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THE AMERICAN CHURCH, AND THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH.

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THE two commonest conceptions of the church among American Christians may be characterized as the *Congregationalist* view, and the *Sectarian* view—both of them radically unscriptural and false.

1. The Congregationalist view holds that a church is a company of believers gathered out of the Christian community by voluntary association, and organized for worship and for other Christian duty. This view finds in every community of Christians as many churches as there are organized associations of this kind, and holds that every such congregation is an independent unit of sovereignty, owing duties of comity, courtesy, and fellowship to the rest, doubtless, but each in itself a complete church. Seeking its warrant in the Scriptures, it plants itself with immense strength on the undeniable, constant usage of the New Testament, which never speaks of "the church" of a province, no matter how small the province may be, but always of "the churches." Little Achaia had no institution called "the church of Achaia"; but it had churches; and so with Galatia. The little patch of Asia Minor, which is the New Testament Asia, had certainly more than seven churches, but no "church of Asia." Corinth had its own church; and the harbor town of Corinth, Cenchræ, nine miles distant, had its own church, too. The point seems inexpugnably taken against those who would hold that the church is a provincial organization stretching over a considerable region and embracing many towns.

But while holding this point so clearly, the adherents of this theory have resolutely blinked another point which is just as clear and constant, to wit: that the Scriptures, which never speak of *the church* of any province, equally refrain from speaking of *the churches* of a town. The Christians of a town multiply by thousands; they are disturbed by mutual alienations and serious variations in opinion, and strong personal attachments to different leaders; but they

are always *one church* in that town; and if a division seems to impend, the apostle deprecates it with horror, saying, "I beseech you by the mercies of God, don't divide." All which is very unlike Congregationalism.

2. But it is still more unlike the alternative theory of *Sectarianism*; which holds not only that the Christian population of any town may properly be split up into different parties without common organization, but also that each one of these parties, entering into confederation with a like party in other communities, becomes thus a constituent part of a church—not of the town church where it exists, but of a sect of Christians extended over a nation or a continent. For this national party of Christians it calls by the name *Church*; though it is as far removed from anything known by that name in the New Testament as can well be imagined. In the dialect of the New Testament there are names distinctly applied to the sort of organization which we commonly call by the name of church. It is spoken of there as a *σχίσμα* or a *αἵρεσις*. We shall inevitably go astray in all our reasonings on this subject unless we bear in mind that this prevalent American use of the word *church* is one unknown to the Scriptures.

And it is well to remark, in passing, that this misnomer is not in the least justified by the fact that some one or other of these schisms or heresies is disposed to insist with somewhat obtrusive emphasis on the undeniable fact that the others are not churches. Of course they are not churches—any of them. A party of Christians is not the church, any more than a party of citizens is the state—any more than the part of anything is the whole of it.

3. And let me, in one more word, note a caution against one other misconception of the church, which I suspect to be prevalent—that the church of Christ is *the sum* of existing so-called churches, schisms, or (according to a favorite American euphemism) "denominations." According to the New

Testament conception, the church is made up of the Christian people, not of Christian parties. It is "the communion of saints"—not a congregation of a selection of the saints. It is "the communion of saints," not the confederation of sects. The kingdom of Christ is the commonwealth of all humble and holy souls. His reign is within them.

Setting aside, thus, three untenable conceptions: (1) that a church is a club of Christians formed on some principle of selection out of a Christian community; (2) that a church is a sect of Christians constituted over a large region by the federation of such local clubs; (3) that the church is the totality of sects;—setting these aside, I propose this as the true conception, that the church of any place is the whole commonwealth of the Christian people of that place. There have been many "notes of the church" proposed by Christians of various parties,—form of government, pedigree of ordination, purity of doctrine, universality of extent,—always with a view to this: that the application of them shall prove each man's party to be the only church, and shall leave the other parties outside of it. But it is not difficult in reading the Acts and letters of the Apostles to recognize *this* as the one trait of the church as they understood it, that it was the fellowship of all the Christians.

Now while I acknowledge most painful defects in the organization of our modern, and especially our American Christianity, and while I look with earnest hope, not unmixed with anxiety, at the many movements toward a better state of things, I confess a lack of complete and unreserved sympathy with the lamentations that are often heard over the lost unity of the church, and with longings after a restoration of unity. For I cannot bring myself to account of the unity of Christ's church as of a thing that used to be, or a thing that ought to be attained in the future; but as a thing that *is*—*is now*, as it was in the beginning and ever shall be. The religious affections of my heart fail to lay hold with any satisfaction on some fragment of a church which used to be one, and hopes to be one again. But I recognize and love, through all the ages and in every land, One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, the fellowship of all saints.

And that which I acknowledge and love as I look abroad over the great scope of the world and of history. I do not fail to find when I look about me in whatever place I find my work appointed—the one church,

the commonwealth of believers. To the service of this, and not of any fraction of it, however pure in doctrine, however scriptural or historical in ritual, however correct in form of organization, however imposing by the magnificence of its extension—to the service of the whole fellowship of believers in the town in which I serve, I am devoted by the consecration that makes me the minister of Christ.

