

Considerations on the Nature & Unity of the Church of Christ

by John Nelson Darby

The unity of the church can only be achieved through the unity of the Spirit, which is perfected in spiritual persons.

Scripture: Isaiah 43:10, Malachi 3:16, Luke 12:36, John 11:52, John 17:21, Romans 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 11:26, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 4:3, Philippians 2:2

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Spiritual Communion"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the importance of the unity of the Church of Christ, arguing that true communion among believers transcends denominational differences and is rooted in the Spirit of God. He points out that the current state of division among professing Christians hinders the manifestation of the Church's true nature and purpose, which is to reflect the glory of Christ. Darby calls for believers to focus on their common identity in Christ and to remove barriers that prevent unity, urging them to witness to the world through their love and shared faith. He stresses that the unity of the Church is not about formal affiliations but about spiritual oneness in Christ, which is essential for the Church to fulfill its mission. Ultimately, he challenges believers to seek the glory of the Lord and to act in accordance with His will to achieve true unity.

Transcript

John 17:21; Luke 12:36.

Individuals of the children of God are to be found in all the different denominations, who profess the same pure faith; but where is their bond of union? The point is not that unbelieving professors are mixed with the people of God in their communion, but that the bond of communion is not the unity of the people of God, but really (in fact) their differences.

The bonds of nominal union are such as separate the children of God from each other; so that, instead of (itself an imperfect state) unbelievers being found mixed up with them, the people of God are found as individuals, among bodies of professing Christians, joined in communion upon other and different grounds; not in fact as the people of God at all. The truth of this cannot be denied, and surely it is a very extraordinary state for the Church to be in. I think the study of the history of the Church (bearing in mind what the true Church of God is) will enable us to account for it. Such is not my present purpose, as writing

merely on the principle of that inquiring, strengthening character, in which "they that feared the Lord spoke often one to another" (Malachi 3:16). ...

It was the purpose of God in Christ to gather in one all things in heaven and on earth, reconciled to Himself in Him; and that the church should be, though necessarily imperfect in His absence, yet by the energy of the Spirit, the witness of this on earth, by gathering the children of God which were scattered abroad. Believers know that all who are born of the Spirit have substantial unity of mind, so as to know each other, and love each other, as brethren. But this is not all, even if it were fulfilled in practice, which it is not; for they were so to be all one, that the world might know that Jesus was sent of God: in this we must all confess our sad failure.

I shall not attempt so much to propose measures here for the children of God, as to establish healthful principles: for it is manifest to me that it must flow from the growing influence of the Spirit of God and His unseen teaching; but we may observe what are positive hindrances, and in what that union consisted. In the first place, it is not a formal union of the outward professing bodies that is desirable; indeed it is surprising that reflecting Protestants should desire it: far from doing good, I conceive it would be impossible that such a body could be at all recognized as the church of God.

It would be a counterpart to Romish unity; we should have the life of the church and the power of the Word lost, and the unity of spiritual life utterly excluded. Whatever plans may be in the order of Providence, we can only act upon the principles of grace; and true unity is the unity of the Spirit, and it must be wrought by the operation of the Spirit. In the great darkness of the Church hitherto, outward division has been a main support, not only of zeal, but also of the authority of the Word, which is instrumentally the life of the church; and the Reformation consisted not in the institution of a pure form of church, but in setting up the Word, and the great Christian foundation and corner stone of "justification by faith", in which believers might find life.

But further, if the view that has been taken of the state of the church be correct, we may adjudge that he is an enemy to the work of the Spirit of God who seeks the interests of any particular denomination; and that those who believe in "the power and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ" ought carefully to keep from such a spirit; for it is drawing back the church to a state occasioned by ignorance and non-subjection to the Word, and making a duty of its worst and antichristian results.

This is a most subtle and prevailing mental disease, "he follows not us", even when men are really Christians. Let the people of God see if they be not hindering the manifestation of the church by this spirit. I believe there is scarcely a public act of Christian men (at any rate of the higher orders), which is not infected with this; but its tendency is manifestly hostile to the spiritual interests of God's people, and the manifestation of the glory of Christ. Christians are little aware how this prevails in their minds; how they seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ; and how it dries up the springs of grace and spiritual communion; how it precludes that order to which blessing is attached - the gathering together in the Lord's name.

No meeting, which is not framed to embrace all the children of God in the full basis of the kingdom of the Son, can find the fulness of blessing, because it does not contemplate it - because its faith does not embrace it. ...

Let us then pass, brethren beloved of the Lord - ye who love Him in sincerity, and would rejoice in His voice - to the practical exigency of our present situation. Let us weigh His mind concerning us. God has

made known His purposes in Him, and how those purposes are effected. He has "made known to us the mystery of his will, according to His good pleasure which He has purposed in himself, that in the dispensation of the fulness of times, He might gather in one all things in Christ, whether they be things in heaven or things on earth, even in Him, in whom also we have received an inheritance" - in one and in Christ. In Him alone therefore can we find this unity; but the blessed Word (who can be thankful enough for it?) will inform us further. It is as to its earthly members "gathering in one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:52). And how is this? "That one man should die for them". As our Lord in the vision of the fruit of the travail of His soul declares, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me: this he said signifying what death he should die". It is then Christ who will draw - to Himself (nothing short of or less than this can produce unity, "He that gathers not with him, scatters"); and draw to Himself by being lifted up from the earth. In a word, we find His death is the center of communion till His coming again, and in this rests the whole power of truth. Accordingly, the outward symbol and instrument of unity is the partaking of the Lord's supper - "we, being many, are one loaf, one body, for we all partake of that one loaf". And what does Paul declare to be the true intent and testimony of that rite? That whenever "ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye announce the Lord's death until he come" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Here then are found the character and life of the church, that into which it is called, that in which the truth of its existence subsists, and in which alone is true unity. ...

