

# THE PRESBYTERIAN QUARTERLY.

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## I. PHILIP MELANCHTHON, SCHOLAR AND REFORMER.<sup>1</sup>

OF the many brief descriptions of the Reformation, none is more striking than that which represents it as the return of Christendom to a book. Of course, so continental, profound and complex a movement cannot be described in a single sentence. But with a rough kind of truth it may be said, that when the hour of the great religious revolution struck, the various lines on which its historical causes had for centuries been moving converged and terminated in the Holy Bible. If we were limited to a single statement as to what the Reformation, in its inmost essence, was, and what, as it perpetuates itself in the Protestant churches, it still is; after all our study of the historical events which preceded it as coöperating agents—the papal schism, the reforming councils, the struggles between Gallicanism and Ultramontanism, the classical revival, the destructive and constructive forces which tore down the mediæval and built up the modern society, as the inventions of printing, of gunpowder and of the mariner's compass and the great voyages of discovery, the religious labors of local and national reformers like Wicliff and Huss and Savonarola—if, I say, after all this study, we were called to select a single sentence in which to embody the idea of the Reformation, we could find no better sentence for the purpose than that of Wil-

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<sup>1</sup>An address delivered in the chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary on the occasion of the celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Philip Melanchthon. The Rev. Dr. Green, Chairman of the Faculty, presided; and the Rev. Dr. Jacobs, Dean of the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, took part in the services. The hymns sung were written by Melanchthon and Luther.

## VII. A PLEA FOR UNITY.

A SECT is a body of persons distinguished, by certain peculiarities of belief or practice, from other bodies adhering to the same general system; and sectarianism is an excessive zeal for a particular sect zeal overshadows the devotion due to the interests of the whole body of which the sect is a part.

Denominationalism may be perfectly justifiable, and often is, when the members of a denomination acknowledge that their denomination is but a part of the greater whole, and not the whole itself, and when it places the interests of the church catholic above those of any part, making its own life and work a means for the advancement of the great body of which Christ is the head. This kind of denominationalism can be justified before God, in most cases, but sectarianism never. Sectarianism is one of the greatest disappointments of Christian history, and is productive of very great injury to the progress and spiritual power as well as influence of the church of God.

The spectacle afforded by the sectarianism of Christians is one which must gratify the church's enemies, and be most humiliating to the church itself. We see sects claiming to be the whole church of Christ, unchurching all other sects, denying communion to their members, and refusing to acknowledge the validity of their sacraments and ordination.

The cause of this is the elevation of non-essentials to the high position of essentials in belief or practice, and making non-essentials tests of churchship. Many non-essentials are important to the most symmetrical development of the church and of individual character, but they are not necessary to the existence of the church, or any part of it. For example, some sects believe in divine predestination, and some deny it; but both classes are parts of the church of God, owned and blessed with the presence and power of his Spirit by the great Head of the church. Others differ as to the nature of the Lord's supper, a part holding that in the elements we have but symbols of the body and blood of

Christ; another part, that they are this, and also seals of divine grace; another, that with the bread and wine is actually present the body of Christ. Some claim that water baptism can be only performed by immersion of the whole body in water, and others, that it is rightly done by affusion or sprinkling. A few hold that the praise of God may be sung only in the use of certain translations or paraphrases of the inspired psalms. There is a great denomination of Christians who stand for apostolical succession, teaching that a body can be a church only by actual succession of bishops running from apostolic hands, in unbroken line, to the present time.

These dogmas belong to the class of beliefs and practices called "non-essentials," and the acceptance of them is not claimed to be essential to the salvation of the soul. Now, if they be not necessary for admittance into the favor of God, and to heaven, why should they be made essential to membership or communion in the church of God on earth? Shall the visible church, imperfect by its own admission, set up a higher standard of membership than Christ has established for membership in the invisible church? Is it reasonable? Is it scriptural?

It is not reasonable, because it is manifestly impossible, with the diversities of human disposition and environment, to have absolute uniformity of belief or practice, in all particulars, in any organization of human beings. There are no two persons in the same sect who agree on everything. Men's minds are constituted differently, as are the trees of the wood, the flowers of the field, and the birds of the air. They must differ, because they are different. The attempt to establish uniformity in social customs, in business methods, in civic matters, in literature or art, has always failed; and now, after two thousands of years, Christianity has also failed to secure uniformity. It is impossible; it is undesirable. God did not make the world that way, and we cannot make it over again.

Nor is uniformity scriptural. The apostles differed about many things, as we know by the inspired record of their lives, and yet they acknowledged one another's apostleship. The teachings of the inspired record show most plainly that non-essentials cannot

properly be made tests of membership in the church. Christ said, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; he that believeth not the Son of God cannot see life"; and on the cross he acknowledged as saved a poor malefactor, who had not been baptized, could not be, had not even seen the sacrament of the Lord's supper, and who was doubtless absolutely ignorant of all forms of Christian church worship or government. The Lord set up faith in himself as the one test of salvation, and, by inference, of membership in the church. So the Apostle Paul, when asked, "What must I do to be saved?" replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." The same hour of the night, the inquirer and his household were baptized. It is incredible that, if there had been anything besides faith in Christ necessary to salvation, Paul could have omitted it, or that it should not have been put down in the inspired history, which was intended to be an infallible guide for the church of subsequent ages; and the argument is, that what was sufficient for the salvation of the soul is sufficient qualification for churchship in the visible church.

