

LECTURE III

UNITY

I

SCOTLAND has had peculiar historical experience of the problem of religious unity and difference, and is in a specially favourable position for assessing the values of both, and offering a balanced judgment on the subject.

There was unity outward and visible in the Scottish Church through many centuries, a unity due to authority, ecclesiastical and political, and to the external uniformities that are natural to undeveloped bodies. The unity persisted on a national scale through the Reformation period. There was one "face of Kirk" in Scotland, with the approval and support of both the community and, after the abdication of Mary Queen of Scots, the constituted civil authority. No division would have been tolerable or tolerated in religious, any more than in political, affairs. Just as it was unthinkable that there should be two governments in the country, so it seemed obvious—if the question ever occurred to anyone—that there could not be two Churches.

The Reformation was, however, from one point of view, a brave attempt to christen the Renaissance, and it consequently adopted individualism. The authority side was not abandoned, for the most extreme revolutionists are often in fact singularly timid and to an astonishing extent incline to retain old assumptions. Authority remained the prevailing character of the institution, even though the hierarchy vanished and priestcraft was condemned; but the Renaissance, so slow to reach Scotland, did let loose the thinking and worshipping individual, who presently began to differ from his fellows, and to make discoveries, small ones, but his own, which had a tendency to appear momentous and fundamental. The idea of worldwide unity as represented by the Papacy had lost its reputation, and the Christian religion had to adapt itself to a swing of the pendulum, as national Churches were formed, and as the individual asserted himself in every sphere. The Bible and the Fathers were avidly

and conscientiously studied by the Reformers and their followers, but the regions surveyed were so strange, so vast and so uncharted, that the results were superficial at the best, and at the worst they approached the chaotic. Fortunately or unfortunately, discussion in Scotland was kept within one Church and one theological system, remarkably few, whether as lone seekers or in groups, adventuring further. Neither the Bible nor the Fathers, however, can be understood apart from historical criticism, and of this there was none available. Everything was read by candle-light; a vivid but limited experience was the only interpreter. All leant, of course, upon the Holy Spirit, and their faith was not unrewarded; but much seemed obscure and much was more obscure than it seemed, while difference of circumstances, of opportunity and of temperament gave rise to different interpretations. Ecclesiastical problems were forced to the front by the political situation, and attention concentrated upon these rather than upon strictly theological questions. It was possibly a case of straining out gnats and swallowing camels, but there has been much of this in the course of history chiefly because the relative importance of issues is impossible to judge contemporaneously.

In all spheres of thought and existence there are those, on the one hand, who are jealous of what the past has achieved for them and prepared to endure inherited limitations, and those, on the other hand, who are impatient of the conditions in which they find themselves entrammelled, and attracted by the possibilities of a wide if uncharted future. Leadership, social emergencies, and indeed almost anything from war to weather, may influence people in favour of one or other of these attitudes, and history records the ebb and flow.

In sixteenth-century Scotland the Reformers of the Knox and Melville connection were the daring left-wing innovators, but both their vision and their energy had limits, and by and by things settled down to the mild—or, rather, very mild—episcopacy of James VI, and to such most respectable conservatism as that of the Aberdeen Doctors. Discontent, however, presently began to stir once more; and, not without cause, popular feeling found expression in a religious, patriotic and independent movement symbolised by the National Covenant of 1638. There

followed a Puritan period, narrow and then narrower, till those in charge, having overstrained their enthusiasm and exhausted the nation's supply of zeal, were thrown aside, and absolutism and episcopacy returned, not only unopposed but with a hearty welcome and a great sigh of relief, at the Restoration. Through sheer weakness of character, however, both absolutism and episcopacy, though their opportunity was unique, failed ignominiously. Scottish hostility developed such intensity that this is even to-day an element in the spiritual and social situation. Presbyterianism and constitutionalism were accordingly re-introduced, and have persisted since 1690.

The Scots Reformation had been relatively thorough, and a national Church without appreciable rival had been established. In spite of internal differences of a marked nature, there was in the seventeenth century no serious thought of breaking this unity. Covenanters or anti-Covenanters went into exile or skulked in remote places of refuge; but no real schism occurred, or, indeed, was practicable. It was different in the eighteenth century. The union of the Parliaments in 1707 reduced the political and economic tensions, and there was no further threat from episcopacy; but the two natural parties persisted, and it was only a matter of time till they found themselves face to face as Moderates and Evangelicals. Rationalism and democracy were among the respective sources of influence. The Church of Scotland began to disintegrate. Sectarianism, which had made remarkably little impression on seventeenth-century Scotland, now wrecked the visible unity of the Church and destroyed its authority. Separation after separation occurred until by 1806 there were no fewer than seven recognisable Presbyterian denominations in Scotland living in a spiritual atmosphere heavily charged with poison. The situation had some resemblance to that in North Africa in the days of Augustine.

Those who found a place in one or other of the seceding bodies were Evangelicals; but within the original Church of Scotland there remained not only the bulk of the population, but many most earnest Evangelicals, who, true to Calvin's dislike of schism and of the sect view of holiness, and not perhaps alive to some other features of his teaching, maintained a position of diminishing strength until the latter part of the

century. Evangelicals within and without the Church of Scotland stood distinctively for gospel freedom, orthodoxy and strict morality, the rights of the individual and of the laity, and the spiritual independence of the Church. The Moderates stood for law and authority, unity, broadmindedness, community spirit, and collaboration with the secular powers. Latterly the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic Movement and the various influences of which the French Revolution was the most patent symptom, brought on an Evangelical revival; and in 1843 most of the remaining Evangelicals left the Church of Scotland at the Disruption, the particular occasion being a serious dispute with Government as to the boundary line between the spheres of Church and State.

