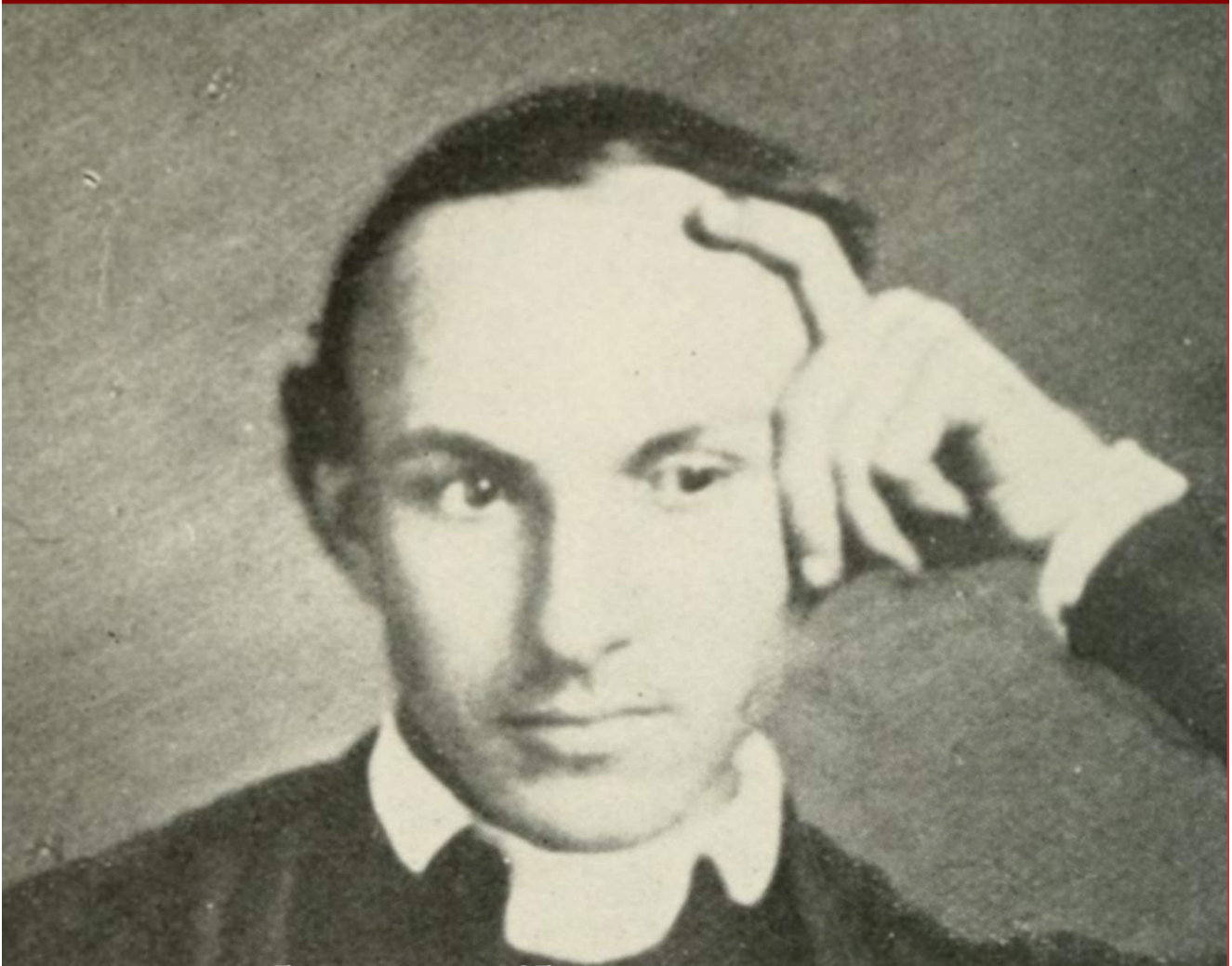


Matthias Loy

**The Unity of
The Church**



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The Unity of The Church

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The Unity of The Church

By Matthias Loy

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The Unity Of The Church.

By Rev. Matthias Loy, Delaware, Ohio.

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH is an object of faith, not of sight. That which makes her what she is, comes not under the cognizance of our senses: it is spiritually discerned. She is the body of Jesus Christ; yet not his natural body, as it was once seen in its mission of mercy upon the earth, but his body mystical, whose members are not distinguishable as such by human eyes. She is the Holy Temple of God; yet not a tangible temple, as was once the glory of Jerusalem, but a spiritual house built up of lively stones. She is formed and continually pervaded by the life of her Head; and wherever this life, which is conveyed to man by the means of grace, is permitted to abide, there she exists. The entrance of our Savior's life into a human soul, renders the latter a part of the body, by making it a partaker of the life.

Invisible and Visible

The Marks Are Not The Body

To be a member of Christ is to be a member of the church, which is Christ, so far as he and his disciples may be, and really are one. 1 Cor. 12:12; John 17:21-23. This life is invisible: we see it neither as it exists in itself, nor as it exists in man; we see it neither in individual Christians, nor in the Christian church, as the sum of all individual Christians. In the individual's external life its effects are visible, not its substance; and even these effects, from which we infer its existence, are only unreliable signs; for the natural tree may bear fruit so much like that of the spiritual, that we cannot be absolutely certain which has borne it. No man can say of his brother, with absolute certainty, that he is a true believer. And although the whole body of those in whom Christ has been formed, does make its existence manifest by

the use of its privileges and the discharge of its duties; and although we are made certain of its existence in a particular place by infallible marks; yet the evidence of its existence, and the source of our knowledge of its nature, are not sense. The marks by which we know the body to exist, are not the body itself.

The True Body Is Invisible

The church is, and in order to be the body of Christ, must be essentially invisible. She possesses not a single essential attribute by which she is visible. If it were not for the instructions of the Holy Spirit, we would be ignorant, not only of her nature, but even of her very existence. We would see men and their deeds, and would know them to be a peculiar organization; but that which is the very life of the organization, without which it is a mere human society, not the church of Jesus Christ, we could never see and never know. We learn that there is a church of Christ, and what are her characteristics, from Holy Scripture: we know it by faith. We learn that this church exists in any given place, not because we see her there, but because the means of grace, which will accomplish that whereunto they are sent, are used there. But the means of grace are not the church: in them we have evidences only by faith; to our mere senses they prove nothing, because there is no natural connection between these means and the church. The Holy Catholic Church is an object of faith, not of sight.

Men Compose The Church

We are not forgetting that the church is composed of men, and that these are visible. We know that their visible part, the body, is sanctified as well as the soul, and that it consequently belongs also to the church. We know that holy men may be seen, even if their inward holiness may not. But a congregation of professed holy men is not necessarily a holy congregation; the probability would be, in any given instance, that it is not, on account of there being some unholy individuals among them. We would call it holy only by a figure of speech, predicating of the whole, what is strictly true only of a part. Then, literally, the holy congregation is not visible; the holy congregation is in that which is styled holy, and which is visible. The men are seen, not the holy men, The church is not men, as such; it is men in

whom Christ lives, and as such we see them not. But it is only as such that they are of the church at all. If we see them not as such, we see a congregation of men, but not the church. She is invisible.

The Church Is Also Visible

But there is a very good reason, notwithstanding, why the church has always been, and must always be, called visible as well as invisible. The congregation of *professed*, contains the congregation of *true* believers within itself: it is the church for human eyes, as the invisible is the church for God's who knoweth them that are his. The word church, it must be admitted, does not mean precisely the same thing in the two instances: the same object will not admit of two epithets, one of which excludes the other. It is taken in a narrow and in a broad sense. The church is the congregation of believers; the human beings in whom Christ lives. These believers confess their faith, and thus endeavor to manifest themselves as such; they band together under a certain form of government, and engage in certain acts, and are thus made known as the church. Those, and only those, who sincerely believe, are what they seem; and they form the church in reality. The congregation of professed believers has probably some whose faith is a mere pretense. It is the church notwithstanding; but the word is now used figuratively; it belongs to the believers, but for their sake it is applied to the whole body among whom they are, and among whom they are not distinguished by any visible mark. The organization is the church's; it is her confession and her government; and therefore the name church is correctly given it. All belonging to it are in the church, though constituent parts of her, i. e., real members,, are only those who truly believe.

