf¹, one body. They must grasp, and give practical effect to, the principle that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus²."

For that society, or organism, into which Jewish and Gentile believers were alike brought, a name was found; it was that of *Ecclesia*, translated *Church*. It will be worth our while to spend a few moments on the use of this name and its significance. We find mention in the New Testament of "the Church" and of "Churches." What is the relation between the singular term and the plural historically, and what did the distinction import? The sublime passages concerning the Church as the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ occur in the Epp. to the Colossians and Ephesians³, which are not among the early Pauline Epistles. Nevertheless in comparatively early Epistles, the authorship of which by St Paul himself is rarely disputed, there are expressions which seem plainly to shew that he thought of the Church as a single body to which all who had been baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ belonged. In the Epp. to the Galatians and

¹ 1 Cor. x. 17, R.V. mg.² Gal. iii. 28.³ Col. i. 18, 24; Eph. i. 22, v. 23 ff.

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[More information](#)

8 UNITY BETWEEN CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

1 Corinthians¹ he refers to the fact that he persecuted the "Church of God," and his persecution was not confined to believers in Jerusalem or even in Judæa, but extended to adjacent regions. He might have spoken of "the Churches of Syria," as he does elsewhere (using the plural) of those of Judæa, Galatia, Asia, Macedonia². But he prefers to speak of the Church, and he describes it as "the Church of God." The impiety of his action thus appeared in its true light. He had not merely attacked certain local associations, but that sacred body—"the Church of God." Again, it is evident that he is thinking of a society embracing believers everywhere when he writes to the Corinthians concerning different forms of ministry, "God placed some in the Church, first Apostles, secondarily prophets" and so forth³. Again, when he bids the Corinthians, "Give no occasion of stumbling, either to Jews or to Greeks, or to the Church of God⁴," or asks them whether they "despise the Church of God⁵," although it was their conduct to brethren among whom they lived that was especially in question, it is evident that, as in the case of his own action as a persecutor, the gravity of the fault can in his view only be truly measured when it is realised that each individual Church is a representative of the Church Universal. This representative character of local Churches also appears in the expression common in his Epistles, the "Church in" such and such a place.

The usage of St Paul's Epistles does not, therefore, encourage the idea that the application of the term *ecclesia* to particular associations preceded its application

¹ Gal. i. 13; 1 Cor. xv. 9.

² 1 Cor. xvi. 1, 19; 2 Cor. viii. 1; Gal. i. 2, 22.

³ 1 Cor. xii. 28.

⁴ 1 Cor. x. 32.

⁵ 1 Cor. xi. 22.

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[More information](#)

V. H. STANTON

9

to the whole body, but the contrary, and plainly it expressed for him from the first a most sublime conception. I may add that there is no reason to suppose that the use of the term originated with him. We find it in the Gospel according to St Matthew, the Epistle of St James and the Apocalypse of St John, writings which shew no trace of his influence.

There is no passage of the New Testament from which it is possible to infer clearly the idea which underlay its application to believers in Jesus Christ. But when it is considered how full of the Old Testament the minds of the first generation of Christians were, it must appear to be in every way most probable that the word *ecclesia* suggested itself because it is the one most frequently employed in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) to render the Hebrew word *kāhāl*, the chief term used for the assembly of Israel in the presence of God, gathered together in such a manner and for such purposes as forced them to realise their distinctive existence as a people, and their peculiar relation to God. The believers in Jesus now formed the *ecclesia* of God, the true Israel, which in one sense was a continuation of the old and yet had taken its place. This was the view put forward by Dr Hort in his lectures on the Christian Ecclesia¹, and it is at the present time widely, I believe I may say generally, held. I may mention that the eminent German Church historians, A. Harnack² and Sohm³, give it without hesitation as the true one.

Among the Jews the thought of the people in its rela-

¹ *The Christian Ecclesia*, pp. 3 ff.

² *Die Mission u. Ausbreitung d. Christentums*, p. 292.

³ *Kirchenrecht*, I. pp. 16 ff.

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[More information](#)

10 UNITY BETWEEN CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

tion to God was associated with great assemblies in the courts and precincts of the temple at Jerusalem, which altogether overshadowed any expression of their covenant relation to God as a people which they could find in their synagogue-worship, however greatly they valued the bonds with one another which were strengthened, and the spiritual help which they obtained, through their synagogues. But Christians had no single, central meeting-place for their common worship at which their ideal unity was embodied. It was, therefore, all the more natural that the exalted name which described that unity should be transferred to the communities in different places which shared the life, the privileges, and the responsibilities of the whole, and in many ways stood to those who composed them severally for the whole. The divisions between these communities were local only. They arose from the limitations to intercourse and common action which distance imposed. Or, in cases where the Church in some Christian's house is referred to, they were due to the necessity, or the great convenience, of meeting in small numbers, owing to the want of buildings for Christian worship, or the hostility of the surrounding population. Moreover these local bodies were not suffered to forget the ties which bound them all together. Those in the Greek-speaking world were required to send alms to the Churches in Judæa. Again an individual Church was not free to disregard the judgment of the rest. After St Paul has reasoned with the Corinthians on the subject of a practice which he deemed inexpedient, he clinches the matter by declaring, "we have no such custom neither the Churches of God¹." Lastly, the Apostles, and

¹ 1 Cor. xi. 16.