Some of the smaller groups were meantime closing their ranks, and from the middle of the century the Presbyterian forces consisted almost entirely of the Church of Scotland, the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church. It has to be admitted that all this local disputation indicates a sad absence of concern about visible unity on the part of the various seceding bodies, and viewed from that angle the position was unhappy, so that one is tempted to apply the words of Robert Leighton: "Ah, my beloved, the body of religion is torn, and the soul of it expires, while we are striving about the hem of its garment."¹ There is, however, another angle from which the scene may be regarded, for inward personal oneness with Christ may be held to have been marvellously facilitated in the smaller sects, and spiritual fellowship given a reality which it failed to develop within larger formal visible organisations.

But the need for outward unity began for a number of reasons under rapidly altering circumstances, social and intellectual, to be forced upon all the denominations as the nineteenth century proceeded, and the successful unions of 1900 and 1929 resulted, giving to Scotland nearly, though not quite, all that could be desired in this direction.

II

Nature appears to be concerned for unity in and through variety. Mere abstract, undifferentiated oneness would be worthless and meaningless and, indeed it is the obviousness of this to which, at

least in part, we owe the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity. Neither has absolute chaos any attraction to offer to mind or soul. The reality to which we belong involves the tension of unity and difference.

In all such cases of tension we find a certain vitality and elasticity, a kind of tidal movement, a tendency to emphasis in one direction or in the other, gradually to overemphasis and seldom to anything like perfect balance; and in a society that consists of individuals this means parties committed to principles and programmes that are essentially partial and inadequate, half-truths at the most. A great many people seem to be short-sighted, quickly allured by anything that contains enough truth to float it, complacently satisfied with one side of a story, unable or unwilling to trouble about reconciling opposites. Thus, as T. S. Eliot reminds us, either monotheism or tritheism is easier as a conception than is trinitarianism.²

It is plain that the resolution of these tensions is never a matter of compromise; neither is it so mechanical and inevitable as appeared to Hegel; nor is it like that in electricity or in the ellipse, where the situation is constant. Natural history encourages us to believe in ultimate progress, but has also much to say about enterprising and ingenious schemes that led to their own undoing, like the size of the mammoth, or to a dead end, like the civilisation of the bees. Reflecting upon the whole range of history Toynbee has given us much that is suggestive and enlightening, and while any analysis of this sort seems much too simple to be adequate, at least we can be sure that many changes of direction have indeed been due, as he indicates, to the weariness of a good idea. In our day it is apparent that the Renaissance has spent itself, that the charms of individualism have become familiar and that its blemishes have begun to be observed, with the result that humanity has for some time been turning its attention to community, and is certain to become even more interested in it.

The emphasis has changed; hence not only trade unions and community centres and United Nations and all sorts of getting-togethernesses, but also Church unions and ecumenical movements. It is far from surprising that the lead in such recent religious enterprise should have been assumed by the Church of

England: visible and corporate unity naturally means more to the admirers of authority than to those of liberty. But all the Churches desire unity. The conception is so abundantly present in Scripture that no other feeling would be possible. Monotheism in its New Testament interpretation, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, is fundamental. Life presupposes some system in things, some control, and this reason confirms; we cannot do without the idea of some direction, some purpose, some end, and it is such assumptions that we express when we speak of a Kingdom of God. The thought of Christian unity is approached by the help of Scriptural metaphors, such as the Body of Christ or the Vine and the Branches. ~

Fortunately, we are not concerned to-day about a unity into which men are to be compelled to enter. Persecution has, indeed, in our time been revived as a constituent element in totalitarian programmes, and though persecuting methods have time and again in the course of history failed ignominiously, this has been due at least in part to the want of thoroughness in their application. There have been effective persecutions; and the persecutors of our day seem to have little to learn as to the need for complete heartlessness in this connection. Persecution may induce unity among such as suffer in common. But though Rome is on principle intolerant and holds that "The Christian revelation is the supernatural message of the Creator to His creatures, to which there can be no lawful resistance,"³ and though Robert Baillie in seventeenth-century Scotland and others equally learned and pious held that the State would no more be justified in granting "liberty or toleration to errors" than in condoning brothels, theatres and duels,⁴ and found their text in 2 Cor. vi. 15, yet most Christians have long ago adopted quite a different conception of the nature of truth, and are so thoroughly convinced of the worthlessness of beliefs accepted solely on authority, that they can scarcely understand Augustine's compulsory methods, or the "persecuting and intolerant principles" of the Solemn League and Covenant by which it was hoped to introduce uniformity of religion into our three kingdoms. A. N. Whitehead expresses the modern view when he writes: "The duty of tolerance is our finite homage to the abundance of inexhaustible novelty which is awaiting the

future, and to the complexity of accomplished fact which exceeds our stretch of insight."⁵ It is possible that we carry too far our complacency and geniality in this matter, and that we display too little Christian courage and too little Christian conviction; but we are certainly not likely to resile from belief in freedom of thought.