The Visible Church Has Rights And Duties

This visible organization not only contains the members of the church, but also has all the rights and duties which belong to her. It is the church appearing, not in her essence, nor in any of her essential attributes — for she is invisible — but in her action, which is visible. All gifts of God are conferred through the visible church, and all those who receive these gifts unto salvation, act with the visible, but become members of the body of Jesus Christ, the invisible church. For our temporal dealings with the

church, we need be concerned no further than with the visible congregation; in this are the means of grace, and all authority to use them for our salvation. But for our own safety, we must not rest content with belonging to the visible congregation; for although it is the church, because it embraces the true members within it, it embraces also those who are not true members: no man is sure of salvation because he belongs to it, although whoever is saved will belong to it. Only to them who are in Christ Jesus is there no condemnation.

The distinction between the church invisible and visible, is of the greatest importance, both for doctrine and practice; it is no idle speculation. Without it there is no comfort in viewing the church, either in its present state, or in its past history; with it we shall be able to pursue our way through the mazes, into which the question of her unity introduces us, without becoming disheartened.

The Church Is One

The church is one. Her unity is essential to her very existence. The Holy Catholic Church has ceased to be so soon as she ceases to be one, just as her great Head is one, and never can be otherwise. It is our Lord's purpose, as made known by the Gospel, to save men by gathering them into one body, through the impartation of his life, so that they might become his body.

“When he saw the multitude he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted and were scattered abroad as sheep having no shepherd.” — Matt. 9:36.

“He that gathereth not with me, scattereth.” — Matt 12:30

“There shall be one fold and one shepherd.” — John 10:16.

“How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, but ye would not.” — Matt. 23:87.

As this was our Savior's plan, so it was his prayer.

“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word: that they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.” John 17:20-21.

Now, we would mistake the meaning of such passages sadly, if we applied them solely, or even primarily, to a mere outward convention of professing Christians. They mean far more than this. The illustration in the passage last quoted, according to which the union of Christians in one body, is like the union of the Father and Son, ought to be an effectual safeguard against any such misinterpretation. The oneness of the Father and his only begotten, is surely something more than mere harmony of thought or of action. The Savior is the vine, of which believers are the branches, and these bring forth fruit, because the life of the vine is in them: they who, as withered branches, merely adhere to the vine outwardly, without being pervaded by its life, are not of it, and can yield no fruit. — John 15:1-8.

The unity is in the life of the body, which underlies all appearance of unity, not in the external harmony of the members, which is only the result of an internal life-union. Nor is this view at all inconsistent with the final clause in John 17:21, where the object of the Savior’s prayer for unity among his members is stated to be:

“That the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”

The argument for our Lord’s divine mission is furnished always by the holy church: is furnished now, when divisions have become almost innumerable, and will be furnished, even if thousands more should arise. There is still one body to show that God hath sent him. Men know the fact, whether they perfectly understand it or not. However much the argument might be strengthened by external union among all Christians, or however much is detracted from its force by their external divisions, it still stands independently of all untoward circumstances: there is one body striving to glorify God through faith in Christ Jesus. And the outward unity never could exist without the inward: the latter is a condition of the former; so that all the scriptures which speak of unity generally, must be referred to the internal, of which the external is a product. The purpose and prayer of our Lord are not frustrated by the errors of man, who, to suit many tastes, might prefer many churches.

In The Epistles

As the Savior promised and prayed, so it came to pass. In the apostolic epistles the unity is described as really existing, notwithstanding the external divisions which had already arisen.

“Ye are all one in Christ.” — Gal. 8:28.

“He is our peace, who hath made both one.” — Eph. 2:14.

It is not the goal yet to be attained at some future period, but attained already. And in Eph. 4:4-6, this unity is not only asserted to be then existing, but it is also elucidated by pointing out the several unities which enter into the unity of the whole body:

“There is one body and one spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

That the word “body” in the passage, means the church, according to the context and Col. 1:18, it is barely necessary to mention. Into this one body members are introduced, by being buried with the one Lord, by the one baptism into his death, Rom. 6:3-6, becoming thus partakers of his life; members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. — Eph. 5:30. The “one spirit” is thus given, Acts 2:38, and works in us the “one faith,” Eph. 2:8, in the “one Lord,” accompanying which is always “the one hope of our calling.” The body is one by the one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one hope, one Father and one spirit; and as all these unities meet in faith, as its cause, means, object and effect, the body is one in virtue of the one faith abiding in all whose life is Christ. It is the one congregation of believers. Whoever believes is in the unity of the church, is a child of the Jerusalem which is above, the mother of us all. And he remains in this unity, notwithstanding his doctrinal or practical errors, so long as he continues to believe; for so long the Holy Spirit is not taken away.

Errors Coexist With The Indwelling of the Spirit

This, of course, presupposes that there are errors consistent with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. As regards our practice, few, we trust, will be disposed to question this:

“...for if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” — 1 John 1:8.

The more, indeed, we understand the marvelous heights of God’s grace, the more will be able and willing to acknowledge the stupendous depths of our sin. But not every offense is an expulsion of the spirit from our hearts, or a fall from grace. It is the continuance of the Holy Spirit’s work, that enables us to see and repent of our iniquities; it is the grace of God remaining upon us, that gives us contrite hearts when we have done a wrong; and it is the continued presence of faith in the soul, that secures its forgiveness. Our faults are manifold, but we remain God’s dear children still, if only our desire be to serve him, and our repentance be sincere when we see wherein we have failed.

“If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.” — 1 John 2:1.

It is almost needless to say that to live in gross violation of God’s holy law, and still to be sincerely penitent for our sins, is a contradiction. The earnest desire to walk worthy of God unto all pleasing, and the indifference to right or wrong, when lust or interest is involved, cannot grow together: recklessness and vigilance cannot kiss each other. When sin is once willful, it is no longer a believer’s sin, and will no longer be followed by immediate repentance and forgiveness. But every believer, with all his vigilance and prayer, has his infirmities which, if he were not a child of grace, would insure his condemnation, but which, because he is a sincere believer, and therefore penitent, are richly and daily forgiven. And so long as he remains a believer, he remains a member of the Lord’s body, notwithstanding his sin.

Not Every Error Excludes One From The Congregation

But the same is also true with regard to doctrine: not every error excludes from the congregation of saints. The believer is not necessarily infallible. "The entrance of God's word giveth light;" but this light still leaves it possible for us to be mistaken on some points: for our enlightenment, like our sanctification, is progressive and gradual. We are to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," 2 Pet. 3:18; and in that degree in which growth in knowledge is yet possible for us, we evidently come short of perfection. Not as though we must necessarily hold and teach unscriptural opinions because we know but in part. Deficiency in knowledge is not in itself doctrinal error. Many points of doctrine are never presented to our minds, and are therefore never rejected, although they are not consciously accepted. We say consciously, because the whole truth is really embodied in a very small compass, and is thus received by many, who never learn to know all the particulars which it involves. The Apostles' Creed contains a summary of all the Christian doctrine, and whoever believes it, has the whole Christian faith. Yet in developing it, and making specifications of its contents, men may err. They depart from the analogy of faith, and thus fall into inconsistencies. Errors may even be introduced, which overthrow the very foundation, i. e., which are no longer erroneous developments of the true faith, but human speculations substituted for the rejected truth. The objective faith is dropped because the subjective has departed: the faith which is believed has vanished because there was no faith to believe it. But it is evident that, while we are not yet perfect in knowledge, we may mistake the contents of that which we firmly believe. We may have the faith which believes, and yet be in error as to what is all implied in the faith which is believed. The foundation is firmly held, but incongruous materials are laid upon it. Now, the faith which believes does not depart, because we have unwittingly mistaken stubble for gold. A man may still be a believer, though he have made the mistake. We have the examples of holy men in all ages, men whose faith is unquestioned, who were not only rebuked by others for erroneous doctrine, but who, by recanting, rebuked themselves. Were they not believers while they held the non-fundamental errors? Their recantation show that they were. But were not those just as well who, because they never saw their mistake, did not recant.

