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OF THE

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OF THE

EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE,

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II.

CHRISTIAN UNION.

Saturday, October 4th, 1873.

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# THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH BASED ON PERSONAL UNION WITH CHRIST.

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THE Church of Christ is one. There is one fold and one Shepherd; one King and one kingdom; one Father and one family. In this sense the Church includes all the redeemed—those now in heaven, those now on earth, and those who are hereafter to be born.

Our present concern, however, is with the Church as it now exists in the world. The unity of the Church on earth may be viewed under three aspects: first, in reference to individual believers; secondly, in reference to local congregations or churches; and, thirdly, in reference to national and denominational churches. Under all these aspects the Church is one, and its unity in all its forms depends on union with Christ, its Head. As to these two points there is, and can be, no difference of opinion.

## I. *The Unity of Individual Believers.*

The question, What constitutes union with Christ? can not be categorically answered, because that union is manifold. In the first place, we were in him before the foundation of the world. As we were in Adam before we were born, so we were in Christ before we came into this world. This is a union in idea and in purpose which antedates all that is real or actual. Secondly, those thus in Christ come into the world, as the Church universal believes, in a state of sin and condemnation, and remain in that state until they are renewed by the Holy Ghost, and become the dwelling-place of the Spirit of God. God is everywhere, and everywhere equally present. He fills heaven and earth, but he is said to dwell wherever he permanently manifests his presence, as he does now in heaven, as he did of old in the Temple, and as he does in all ages and places in the hearts of his people. As God is immanent in the world, and is the source of all the manifestations of intelligence in the operations of nature, so he is immanent in the souls of the regenerated, and is the source of their spiritual life and of all its manifestations; and as the Spirit is given without measure to Christ, and is from him communicated to his people, it follows that he and they are one, and that they are all members one of another. The illustration which our Lord gives of the

nature of this union is drawn from the vine and its branches. As every fibre of the root, the stem, the branches, the foliage, and the fruit are one organic, living whole, so are Christ and his people. St. Paul says Christ is the head, we are his body. As the life of the head pervades the whole body in all its parts and makes them one, so the life of Christ pervades his people and makes them one. This is the mystical union. It is a vital, permanent, and everlasting bond of connection between Christ and his people, and of his people one with another. They are as truly one as the vine and its branches, and the head and members of the human body are one. There is no doctrine of the Bible more clearly, frequently, or variously taught than this.

This is a union which, so to speak, lies below our consciousness. An infant may be in Christ not only in the foreknowledge and purpose of God, but by the indwelling of the Spirit, and be no more aware of it than that he is a child of Adam. There is, therefore, a third bond of union between Christ and his people, and that is faith. As soon as a new-born soul opens its eyes, it sees the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He believes the record which God has given of his Son. He receives him as God manifest in the flesh, because he sees in him the glory of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. This is faith. Faith, therefore, is the willing, conscious bond of union between the soul and Christ. Hence it is said that Christ dwells in our heart by faith; and that it is not we that live, but Christ liveth in us, and that the life that we now live is by faith of the Son of God, who loveth us, and gave himself for us. Hence, also, all that is said of those who are in Christ is said of those who believe. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus; but he that believeth is not condemned. By faith we are the sons of God; but those who are in Christ are sons and heirs according to the promise. So far, therefore, as adults are concerned, believers, and believers only, are in Christ. But faith is a fruit of the Spirit, and an evidence of his indwelling in the heart; and therefore it is that indwelling of the Spirit which is the real and efficacious

bond of union between us and Christ. From this two things follow : First, that any man in whom the Spirit dwells is in Christ, and is a member of his mystical body, which is the Church ; and, second, that all the normal or legitimate manifestations of the unity of the Church are due to the indwelling of the Spirit ; in other words, nothing, whether inward or outward, is essential to the unity of the Church which is not a fruit of the Spirit. It is here as with the human frame ; nothing is essential to the unity of the body which is not due to the common life which pervades the whole.