Unity has not exactly the same meaning for all the Churches. The so-called Catholic seems to think of it in terms of institution and organisation, as when Bishop Gore writes: "A once for all delivered faith and a once for all covenanted grace associate themselves naturally with a once for all instituted society and a once for all established ministry";⁶ the concern being evidently for a visible, concrete, formal entity, so that one stands, anxiously, if proudly, looking back. Professor Florovsky has written: "The unity of every local Congregation springs from the unity in the Eucharistic meal. And it is as the celebrant of the Eucharist that the priest is the minister and the builder of Church unity."⁷ Here the emphasis is on something performed, an activity shared.

The so-called Protestant emphasis would appear to show less interest in externals. The Headship of Christ is a spiritual Headship; Christian fellowship is a spiritual relationship. Said Whately: "The Church is undoubtedly one, and so is the Human Race one, but not as a society."⁸ The connection is inward, and is little affected by outward separations and differences. The two types have it in common that spirit must find a medium of expression.

Individualism is not absent from Catholicism, for that gave its blessing to the solitary and the contemplative, and in the Church of England the early morning Communion service appeals in a special way to the devout individual. The institutional Church at its best is an organism rather than a mere organisation, and spiritual dynamic will manifest itself accordingly. On the other hand, even extreme spiritual groups are now more fully organised, and more conscious than once they were of the value of corporate life. The Protestant, however, remains nervous about deadening uniformity, the Catholic about what has been called "vagabond liberty of individual minds."

Bishop Kenneth Kirk, in his *Vision of God*, states dogmatically that "It is fully recognised on all hands that the reformers' practice did not square with their theory of the liberty of the individual. The Antinomian results of their own teaching compelled them to rule their several Churches with a rod of iron."⁹ This appears to be a singularly crude caricature of the Reformed teaching, which carefully balanced the new and long-neglected liberty with the old and still-revered law. Any Antinomianism was due to precisely the same misunderstanding which this passage betrays as to the nature of liberty. The Reformed teaching knew the difference between liberty and licence, and did not dream of substituting liberty for law, but sought to restore to liberty its proper place along with law, in the only true combination.

Within the Roman Church there are marked differences due to race and climate and history, differences between the American, Spanish, Irish and Polish types, differences among the Orders, differences amongst theologians and liturgiologists. As a Chaplain to the Forces in Baghdad at the close of the First World War, the present writer was associated with four Romanist padres, each one as different from the others as could be imagined. Any Roman church reveals altar against altar. But all are under the Papacy. Differences amongst Anglicans, and indeed amongst Anglo-Catholics, are also known to exist; but as with the Romanists the unity that is prized and claimed is institutional. Everywhere there are differences due to development in course of time; thus Burn-Murdoch can speak of "the chameleon-like character of what is commonly called 'episcopacy.'"¹⁰ But in spite of all this there is reason to insist upon the reality of the unity that exists among Christians as evidenced for example by the fact of Amsterdam, 1948, and the agreement there to what Dr. Carnegie Simpson said in 1934: "What we have to do is to express a unity which already exists."¹¹ All are at least "looking unto Jesus." The differences must therefore somehow be capable of description as matters of emphasis, a word used in an important connection in the Report of Section I at Amsterdam. Dr. Vidler strikes a true note when, in terms somewhat spoiled by display of a preference, he says: "I conceive that the elements of, and the forces that make for, both true churchmanship and

sectarianism are universally present and at work, though mingled in different proportions and in diverse modes in the various Christian bodies."¹²

III

Without doubt the extraordinary sectarian fragmentation in Cromwellian England, and that which has become characteristic of more modern American religion, reveal a diseased condition. The history of the Brethren shows the fissiparous tendency of such bodies. There seem to be no limits to the scruples which tender consciences may develop; winding themselves, as has been said, round a scruple, "like a hedgehog round a straw."¹³ No detail appears to be too minute or insignificant to be idolised. There is here little indication that visible unity is at all in mind even as an ideal.

But there has often been failure to realise the very great importance of allowing differences in the spiritual sphere to express themselves, and one notices a certain snobbishness and haughtiness in the use of the word "schism." It is obvious that only through difference can any unity worth having be realised; richness of content is as important as identity; and if there are differences it may in some cases be much better that they show themselves in separate organisations. Where the personal element is allowed freely to enter in at the expense of the institutional, there is no doubt risk of disaster, but there is also the one real possibility of progress. "For a healthy society," wrote Principal W. M. Macgregor, "the awakening of the individual is indispensable."¹⁴ Nor must it be forgotten how the early Christians broke with the Jewish Church.

Conservative churchmen are easily horrified by thoughts of schism, but if a separation takes place, as when a political rebellion occurs, there may very well be good and sufficient reasons. Consider how the worldliness and formalism of the Church in seventeenth-century France drove some to Jansenism, but many more to Mysticism and some further still to Quietism. Such movements were due to sheer spiritual desperation. Many a secession has been of value, not only to those who went out, but to the ecclesiastical authorities whose tyranny, or subservience to political or financial powers, or blindness to new

conditions, or sense of security, or mishandling of a situation forced the issue. It is also to be noted how often the complacent *securus judicat orbis terrarum*¹⁵ has not faced the facts. There have been times when the dominant opinion was wrong, and when the true Church was but a remnant: Calvin pointed out to the King of France that ungodliness might prevail for ages, but "He is strong, who taketh vengeance to the third and fourth generation"; that one may sin with the multitude, but that Noah and his little family by faith "condemned the world."¹⁶ "Multitude of men approving"¹⁷ was no sufficient test in the eyes of the Scots Reformers.