Charity In The Face Of Error

It would be the very summit of uncharitableness to consider a man lost, and treat him as such, because he was in error, without any regard to the character of the error itself, or of the person holding it. The former may be non-fundamental, i. e., may be but an inconsistency which does not by any means subvert the foundation. The latter may be a true believer, who receives the error not wittingly, but because the truth is not known, or, if known, seems to him, from defect of light to illustrate it as truth, to be an error. Faith may remain in both cases. If only the error be not held in spite of the better light, and be not subversive of the foundation, its retention is not a foil from grace nor a despite to the Holy Spirit.

Doctrinal Error Is Not Indifferent

But whilst we insist upon it that not every error is fatal, we wish to guard against the misconception, or false conclusion, according to which it is forthwith pronounced indifferent. Fatal or indifferent are not the only alternatives. No sin in practice is indifferent, yet our hopes were indeed vain, if all were absolutely fatal. Every sin in doctrine is dangerous, whether fundamental or not. It is so, not only because we are accountable for the light which we might have enjoyed, and the acceptance of which might have preserved us from the mistakes made, but also because one error opens the way for another and a more dangerous. Each false doctrine is a step, however small, towards the establishment of a system growing out of our own minds, and subversive of that which is revealed. It is therefore of most grave importance, even though by the restraining grace of God it does not always eventuate in such ruin. The consequences may be averted, and cannot, therefore, fairly be considered as necessarily involved in the error, and the sin may be forgiven among those secret faults, for the pardon of which believers daily pray. — Ps. 19:12.

Thus both those who sin in practice, and those who sin in doctrine, may remain believers, and consequently living members of the congregation of saints. All the baptized who, notwithstanding their faults, cling sincerely to their one Lord in the one faith, being thus daily cleansed from all their sins, are of the church, the “one body.” Here there is unity, and no schism. The church is invisible, composed of believers wherever found, and whatever called, and therefore she is one: there cannot be two or more bodies of believers; for those very characteristics which would render them totally

distinct from each other, and heterogeneous, would stamp one or the other as unbelievers.

The Church Will Always Be One

The church, therefore, has a unity belonging to her very essence. She always was, and always will be, one. Her essential unity is not disturbed by the divisions in her outward appearance. The members of the various Christian denominations are either of the one church, or not of Christ's church at all: there is no intermediate position in which they could be not of the one church, and yet of the church. The promise, "there shall be one fold and one shepherd," is already realized. Though all Christians cannot, in this world, be gathered together in one place, yet are they all one in Christ Jesus. Though they have not all the same forms of government, and the same ceremonies, yet have they one Lord. Though they have not even the same doctrine in all particulars, yet have they the one faith and the one baptism, if they be Christians at all. No diversities among them can break the oneness of the Lord's body. For so long as these diversities are consistent with the indwelling of the one spirit, and the existence of the one faith in the soul, so long there is no rent in the body: so soon as they grieve away the spirit, and make shipwreck of the faith, there is a simple falling away from, not a division in the church.

We are offering no apology for sects; we have no desire to remove out of sight the sin of heresy and schism. These are usually too much overlooked already. It behooves us to warn against them, not to extenuate. But there is discomfort enough in the present aspect of the church, without adding uncomfortable error. It is meet to call the attention of sincere minds, who see only discouragements on every side, because of the many sects around them, to the consoling fact that there is a oneness underlying all. We need not despair: God is present with his church every day. But we must not treat the outward divisions with indifference. Although they do not put asunder what God hath joined together in his beloved, yet they are evils whose pernicious consequences we, in the present times, incur little danger of overrating.

All Spiritual Things Intended to Exercise Influence In This World Must Assume A Corporeal Form

The church must render her presence upon earth discernible. This necessity lies in her nature and design. Not only must the individuals of whom she is composed, come forth to the light, not as the manner of some is, secluding themselves in dark retreats, but they must come forward as a body, with Christian confession in all its branches, and using those gracious means by which the body edifies itself, and increases the number of its members. Whatever is intended for this world must, in some way, come under the cognizance of men's senses; there must be some sign indicating its presence. The church in becoming visible, does but obey a common law. Even that which is strictly spiritual in its nature, attains its end among men by some corporeal means. By these the church must do her work. The word, which is the power of God unto salvation, must have an audible or visible sign as its vehicle, thus, as a sensible thing, conveying the spirit of God through the senses to the spirit of man. Baptism requires material contact between water and man's body, though the invisible gift of regeneration, which it brings, influences his spiritual nature. As with the sacrament of communion with the Lord's body and blood: there is a visible earthly, and an invisible heavenly element — a spiritual and a corporeal, mysteriously united for that mystery of sense and spirit, man. The means of grace are signs, not of an absent gift merely typified, but of a gift always present with them, and conveyed by them, and of whose invisible presence they visibly assure us. And if we could see more deeply into the mystery of man and his redemption, we would no doubt perceive that these means of grace, corporeal-spiritual, visible-invisible as they are, exert an influence upon our bodies, as well as upon our souls. This is more than intimated in the case of the Holy Supper, the crowning mystery of all, not only in the indication given of an intimate relation between its operation and the resurrection of the body, John 6, but also in the plain scriptural statement respecting its influence upon our bodily health, 1 Cor. 11. *We read of no spiritual influence exerted upon man without the intervention of corporeal means.* The former comes upon us through the latter, whether it affects the body in its transit or not so much is certain. The Zwinglian, and all similar spiritualistic notions of an immediate exercise of the Holy Spirit's power for man's salvation, are wholly without foundation in holy scripture. Even on the day of Pentecost, when, as is usual in the beginnings of all great epochs, there was much that we must consider extraordinary and miraculous, the

spirit was not imparted without all visible, material means, as his bearers and signs of his presence.

Now, from this law, requiring all spiritual things, which are intended to exercise an influence in this world, to assume a corporeal form, the church, as we have already observed, is not exempted. Though in her very essence she is a spiritual house which we cannot see, yet must she show her existence. She must have an external form, underlying which will be the invisible reality: she must become visible. The administration of the means of grace — those corporeal bearers of spiritual power — is given to her; and in dispensing them, and properly receiving them, she becomes visible; they are the external signs which unmistakably indicate her presence. We see her, where these are, precisely in the same sense in which we see the impartation of a spiritual gift when we see the means used with which it is inseparably connected. She cannot do her work invisibly: she cannot impart or receive grace invisibly, she can do it only in the sight and hearing of men. And to do it all decently and in order, she organizes herself externally, visibly, and discharges her duty, and uses her privileges, just as though there were not a deeper organization back of all, which is each member's great comfort, but with which, in our external relations, we have nothing to do. For this world, this visible body is the church, and with it must we have all our visible dealings. There is no appeal to an invisible, except in the one question of final salvation; for in this God's eye, who sees what is invisible to us, is alone concerned. The visible church is thus necessary, to give and to receive grace, which cannot be done invisibly, although not all who profess to receive grace are the saved, but those who receive it really by faith, i. e., the invisible church. The destruction of the visible church would involve the ruin of the invisible, because it would imply the destruction of those means by which alone the invisible can receive additions to her membership. If the church is to be at all, she must be visible.

The Sacrificial Acts Require A Church Visible

Moreover, the necessity of the church visible, is apparent also from those sacrificial acts, by which she is required to manifest her gratitude to God, and to give him the glory. These can just as little be performed invisibly as the sacramental. The duty of confession is only second to that of believing. The first requisite after becoming a child of light is, to let the light shine.

What is in the heart must show itself. And it is to be particularly observed, that the continuance in a state of grace, and therefore the final salvation, is ordinarily made dependent upon such showing.

“For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” — Rom. 10:10.

This is in accordance with our Savior’s words:

“...whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven; but whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.” — Matt. 10:32-3; Luke 12:8.

The reasons for this are obvious. The glory of God cannot be promoted by a concealment of that which he has done for our souls: it must come forth, that he may have the praise, and that others may also learn to adore him. To this end are we made a royal priesthood, that we might show forth the praises of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. — 1 Pet. 2:9. Every Christian becomes thus a preacher of righteousness, striving to make God’s praise glorious all around him, and laboring to make known to others that name, by which alone men can be saved. So the natural tendency of things inward to externalize themselves, pushes the faith outward in the form of confession, that it may redound to the Redeemer’s praise. If faith exist at all in a saving form, it must come forward to the light: for this, as we have seen, there are internal and external motives, the resistance of which will jeopardize the very existence of faith. Believers, therefore, necessarily become visible, as well by the administration and reception of the means of grace, as by the consequences of right reception, namely, Christian confession in words and works.

