

The Nature and Unity of the Church

by John Nelson Darby

The true nature of the Church is a unity of the Spirit, wrought by the operation of the Spirit, and its manifestation is hindered by seeking the interests of particular denominations and failing to wait upon the will of God.

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1, Luke 12:36, John 17:21, Romans 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 1:10, Philippians 3:14, 1 Peter 2:9

Topics: "Unity of the Church", "The Nature of Faith"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the nature and unity of the Church, urging believers to recognize the moral inconsistencies that lead to division and sectarianism. He highlights that true unity is found in the Spirit of God and the shared faith in Christ's death and resurrection, which should bind believers together rather than their differences. Darby calls for a return to the foundational truths of the gospel, encouraging believers to seek the glory of God and the coming of Christ as the ultimate goal of their faith. He warns against the dangers of worldly interests infiltrating the Church and stresses the importance of living in accordance with the teachings of Christ to manifest true unity. Ultimately, he believes that the Church's witness to the world hinges on its ability to reflect the unity and glory of Christ.

Transcript

John 17:21

Luke 12: 36

Collected Writings of J. N. Darby, 1: 20-35, Dublin 1828

The writer of these pages - he trusts, not the author of them - would add whatever God might afford him in ministering to the progress of the Church through the various exercises to which its faith is exposed. He cannot doubt that much of the moral truth on which the following considerations depend has been realised in the minds of believers, of students of the divine Word; but he has felt in the little communion, though great intercourse, which such have with each other, that the expression of these thoughts might, by the blessing of God, direct the attention of believers to, and more explicitly manifest to the Church from the divine Word, its just objects; and consequently, by their reception, determine its character and conduct; ensuring, under God's blessing, more consistency of operation; stablish, strengthen, settle it in its own hopes, and make it exhibit with more clearness and power the grace of God to the world; lead believers to more explicit reliance on the operations of the divine Spirit, and to look less to the plans of men and

human co-operations, or what will be found in the end to be human interests. While the aims and purposes of believers are very mixed in their nature, and fall far below the standard for which God has gathered them, and which He proposes as the influential object of their faith and consequently motive of their conduct, yet division, and sectarianism are, even in the mercy of God's providence, the necessary result, whether it assume the character of Establishment or of Dissent. I am supposing here, of course, that the great truths of the gospel are the professed faith of the churches, as they are in all the genuine Protestant churches.

For the just consequence of the reception of gospel facts by faith and its end in man is the purification of the desires in love - a life to Him who died for us and rose again - a life of hope in His glory. To suppose therefore unity where the life of the Church falls entirely short of the just consequences of its faith, is to suppose that the Spirit of God would acquiesce in the moral inconsistency of degenerate man, and that God would be satisfied that His Church should sink below the glory of its great Head, without even a testimony that He was dishonoured by it.

In truth it has never been so: judgments from without for a good while marked His displeasure while it was sinking, and when it was utterly sunk in apostasy, He raised His witnesses, who should sigh and cry for the abominations that were done in it; who, in much darkness of spiritual understanding, bore testimony against the moral corruption that had overwhelmed the Church; and who, in the acknowledgment of the redemption by the Lord Jesus out of this present evil world, testified the apostasy of the professing Church. When it pleased God to raise this testimony into the place of public sanction, while doctrinal truth - we may believe - was fully developed for the foundation and edification of the faith of believers, it by no means followed that the Church thereupon emerged wholly in spirit and power from the depression, and assumed the character which it has in the purpose of its Author, and became an adequate and distinctive witness of His thoughts to the world.

Such indeed, however blessed, as we are all bound most thankfully to acknowledge the Reformation to have been, was not the case: it was much and manifestly mixed with human agency.

And though the exhibition of the Word, as that on which the soul could rest itself, was graciously afforded, still there was much of the old system which remained in the constitution of the churches, and which was in no way the result of the development of the mind of Christ, by setting up the light and authority of the Word.