On the other hand, it is sad to think how often the unity of the Church has been broken by a contentious spirit, individual conceit, temperamental restlessness, envy, suspicion, ambition, prejudice, obstinacy, self-righteous zeal, want of a sense of proportion, personal enmities, susceptibility to flattery, *rabies theologorum*, or even the financier's hunch that a certain line might prove saleable. The New Testament and later documents of Church history reveal many instances of faction, misunderstanding, difference of spirit, one-sided views, unsympathetic intransigence, over-devotion to the old ways, a passion for novelties, concentration on details, perhaps above all, personal differences.

The great break-up of the Church at the Reformation was, of course, due to many causes, not all of them religious; but the movement was negative at first, and this is a fairly general characteristic of the development of differences. People become conscious of dissatisfaction, and in that frame of mind they will readily accept the first remedy that seriously challenges their attention. To the discontent of thousands of Germans Luther seemed to say exactly what they had been groping after. To similar semi-conscious feelings not so far away in Switzerland, it was the voice of Calvin that seemed to bring the very word that they needed.

*"Justinian's Pandects only make precise
What simply sparkled in men's eyes before,
Twitched in their brow or quivered on their lip,
Waited the speech they called, but would not come."*¹⁸

Men in such circumstances do not compare the various solutions and cautiously select one; their thoughts and feelings flow easily into prepared moulds, as they do into the local proverbs and clichés: the word may be inadequate, but 'twill serve. Changes, however, when once accepted are difficult to undo. They also lead on to other changes undreamt of, unwished for, but in practice or in logic inevitable. Further, followers have seldom the same restraint as leaders: it is thus that the "isms" arrive.

Calvin was wholehearted in his dislike of Schism and his condemnation of sectarianism. "I have no wish to patronise even the minutest errors as if I thought it right to foster them by flattery or connivance: what I say is, that we are not on account of every minute difference to abandon a Church." "If the holy prophets felt no obligation to withdraw from the Church on account of the very numerous and heinous crimes, not of one or two individuals, but almost of the whole people, we arrogate too much to ourselves, if we presume forthwith to withdraw." He hoped that if division proved necessary, the result might be that out of variety there might come a higher unity "as various tones in music produce sweet melody." The formation of sects, however, seemed to him to be sometimes due to misunderstanding of what was meant by the holiness of the Church, and he maintained that "sacred rites are not less pure and salutary to a man who is holy and upright, from being at the same time handled by the impure." He earnestly desired unity, and advocated its pursuit, declaring himself prepared "at whatever cost of toil and trouble" to work towards it.¹⁹ Professor Henri Clavier in his *Études sur le Calvinisme* was able to devote a section to "*l'acuménisme de Calvin*."²⁰

To Scottish theologians the duty of unity and the dangers of separation were plain, from home experience, as well as from their intimacy with the Book of Acts and the disputes in the early Church with heretics and between leaders, and their knowledge of the situation created by Anabaptists abroad and sectaries in England. There had been a revolt from Antichrist as represented by the Papacy, but on the other hand a spiritual and sectarian Antichrist, as Samuel Rutherford saw, was a possibility as alarming,²¹ and while they would have agreed with

John Robinson about more light and truth yet to break forth from the Word of God, they feared the ignorant vagaries of human imagination, and so were tempted to "come to a period in religion, and would go no further than the instruments of their reformation."²²

James Durham's exhortations on the subject of separation are well-known. "There is nothing that doth more tend to the reproach of the blessed name of our Lord Jesus, that maketh Christianity more hateful, that rendereth the Gospel more unfruitful, and more marreth the progress and interest of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus; and in a word, doth more shut out all good, and let in by an open door everything that is evil into the Church, than the woeful evil of division doth." "It is the duty of all Christians, especially of ministers of the Gospel, to endeavour the preserving of unity and the preventing of division. Never did men run to quench fire in a city, lest all should be destroyed, with more diligence, than men ought to bestir themselves to quench this in the Church; never did mariners use more speed to stop a leak in a ship, lest all should be drowned, than ministers especially, and all Christian men, should haste to stop the beginning of the breaking in of these waters of strife." He upholds "the principle of the unity of the Catholic visible Church."²³

Later Thomas Boston preached a powerful sermon on the text: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that there be no divisions among you."²⁴ Of the Cameronians who held aloof in 1690 we are told that they made no claim to be a separate Church, and only longed for such a change in the mind of the Church of Scotland as would render unnecessary a continuation of their protest.²⁵ And the Seceders of the eighteenth century were careful to point out the difference between departing from communion with a Church on account of corruption and unchurching that body; they appealed to the first free, faithful and reforming General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.²⁶ At a later stage a more illiberal spirit developed among them and they resorted to excommunicating one another: men like Adam Gib had principles for which they were prepared to suffer, but they were somewhat deficient in charity.²⁷

There was no hesitation among Scots as to the value of visible unity. The *Westminster Confession* refers to the "Catholic visible Church," and the phrase is not unusual. They baptised into the membership of this Church, and ministers were ordained to its ministry, while Communion in a Scottish parish church is to-day open to all who are in communion with any branch of the Church of God.