Both Kinds Of Acts Require The Union Of Believers In A Congregation

All these external acts require the union of believers in a congregation. Not each individual Christian, isolated from his brethren, is intended thus to become visible, but the whole body, of which each individual is a member. The design never could be accomplished by many persons, each of whom stood separate from all the rest. It would be the utmost selfishness, and

therefore inconsistent with all Christian character, for each one to presume to be his own church, dispensing to himself the means of grace, according to his own selfish pleasure, and confessing his faith, according to his own bad taste, apart from all others. The means of grace never were given to individuals to be thus abused: they belong to the church. And the deepest yearnings of the heart for communion with kindred souls — yearnings which God mercifully satisfies in the communion of saints — would be thus trampled upon. It is not in God to permit such indecency and disorder, and not in Christian men to wish such misery. The common faith unites the members of the one body to labor, to suffer and to rejoice together; and he who would stand wholly isolated, could do so only because he has no sympathy in faith and hope with other believers, i. e., only because he is no believer at all. Hence we read that the first Christians were together, and had all things in common, Acts 2:44, and that such as should be saved were added unto the church, 2:47. Hence too the exhortation:

“let us consider one another, to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is.” Heb. 10:24-5.

All the people are to praise God and confess his name together.

“Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like minded one toward another, according to Christ Jesus, that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God.” — Rom. 15:5-6.

Thus a united front was presented to the enemy, and thus the early Christians sustained each other, by bearing their burdens and tasting their joys together. And thus it must ever be. For the Lord is ever present where Christians, though but two or three are gathered together in his name, not where each man stands separately in his own name. The great work which Christ has enjoined upon his people, not only requires many men and many means, but many men and means united; and only when the work is done by a body acting in his name, can it redound to his glory. This truth was not overlooked in the first ages of the church, as it but too frequently is now. Then works of charity were not only done to alleviate human suffering, but also, and primarily, to show forth God’s praise: the noble means had a still nobler end. Hence not every individual did what he could, independently of

the church; he did not act in his own name, and reap the praise of his loving deeds; he was not the dispenser of his own alms, knowing that individual gifts, however faithfully and humbly bestowed, are more likely to bring to the donor, than to him who renders us merciful, the recipient's thanks and praise. For how does the recipient know that it was for Christ's sake that mercy was shown, rather than from some personal considerations or self-interest? The humble Christian, therefore, laid his possessions at the apostles' feet, and brought his alms as sacrifices to God, to be bestowed upon the necessitous, or applied to noble ends through God's own institution, that God only, not any man, might have the glory. The donor's humble heart could not conceive that it was of any importance that he should be known as the giver: his end was fully accomplished when he was conscious of having increased those means by which Christ's Bride glorifies her Lord. The present trumpeting abroad of individual names, with praises for individual works of love, belongs to the selfishness of the age which envies God Ms glory. The church was intended to be, and anciently was, the recipient of individual offerings to every Christian charity, and the dispenser of these treasures in her Lord's name; and surely our private judgment ought to be sufficiently humble to suppose, that she knows at least, as well how to distribute and how to economize, as the individual.

Thus is it apparent that the church must be visible, as a church — a corporate body — both to administer those means of grace by which she is sustained and enlarged, and to discharge those duties by which, while she is a minister of mercy among men, she gives glory to God in the highest. She is a visible church, otherwise men's souls would not be saved, the saving grace which is visibly dispensed being wanting, and the command, "whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him," could not be obeyed.

How The Church Is Designed To Be United

Much of that which has been already said, tends to render probable the unity of the church visible. That she is designed to be visibly one, wherein this oneness consists, and how she is affected by divisions, are topics of great importance for the understanding of her unity, and merit our more particular attention.

Unity Is An Essential Attribute Of The Invisible Church

That the visible church is designed to be one, is clear from the fact, that unity is an essential attribute of her invisible nature. So far as possible, the attributes of the one must be transferable to the other. Not as though they could always be predicated with the same necessity of each. The visible is striving after much that the invisible has already attained. But she strives after it in accordance with God's holy will. It is the goal that God has placed before her. The church, e. g., is holy — the congregation of saints. This applies to her invisible nature, as composed of those who are in Christ Jesus. But the outward congregation must strive to realize this attribute in itself. Not as though the church ceased to be holy on account of those in the congregation who are mere hypocrites. Far from it: she is holy in spite of all the unholy members. But her aim must be to sanctify all, and therefore, she must put away from herself the person who is incorrigibly unholy. It is God's design in reference to all: they are not called unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. The visible church is designed to be pure, and so far as she comes short of this, she sins, and needs daily cleansing by the blood of Jesus: those who will not be cleansed, if discovered, are cut out. So, as the church is one invisibly, it is God's design that she should be visibly one, and this oneness must, accordingly, be her aim. God gave pastors and teachers for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man. — Eph. 4:11-13. Not as though the defect of outward unity could divide the invisible church: she remains, and remains one, as God instituted her, in spite of all man's sin. But as a departure from her holiness is a sin, so must a departure from her unity be a sin also: a sin that in both cases is ruinous, if obstinately and impenitently persisted in, but which, in neither case, absolutely excludes the sinners from Christ's body and the hope of salvation. Whether it does cut off from the living vine or not, will depend upon the peculiar character of the offense and the offender, i. e., whether the former is of such a character as to overthrow the foundation of faith, and whether the latter sins in spite of the grace which would restrain him, or merely from a mistaken view of his duty. But in any case, the departure from unity is a departure from God's design respecting the visible church, as this design is revealed to us in the unity of the invisible: the one should be, because the other is, one; and this oneness cannot be neglected without

great danger, just as the will of God in any other respect cannot be neglected without sin.

The Scriptures Urge Unity

But we are not left to conclude the unity of the visible church from mere inference. The scriptures directly assert and urge it. It will not be contended that reference is had only to the invisible church, in such passages as these:

“I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.” — 1 Cor. 1:10.

“God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor to that part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body.” — 1 Cor. 12:24-5.

The unity enjoined here is manifestly external, as well as internal. Stress is always to be laid upon the latter, as by far the most important, indeed as the only basis upon which the former is possible. But never can the truth lie in the maintenance of one, to the exclusion of the other. The relation between the two is similar to that between faith and its confession. The one underlies the other, and renders it necessary. Not only must we be “one in Christ,” by the possession of his life, but we must also, as a consequence, be of “the same mind,” and “speak the same thing.” Thus only will the argument for the Savior’s divine mission, from the oneness of his disciples in him, as presented in John 17:21, receive all the force of which it is capable.

The argument holds good, as we have already observed, even in spite of schisms in the visible body: the church’s oneness, as a body of Christ’s disciples, does not depend upon anything external: but if outward unity will in any case make the argument apparent to one who sees it not, or make it strong to one who thinks it weak, the duty of external oneness to render the internal manifest, must be evident. And one body, visibly one, is a stronger argument, at least to some of “the world,” for the divine efficacy of that grace and truth, the object of which is asserted to be the gathering together into one, that which was scattered abroad, than the one body visibly rent and divided.

Schism Can Only Exist In The Visible Church

The divisions forbidden in the passages which we have cited, necessarily refer to the visible, not the invisible church. For there can be no schism in the Lord's body, in any other than the external sense. There may be different organizations, all claiming the name of church. But each one will either be of the Lord's mystical body or not. If it is, then there is no division; if it is not, it no more deserves the name of Christ's church than any other human organization whatever, i. e., it is not a division of the church, but a party wholly different from it. The schism can only be in the visible church, leaving the one body mystical unaffected. Those who are externally separated from others, are not, therefore, lost: they may still be living branches of the living vine, although they sin by their schism. If they are separated from the Lord's body and life, they are no longer any part of the church. They are a mere "Benevolent Society," or something similar, outside of the church; and if they commenced in the spirit, and ended in the flesh, so as to form thus an independent society, disowned by the church, they are not a schism, but an apostasy. Look at it as we will, the church, in the proper sense, is, and must be, one: the invisible church is undivided and indivisible. There is one Lord and one body. A schism cannot possibly have place in any other domain than that of visibility. Now, as the scriptures forbid divisions in the church, and these can occur only in the visible organization, unity in the visible church is God's holy will.