I am quite ready for that impatient interruption complaining that all this is quite out of time and place—that whatever may once have been true, and whatever may even now be true in some communities, in the American city of the nineteenth century the church is no longer one, but is divided. Divided? Yes, indeed. That which the Apostle Paul deprecated with earnest entreaty, adjuring the Christians of Corinth by the mercies of God that it should not be, has befallen us, that "there are divisions among us." Doubtless the Church of Christ in the American town is divided; but it is a divided unit—it is not many units. It is a divided church—it is not many churches, even though in our debased modern dialect we may combine to call it so. The one Church of Christ in the American town does not need to be created. It needs only to be *recognized*, and to be *manifested* to the world.

It needs to be *recognized* by its own members and ministers. It does not now offer itself to observation in any corporate form. It has no chief officer, the visible center of unity; no organized council or presbytery consulting for its united interest; no constitution or laws except the word of its Lord in the New Testament; but, men and brethren, you who believe in the Holy Ghost, do you doubt—can you doubt, so long as they who pass from death to life are known by this that they love the brethren,—that in your own city, where you live and labor, the Church of Christ, one and indivisible, is a most solid reality?—the Church, with its cementing power of mutual love, so sadly hindered by ignorances and misconceptions, and by the miserable divisive spirit of sectarian allegiance; with its common zeal for its one Lord now wretchedly squandered in wasteful competitions; with its craving needs and duties, so often forgotten by its ministers in their exorbitant sense of duty to a narrow parish or congregation? Must you needs *see* this one Church of Christ before you can believe? Have you no sense of paramount loyalty and duty to the whole body of Christ's disciples, but only a little gush of

sentiment, when you have given the devotion of your heart and the strength of your manhood to the supreme service of the party of Christians whose fortunes you are pushing with the spirit of a baseball game, as if the "emulations" which Paul condemns as works of the flesh were the very fruits of the Holy Spirit?

And just because I have small respect for that love for the one church which expends itself wholly in sentimental words, I bring the matter down to a most practical illustration :

From year to year, as the midsummer returns, is renewed the annual reproach of the American Church. In city after city, town after town, as the season of discomfort, danger, and sickness comes on, the Christian ministers, with the honorable exception of one great communion, and with certain individual exceptions beside, will, as a body, simultaneously forsake their charge, and leave the city deserted of its resident pastors. And each man speaking for himself will say, and say truly, that he leaves with the consent of his congregation, and that so far as his congregation is concerned this is the best time for him to take his needful rest. And no man will consider that each man is member of a college of clergy having charge of the common interests of the church of the whole town. If once the individual minister should learn to recognize in his own heart that the one church of the one Lord in his town was a most solemn reality, and that he was not merely the one pastor of his little fold of the flock, but also one of the company of the pastors of the whole flock, this annual scandal would at once begin to be abated.

This point simply by way of illustration of what might follow from the mere recognition in each man's heart and conscience of the doctrine of the Scriptures concerning the unity of believers, and the solid spiritual fact that they not only ought to be one, but are one.

And when I have said that the unity of the town church ought to be recognized by its ministers and members, I need hardly add that it ought to be *manifested* to the world. Being acknowledged in the individual mind and conscience, it certainly would be manifested, and that would be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord from heaven, that the believers should be one, that the world might know that the Father had sent the Son. Whether that would come to pass which certainly did come to pass early in the primeval history of the church, that the town church should be

represented by the town bishop at the head of the town clergy,—this might be—or might not be. But somehow or other the one church would find its voice, to which the world would love to listen.

Even now, he that hath ears to hear may hear what the Bride saith as well as what the Spirit saith. Every Christian town has its speaking monuments not only of the "competitive Christianity" which divides us, but of the common Christianity in which we unite. Every office of charity organization is a head-quarters of the one church ; and every individual charity from which is wholly eliminated the leaven of partizanship, so that, undertaken in the common love of Christ, and aiming at the common good of all for whom Christ died, it delights in putting glory on Christ himself and his whole church, is a work of the one church.

For the manifestation of the one church of their town, how good a work could be wrought by any two or three Christian men, who in a spirit wholly purified from partizanship should simply publish from year to year, with growing completeness, the Year-Book of the Church of Christ in that place, which should exhibit in love and holy pride and exultation the roster of its clergy and its meetings, and the works which each year are wrought there, through the divided congregations and the sharply competing sects, in the name of God's holy Child, Jesus ! Such a record, without one word of comment, would itself be a potent testimony to the general conscience, for Christ and His Church.

[FOR CHRISTIAN LITERATURE.]

LETTERS FROM JOHN HUS TO HIS CHURCH IN PRAGUE.

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PREFATORY REMARKS.

FROM November 5th, 1414, to April 22d, 1418, there was held in the city of Constance, in the Grandduchy of Baden, a famous Council, which ranks as one of the greatest of the Ecumenical Councils, but unhappily is best remembered in connection with the burning of John Hus on July 6th, 1415, and of Jerome, of Prague, on May 30th, 1416. Hus had come to the Council under a promise of safe-conduct and comfortable lodging and safe return to his church in Prague. But he had been summoned to defend himself against the charge of heresy, and upon the principle that no faith was to be kept with heretics, a principle which rules in some branches of the Christian