The unity that specially interested them, however, was not external and formal. Durham says: "The visible Church is one garden comprehending many beds of spices, one Church made up here of many particular Churches."²⁸ By Calvin the stress was laid upon the Headship of Christ: "On Him alone the unity of the Church depends"; "The body, it is true, has its nerves, its joints and ligaments, but all these things derive their vigour solely from the Head; so that the whole binding of them together is from that source."²⁹ The particular churches in Scripture are always geographically separate, and we find nothing corresponding to the modern denomination; but difference is difference whether it be of place or of opinion and procedure, and if the idea of visible unity has no difficulties with boundaries of land and language, it need have none with boundaries of thought amongst those who profess a common loyalty to Christ. As Bannerman has put it, these differences "are not to be accounted of in comparison with the common privilege of the covenant relationship in which all his Churches stand to him."³⁰

One may note that in the Lord's Supper, which is still unhappily such a centre of discord, all are to a remarkable extent at one as they concentrate upon Christ; they come in adoration and a spirit of sacrifice; they feed together upon Him; they are one family in the fellowship of which He is the Head; they remember His life and death and Resurrection, the facts of redemption; they offer their common thanksgivings for His benefits; and they all depart with new resolves and new power. But this unity with one another through Christ, though it might if recognised, blur our differences to some extent, is obviously compatible with very slight external federation, and might, as Vidler suggests, mean little more than acquiescing in one another's peculiarities, while continuing to cultivate our own.³¹ This would be toleration, with all its temptations to shade off into

indifference, a position difficult to reconcile with any strength of conviction such as would still require to be maintained within a visible unity that is to avoid the deadness of mere uniformity. Though we may be of one heart and of one soul while of diverse opinions, one in aim although far from agreed as to means, yet without genuine communion of spirit, small advantage can be expected from any junction. Apart from the presence of Christ, there is no Church.

*Catholicity*³² represents the Catholic as accepting the order: Christ—the visible Church—the individual Christian, in contrast to a Protestant order: Christ—the individual Christian—the Church. That Protestantism has an individualist tendency has been admitted; but these supposed orders cannot be set over against one another as right against wrong. The Catholic emphasis is just as much one-sided as the other; there would have been no Reformation at all had that not been notoriously the case. The proper balance would not be so simple as either of these orders, but would do full justice to both; to community and to individual; to institutional and to spiritual; to authority and to liberty; to objective and to subjective. If the Protestant tends “to put the individual before the Church,” his is simply the complementary overemphasis to that of the Catholic, who puts the Church before the individual. The Calvinist at least recognises that it is through the Church that Grace takes action, and that in this respect the whole must be regarded as having logical priority to the parts. That is not the complete story; Dr. Wedel from America is of opinion that “most Protestants, if pressed, would have placed the idea of Church a distant second in comparison with the idea of personal commitment to Christ,”³³ and Principal Rainy, as a Free Churchman in Scotland, affirmed that “No Scottish peasant, whose heart beat true to his Church’s teaching, ever placed the Church first. The first thing is to be in Christ; and the next thing is to be like him in all manner of conversation.”³⁴ But such would not be the view of everyone, and some would see real danger in any such tendency. The *Westminster Confession* quite clearly states that the Visible Church is “the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

IV

It was the Reformation emphasis upon inward, personal religion as over against the prevailing emphasis upon externals that induced the revival of the expression "the Church invisible." There has been curious confusion as to what was meant. Thus at the time of the Reformation the Jesuit Tyrie twitted the Scots about their "invisible Kirk of Scotland."³⁵ In the American Theological Committee's Report on the Nature of the Church prepared (1945) for the World Conference on Faith and Order, it is explained that Anglicans regard the Church as "a visible society with institutionalised officers, regulations and powers," apart from whose membership no one can be considered a Christian, and the report goes on to say: "It is for this reason that among Anglicans, the term invisible Church seems quite meaningless. They did not see how the New Testament attitude of 'telling it' to the Church could be rational, if the Church were invisible, and, equally, would they find it difficult to 'hear' an invisible Church."³⁶ Also Dr. Vidler has written: "By the Church I mean here, not some abstract ideal which appeals to the imagination, or what is sometimes called 'the invisible Church,' but the actual Church as it has been in history and as it is to-day—what is commonly called 'organised Christianity.'"³⁷ These are typical examples of misunderstanding.

Romanists and Anglo-Catholics on the one hand and Independents on the other have not only rejected the expression, but have assigned a controversial importance to it which is scarcely justified. Reformed Churches to-day are not much concerned for the word "invisible," which is in any case not scriptural in this connection: the point can very well be made without it, for all that is meant by the Church invisible is "God's Elect," and that is sufficiently scriptural, and neither abstract nor imaginary. The main thing is the attempt to bring out that the Church is more than a mere earthly organisation, a human device, that it is God's, and that it is essentially the instrument of a divine and spiritual purpose.

