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Christian Unity : The Church Visible and Invisible.

BY THE REV. W. J. SAWLE B.D.

THE aim of this essay is to examine the old distinction between the visible and invisible Church, and to relate it to the vexed question of Christian unity in the hope that some further light may be shed on this subject. Through the centuries, while other doctrinal matters have received a more or less official explanation, the nature of the Church, its authority, its organisation and the conditions of union within its borders, have incessantly cropped up, never to receive any official answer.

In the days of James I, Dr. Field, Dean of Gloucester, wrote " the consideration of the unhappy divisions of the Christian world, and the infinite distractions of men's minds, not knowing, in so great variety of opinions, what to think or to whom to join themselves (every faction boasting of the pure and sincere profession of heavenly truth, challenging to itself alone the name of the Church, and fastening upon all that dissent, or are otherwise minded, the hateful note of schism and heresy), hath made me ever think that there is no part of heavenly knowledge more necessary, than that which concerneth the Church. For, seeing the controversies of religion in our time are grown in number so many, and in nature so intricate, that few have time and leisure, fewer strength of understanding, to examine them ; what remaineth for men desirous of satisfaction in things of such consequence, but diligently to search out which, amongst all the societies of men in the world, is that blessed company of holy ones, that household of faith, that spouse of Christ, and Church of the living God, which is the pillar and ground of truth, that so they may embrace her communion, follow her directions, and rest in her judgment."¹ Richard Hooker, too, penned words which are ever relevant to our situation, " For lack of diligent observing the difference, first between the Church of God, mystical and visible, then between the visible, sound and corrupted, sometimes more, sometimes less, the oversights are neither few nor light that have been committed."²

One thing is both fundamental and clear, viz., that the assumption of unity is valid. If, of course, this be not the case, then all trouble and difficulty are spared, and the problem is very much one of our own making ; but the one thing which the Christian conscience resolutely refuses to admit is that Christ is divided, and Christian experience continually justifies this belief. There is between Christians of all denominations a sense of fellowship in the things of Christ, which only the wilfully hardened cannot appreciate.

And the New Testament gives point to all this. It is quite clear that our Lord founded a society, the purpose of which was not so much that of being called out of the world, but of being summoned as an assembly or congregation for the purposes of fellowship and worship.³

And those who are summoned together hear, in the first place, the call of God and, because of that call, are able to enjoy fellowship with other believers similarly called.

The Church of Christ is thus a holy society of which all the members are in immediate union with the Saviour through the Holy Spirit. Further point is given to this by the use of analogies such as a vine,⁴ a temple,⁵ and a living body,⁶ as well as the great picture of the Church as the spouse of Christ⁷—an analogy derived from the closest and most intimate union of human nature to express the intensity of the union between the Saviour and His Church. Noteworthy, too, is that in which the bond of unity is compared with the relations between the Persons of the Godhead.⁸ There is no doubt at all from the New Testament as to the existence of such a society, a company of believers united in one Body of which Christ is the Head, and of which the Holy Spirit is the Life.

Christian experience reminds us only too often that this sacred body is, in our present condition, not distinctly visible as a society. The true Church of Christ in the world at every moment, and at this moment, is not a definitely visible body, since its members are united to Christ by spiritual bonds not open to our observation, nor can it be discerned in its entirety within the limits of any organisation. And again,

“ Part of His host have crossed the flood,
And part are crossing now ”.

Hence the distinction, legitimately drawn, between the visible and invisible Church. To the latter alone does the designation of “ ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC ” properly belong. As Luther declared, “ Belief in ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, APOSTOLIC CHURCH is an article of faith and not of sight.”⁹

Practical problems of great importance arise with the attempt to assess the character and position of the visible communities within Christendom. Always in the New Testament the word “ church ” is applied to separate communities of Christians and, as Dean Henry Wace observed, “ In point of fact, as the history of the New Testament advances, we find the Christian community composed more and more of a number of distinct societies, each with its special characteristics, its individual life, its peculiar corruptions and heresies and dangers. In so far as they were uncorrupted they were animated by one truth, and they were united in one bond of charity, but they still appear in inspired language as distinct communities, and the “ Church ” as a single visible society on earth is not so addressed or spoken of by the Spirit of God.”¹⁰

Some have argued that this reformed distinction does not harmonise with the writings of the Fathers of the first four centuries, even though Origen refers to the “ Church properly so-called ” and Jerome and Augustine distinguish the real Body of Christ from His visible and nominal Body. This objection loses much of its force when we remember that in those early days it was in some sense possible to speak of one visible Church on earth. Not until the 16th century had the Christian situation so degenerated as to cause the reformed distinction to crystallise. Language which was admissible and practically true in

those days, is both inapplicable and irrelevant in an entirely different situation.