In What Does This Unity Consist

Wherein this unity consists, is a question concerning which there is not only a variety, but also an utter contrariety of opinions among Christians. It will not be expected that we should enter into a particular examination of these conflicting theories: the task might prove endless. If the truth can be ascertained, it will itself be a refutation of all opposing error. But the truth surely cannot lie in those systems which make something indifferent in itself essential to unity. That, without which the church may remain herself, cannot be a mark of her existence as one. The mark of visible, must have some necessary connection with her invisible unity. She is not one visibly, because all her members are in one locality, for they are not, and cannot be; nor because all agree in holding the same forms and ceremonies of human

appointment; for man's inventions, however decent and profitable in themselves, cannot be a test of membership in a divine institution, as the church is admitted to be.

The rejection of man's devices is not necessarily schism: not necessarily, we say, because in some instances it may be, not in itself, but as a manifestation of a schism existing internally before. Visible unity must consist in preserving, so far as this may be visibly done, the essentials to invisible unity: it will accordingly find its principle in the life of Christ, and those means by which that life is imparted to us. Hence the truth of the Augsburg Confession, Art. VII, cannot be gainsaid:

“It is sufficient for the true unity of the church, that the Gospel is therein preached in harmony with, and according to its true intent and meaning, and that the sacraments are administered in consonance with the word of God. Nor is it necessary to the true unity of the Christian church, that uniform traditions, rites and ceremonies of human appointment should be everywhere observed.”

This must necessarily be referred to the church visible. For the church is not invisibly one, by virtue of her unity of doctrine and administration of sacraments, nor do the confessions ever so teach. They do not deny the Christianity of all who, in any degree, hold false doctrine. They insist that false doctrine is, in its nature, unchristian: and who would deny this? They accordingly condemn it, and warn against it. They also condemn those persons who harbor it, so far as they are found fighting against God, by fighting against any article of revealed truth. How could they do otherwise if their professions are to be considered at all sincere? But this condemnation of errorists no more implies the belief of their final damnation, than the condemnation of vice and of the vicious person implies the belief in his inevitable ruin. We sin daily: do we not condemn the sin which we know ourselves to have committed? But every true believer knows how unreal such condemnation of our sin always is, when it falls only upon the abstract sin, leaving us, the sinners, quite unscathed. We condemn not only one sin, but ourselves who commit the sin: there can be no sincere repentance without this. And yet when we condemn ourselves, or rather apply the condemnation of the law to ourselves, not merely to our offenses, we are far from supposing that we are everlastingly damned — that we cannot at all be saved. The word of God condemns us all, so far as we sin in doctrine or in practice: condemns us, too, for those sins of which

we, perhaps, never become conscious: and yet we poor sinners by no means infer from this that, according to the scriptures, none but those who are pure as angels, can be saved. Our confessions do “reject” and “condemn,” not only errors, but also those who hold them: but they do so only as the scriptures do so, declaring the error, and the errorist, so far as he holds the error, unchristian.

So Long As The Life In Christ by Faith Is Preserved

The confessions do not teach that every departure from the form of sound words, necessarily results in damnation. There may be, and we sincerely believe there are, those who in some respects hold and teach unsound doctrine, not “in harmony with, and according to the true intent and meaning” of the Gospel, who are still in Christ Jesus, not having made shipwreck of the “one faith,” and therefore true members of the “one body,” the invisible church. To the true unity of the congregation of believers, harmony in every point of doctrine is not necessary, so long as the life in Christ by faith is preserved: that is, there may be differences in such points as do not affect the foundation immediately: for so long errors, though dangerous both objectively and subjectively, are consistent with the state of grace. The article quoted, therefore, defines the essentials of visible, not invisible church unity. In this view we are confirmed by the denial that rites and ceremonies of human appointment are necessary to true unity: a denial of which the church would never have thought, had the intention been to define the unity of the church invisible.

The true unity of the visible church consists not, then, in any ceremony or rite of human appointment, or in any human tradition whatever. It would, indeed, be very desirable to have the same form of government, the same order of divine worship, the same observance of festivals and fasts, the same rites and ceremonies, kc., in all places. The advantages resulting from such uniformity would be manifold. But they are not essential, precisely because they are not divine, and may therefore vary largely without schism. As regards these things, “let every one be persuaded in his own mind.” Decency and order must be preserved; but whether they be observed by Episcopal, or Presbyterian, or Congregational rules, is utterly immaterial, because only the general rule is divine, the special a matter of mere expediency. We cannot, in things of this kind, find any tests of unity: these

must lie in the domain of the necessary and divine, not in that of the expedient and human.

Purity of Word and Sacrament The Only True Test Of Unity

The only test can be that given in our noble Augustana, namely, the purity of the word and the sacraments, as the means essential to the invisible, and therefore also to the visible church. As long as the means of grace are validly administered, there must be a Christian church; for these means will accomplish that whereunto they are sent, at least in some cases. It were sheer unbelief to deny this. The invisible church is thus secure of her existence, so long as the means of grace exist: for they continue adding unto the one body them that shall be saved. The mark of outward unity is the outward manifestation of that which has been inwardly embraced, and which renders the possessor a branch of the vine. We are members of the invisible church by faith, which is the internal product of the word and the sacraments; we are members of the visible church by our confession, which is the external product of these same means of grace. As faith without works is dead, so must it be dead without confession, of which, indeed, works form a part. The most intelligible, and therefore ordinarily the only adequate confession, is by means of words. Our faith cannot become manifest by mere deeds, except in its most general form: works cannot distinguish the Arian or Pelagian from the orthodox Christian.

“I Believe The Bible” Is Not Enough

The mere assertion, moreover, that we believe what the Bible teaches, is not the confession required; for neither will this mark the difference between the believer of the truth and the holder of falsehoods: errorists and heretics are not usually remarkable for their denial of the formal principle of Protestantism. Besides, it must be a narrow faith that believes only this one article of Christian doctrine: “the Bible is true,” caring nothing about the truth which it contains. That religious system, which deems no other doctrine necessary, must be superlatively lean. The church must have her confession to become visible. A human organization will remain such, no matter how much its members meet to sing and pray and preach, mimicking

the church, and striving to undermine by mimicking her. And her confession must be specific, that is, it must state, not only where the truth is believed to be found, but also what the truth is which faith apprehends. The confession will mark a congregation as Christian, contradistinguished from all mere human societies, and as orthodox, in no way participating in the errors of those who, while professing to believe the scriptures, reject the truth which it Teaches. It is accordingly in the domain of Christian confession, that we must look for the grounds and tests of divisions in the visible church. As the verbal confession is the most important, disunion usually lies in false doctrine and false administration of the sacraments, i. e., doctrine and administration not in accordance with Holy Scripture.

The Manifestation of Internal Evil By A False Confession

And because they are a consequence of doctrinal errors, of which they are generally an actual confession, practical errors, as contradistinguished from doctrinal, afford another root of divisions. The manifestation of internal evil by a false confession, is usually styled heresy; the manifestation of the same by false conduct, leading to separations, is termed schism. Both, considered as confessions, manifest an unscriptural state of mind and heart. The nature of each, and their relation to each other, we shall endeavor to point out.

First of all it is necessary to guard against the error, as though the preaching of false doctrine, or the unscriptural administration of the sacraments, in any congregation, would render it necessarily schismatical. The congregation may be wholly innocent. The breach of unity lies in the false confession, which demands the unscriptural use of the means of grace, or which, at least, tolerates any unsound words. Occasional errors may occur, in spite of the pure confession; but where the latter is found, the error remains an individual affair of the minister, with which the congregation is not chargeable, provided it discharge its duty in guarding against the continuance of the evil. When it tolerates the false doctrine, it is, of course, already on the way to schism, the confession being a mere dead letter while the hearts of the people are indifferent to it. The position of the congregation, not that of its minister, decides whether the members are in schism.