The elevation of non-essentials into the place of essentials has the effect of obscuring the one great truth, that the soul is saved by faith in Christ alone, and it places stumbling-blocks in the way of sinners trying to find their way to God. It is also the cause of all sectarianism. Let us see what would be the effect of acting on the principle that faith in Christ is the only reasonable and scriptural test of churchship.

It would make evident what is true, that the real bond of unity among Christians is their common union with Christ. We are one, in any real and effective unity, only because we are united to him by a common faith. It is not an artificial unity, made by man, or the effect of certain rules of government, worship, or belief, external bonds, but a spiritual tie which connects each soul with its Saviour. It is the same difference which obtains between an ordinary organization among men, like a society, an association, or a corporation, and the family tie. The family is God's symbol of the church, and we read of "the whole family in heaven and earth." One is a member of a family, not by any agreement,

compact, or set of rules, but by a common relation to one father. So we are one in Christ for the single reason that we are his children. This makes all Christians brothers, and this brotherhood cannot be destroyed. Its gracious consequences and privileges may be marred or obscured; brothers may refuse to acknowledge one another; but the fact of brotherhood remains.

Now, it may be objected that this is true of the invisible church, the body of those who are regenerated by the Holy Ghost, and that it cannot be made to apply to membership in the visible church. To this the reply is, that there is no hint in the Scriptures of such a difference between the principles of the invisible and the visible church, but the whole meaning of Scripture is the other way. The invisible church is invisible; we have no judgment to pronounce upon its membership. It is known only to God. The Bible is the constitution of the visible church, and its rules and examples are for the church which we see. If faith in Christ makes a man a member of the invisible church, a credible profession of such faith ought to entitle him to membership in the visible church. All Scripture example agrees with this. When Philip said to the Ethiopian treasurer who applied for membership by baptism, "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest," the applicant replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God," and Philip admitted him at once by baptism. It cannot be justly objected that Philip and other early preachers were inspired, could read human hearts, and, therefore, knew that applicants did truly believe, and were really members of the invisible church; for men were found, regularly admitted by the apostles, who were impenitent and unregenerate. The test of church membership was a profession of faith in Christ.

To accept this as the one test of churchship would have the effect of eliminating much of denominational rivalry and consequent scandal to Christianity. It would result in an enormous increase of spiritual power in the whole church, would bring about a condition infinitely more favorable to the work of the Holy Ghost, and it would be a means of saving a prodigious amount of money and labor which is largely wasted in keeping up more organizations than are needed in tens of thousands of communities.

Another result would probably be the reduction in number of the sects of Christendom. It would certainly not lead to the consolidation of all denominations, at least in the near future, if ever; but it would make the church of God one in feeling, and one in its standing before the world. Sectarianism is one of the greatest obstacles to the conversion of mankind to Christ, and the general acknowledgment, by all, of the churchship of all would silence the most effective cavils, as well as commend the church to the favor of God.

It is a mistake to seek consolidation of all organizations, and absolute uniformity of forms of creed, sacrament, worship, and government. It is based upon a misunderstanding of what Christian unity is. It is not the acceptance of a form; it is a common union with Christ. If this be true, we have already the thing we seek. We are one. What, then, is needed? The manifestation and practice of unity. We are simply to strive to live up to the fact. Just as with any other spiritual fact in the case of an individual or a collection of individuals, we are to live up to it.

I appeal to psalm-singing Presbyterian close-communicants: Have you a right to refuse church fellowship to those who sing uninspired hymns? And to the Baptists: Have you a right to deny communion to non-immersionists, and to rebaptize members of other denominations when they come to you, and to rebaptize and reordain their ministers when they ask orders in your denomination, when you acknowledge that they are Christians? I appeal to the Episcopalians: Though you accept the baptism of other denominations, have you a right to treat those going from us to you as if they had never been church members, and to refuse the admittance of ministers of other sects into your pulpits? Do you not cordially concede that we are Christians; and do you not declare that when we die we go to heaven? How, then, can you say that we are not a church, and that our ministers are not ministers at all? Can this be justified before Christ? or would the great apostle to the Gentiles approve it?

We are one family; let us acknowledge it; so far from being ashamed, let us all glory in it. Any denomination may declare that it is the nearest to the Scripture model, and lovingly endeavor

to persuade all others to believe all which itself believes, and yet cordially acknowledge that we are all one family in Christ, and members one of another.

We are named for Christ. He is declared to be the one "of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." We are named "Christians." Let us not say, "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas." Paul was not crucified for you. *Christian* is a nobler name than that of any denomination. The proudest title which any man on earth or any saint in heaven can wear is that derived from the name of his Saviour and King; and the grandest of all confessions is, "I believe in Christ; I am a Christian." Let us look more upon the things which we all hold in common. We have one God the Father, one Holy Spirit the Sanctifier, one Christ the Saviour, one Bible, one gospel, and one everlasting home; a house of many mansions, but one house, one building of God, eternal in the heavens.

In view of these great things which we hold in common, let us love and acknowledge one another. Let us preach the gospel in each other's pulpits, join in a common communion at our several tables of the Lord. Let us assemble around one common mercy-seat in prayer. Let us coöperate in all evangelical missions, and let us thus show to the world, to each other, and to Christ, in every way, that his prayer is being answered, in which he asked for his people that they might be one.

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