And the Reformation was surely such a different situation. "The Church" was a great name to conjure with, for around it had been gathered authority of almost every kind. The Roman Church had not only acquired vast temporal influence, but had so gathered around her the sacred associations of the true Church, that the vital question of the conditions of salvation were at stake when the Reformers made their protest. They had little difficulty in appealing to the true Church as distinct from the then visible Roman Church, and the New Testament was certainly behind Luther in his doctrine of justification by faith, by which was smashed for ever the Roman claim to spiritual authority. To quote Dean Wace in illustration of this point, "The primary work of the great Reformer was to establish Christian liberty on the basis of the assurance of salvation through direct union with Christ. He recalled the primitive truth that the Word on God's part, and the faith evoked by that Word on man's part, placed the soul in direct communion with the Saviour; and however important, and in ordinary circumstances necessary, other things might be, yet the Christian could, in the last resort, dispense with them all for the purpose of his salvation. Once regenerated by the Divine Word and united with Christ, no human or ecclesiastical power could separate him from his Saviour, and the Church might excommunicate or burn him without any risk to his ultimate salvation. The word of the Saviour, promising him forgiveness, justification, and salvation, had made him free; and though he was the more bound to use his freedom for the good of his fellow-Christians, and in communion with them, no act of theirs could separate him from the true Body of Christ, if his own faith remained true and firm." ¹¹

This emphasis is more than necessary to-day, for "the noble, and alas too fruitful error" — to use Archbishop Benson's words — "of arraying the visible Church in the attributes of the Church invisible" dies hard. Ideas of the Church as "the extension of the Incarnation" need to be qualified by this wholesome Reformed distinction; otherwise there occurs that mischievous error, of identifying Christ with the visible Church, into which much modern liturgical study appears to have fallen.

On the other hand it must also be strongly maintained that this distinction does not preclude recognition of visible societies as founded by Christ, and dependent for their organisation and their laws upon His will. The Church our Lord Himself founded was, in the nature of the case, visible. But this by no means necessitates the confession of visibility as an essential and permanent characteristic of that Church which is His Body. True believers in Christ, as long as they are in the flesh, are visible, and are required by Christ's ordinance to maintain the closest possible visible unity with each other. For this purpose the Lord has established the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, for we are so made that we need Christian fellowship. It is in this context that the words of Calvin concerning the visible Church, are to be understood, "there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and

government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels. For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for . . . and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal.”¹²

Is this doctrine of any value to-day, especially with so much talk of reunion? For evangelical Churchmen Article XIX provides a valuable starting point for discussion. “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same. As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred; so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith.” The visible Church is a community, having as its principle of unity, faith centred in Christ; its standard of teaching is the Word of God, devoid of all accretions and additions: and the Sacraments are duly¹³ ministered.

The history of evangelical Churchmen abounds in illustrations of the teaching of the Article. We have always found ourselves in sympathy with those Free Churchmen whose faith is based upon the pure Gospel of our Blessed Saviour. At times, indeed, our fellowship has expressed itself in a manner which has caused great consternation in some circles. Kikuyu, and the Scheme for Union in South India, are apt illustrations of this. Is it not because the question of reunion is, for us, lifted entirely into a moral and spiritual sphere, that matters of organisation and debatable technicalities are relegated to a secondary place? Finding our unity in Christ Jesus through a Christian experience which knows no denominational barriers, being derived from the Scriptures and confirmed by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we are able to make a lasting contribution to heal the wounds which have rent the visible Church of Christ and marred its witness to the world. Some words from a sermon preached by Bishop Joseph Hall from Canticles vi : 9 on the beauty and unity of the Church form a fitting conclusion.