It was St. Augustine who gave the impulse for the use of the phrase "the Church Invisible";³⁸ but he was a Platonist to the last, and the Reformers were not interested in his idealism. It is

curious to find Karl Ludwig Schmidt attributing to Protestantism "this unrealistic Platonism,"³⁹ and one is reminded of Melancthon's plain statement: "We never have dreamt that we were a Platonic state, as some in their wickedness scoffingly allege."⁴⁰ Luther, when he fell foul of the Church as papal organisation, had to face the problem that redemption, which had normally been available through the visible Church, was in his day not, if he was right, obtainable in the society which had hitherto claimed to be that Church. The outward seat of religion being discredited, he turned to the inward, thinking of the true Church as the community spiritually at one with Christ, a body, not independent of the visible Church, but distinguishable from it, invisible in that its membership could only be known to God, but no figment of the imagination since it consisted entirely of real people. His view is open to the charge to which his teaching is exposed at other points, that by his stress upon the individual's direct priestly relationship with Christ he makes the organised visible Church and everything connected with it of no account for salvation. To Luther the outward organisation of the Church was a subsidiary matter, and he ultimately acquiesced in seeing it placed under State management, an attitude of which pietism was a natural result. He had no desire to injure the position of the visible Church, but he did wish to avoid acknowledging the Church of Rome as the authoritative and exclusively true Church.⁴¹

*The Apostolic Ministry*⁴² points out that such a conception of the Church invisible implies that the true Church is not dependent upon the ministry, and enables the most extreme individualist who proclaims it his final corporate authority to call himself a Christian while disowning "the visible Church, the apostolic ministry, the creeds and sacraments, and the plain sense of Scripture itself." Even such a strongly individualist interpretation is not shunned by Professor William Hastie, who, though a Presbyterian, almost gleefully claimed that the idea of the invisible Church "gave room and verge enough for all the emancipated faith and life of the modern world";⁴³ he had in mind release from both the authority and the exclusiveness of the pre-Reformation Church. American Baptists, who have a system of independent local congregations, admit the conception,

for they think of the whole number of believers as in some sense constituting a Church, though this cannot be ecclesiastically organised.⁴⁴ English Baptists, in reply to the Lambeth Appeal of 1930, expressed themselves to a similar effect, thus putting forward a kind of "spiritual interdenominationalism" which Professor J. H. S. Burleigh suggests really unchurches all denominations.⁴⁵ The Disciples or Churches of Christ deny the doctrine of the invisible Church if it implies that there is not a definite visible organisation.⁴⁶

Others, mindful of times of persecution, mean by the Church invisible something like an "underground" Church, or Church in the desert or under the Cross, a company worshipping secretly till better days arrive. History affords numerous instances of bodies which thus kept alive the faith or some neglected aspect of it and classed themselves with the Old Testament "remnant." Calvin, in his letter to Francis I, refers in this connection to the faithful in the days of Elijah, and elsewhere he called attention to the fact that it was the visible Church which Micah stood alone in resisting, the idea being that the true Church might be other than the visible Church of the moment and might not itself be discernible.⁴⁷ In Scotland, John Welch wrote: "Sometimes through the extremity of persecution, they may be latent or lurk, so that they are not openly visible and known at all."⁴⁸

Professor Leonard Hodgson⁴⁹ amongst Anglicans points to Article XIX, and one gathers that, as one might expect, it is ambiguous, but that the notion of the Church invisible is not excluded; and Father Hebert⁵⁰ speaks of "the spiritual unity of the whole body of Christ" in which God has knit together His elect, while T. M. Parker, in *Truth, Unity and Concord*, writes: "There is a true sense in which we may speak of the Church as invisible—which consists of all those who are actually united through Christ to God by grace,"⁵¹ an utterance closely resembling Abraham Kuyper's version of Calvin's view: "All regenerate human life forms one organic body of which Christ is the Head, and whose members are bound together by their mystical union with Him."⁵² Some Anglicans use the expression Church invisible as simply equivalent to the Church triumphant. Catholic support for a conception more like that of Calvin came

at Lausanne in 1927 from Chrysostom, Orthodox Archbishop of Athens, who said: "The Church is, of course, invisible as well as visible. All its members are united in one body by grace . . . and this bond of grace is invisible. The faithful are also united by a common belief and by the sacraments, and these belong in part to the sphere of the unseen; so that in this aspect, again, the Church has an invisible character. And this twofold nature of the Church, seen and unseen, can be inferred from the Bible and the Fathers, which teach us to regard the Church as symbolising the two natures, divine and human, in the one Person of the Lord, whose work the Church continues. Like Him, therefore, the Church must be at one and the same time outward and inward, human and divine, in virtue of its correspondence with the divine and human natures of its Founder: visible, therefore, and at the same time, invisible."⁵³

Independents usually found no need for the word "invisible," for to them the Church was a group of believers: the visible Church consisted of the converted, the redeemed, the righteous, and was therefore very much what Luther sought to identify by the term "invisible." The English Free Church Federal Council, however, while avoiding the word, gives expression to the notion when it states: "The One Church consists of all the redeemed in Christ, in this world and in the world beyond our sight."⁵⁴ J. S. Whale, writing in the name of Congregationalism, emphatically uses the words, "The Church is invisible,"⁵⁵ and sets forth very clearly a view with which Calvin would have been satisfied.

For Calvin⁵⁶ the Church invisible means the Elect, but these were for him relatively few, "a small and despised number, concealed in an immense crowd, like a few grains of wheat buried among a heap of chaff," and their identity was known only to God. His discussions of the Church deal for the most part with the Church visible, of which he has much to say as the only way to God. Only those who have the Church for a Mother have God as their Father; but Church here means the baptised rather than the company of the faithful, and, owing to his conviction that faith is necessary for salvation, he had to recognise that many within the visible Church were not elect and would not be saved, but that there was no standard by which it could be

determined with regard to any individual, whether or not God had ordained his ultimate salvation, and the phrase, Church Invisible, was useful to describe, though it could not indicate, such as were being saved within the visible Church of all the centuries.