The first manifestation of the unity of the Church, considered as consisting of scattered believers, is the unity of faith. The promise of Christ that he would send the Spirit to guide his people into the knowledge of the truth was not confined to the apostles or the officers of the Church. It was given to all believers ; for the Spirit dwells in all, and is in all the Spirit of truth. Hence our Lord says of his people, "They shall all be taught of God ;" and St. John tells believers, "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things..... The anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye have no need that any man teach you, but the same anointing teacheth you all things." St. Paul says, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, neither can he know them ..... but the spiritual man discerneth all things." The Spirit does not reveal new truths, but leads to the right apprehension and cordial belief, as the apostle expresses it, of "the things freely given us of God ;" *i. e.*, "of the things clearly revealed to us in his word." As this inward teaching of the Spirit is common to all believers, it must be the same in all. So far, therefore, as they are taught by the Spirit they must agree in doctrine. The apostle, therefore, says that as there is one body and one Spirit, so there is one faith, as well as one Lord and one baptism. What is thus taught in Scripture is found to be historically true. All Christians believe in the Apostles' Creed ; they all accept the doctrinal decisions of the first six Ecumenical Councils concerning the nature of God and the person of Christ. They, therefore, all believe in the doctrine of the Trinity and of the perfect Godhead and perfect humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. They adore him as God manifest in the flesh. They receive him as the only Saviour of men. They believe that he saves us by his blood, by bearing our sins in his own body on the tree. They believe that all power in heaven and earth is committed to his hands, and that to him every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. They all believe in the Holy Ghost, and the absolute necessity of regeneration and sanctification by the power of his grace. They believe in the Holy Cath-

olic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. This is the confession that has been made in all ages, in all languages, and in all places where Christians have existed.

As, however, the promise of God to sanctify his people is not a promise to render them perfectly holy in this life, and as his promise to bless them is not a promise to render them at once perfectly happy, so neither is the promise to lead them to the knowledge of the truth a promise that they shall be perfect in knowledge. Perfect knowledge, however, is the condition of perfect unity. So long as we know in part, we can only believe in part. Perfect unity is the goal toward which the Church tends. God has given the ministry until we all come to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Diversity of doctrine, therefore, among believers is unavoidable in our imperfect state. In despite, however, of this diversity, and of the denunciations and separations to which it gives rise, the true Church emerges from the dust and tumult of conflict as one body, having one Lord, and marshaled under one standard.

The second effect of the indwelling of the Spirit by which all believers are united is the sameness of their spiritual life, or religious experience. All are convinced of their guilt and of their need of expiation by the blood of Christ. All are convinced of their need of the renewing of the Holy Ghost. The Spirit convinces all of the sin of not believing in Christ. It convinces all of the righteousness of his claim to be the Son of God, and that he has wrought out an everlasting righteousness for us sinners. Christ, therefore, is to all the object of adoration, love, confidence, and devotion. Their religious life is consequently the same. As the physiology of the Caucasian is the physiology of the Mongolian and of the African, so does the Christian experience of one believer answer to that of all his fellow-believers. Hence the people of God of all ages and nations find in the sacred Scriptures the true expressions of their love, reverence, gratitude, of their penitence, faith, and joy. Hence also the prayers and hymns of one age answer for all other ages. We all sing the hymns of the Greek fathers, of the Latin saints, of Luther and Gerhard, of Watts, Toplady, and Wesley. The world over, therefore, the heart of one Christian beats in unison with that of every other Christian.

Thirdly, all believers are united by their mutual love, which the apostle calls the bond of perfectness. This love is the test of discipleship. "Hereby shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." "If a man love not his brother whom he hath seen, how can

he love God whom he hath not seen?" It is just as unnatural, and, according to the apostle, just as impossible, that one Christian should hate another, as that the hands should hate the feet, or the feet the hands.

This love is founded, first, on congeniality. All believers have the same views and feelings, the same objects of affection and pursuit. Secondly, it is founded on relationship. They belong to the same Master, who has bought them with his own precious blood; they are subjects of the same King, and children of the same Father; and, more intimately still, they are related as members of the same body, pervaded by the same life, so that, if one member suffer, all the members must suffer with it, and if one member rejoice, all the members must rejoice with it.

This brotherly love manifests itself, first, in mutual recognition. Christians know and acknowledge each other as brethren. One may be rich, the other poor; one may be bond, the other free; one a Greek, another a barbarian; one a Jew, another a Gentile. It makes no difference. They are all one in Christ Jesus. They instinctively love, honor, and confide in each other as children of a common father. They recognize the dignity and equality of being the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. They know that the time is at hand when each and all shall experience such an exaltation in knowledge, in power, in holiness and glory, that all earthly distinctions will be utterly obliterated. When one believer, therefore, meets another believer, it matters not of what rank or of what denomination, his heart goes out to him, and he can not help giving him the right hand of fellowship. He will pray with him, worship with him, and sit with him at the table of their common Lord.

Secondly, Christian love manifests itself in a disposition to bear each other's burdens and to supply each other's wants. The Christian does not regard his possessions as exclusively his own, but as a trust committed to him for the benefit of his fellow-believers. Christianity, however, is not agrarianism. It enjoins no community of goods. It teaches the two fundamental principles of social science: first, if a man will not work, neither shall he eat; and, secondly, those who can not work should be comfortably supported by those who can. Even in Christian families there is often a great disparity in the wealth and social position of its members. Nevertheless, they all regard and treat each other as brethren. Thus it should be, and thus it will be among Christians.