This gave to the state and practice of the Church - whatever the excellence of individuals may have been - a character which many discerned to be short of that which was acceptable to God: and the authority of the Word having been recognised as the basis of the Reformation, many sought to follow it, as they supposed, more perfectly.

Hence arose all the branches of Nonconformity and Dissent, in proportion to the secularity or alienation from God of the body publicly recognised as the Church.

For it must be observed that, since the time when Popery prevailed over the nations till lately, among those who have taken a share in the revival of religion, that has in general been called the Church which has been received as such by the rulers of this world, and not those who were delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son; who were come to the "Church of the first-born which are written in heaven".

These observations are in some measure applicable to all the great national Protestant bodies since the outward form and constitution became so prominent a matter, which was not the case originally while deliverance from Babylon was in question. From all this has flowed an anomalous and trying consequence; namely, that the true Church of God has no avowed communion at all.

There are, I suppose, none of its members who would not now acknowledge, that 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?

It 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 point of 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, I think, 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 spake often one to another.

But it must surely form a practical matter of great importance to the judgment of those who, loving Jerusalem, it pitieth them to see her in the dust" - those who "wait for the consolation of Israel". I do believe, indeed, that there will be a gradual development of the people of God, by a separation from the world of which many of them perhaps now think little.

The Lord will be present with His people in the hour of their temptation, and hide them secretly in the tabernacle of His presence; but it is not my purpose to follow presumptuously my own thoughts about this. We may remark that the people of God have found, since the increased outpouring of His Spirit, - I leave this and other incorrect expressions unchanged - a sort of remedy for this disunion - manifestly an imperfect, though not an untrue one - in the Bible Society, and in Missionary exertions; which gave - the one, a sort of vague unity in the common acknowledgment of the Word, which, if investigated, will be found to have partially inherent in it, though not recognised in its power, the germ of true unity - the other, an unity of desire and action, which tended in thought towards that kingdom, the want of the power of which was felt.

And in this they found some relief for that sense of want, which the workings of the divine Spirit had produced in them. From the state of things of which I have spoken have resulted other efforts, either of the energies of knowledge, or the desires of spiritual life, exercising themselves, often to the peril of the individual, in - as it is conceived - mistaken efforts at producing a separation or reunion of believers, by taking a ground of their separation quite distinct from ordinary dissent as much as from Establishment. The spirit and desire in which much of this was carried on, was, doubtless, in many instances the genuine cravings of a mind actuated by the Spirit of God; but it has often been defective, in not practically waiting upon His will; and though doubtless affording a part of that testimony to what the Church was, which was consistent with the infirmity of our nature and the actual position of the Church, yet, even when of the highest order, it has failed for the reason mentioned, as in fact it ran before the general progress of the

divine counsels.

But those strivings of the Spirit in us - for such I believe them to be - are surely deserving of the serious attention of the people of God. This painful sense of our immense distance from that genuine exhibition of the purpose of God in His Church, this looking after His power and glory, ought to lead us to thankfulness that He still thus deals with us, and to receive it as a pledge of that faithfulness which shall make the people of God, in due time, shine in the glory of the Lord.

It should lead us also assiduously to seek what is the mind of Christ as to the path of believers in the present day; that it may be, though not exactly according to their own desires, yet perfectly according to what His present will concerning them is. We know that it was the purpose of God in Christ to gather in one all things in heaven and on earth; reconciled unto 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, as 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 recognised 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 - as is very generally admitted - but also of the authority of the Word, which is instrumentally the life of the Church; and the Reformation consisted not, as has been commonly said, 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 followeth 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, or of those who are active in the nominal churches - which is not infected with this; but its tendency is manifestly hostile to the spiritual interests of the people of God, 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. Where two or three are gathered together in His name, His name is recorded there for blessing; because they are met in the fulness of the power of the unchangeable interests of that everlasting kingdom in which it has pleased the glorious Jehovah to glorify Himself, and to make His name and saving health known in the Person of the Son, by the power of the Spirit.