The *Westminster Confession* thus expounds his view: "The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all. The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all these throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. . . . The Catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them." T. W. Manson,⁵⁷ though a Presbyterian, refers somewhat disdainfully to this Article of the Confession.

Samuel Rutherford⁵⁸ instances the possible case of a group of seven professing Christians, fully organised as a congregation and mutually satisfied as to the reality of their Christian standing, where yet not one may actually be accepted by God. "Conversion," he says, "is the essence of the Invisible Church, not of the Visible Church." The visible Church may add to itself such as God may not include in the Church Invisible, and may cast out persons whom God will finally save. Some members in the visible body he declares are no more parts of the Body of Christ as Church invisible than a wooden leg is a member of a living man. At the time of the Reformation the notion of the invisible Church proved serviceable in the conflict with Rome; in Rutherford's case it was helpful in his controversy with the Independents, for in his opinion it rendered separation pointless.

In our own day interest in the idea has mostly been due to the fact of the multitude of Churches; but this seems to call rather

for some such conception as the Calvinists employed when, in spite of all divisions, they continued to speak of a Catholic visible Church. The truth upon which the doctrine of the Church Invisible is based, as John Macpherson observed, and as indeed all the authorities are agreed, is that spiritual qualities are "incognisable."⁵⁹ On a certain view of Church and Sacraments this is irrelevant. But its acceptance need not in any way affect recognition of the necessity for a visible Church, though it may lessen interest in the idea of one universal corporate organisation so that among Scottish followers of Calvin, such as Rutherford and Durham, or in more recent times Bannerman and Walker, or present-day leaders of the Reformed Churches, while division is deplored, the fact of division does not appear to create overwhelming anxiety.⁶⁰ Indeed, George Hill seemed to feel that common devotion to one Lord, and the exercise of love and forbearance towards people who differ from us may be all that God really wants in the way of unity, and may please Him better than the results of stricter uniformity might do.⁶¹ Professor W. P. Paterson⁶² says something similar. The main pressure for union, apart from the general drift of opinion in the community direction and the natural bias of the institutional Church for organic unity, has been practical. The most weighty argument for the encouragement of all possible approaches, federations, incorporating unions or co-operative endeavours is the very plain need of these times for concentrated Christian effort in thought and life, at home and abroad. Every discussion of the subject should take place in the light of the original purpose of Christ: His followers were to be one that the world might believe. As to whether one huge incorporation will ever emerge, or would be desirable, or could be long maintained, it is impossible to dogmatise, and the enormous practical difficulties attaching themselves to every imaginable scheme require no exposition; but efforts at better understanding, theological and ecclesiastical, and at the elimination of a multitude of wholly out-of-date distinctions and totally unjustifiable survivals, are clearly in accordance with common sense as well as with the mind of Christ, and should receive the prayerful and charitable and active and even sacrificial support of every Christian community and Christian individual. The day is past for mere sentiment or

mere prejudice, for the situation reflected in George Buchanan's⁶³ lines:

*"But touch our old traditions, and at once
You are our foe and hated to the death."*

V

At Lausanne in 1927 attention was directed to the fact that one serious difference among the Churches lay just in their attitude to difference.⁶⁴ Some were of opinion that no division had ever come to pass without sin; others that the divisions were due to complementary gifts of the Spirit and aspects of the truth; still others that past separations should be regarded with penitence, but at the same time with thankfulness that God had used them to advance His ends. There have been religious men who showed little interest in the causes of separations and have urged that we should call ourselves not Papist, Lutheran, Calvinist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, but Christian. Selden affirmed that the differences were all about "trimmings."⁶⁵ It is, however, easy to underestimate the spiritual importance and value of the special witness of groups. They may annoy us by their conscious superiority:

*"We are a garden wall'd around,
Chosen and made peculiar ground;
A little spot enclosed by grace
Out of the world's wild wilderness."*⁶⁶

Even large denominations have shown this same spirit in arrogating to themselves the analogy of Noah's ark. Lactantius held that "the people of God have been rent into divisions at the instigation of demons."⁶⁷ Hilaire Belloc regarded the Reformation as a calamity because its destruction of unity meant the end of European culture, "for a thing is because it is one."⁶⁸ On the other hand, there is Milton's vigorous protest: "While we still affect by all means a rigid external formality, we may as soon fall again into a gross conforming stupidity, a stark and dead congealment of wood and hay and stubble, forced and frozen together, which is more to the sudden degenerating of a Church than many sub-dichotomies of petty schisms."⁶⁹ Some

also feel that the old denominational boundaries are not the real lines of division among Christian people; what was once a live issue is no longer something to live or die for: there are cases of this sort where the past is holding up the future and hindering true progress, groups nursing their wrath to keep it warm. Some self-examination is indicated. Fortunately, most of the bitterness and vulgar abuse and the suspicion and the zeal of the controversialist for mere victory, have vanished from the ecclesiastical stage. There has been a great and welcome change in the direction of charity. There have also been frequent good-natured attempts to produce something resembling unity by stressing essentials, as we are reminded by the popularity of the adage: "*In necessariis unitas, in non-necessariis libertas, in utrisque caritas*";⁷⁰ though in such discussions it inevitably emerges that what the various parties regard as essentials are precisely those points on which they differ from the others.