Heresy and Schism

The words heresy and schism have originally the same meaning, and are used synonymously in holy scripture. But in ecclesiastical writers they have come to be the representatives of two different, though closely connected ideas. A heresy is a departure from the truth, as held by the church, in a fundamental point. It is, therefore, a separation from the church, at least in mind, if not in the outward action. But the latter eventually must result from the former, if there be any earnestness in maintaining the truth. The heretic will, if the difference between him and the congregation seem important, proclaim his conviction, and his withdrawal or expulsion must soon follow. The result is schism, i. e., the external separation from the congregation, and the organization of another. But this separation sometimes takes place where there are no conscious doctrinal differences. Hence, although heresy always results in schism, if persisted in, schism does not always presuppose heresy. Ethical, as well as doctrinal differences, may cause schisms. But when there is an internal separation from the church, whether originating in opposite convictions, or in discordant tastes and feelings, the doctrine of those separating externally, will not be left unaffected by it. Hence the confession says nothing of those causes of divisions which apparently lie outside of the domain of doctrine, leaving them all to be traced back to some disagreement in the word and sacraments, without which disagreement, though other causes may have operated in that direction, there could be no external breach.

That practical and personal differences are frequently the antecedents of ecclesiastical ruptures, experience has shown. The division here does not seem to be caused by any doctrinal discordance. Indeed, sometimes altar is set up against altar, for no better reason than that some disaffected persons do not like the minister, or some of the members of the congregation, or some peculiar forms or ceremonies in the public worship. At first sight such unreasonableness seems to have nothing whatever to do with doctrine. And yet if we look again, we will not fail to perceive a connection. For the refusal to sacrifice personal preferences in matters indifferent to the preservation of unity, implies one of these two things: either that schism is thought to be no sin, and can, therefore, for the gratification of any whim or taste, be produced with impunity; or, that those indifferent matters are considered of such moment, as to justify schism, in other words, that adiaphora are fundamentals.

That both these alternatives are grave errors, is obvious; and that those who adopt either cannot be considered as still preaching the Gospel in harmony with the word of God, and fully agreeing in doctrine with the church that so preaches, is quite evident. Besides, it will generally be found that schismatics have some pet notion which they would be glad to introduce, but which the church, to the great wounding of their pride, refuses to adopt, or in any way to countenance. History therefore furnishes but few examples of sects which did not, sooner or later, manifest their doctrinal opposition to the church, whatever their professions of agreement may have been. A sect which has ceased to give itself a reason for its separation from the body — a reason, too, more specious than that of personal or adiaphoristic differences — will not long maintain its separate organization. Some important difference must exist, to justify it in its own eyes. The permanent breach of love implies the breach of faith; and it is therefore unfair to represent our confession as teaching, that the unity of the church is not broken, so long as there is no manifest heresy proclaimed by either party, even if altar be erected against altar. The confession takes for granted that when party contends against party, both cannot have the word pure. The internal and external separation, heresy and schism; are both opposed to the means of grace in their purity, and are therefore both represented as breaking the unity of the visible church.

Heresy is sometimes defined as the denial of truth in general, without special reference to the importance of the truth denied, or to the intention or character of him who denies. Both these points must, however, enter into any definition that would aim at correctness as well as precision.

Every truth which it has pleased God to reveal, is of unspeakable worth, no matter whether in our systems of doctrine it occupies a prominent or subordinate position. The truth is one, and each part must, therefore, challenge the respect which all truth deserves. But all parts of truth are not equally essential. The old systematic theologians were right in making distinctions where the differences are so palpable. They divided the several truths which are the objects of faith, into fundamental and non-fundamental articles. Not as though they believed that any revealed truth could be unimportant, and therefore treated with indifference. They knew right well that what was important enough to be revealed, could not be too unimportant to be received. The non-fundamentals are those which could be ignored, and even in some circumstances, denied without damnation. They

are not absolutely necessary to salvation. When the believer rejects them, under the impression that they are unscriptural error, he does not thereby become an unbeliever: the foundation still remains. When they are known and acknowledged to be revealed truths, they of course become subjectively fundamental: their denial is as much an indication of unbelief as the rejection of any confessedly fundamental doctrines.

The fundamentals are such as are necessary to salvation; though they are not all necessary in precisely the same sense. They may be divided into two classes: first, those of which it is dangerous even to be ignorant, inasmuch as they are the necessary foundation of faith, without which, in the case of those whose years require the activity of faith, faith itself cannot exist; and secondly, those of which we may be ignorant, but which, when known, we cannot, under any circumstances, deny without grieving the Holy Spirit. The term heresy should be confined to those who reject fundamentals, not applied indiscriminately to all errorists.

Non-fundamentals may be rejected without heresy. In making this assertion, we are quite sure of using the word as our fathers used it. "Heresy," says Quenstedt, "is not every error contrary to the word of God, but such error as subverts the foundation of faith." "Properly to call any one a heretic," says Gerhardt, "it is necessary that his error infringes upon the very foundation of faith." As far as the object of our faith is concerned, we are therefore justified in saying, that only fundamental error is heresy, and that it is uncharitable to apply the odious name to any other.

But another question remains. The character of the errorist, as we have already stated, must not be left out of view, in defining heresy. In the words of Gerhardt, we must assert it to be a characteristic of the heretic, "that malice and pertinacity are conjoined with his error, so that he obstinately defends it, notwithstanding that he has been frequently warned." The believer is not forthwith a heretic, because he has inadvertently and temporarily made a fundamental mistake. He must be warned again and again, and only by being selfishly obstinate, and refusing to be enlightened and to yield, he becomes a heretic. But the fact of his temporarily holding a fundamental error, does not, in itself, constitute him a heretic, this term implying moral obliquity as well as doctrinal fundamental error. This is plain from both scriptural and ecclesiastical usage of the term.

In holy scripture the word occurs in various connections, sometimes synonymously with the now usual meaning of the term "schism." It is

applied to parties among the Jews, as “the sect of the Sadducees,” Acts 5:17, and “the sect of the Pharisees,” Acts 15:5, in both which cases it is “heresy” in the original. In the same sense of party it is applied by enemies to the whole Christian body, when this is called the “sect of the Nazarenes.” Christians are here intended to be classed as a Jewish faction, with Pharisees and Sadducees. But the word is also applied, by the apostles themselves, to parties in the Christian church, e. g., 1 Cor. 11:10: “for there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.” Here the evil disposition, the sin, is evidently implied. It is not merely an innocent mistake of the intellect, but an error of the heart also, concerning the subject of which the passage implicitly denies that he shall be approved. If any doubt should remain, as to this sense of the word in scripture, i. e., that it implies a wrong state of the heart, as well as of the head, it must be at once dispersed, when we remember that in Gal. 5:20, “heresies” are classed among the “works of the flesh” and censured as such. Here they cannot be innocent mistakes, else it could not be said, as it is in the last passage, “that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” They are stubborn errors, maintained from carnal motives, in spite of all warning and instruction: errors permitted not as a probation to them who hold them, but to the saints, who, by the endurance of the trial should become manifest as the approved. Coincident with this, are the other passages of scripture in which the word occurs as applied to professing Christians.

“There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them.” — 2 Pet. 2:1.

Hence St. Paul commands: “a man that is a heretic, after the first and second admonition reject.” — Titus 3:10. We are therefore making no rash assertion, when we say that the biblical sense of the word “heretic,” so far as it applies to professed Christians, implies moral obliquity, as well as mental error, and that biblical usage does not justify its application to one who is innocently in error, i. e., whose conscience has never been properly enlightened by receiving “the first and second admonition.” As far as the word is used of parties among those not professing Christianity, we can, of course, have nothing to do with it here: probably no one will dissent from the remarks of Gerhardt, that no one can properly be called a heretic, who

has not, by baptism, been received into the visible church. And with this sense the ecclesiastical usage corresponds throughout.