Our duty as believers is to be witnesses of what we believe. "Ye", says the God of the Jews by the prophet Isaiah, "are my witnesses", in His challenge to the false gods; and as Christ is the faithful and true Witness, such ought the church to be. "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye may show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light". Of what then is the church to be a witness - against the idolatrous glory of the world? Even of that glory into which Christ has risen, by their practical conformity to His death; of their true belief in the cross, by their being crucified to the world, and the world to them.

The unity of the church, to which "the Lord added daily such as should be saved", was when none said anything was his own, and "their conversation was in heaven"; for they could not be divided in the common hope of that. It knit men's hearts together by necessity. The Spirit of God has left it on record, that division began about the goods of the church, even in their best use, on the part of those interested in them. ...

Let the almighty doctrine of the cross be testified to all men, and let the eye of the believer be directed to the coming of the Lord. But let us not defraud our souls of all the glory which accompanies that hope, by setting our affections on things which will be proved to have had their origin in this world, and to end in it. Will they abide His coming?

Further, unity is the glory of the church; but unity to secure and promote our own interests is not the unity of the church, but confederacy and denial of the nature and hope of the church. Unity of the church is the unity of the Spirit, can only be in the things of the Spirit, and thus can only be perfected in spiritual persons. It is indeed the essential character of the church, and this strongly testifies to the believer its present state. ...

There are two things which we must consider. First, Are our objects in our work exclusively the Lord's objects, and no other? If they have not been such in bodies separate from each other, they will not be in any union of them together. Let the Lord's people weigh this. Second, let our conduct be the witness of our objects. If we are not living in the power of the Lord's kingdom, we certainly shall not be consistent in

seeking its ends. Let it enter our minds, while we are all thinking what good thing we may do to inherit eternal life, to sell all that we have, take up our cross, and follow Christ. Does not this go very close to the hearts of many?

Let us bear in mind, then, that what are called communions are (as to the mind of the Lord about His church) disunion; and, in fact, a disavowal of Christ and the Word. ... "Is Christ divided?" Is He not, as far as our disobedient hearts are concerned? I ask believers, "whereas there is among you envying and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" ...

Let the strong bear the infirmity of the weak, and not please themselves. Professed churches (especially those established) have sinned greatly in insisting on things indifferent and hindering the union of believers, and this charge rests heavily on the hierarchies of the several churches. Certainly order is necessary; but where they said, 'the things are indifferent and nothing in themselves: therefore you must use them for our pleasure's sake', the word of the Spirit of Christ says, 'they are indifferent: therefore we will yield to your weakness, and not offend a brother for whom Christ died'. Paul would have eaten no meat while the world endured, if it had hurt the conscience of a weak brother, though the weak brother was in the wrong. ...

Let believers remove the hindrances to the Lord's glory, which their own inconsistencies present, and by which they are joined to the world, and their judgments perverted. Let them commune one with another, seeking His will from the Word, and see if a blessing do not attend it; at any rate it will attend themselves; they will meet the Lord as those that have waited for Him, and can rejoice unfeignedly in His salvation. Let them begin by studying Romans chapter 12, if they think they are partakers of the unspeakable redemption wrought by the cross. ...

Let them wait upon the Lord, and wait according to the teaching of His Spirit, and in conformity to the image, by the life of the Spirit, of His Son. Let them go their way forth by the footsteps of the flock, if they would know where the good Shepherd feeds His flock at noon. ...

But if any one will say, if you see these things, what are you doing yourself? I can only deeply acknowledge the strange and infinite shortcomings, and sorrow and mourn over them; I acknowledge the weakness of my faith, but I earnestly seek for direction. And let me add, when so many who ought to guide go their own way, those who would have gladly followed are made slow and feeble lest they should in any wise err from the straight path, and hinder their service though their souls might be safe. But I would solemnly repeat what I said before - the unity of the church cannot possibly be found till the common object of those who are members of it is the glory of the Lord, who is the Author and finisher of its faith: a glory which is to be made known in its brightness at His appearing, when the fashion of this world shall pass away, and therefore acted up to and entered upon in spirit when we are planted together in the likeness of His death. Because unity can, in the nature of things, be there only; unless the Spirit of God who brings His people together, gather them for purposes not of God, and the counsels of God in Christ come to nought. The Lord Himself says, "That they all may be one; as thou Father art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them, that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me" (John 17:21-23).

O that the church would weigh this word, and see if their present state do not preclude necessarily their shining in the glory of the Lord, or of fulfilling that purpose for which they were called. And I ask them, do they at all look for or desire this? or are they content to sit down and say that His promise is come utterly to an end for evermore? Surely if we cannot say, "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee", we should say, "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, as in the generations of old". Surely the eye has not seen nor ear heard what He prepares for him that waits for Him. Will He give His glory to one division or another? Or where will He find a place for it to rest upon amongst us? ...

I have gone beyond my original intention in this paper; if I have in anything gone beyond the measure of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, I shall thankfully accept reproof, and pray God to make it forgotten.

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