So much for the unity of believers considered as individuals scattered over the world. They are one body in Christ Jesus, in virtue of their union with him by the indwelling of his Spirit. This renders them

one in faith, one in their inward spiritual life, and one in love. They therefore recognize each other as brethren, and are ever ready to minister to each other's wants.

## II. *The Unity of Individual Churches or Congregations.*

The Spirit as he dwells in the hearts of believers is an organizing principle. As men in virtue of their social nature form themselves into societies, so believers in virtue of their new nature as Christians form themselves into local churches or congregations. Social organizations among men is necessary for the well-being of the individuals of which they are composed and of the society as a whole. A hermit is only half a man. Half his nature lies dormant. So an isolated Christian is only half a Christian. Believers have graces to exercise, exigencies to meet, and duties to meet which demand organic union with their fellow-believers. They have not only a mutual interest in each other's welfare, but a mutual responsibility for each other's conduct. They are jointly intrusted with their Master's honor, and therefore are bound to decide who are and who are not to be recognized as Christians. Being essentially a communion, they have a right to determine who are to be admitted to their fellowship. All this supposes external organization. In all ages, therefore, believers living in the same neighborhood have united in forming these local churches.

As believers in their individual capacity scattered over the world constitute the mystical body of Christ on earth, so these local churches constitute one body, which is the visible church in each successive age. These churches are one body, first, spiritually. They have one God and Saviour. They are united in one spiritual life. They have one faith and one baptism. They are all one family. As of old the patriarch, surrounded by his sons and their families, constituted one great household, so it is now with these local churches, they are all children of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom every family in heaven and earth is named.

They are one body also externally and visibly. First, because they recognize each other as churches. This involves the acknowledgment that each has all the prerogatives and privileges which by the law of Christ belong to such organizations: the right to conduct public worship, to preach the Gospel, to administer the sacrament, and to exercise discipline. Secondly, they are one body, because membership in one of these local churches involves the right to membership in every other such church. The terms of church membership are prescribed by Christ, and can not be altered. We are bound to receive those whom he receives. A Christian in one place is a Chris-

tian in all other places, and is entitled to be so regarded and treated. His prerogatives arise out of his character and his relation to Christ, and, therefore, go with him wherever he goes. Hence, in the beginning, a member of the Church of Jerusalem was of right a member of the Church of Antioch or of Corinth, if he removed to either of those places. Of course, if one church should violate the law of Christ in admitting members whom it ought not to admit, or in excluding those whom it ought not to exclude, other churches are not bound to imitate them in this act of disobedience. But we are now speaking of the principle, and not of its necessary limitations in practice owing to our manifold infirmities. The fact remains that the member of one local Christian church is normally and of right a member of every other such church, makes them all one great communion, one visible body here on earth.

Thirdly, these separate congregations are one church because they are subject to one tribunal. The various tribes and races constituting the Russian empire are one body because they are all subject to the same emperor. In like manner, all the scattered individual local churches or congregations on earth are one, not only spiritually because they are all subject to Christ, their invisible head in heaven, but they are externally one because they are subject to the same visible authority on earth. During the apostolic age that authority was the apostles. Their jurisdiction was not diocesan, but universal, because it arose out of their personal gifts of plenary knowledge and infallibility in teaching. All believers and all local churches were bound to submit to those whose infallibility was authenticated by Christ himself, by signs and wonders, and miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost. We therefore find Paul writing with full apostolical authority to the Church in Rome before he had ever visited that city; and Peter addressed his epistles to believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, the very centre of Paul's sphere of labor. All the churches of that age and of every age bowed to the decisions of the council of Jerusalem.

Since the age of the apostles the common tribunal to which all local churches are subject is the Word of God. They all acknowledge the Scriptures to be the infallible rule of faith and practice. To this they all profess to bow. The ultimate appeal of each and all is the written Word. And, secondly, each local church is subject to other churches to which it has access. As no individual believer is isolated and independent of all other believers, so no individual church is isolated and independent of all other churches. The law of Christ is that of mutual subjection. The ground of that subjection is not any social compact, so that the obligation to obedience is limited to those who are parties