In the name of Christ, therefore, they enter - in whatever measure of faith - into the full counsels of God, and are "fellow-workers under God". Thus whatever they ask is done, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

But the very foundation on which these promises rest is broken up, and its consistency destroyed, by bonds of communion not formed on the scope of the purposes of God in Christ. I say not, indeed, that they may not find a feeble measure of spiritual food; which, though generally partial in its character, may be suited to strengthen their personal hope of eternal life.

But the glory of the Lord is very near the believing soul, and, in proportion as we seek it, will personal blessing be found. It puts me in mind indeed - as all doubtless have some separate portion of the form of the Church - of those who parted the Saviour's garments among them; while that inner vest, which could not be rended, which was inseparably one in its nature, was cast lots for whose it should be; but in the meanwhile, the name of Him, the presence of the power of whose life would unite them all in appropriate order, is left exposed and dishonoured.

Indeed, I fear that these have fallen too much into the hands of those who care not for Him, and that the Lord will never clothe Himself with them again, viewed in their present state. Indeed, it could not be when He appears in His glory. I say it not in presumption or dislike - for the reproach of it is a grievous burden, it is an humbling, most afflicting thought - but that second temple, which had been raised by the mercy of God after the long Babylonish captivity, we have learned to trust in too much as "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these".

We have been haughty because of the Lord's holy mountain; we have looked at it as adorned with goodly stones and gifts; and have ceased to look to the Lord of the temple - have ceased almost to walk by faith, or to have communion in the hope of the return of the messenger of the covenant to be the glory of this latter house. The unclean spirit of idolatry may have been purged out; but the great question still remains, Is there the effectual presence of the Spirit of the Lord, or is it merely empty, swept and garnished?

If we have been at all blessed, are we not disregarding Him from whom it came, by pride, and self-complacency, and seeking to turn it to our own, instead of going on to His, glory? 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. The Lord has made known His purposes in Him, and how those purposes are effected.

He hath made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fulness of times, He should gather together in one all things in Christ, whether they be things in heaven, or things on earth, even in Him, in whom we also have received an inheritance - in one and in Christ. Ephesians 1. 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 together in one, the children of God who are scattered abroad. 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 - will draw to Himself - and nothing short of or less than this can produce unity, "He that gathereth not with me, scattereth" - and draw to Himself by being lifted up from the earth. In a Word, we find His death is the centre 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 - "for we being many are one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread". And what does Paul declare to be the true intent and testimony of that rite? That whensoever we eat of that bread and drink of that cup, we do show the Lord's death till He come.

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. It is showing forth the Lord's death, by the efficiency of which they were gathered, and which is the fruitful seed of the Lord's own glory; which is indeed the gathering of His body, "the fulness of him that filleth all in all"; and shewing it forth in the assurance of His coming, "when he shall come to be glorified in his saints and to be admired in all them that believe".

Accordingly the essence and substance of unity, which will appear in glory at His coming, is conformity to His death, by which that glory was all wrought.

And it will be found in result, that conformity to His death will be our frame for glory with Him at His appearing; as the apostle desires, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead".

Have we faith in these things? How shall we show it? By acting on these directions of our Lord, which are founded in His divine knowledge of the objects of faith.

What follows upon our Lord's declaration, in the view of His glory, that it must be by His death?

"He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life in this world, shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me let him follow me, and where I am, there shall also my servant be; if any man serve me, him will my Father honour".

The servant is he who is to be honoured. If we would be servants, we must be so in following Him who died for us.

And in following Him, our honour will be to be with Him in His glory, and the glory of his Father, and of the holy angels. It is matter of great thankfulness that, notwithstanding the scattering of the Church, by its becoming of this world as a body, and its most imperfect revival by the discovery of the free hope of glory, believers have a way before them marked in the Word; that, if we are not given to see as yet the glory of the children of God, the path of that glory in the wilderness should be revealed to us.

We are assured, in doctrine, that the death of the Lord, in whom the free gift came, is the sole foundation on which a soul is built for eternal glory.

In truth it is only to believers in this that I address myself. 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 should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light". 1 Peter 2: 9.

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.