An Errorist Is Not A Heretic

A heretic is one, then, who holds fundamental error in spite of the scriptures. Heresy can therefore only be imputed to parties who, having the will to appear as Christians, have fallen away from the foundation of Christian faith. As long as individuals cling to the foundation, and are unwilling to swerve from it, humbly imploring pardon for any fault which they see, but unable to see the error which others perceive in their doctrine, they are errorists, but not heretics. As such, they must not be at once rejected, but patiently instructed; and under faithful instruction, one of two things will soon take place: they will either receive the grace of God for their enlightenment, and accordingly put away that which God's word shows them to be erroneous, or they will reject the light, and obstinately retain the error, and thus, if it be fundamental, become heretics. Then, if they do not separate from the visible church before, they must be cut off by excommunication, and thus become a heretical sect. Not every sect is such. All heresy is schism, but not vice versa. Every sect is in error, but not heretically so, and not all must, in consequence, be treated alike. Those which are heretical, in the sense here defined, we can of course have nothing whatever to do with: they must be denied to be brethren at all, and can be styled Christians, only because they have received baptism, and thus were once in the church, from which they have now fallen. Had they never been baptized, they would be simple Jews or Pagans, Turks or infidels, according as their opinions coincided with the one or the other. But errorists, who are not heretics, obviously require Christian consideration and regard, as brethren in Christ; and the nature of our relation to them this is the proper place to consider.

Two questions require to be answered here:

1. Is schism, when not founded upon heresy, to be treated as innocent?
2. Is it the church's duty to unite and cooperate with sects not heretical?

These questions now claim our earnest attention.

Is Non-Heretical Schism To Be Treated As Innocent?

In answering the first, justice requires a distinction to be made between the persons and the errors which they may hold, and this distinction will be found conducive to clearness. As regards the errors themselves, then, we can only pronounce them worthy of all condemnation, whether they be of prime or secondary importance. For that which conflicts with revelation, even though the point assailed have no perceptible bearing upon our soul's eternal interests, and may, under some circumstances, be safely dispensed with, can only be of evil, and must be treated as God's and our soul's enemy. The difference between fundamental and non-fundamental, is of no practical value in this respect. Considered in itself, all error is damnable, and all is, moreover, really dangerous; so that many who hold non-fundamental errors, although they are saved notwithstanding their errors, are saved "as by fire."

Whatever may be our view of persons among the sects, it is evident that their errors may neither be ignored nor smoothed over, so as to appear right; and all attempts thus to palliate them, must be looked upon, by all whose spiritual sight is clear, as culpable indifference to God's truth, which is precious in all its parts. That the charge of uncharitableness, made against those who rebuke errors wherever found, can only originate in a want of true religious earnestness and reverence for Jehovah's word, and in ignorance as well as inexperience of true Christian charity in its highest form, on the part of those who, we fear too often without all charity, prefer the charge, needs but to be mentioned: it can need no proof to those who know and believe that God and his word challenges our whole heart, and that to this all else is secondary, and upon this all true love to our neighbor is dependent.

When we turn, however, to the person who holds the errors, our condemnation, if pronounced at all, evidently requires qualification. That errorists are not wholly innocent, under any circumstances, we sincerely believe: no man is innocent who sins in theory or in practice. Sin remains such, notwithstanding the virtuous intention of him who commits it. That our conscience is dark, so that it reproves not the wrong, in consequence of which we presume it right, is itself a sin. Ignorance and bluntness of conscience will not excuse error and vice. Our secret faults are faults which require remission, as well as those of which we are fully conscious. But

ignorance may render error and vice not inconsistent with the continuance in Christ and his grace. That is, when we sin ignorantly, we may have that faith at the same time, which secures our remission daily, and richly. Whilst the law pronounces its condemnation upon all who sin, the Gospel still promises salvation to all that believe; so that although all sinners, whether such in doctrine or in practice, are condemned, there is still no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. And as sects not heretical may be in Christ Jesus, notwithstanding their error, truth does not require that we should consider them lost, nor that we should treat them as aliens. They are our brethren still, though they be erring brethren.

Is It The Church's Duty To Unite And Cooperate With Non-Heretical Sects?

But schism, even when it has not its origin in a heresy, is still a sin, and therefore, whether we may unite or cooperate with now heretical schismatics, does not turn merely upon the question whether they are brethren or not. We shall endeavor to ascertain the nature of the sin of schism, as distinguished from that of heresy. The practical question will then be of easy solution.

Heresy is theoretic schism, and must result in this practically. If those who hold it do not withdraw from the visible church, they must, after sufficient warning and instruction, be expelled. They are then, if they maintain an organization as a party, a sect — a heretical sect. Whether this excommunicated party be large or small, does not affect the case. The truth is not necessarily with the majority. The church is that party which retains the faith once delivered to the saints, even though it be but a small minority. Nor is that necessarily the church which expels an opposing party. Cases may happen, in which error becomes dominant, and refuses to tolerate truth. The errorists then excommunicate the faithful. This was the case in the Reformation. Those in error were in the majority, and, by refusing communion with those who preached the truth, became schismatics. Not every excommunication must be considered valid: only that which is bound by men in God's name, is bound in heaven. It is folly to suppose that men can forgive or retain sins according to their own arbitrary will. The remission and retention are truly as valid when pronounced by man, as if pronounced by God in person; but only when men use God's word, and

pronounce them in God's stead. Absolution may be given, therefore, in any case; for Christ has really died for all, even the vilest, and the gift of remission, for Christ's sake, is ready for all, and is intended to be sincerely offered to all. It is ready, and can be validly offered, even to the impenitent, although we are forbidden to cast pearls before those whom we know to be swine. If men, by unbelief, reject the proffered gift, it is not rendered a nonentity by man's folly. The truth is, there must be a reality to offer, before man can exercise his liberty of choosing or rejecting it. It is absurd to blame men for the rejection of that which was never really offered for their acceptance. It is offered just as truly where it is rejected, as where it is accepted, so that man's hypocritical repentance and faith renders not God's saving word, "son, thy sins are forgiven thee," a falsehood. It is true that moment and, if the word is received in faith, will be so forever.

But the case is different with the retention of sins. In the use of the binding keys, the minister's mistake affects the validity of the act. God is not willing to retain all men's sins as he is to forgive, and man may therefore declare those retained which God has forgiven, and which, on account of the person's faith, remain forgiven. Man has, therefore, no right to use the keys for binding, unless there is unmistakable evidence of impenitent persistence in sin; and we are not bound to consider any person validly excommunicated, whose doctrine and life show forth God's praise, and against whom stubborn impenitence cannot be proven. Therefore, excommunication from any body, does not in itself render a man either a heretic or a schismatic. The party excommunicated in accordance with God's word, or withdrawing in opposition to God's word, is in schism.

But, as we have already observed, persons and parties may withdraw without pretending that the church from which they separate, is incorrigibly heretical. That they sin by so doing is evident from the passages of scripture which forbid divisions. It is manifest, moreover, that the only ground upon which separation is justifiable at all, is, that the body from which another separates, will not tolerate scriptural doctrine and practice, i. e., that the body separated from becomes heretical or schismatical. The sin of schism still exists, but it falls not upon those who come out from the erring party, but upon the latter itself. Mere personal tastes and opinions, without a reason in conscience, never can justify a transgression of the apostolic precept: "let there be no divisions among you." Every party is schismatical, therefore, that breaks off from the church, or from the existing body that is

confessedly orthodox, without having any other than a merely selfish reason, as different tastes, opinions upon adiaphora, etc. Indeed, divisions or schisms are absolutely forbidden; we are permitted to separate from the congregation of true confessors on no account whatever; for those cases in which separation is said to be justifiable, involve no division at all on the part of those who are driven away by the impenitent continuance in wrong, and intolerance of right of the existing body, upon which the sin of schism necessarily falls.

And as schism is forbidden, so continuance in it, under any circumstances whatsoever, is continuance in sin. And although the schismatic may be saved, on the ground of his sinning from want of proper light, yet no man, knowing the sin, and impenitently remaining in it, can have well-founded hopes of salvation, inasmuch as he neglects to fulfill those conditions upon which alone the promise of pardon can be appropriated. Only when persons repent and cease to do evil, whatever self-denial it may cost, can they be assured that their iniquities are covered.

It follows as a necessary consequence from this, that sects or schismatics, whether heretical or not, must be shunned, lest we become partakers of their sin. And this conclusion the scriptures also explicitly inculcate. We are commanded to shun error, whether it is schismatic or not, and schism whether we perceive errors in the schismatic party or not.