of such compact. The command is that we should be subject to our brethren in the Lord, because they are our brethren and the temples and organs of the Holy Ghost. It, therefore, refers to all our brethren. All history proves that this is the law of the Spirit. Every plant and animal has its *nissus formativus*, an inward law, in virtue of which it strives to attain its normal condition. Adverse circumstances may prevent that form being fully assumed. Nevertheless, the effort always reveals itself. So it is with the Church. It has always striven after external unity. This gave rise to the ideas of heresy and schism. It was this effort which led to the convocation of provincial and ecumenical councils, to whose decisions all individual churches were expected to bow. At the time of the Reformation the same impulse revealed itself. The churches then formed ran together as naturally as drops of quicksilver. When this union was prevented, it was by unavoidable hinderances which counteracted an obvious and admitted tendency. It can, therefore, scarcely be doubted that in the normal state of the Church a smaller part is subject to a larger, and every part to the whole. The fact that the visible Church has never fully reached its ideal form is no proof either that the ideal is false or that the actual is not bound to strive to be conformed to the ideal.

It need hardly be said that the Bible teaches no such doctrine as passive obedience either to the Church or the State. The Magna Charta of civil and religious liberty given us from heaven is, that it is right to obey God rather than men. Even the command to children to obey their parents in all things is of necessity limited by their allegiance to God. The obligation of Christians to obey each other is subject to the same limitation. Nevertheless, one church is bound to be subject to other churches for the same reason and in the same measure that a believer is bound to be subject to his brethren.

The idea of the Church, therefore, as presented in the Bible, is that believers scattered over the world are a band of brethren, children of the same Father, subjects of the same Lord, forming one body by the indwelling of the Holy Ghost, uniting all to Christ as their living head. This indwelling of the Spirit makes all believers one in faith, one in their religious life, one in love. Hence they acknowledge each other as brethren, and are ready to bear each other's burden. This is the communion of saints. The Church, in this view, is the mystical body of Christ.

But, by a law of the Spirit, believers living in the same neighborhood unite as churches for public worship and for mutual watch and care. These local churches constitute one body, first, spiritually, because they are

all subject to the same Lord, are animated by the same Holy Spirit, profess the same faith, and are bound together by the bond of Christian love. Secondly, they are externally one body, because they acknowledge each other as churches of Christ, and recognize each other's members, ordinances, ministers, and acts of discipline; and also because they are all subject to the same tribunal. That tribunal, in the beginning, was the apostles; now it is the Bible and the mind of the Church, expressed sometimes in one way and sometimes in another.

That this normal state of the Church has never been fully realized is to be referred partly to unavoidable circumstances, and partly to the imperfections of believers. It is natural that Christians speaking the same language, and constituting one nationality, should be more intimately united than those geographically separated. It is no violation of the unity of the Church that there should be an Episcopal Church in England and another in America, partially independent of each other. But apart from such considerations, true Christians often conscientiously differ so much in matters of doctrine and order as to render their harmonious action in the same ecclesiastical organization impossible. Under such circumstances it is better that they should separate. Two can not walk together unless they be agreed. External union is the product and expression of internal unity. The former should not be pressed beyond the latter. One of the greatest evils in the history of the Church has been the constantly recurring effort to keep men united externally who were inwardly at variance. All forced unions are to be deprecated. They lead on the one hand to hypocrisy, and on the other to persecution. We may lament over such differences and endeavor to remove them, but as long as they exist they can not be wisely ignored. In the present state of the world denominational churches are therefore relatively a good. The practical question is, What is their relation to each other? What are their relative duties? How may their real unity be manifested in the midst of these diversities?

### III. *Denominational Churches.*

1. The first duty of denominational churches to each other is mutual recognition. As we are bound to recognize every Christian as a Christian, and to treat him accordingly; so we are bound to recognize every church as a church, and to treat it accordingly. And as we are not at liberty to give any definition of a Christian which shall exclude any of the true followers of Christ; so we are not at liberty to give any definition of a church which shall exclude any body which Christ recognizes as a church by his presence. A Christian is a man united to Christ by the in-

dwelling of the Holy Spirit; and a church is a body of men, really or by a credible profession, thus united to Christ, organized for the purposes of Christian worship, the proclamation of the Gospel, and for mutual watch and care. If this be the Scriptural definition of a church, we are not at liberty to alter it. The Church consists of the called, and every body of the called organized for church purposes is a church, whether local or denominational. Everywhere in the New Testament the word *ἐκκλησία* is used as a collective term for the *ἐληθοί*. As a man's being a Christian does not depend upon any thing external; upon circumcision or uncircumcision, upon stature, color, or nationality; so whether a body of Christians be a church can not depend upon any thing external. A nation is a nation, whether its government be monarchical, aristocratic, or republican. So a church is a church, whatever be the form of its external organization. Nothing can be essential to the being of a church that is not essential to the Christianity of its members. "Ubi Spiritus Dei, ibi Ecclesia," has in all ages been a motto and an axiom.