Some existing differences are fundamental, and often what seems a trifling matter involves questions of principle which make it extremely serious. On the other hand some of the more apparent differences turn out on investigation to be no more than emphases. Again an easy "comprehensiveness," as Hebert notices, may value unity above truth;⁷¹ and we have T. S. Eliot's expression of dislike for "a union in which theological differences would be so belittled that its Christianity might become wholly bogus."⁷²

Some assume that difference in itself is wrong. Bishop Wand,⁷³ for example, says rightly that the Church is both human and divine, but he appears to hold that division is all on the human level; this is simply to deny that the cause of liberty is divine. It has often been helpful to the increase of truth and righteousness when a new growth could be saved from being merely smothered out of existence, and could be set apart, sheltered, nourished, cultivated. In this way something valuable spiritually or theologically has not seldom been produced and preserved for mankind. Possibly it is only by separatism that this development could be achieved. The unfortunate thing is that such growths are so seldom hardened off and brought back to "rough it" in the garden and to add their fragrance to the one offering. The new idea or whatever it may be, in isolation, without the balancing

influences of the struggle for existence, becomes a freak. It is vital that sects which exist because of their discovery of the importance of some neglected aspect of truth, should not allow the detail to become their god, but should retain some sense of proportion, and contribute their message sooner or later to the common store. Christian Science and other movements can be explained by some defect in the statement or application of Christianity, and it is for the Churches to make room in their systems for features of the gospel whose turn it now happens to be to serve in the front line in a new campaign. There can be little advantage in having a dozen or a hundred sects, each emphasising to the *n*th degree some element in our religion which is only really true and valid when fitted into a wider combination, and restrained by opposite emphases. Many sects might be compared to verses of the Bible, which are perhaps individually beautiful and striking, but which are being read by themselves out of context, and so deprived of full value and helpfulness. The heretics have usually been over-conscientious, shortsighted, devout Christians; and fortunately, the Church, even when it dealt sternly with them in self-defence, often later made amends surreptitiously by a process of necessary readjustment in the direction to which attention had indiscreetly and over-enthusiastically been called. It does not do for a small group to insist upon a separate existence any more than for a would-be Christian individual to maintain independence of the Church. This remark one might extend to include even great national Churches, whose sheer size may blind us to the fact that they also are splinters.

Some stress has been laid upon the Truth as what constitutes the bond of unity in the Church of Christ. He is of course the Truth. "Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." Calvin has written: "The bond of holy unity is the Truth of God, when we embrace it with one consent."⁷⁴ Similar is the stress sometimes laid upon our common relation to the Bible. This is beautifully set forth by Robert Leighton: "No man can come to Me except the Father draw him. And the outward mean of drawing is by the Word; it is the sound of that harp that brings the stones of this spiritual building together. And then, being united to Christ, they are built up; that is, as St. Paul

expresses it, they grow up unto a holy temple in the Lord.”⁷⁵ All would agree that it is in Jesus Christ Himself that we must seek our unity.

Scotland has made its own contribution to the modern ecumenical movement in the direction of visible Christian unity. In 1886 Professor William Milligan of Aberdeen wrote: “Neither words about the beauty of unity nor the fact of an invisible unity avail to help us. What the Church ought to possess is a unity which the eye can see. . . . Visible unity in one form or another is an essential mark of her faithfulness.”⁷⁶ The Union of the Free and United Presbyterian Churches to form the United Free Church in 1900 and the further union of this body with the Church of Scotland in 1929 were practical demonstrations of Christian reconciliation on no mean scale. The same period has witnessed elsewhere much breaking down of what Professor David Welsh called “partitions of proud or sullen seclusion”;⁷⁷ and some unions have been of a less domestic and more venture-some nature.

The Church of Scotland has shared in the work of the Presbyterian Alliance which binds together the Reformed Churches of many lands, races and languages. It was at Edinburgh that Christian statesmanship arranged to hold the World Missionary Conference of 1910 which was the first of the famous series whose latest interim result was Amsterdam 1948. The Church of Scotland will do its part in this determined effort to achieve the fullness of Christ. In this we shall be true to what was always the ideal if not always the practice of the Scottish Church. The Church’s standards assign an honourable place to Ecumenical Councils; and it is interesting to find what is almost a pæan on unity being uttered by George Gillespie, a Scots theologian who died young, but not before he had taken a leading part in the Westminster Assembly and had made his mark as a learned controversialist and resolute exponent of strict Presbyterianism. A few sentences of this will not be found out of date.

Said Gillespie:⁷⁸ “Let there be no strife between us and you, for we be brethren; and is not the Canaanite and the Perizzite yet in the land? . . . It shall be no grief of heart to you afterward that you have pleased others as well as yourselves, and have stretched your principles for an accommodation in Church

government as well as in worship, and that for the Church's peace and edification; and that the ears of our common enemies may tingle when it shall be said, The Churches of Christ in England have rest and are edified, and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the joy of the Holy Ghost, are multiplied. . . . There is but one Christ! yea, the Head and the body make but one Christ, so that you cannot divide the body without dividing Christ. . . . Oh, brethren, we shall be one in heaven; let us pack up differences in this place of our pilgrimage the best way we can. Nay, we will not despair of unity in this world. . . . Brethren, it is not impossible; pray for it, endeavour it, press hard toward the mark of accommodation."