“Beware of false prophets,” of whom many shall arise. — Matt. 7:15; 24:23-24.

“Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch.” — Acts 20:30 — 1.

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers... come out from among them and be ye separate.” — 2 Cor. 6:14-18.

And these warnings refer not to their doctrine merely, to the exclusion of their fellowship.

“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” — Rom. 16:17.

“A man that is a heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject.” — Titus 8:10.

“If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.”
— 2 John 10:11.

And for this, the word of God affords ample reason, when it assures us that it is the nature of evil to eat around it, and contaminate all that comes in contact with it, Gal. 5:9, and that by giving encouragement, in any way, to sin, we become ourselves participators in its guilt, Rev. 18:4.

We Are Commanded To Unite With Those Who Remain In Apostolic Doctrine And Fellowship

Not only are we warned against the doctrine and fellowship of sects, but we are also commanded to unite with those who remain in the doctrine and fellowship of the apostles. This is implied in the example shown us of the first disciples, Acts 2:42, as well as in the duty of confession, Matt. 10:82; Rom. 10:9; for if we confess at all, we must confess the same thing as all other believers: refusal to join with them in word and work, is evidence that we are not of them.

“I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” — 1 Cor. 1:10.

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” — 1 John 2:19.

The scriptures are so full upon this point, that it is a matter of astonishment how much they are disregarded, even by those who profess the highest reverence for the word and will of God.

Unity With Heretics And Schismatics Is Sin

However strong may be our conviction that external divisions are sinful, and that unity is our Master's will, it is plain from these prohibitions and commands, that it may not be sought as an end, to which all must consider everything else subordinate. Union with heretics and schismatics, is itself a sin, and must be vigilantly and prayerfully avoided. The only way of union is for the church to remain firm, refusing to countenance heresy and schism in any form, and for heretics and schismatics to repent and return to the church. If they will not, the sin is not upon the church, but upon the sects. Those who seek union among all, without requiring repentance and amendment of any sect, are guilty of these grievous errors:

1. They make unity consist in mere outward cooperation, without any internal agreement, or any proper manifestation of such agreement in unity of confession. This would be oneness in forms, without unity of spirit, and savors strongly of Romanism.
2. They make outward of more importance than inward unity, thus indifferently exalting man's self-invented marks of unity above those made essential by God's word, and sacrificing everlasting truth, merely to cry peace, peace, when there is no peace.
3. They deny the existence, or ignore the sinfulness of heresy and schism, in spite of the plain teachings of holy scripture; for that cannot be seriously believed to be a sin, which is left unrebuked, and for which no repentance is required.
4. They make the impression that nothing is certain objectively, and thus help to overturn the faith, by inculcating the error, that everything is as we opine it to be. Private judgment is thus permitted to take the liberty of renouncing whatever is unpleasant, whether revealed or not, instead of being kept within proper limits, by insisting that its right is conditioned by the enlightenment of God's spirit, and the unconditional belief of God's revealed word, according to the letter of the canonical scriptures.

But Which Groups And Denominations Are Schismatic?

But whilst it is plain that Christian duty requires us to mark heretics and schismatics, and avoid them, it is not so easy to decide, among the multitude of Christian denominations existing at present, which are, and

which are not, schismatical. The general principles upon which such a decision must be based, have already been pointed out. But the application of these principles to existing parties, evidently implies an investigation into the doctrines and history of each. One party separating from another now, is guilty of schism, if no reason, binding the conscience, can be alleged for such separation, that is, if the party separated from cannot be shown, or at least is not believed to be heretical or schismatical. The principle is schismatical, even if it be in fact merely a secession from a schism. But the denominations now existing, must be traced back to their origin, before it can be positively asserted that they are schismatical. They cannot be distinguished by their names, for when sects once abound, it becomes necessary, even for the church, to assume some specific name, besides that of Christian, in order to prevent its being confounded with sects; nor from their geographical position: for sects are found almost everywhere beside the church.

Whence came this or that denomination? If it originally came into being by an unjustifiable secession from the main body of Christians, it is a sect; and unjustifiable is every secession upon grounds which are not sufficient to justify the excommunication of the other party from the church. For secession is a virtual expulsion of one or the other party from the visible body, implying, moreover, the charge of heresy against it, since if the error is not defended as a truth, it cannot be pronounced incorrigible, and if there is still hope of amendment, no division can be justified. Evidently sects cannot be distinguished merely by their doctrine, since cases have occurred in which there were divisions whilst the confession of the body separated from, was nominally retained: nominally, we say, for it has been observed that this is rarely the case in reality: and yet the separatists are a sect, because of the unnecessary division. And it may happen, on the other hand, that a body, not separatist or schismatic, may hold false doctrine on some non-fundamental points. We repeat it, therefore, that the question is partly historical.

After the corruption of the Roman church, which was incorrigible in its error, and refused even to tolerate the truth on various points of doctrine, the visible church was properly that body from which the Romanists declared themselves separate: the schismatic party was that which would not endure sound doctrine. But after one secession of this kind, the church offered no resistance to the truth, and to separate from the evangelical church, or from

the Romanist, without entering the evangelical, would be nothing else than schism. But this general assertion must be qualified by the statement, that, as the church in one country need not necessarily stand in communication with the church in another, at the time of the Reformation the church visible might assume different forms in different lands, the German could be Lutheran, the English Episcopalian, the Swiss Reformed, without schism. But separations from any of these churches, in the land in which they assumed their original form, would undoubtedly be schism, unless those separating could assert them to be heretical or hopelessly corrupt.

In our own land, again, the case appears under a different aspect. Emigrations from several true branches of the church, as they exist in the several countries in which the church threw off the Romish errors, and also from the various schisms that are found in those countries, combined to form our population; and that which was a true branch of the church in Europe, is such also here, whilst that which was a sect there, has not become anything better by the voyage hither. A sect here is therefore one that was such before emigration hither, or a schism from a true branch of the church in this country. But here, too, there are several bodies which deserve the name and consideration of true branches, not sects. These may be more or less pure, but none is schismatical; and in choosing to which of the various denominations we will attach ourselves, we are bound absolutely to avoid the sects, as those who unite with them become partakers of their sin; and among the true branches, we are bound to connect ourselves with that which is the purest in doctrine, not because the others are schismatical, but because we are bound to avoid false doctrine, as well as carefully to shun schismatics.

It may be necessary to repeat that we do not, when we term any denomination a sect, deny that they may still have the means of grace validly, and therefore bring men to Christ, whilst the members themselves are in Christ Jesus, and may be saved, notwithstanding their sin. Only they who see the sin and repent not, are lost, whilst they who are true believers, and yet continue in this sin of ignorance, have their “secret faults” forgiven. But they are saved “as if by fire.” They are not outside of the visible church, else they would no longer be divisions of, but apostates from the church. Their evil lies not in being beyond the stream of divine grace, so that its refreshing waters cannot reach them, but in the sin of causing and maintaining divisions, thus opposing the express command of God, and

crippling the energies of his church, by dividing the means of glorifying him among various bodies — means which were intended to exert their united influence to attain one great end. Those who know their sin, are bound to shun them — to bid them God speed, as a separate organization, in nothing — in no way to countenance them — to be charitable towards them, and treat the individuals kindly, but to have no fellowship with them as a schismatic body, choosing rather to bear the blame of uncharitableness and bigotry, “falsely, for Christ’s sake,” than to abet or encourage what God has forbidden.

And yet, as the church is really one in Christ, and never can be divided in its invisible essence, so it must be our aim and prayer to unite externally, what is inwardly one, making every sacrifice, except that of our faith and its object, the truth, to edify the body of Christ, “till we all come in the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” — Eph. 4:13. To be indifferent to the existing divisions, because God graciously brings good out of the evil, is as injurious to the cause of Christ, as to be indifferent to any moral delinquency. The church is intended to be outwardly one: she can be so only by holding the same truth, and confessing it with one mouth, without setting altar against altar; but since she is divided now, she can become one only by a firm retention, and an unwavering confession of the truth, on the part of those who possess it: for, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, the truth must at last prevail.

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