Unity, the unity of the Church, to which "the Lord added daily such as should be saved" (the saved - I believe the authorized version right) 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 upon record, that division began about the goods of the Church, even in their best use, on the part of those interested in them; for there could be division, there could be selfish interests.

Am I desiring believers to correct the churches? I am beseeching them to correct themselves, by living up, in some measure, to the hope of their calling.

I beseech them to shew their faith in the death of the Lord Jesus, and their boast in the glorious assurance which they have obtained by it, by conformity to it - to show their faith in His coming, and practically to look for it by a life suitable to desires fixed upon it.

Let them testify against the secularity and blindness of the Church; but let them be consistent in their own conduct. "Let your moderation be known to all men". While the spirit of the world prevails - and how much it prevails, I am persuaded few believers are at all aware - spiritual union cannot subsist. Few believers are at all aware how the spirit which gradually opened the door to the dominion of apostasy, still sheds its wasting and baneful influence over the professing Church.

They think, because they were delivered from its secular dominion, that they are free from the practical spirit which gave rise to it; and because God has wrought much deliverance, therefore they are to be content.

Nothing could be a testimony of a greater alienation of the mind from the Spirit of promise, which, having the prize of the high calling of God set before it, ever presses towards it, ever seeks conformity to death, that it may attain to the resurrection of the dead.

It waits for the Lord, and, beholding His glory in unveiled face, is changed into the same image, from glory to glory.

For, let us ask, is the Church of God as believers would have it? Do we not believe that it is, as a body, utterly departed from Him?

Is it restored so that He would be glorified in it at His appearing?

Is the union of believers such as He marks to be their peculiar characteristic?

Are there not unremoved hindrances?

Is there not a practical spirit of worldliness in essential variance with the true termini of the gospel - the death and coming again of the Lord Jesus the Saviour? Can believers say they act on the precept of their moderation being known unto all men? I do believe that God is working, by means and in ways little thought of, in preparing the way of the Lord, and making His paths straight - doing by a mixture of providence and testimony the work of Elias. I am persuaded that He will put men to shame exactly in the things in which they have boasted. I am persuaded that He will stain the pride of human glory, "the lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of man shall be brought low, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up, and he shall be brought low; and upon all the cedars of Lebanon, that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan, and upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills that are lifted up, and upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall, and upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures. And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of man shall be made low; and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. And the idols he shall utterly abolish. And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth. In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which they made each one for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats; to go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the tops of the ragged rocks, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth", Isaiah 2. But there is a practical part for believers to act. They can lay their hand upon many things in themselves practically inconsistent with the power of that day - things which shew that their hope is not in it - conformity to the world, which shews that the cross has not its proper glory in their eyes. These things let them weigh. These are but desultory suggestions; but are they the testimony of the Spirit or not? Let them be tried by the Word.

Let the mighty 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 accompanied 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, that is of the Church, is the unity of the Spirit, and can only be in the things of the Spirit, and therefore 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.

But, I ask, if the professing Church seeks worldly interests, and if the Spirit of God be amongst us, will it then be the minister of unity in such pursuits as these?

If the various professing churches seek it, each for itself, no answer need be given.

But if they unite in seeking a common interest, let us not be deceived; it is no better, if it be not the work of the Lord. There are two things which we have to 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 strongly the following truths, 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. "Are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" "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? Yea, there is no professed unity among you at all. So far as men pride themselves on being Established, Presbyterian, Baptist, Independent, or anything else, they are antichristian.

How then are we to be united? I answer, it must be the work of the Spirit of God.

Do you follow the testimony of that Spirit in the Word as is practically applicable to your consciences, lest that day take you unawares?

"Whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing";

"if in anything ye be otherwise (i.e., differently) minded, God shall reveal this also unto you", and show us the right path.

Let us rest on this promise of Him who cannot lie. 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.

And why insisted on? Because they gave distinction and place in the world.