There is, indeed, a theory of the Church which makes the form every thing. Romanists hold that Christ gave the apostles power to communicate the Holy Spirit by the imposition of hands. This power the apostles transmitted to their official successors, and they again to theirs, in unbroken succession to the present day. It is in the line of this succession that the Spirit operates. His saving influences are imparted to those only who receive the sacraments from men having the supernatural power to render them efficacious. As, therefore, no man can be a Christian who is not subject to those thus empowered to communicate the Holy Spirit, of course no body of men can be a church unless subject to these exclusive dispensers of salvation. With this theory we have at present nothing to do. A man who confines Christianity to any one external organization must shut his eyes to the plainest facts of history and of daily observation. Apart, therefore, from this Romish theory, it is hard to see how, on Scriptural principles, we can deny a body of believers, in their collective capacity, to be a church, whose members as individuals we are forced to regard as true Christians.

2. A second duty which denominational churches owe each other is that of intercommunion. The terms of Christian fellowship, as before stated, are prescribed by Christ, and are the same for all churches. No particular church has the right to require any thing as a term of communion which Christ has not made a condition of salvation. How can we refuse to receive those whom Christ has received? If men can not alter the conditions of salvation,



they can not alter the terms of Christian communion.

3. A third duty of denominational churches is the recognition of each other's sacraments and orders. If the validity of the sacraments depends on some virtue in him who administers them, then those only are valid which are administered by those having that virtue. But if their validity depends, first, on that being done which Christ has enjoined; second, on its being done by a church or by its authority; third, on its being done with the serious intention of obeying the command of Christ, then the sacraments of one church are just as valid as those of another. And by their validity is meant that they accomplish the ends for which they were appointed.

So also of orders. If ordination be the communication of supernatural power, called the grace of orders, by those to whom the ability to confer that grace exclusively belongs, then those only are true ministers who have been ordained by that specially gifted class of men. Or, if ordination be the act of conferring authority, as when the executive of a nation grants a commission in the navy or army, then no man is a minister who has not been commissioned by the competent authority. But if, as all Protestants believe, the call to the ministry is by the Holy Ghost, then the office of the Church in the matter is simply to authenticate that call, and testify it to the churches. As it is the office of the Church to judge whether a man has the scriptural qualifications for admission to sealing ordinances, so it is its office to decide whether he has the qualifications for the ministry and is called of God to preach the Gospel. In neither case does the Church confer any thing. It can no more make a man a minister than it can make him a Christian. If, then, we recognize a body of men as Christians, we must recognize them in their organized capacity as a church; and if we recognize them as a church, we must recognize their ministers. It does not follow from this, however, that we are bound to receive them into our pulpits. We may recognize a man as a professor of mathematics or of music, and yet not see fit to set him to teach our children.

4. A fourth duty of such churches is that of non-interference. The field is the world; and it is wide enough for all. It is a breach

of courtesy and of the principles of church unity for one church to intrude into the appropriated field of another church, and to spend its strength in endeavoring to proselyte men from one denomination of Christians to another, instead of laboring to convert souls to Christ.

5. Finally, there is the duty of co-operation. In union is strength. All Christians and all churches are engaged in the same work. They are servants of the same Master, soldiers of the same Great Captain of their salvation. If the several corps of an army should refuse to co-operate against the common foe, defeat would be the inevitable result. What, then, is to be expected if the different denominations into which Christians are divided keep contending with each other instead of combining their efforts for the overthrow of the kingdom of darkness?

If the principles above stated be correct, it is of the last importance that they should be practically recognized. If all Christians really believe that they constitute the mystical body of Christ on earth, they would sympathize with each other as readily as the hands sympathize with the feet or the feet with the hands. If all churches, whether local or denominational, believed that they too are one body in Christ Jesus, then instead of conflict we should have concord; instead of mutual criminations we should have mutual respect and confidence; instead of rivalry and opposition we should have cordial co-operation. The whole visible Church would then present an undivided front against infidelity and every form of Antichristian error, and the sacramental host of God, though divided into different corps, would constitute one army glorious and invincible.\*

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\* No speaker on the floor of the Alliance was understood to speak for any one but himself. The Alliance was in no wise committed by any thing he said. Dr. Hodge was called upon to express his views on the Unity of the Church. This he did freely, although fully aware that many Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists dissented more or less from some of the principles which he advanced. In thus acting, he did what was done by every other speaker, from the beginning to the end of the meetings of the Alliance. It is with surprise, therefore, as well as with regret, that he learns that some of his brethren were grieved by what he said, especially on the subject of Christian communion.