“ My dove, my undefiled is one . . . What is it here below that makes the Church one? One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. ‘One Lord’; so it is one in the Head: ‘One Faith’; so it is one in the Heart: ‘One Baptism’; so it is one in the Face. Where these are truly professed to be, though there may be differences of administrations and ceremonies, though there may be differences in opinion, yet there is ‘one Dove’: all those are but diversely coloured feathers of the same Dove. What Church therefore hath ‘One Lord’, Jesus Christ the Righteous, one faith in that Lord, one baptism into that faith, it is the ‘One Dove of Christ.’ To speak more short; one faith abridges all. But what is that one faith? What but the main fundamental doctrine of religion necessary to be known, to be believed unto salvation. . . . But if from particular visible Churches . . . you shall turn your eyes to the true inward universal company of God’s elect and secret ones, there shall you more perfectly find . . . ‘One Dove’ . . . Oh! blessed unity of the saints of God which none of the make-bates of Hell can ever be able to dissolve.”

1. *Field of the Church*, Vol. i., p. xix.
2. Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity* (ed. Keble and Paget), Book iii, ci : 9.
3. So Hort in *The Christian Ecclesia*.
4. John xv.
5. Ephesians ii. 19f.
6. Ephesians iv. 16.
7. Ephesians v. 25.
8. John xvii. 20ff.
9. *The Church and Her Doctrine*, p. 246.
10. *ib.* p. 250.
11. *ib.* p. 260.
12. *The Institutes*, Book iv, ci. 4.
13. The word "duly" (*recte*) is concerned more with the moral and spiritual qualifications for the administration of the Sacraments, than with outward order (*rite*). *Principles of Theology*, p. 271.
14. *Works of Bishop Hall*, Vol. v. pp. 275-6.

Book Reviews.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PIETY.

By W. K. Lowther Clarke. S.P.C.K. 10/6 160pp. With illustrations.

As Editorial Secretary of the S.P.C.K., Dr. Lowther Clarke has had access to a large number of documents and records, which he has made the subject of diligent research. On resigning his office, he gives us some results of his studies. Its purpose, he tells us, is to contribute to the history of that Society, by summarising the books published by it in the eighteenth century and by telling the story of its Secretary for the greater part of the first half of that period, Henry Newman. The rest of the book consists of a number of separate studies of interesting personages and phases of Church life in and about the period : the author confesses that he sometimes goes outside the century of which his title speaks ; as, for example, in the chapter on "English Church Life in 1850."

The opening chapter represents the first part of his main purpose. Under the title "Pastoralia," with sub-headings such as "Churchmanship," "Church Services," "Home Life," etc., it places on record the titles and purposes of a great number of publications, and indicates the impressions gathered from the author's researches. The main result appears to be that, in his opinion, Church life, and individual spiritual life, were not altogether at so low a level at that time as some accounts have represented them to be. So far as the records of the S.P.C.K. show (which are all that he is immediately concerned with), "the one thing we shall not find," he says, "is any spirit of complacency." Manuals explaining the Church service imply "a very high level of devotion." Church-going on Sunday was represented primarily as a duty; "there was no thought of making services 'attractive'." Some quaint touches appear here and there. An Irish Archbishop attacked "that *subsaltory* way of delivery, that rises like a storm in one part of the period and presently sinks into a dead calm that will scarce reach the ear," and pleaded for a revival of "that almost antiquated exercise of expounding the Holy Scripture to your congregation." Such counsels are not out of date to-day !

At the same time, Bishop Gilbert Burnet deplores the bad state of the Church, and the ignorance of candidates for ordination, and the neglect of pastoral care ; and expresses the opinion that "one cause of the growing atheism and impiety here and in Europe" was "the low opinion of the clergy," owing to their worldly lives. And the author himself acknowledges that in the Prayer Book religion he has described "the emotions were, if not starved, at least not adequately fed."

An especially interesting point of detail, for Evangelicals, appears in the following sentence in the section on Holy Communion—"As regards doctrinal emphasis, I can find no sign of any belief in the Real Presence in the form often taught to-day ; the entire emphasis is on the reality of the Gift."