If the pride of authority and the pride of separation were dissolved - neither of which are of the Spirit of Christ - and the word of the Lord taken as the sole practical guide, and sought to be acted up to by believers, we shall be spared much judgment, though we shall not perhaps find altogether the glory of the Lord, and many a poor believer, on whom the eye of the Lord is set for blessing, would find comfort and rest.

Yet to such I say, Fear not, you know in whom you have believed, and if judgments do come, dearest brethren, you may lift up your heads, "for your redemption draweth nigh".

But for the churches - if yet the Lord might have mercy, for sanction them in their present state He cannot, as they must own - let them judge themselves by the Word. 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 the twelfth chapter of the epistle to the Romans, if they think they are partakers of the unspeakable redemption wrought by the cross. Let me ask the professing churches, in all love, one question. They have often professed to the Roman Catholics, and truly too, their unity in doctrinal faith, why then is there not an actual unity?

If they see error in each other, ought they not to be humbled for each other?

Why not, as far as was attained, mind the same rule, speak the same thing; and if in anything there was diversity of mind - instead of disputing on the footing of ignorance - wait in prayer, that God might reveal this also unto them. Ought not those who love the Lord amongst them, to see if they could not discern a cause?

Yet I well know that, till the spirit of the world be purged from amongst them, unity cannot be, nor believers find safe rest. I fear lest it should be by the "spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning".

The children of God can but follow one thing - the glory of the Lord's name, and that according to the way marked in the Word; if the professing Church be proud of itself, and neglect this, they have nothing else left, but as He, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, "suffered without the gate" they "go forth to him without the camp, bearing his reproach".

It were well to weigh deeply the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Zephaniah. What is going on in England at this moment - a moment of anxiety and distress of judgment among her political and thinking men? Why, we see the churches themselves using the advocacy of actual unbelievers - I say it in no scorn to them - to obtain a share in, or keep to themselves the secular advantages and honours of that world out of which

the Lord came to redeem us.

Is this like His peculiar people? What have I to do with these things? Nothing. But as there are brethren connected both with one and the other, every one who thinks of it has to testify with his whole strength, that somehow or other he may keep himself clear of it, that he be not ashamed in the day of the Lord's coming.

And many whom the people of God have trusted in, and relied upon, as they that have understanding, go on in the train; and the simple, as they that followed Absalom, go after them, not knowing whither they are going. We may well believe what this advocacy is. But what a substitute for leaning on the Lord Jehovah the Saviour, for the spiritual prosperity of His own people, as their servants in prayer and ministry for His name's sake: while, as we might well suppose, their advocates use them but as the instruments of their own party purposes. But such alliances cannot prosper.

But what are the people of the Lord to do? 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.

Let them be followers of them who, through faith and patience inherit the promises, remembering the word: "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. And I will wait upon the Lord that hideth his face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him".

And if the way seem dark amongst them, let them recollect the word of Isaiah: "Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God". If I be asked again what have I to do with them; I can only answer, that I earnestly care for them: for the Dissenters for their integrity of conscience, and often deep apprehensions of the mind of Christ; and for the Church, if it were but for the memory of those men, who, however they may have been outwardly entangled with what was not of their own spirit and failed in freeing themselves from it, seem to have inwardly drunk more deeply of the Spirit of Him who called them, than any since the days of the apostles; men in whose communion I thankfully delight myself, whom I delight to honour.

But are there none to call in mind the spirit they were of? We have many advantages which they had not.

O that God may put the power of His Spirit in many to work the work while it is called today: that He may take away the spirit of slumber from them that sleep, and lead in His own path - the narrow but blessed path which leadeth unto life - the path in which the Lord of glory trod - those whom He has awakened, that they may walk in the light of the Lord. 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. 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, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, as in the generations of old. Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab and wounded the dragon?"

Surely the eye hath not seen nor ear heard what He prepareth for him that waiteth 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?

Or is it that finding the life of your hand [i.e. "finding your life in what you are doing" - earlier reference to the Bible Society, etc.], therefore you are not grieved? Yet will He surely gather His people and they shall be ashamed. 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.

J. N. Darby.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/the-nature-and-unity-of-the-church/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net