

"CAN CHRISTIANS UNITE?"

I should like to center my thoughts for this meditation around the question:

INTRODUCTION

On this Feast of Pentecost when we remember how the Church began, I am going to speak to you on an issue facing Christian people today:

"Can Christians Unite?"

DEVELOPMENT

If a visitor from another land drives through any fair-sized town in this land today he's almost bound to notice the number of corner sites that are occupied by churches - tall ones, squat ones, Gothic ones, modern ones, plain ones, wooden ones, brick ones. And, if he stops to read the notice boards, he will discover that they represent a huge variety of denominations. (There are estimated to be about 259 in America at this time). They are part of the landscape; they are accepted as part of the normal life of the community.

But suppose our visitor came from India, a land where less than one percent of the population is affiliated to a Christian Church. He might wonder to himself, "Does all this make sense? Here are all these churches, presumably owing loyalty to Jesus Christ. They must have a vast amount in common over against the mass of total unbelief and indifference to the Christian cause in our world today. Yet, here they are, for the most part operating as isolated units, overlapping and even competing as representatives of the Christian Gospel, frittering away an awful lot of energy and money that could surely be harnessed for one united impact on the community and world at large. In the global struggle of today, when Christianity is a minority movement facing a gigantic onslaught from the forces of secularism, Communism, nationalism, and other rival creeds, are these denominational huddles not now a luxury we can no longer afford?"

SHAKE US UP

Sometimes we need a comment like this from outside to shake us up and get us out of our routine acceptance of the status quo. But there are also signs that within our own churches there is a growing discontent with the dividing lines between Christians. After all, in our fluid society, people are continually crossing the denominational lines, and the reasons for the separate existence of the various churches are little understood by the average laymen. We have evidence of how closely Christian people of a land can work together facing a serious community problem, or on the battlefield where no one asks whether the chaplain who reaches a wounded man is a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian, a Baptist, or Methodist. We naturally wonder, why can't the churches get together for good. For good. Wouldn't it be for the good of the nation and world if Christians would unite.

CLERGY VERSUS LAYMEN

"I suppose" says the impatient laymen, "that the trouble is with the professionals. The clergy and the theologians keep us apart by their arguments and disputes concerning points of doctrine, details of ritual, the clerical battling order, and the like. If we locked them all up in a monastery for a year, the ordinary practical churchman could soon work out a united front to make a real Christian impact on our society."

But the theologian answers back, "We're just as concerned - perhaps even more - about unity than you are. In fact we have often moved further along the road to reunion than church members are willing to go. Unity has been just as often defeated by the passion and prejudices of laymen as by the disagreements of theologians. We recognize your argument that the critical world situation demands a breakthrough to much greater Christian unity. We would go much further. We would say that the Gospel itself - irrespective of any outside pressures - pleads with us to overcome our differences and divisions and show to the world the unity that is our Lord's clear will for his church. He prayed that we should be one. And anything that really hinders that oneness wounds his spirit and obstructs the Christian cause."

Well, then, if sheer practical common sense tells us to get together and if the Bible itself shows us that Christian unity is part of the Gospel (you read about the Church in the New Testament and local churches, but there is no mention made of denominations), the question becomes urgent. It is not so much "Can Christians unite?" as "Can they afford, can they dare not to unite?" The time may be running out on us. A pattern of church life that seemed perfectly natural and adequate in the relative isolation and security of fifty years or even twenty five years ago may be totally out of line in this revolutionary age of our day. In many ways the world today is unifying faster than the church, and that could lead to a fearful set-back for the church and Christian cause.

I am not pleading for a more and more massive, more and more centralized church to cope with the modern trend, but rather I am pleading for a far stronger realization of our unity in Christ, and a determination to find an expression of it beyond the dividing lines drawn by ancient controversies. I believe that this is a call of God to his church at this hour. We must remember that, although our Christian thinking may not have caught up with the time, although our organized churches may be slow to adjust to the new age we live in, the Holy Spirit is never out of date, never behind the times. And it is God's spirit, I believe, who is jolting us out of our complacency, and speaking to us again of our unity in Christ.

HOW TO PROCEED

I think we begin at the wrong end, in this business of Christian unity, if we follow the pattern of the world and think in terms of bigger and bigger mergers in order to meet our competition in the ideological struggle. We don't reach Christian unity by riding roughshod over sincere convictions and trying to create, with all possible speed, a super church to confront the Goliaths of the modern world. We begin by realizing again what we have forgotten - that God has given a unity to his church. We are all one in Christ Jesus. When St. Paul found, as he often did, a spirit of division and faction in one of his young churches, this is what he spoke about - their fundamental unity in Christ. When, for instance, he found the church at Ephesus splintering apart, he didn't ask them to devise a formula to bring about unity. Rather he said to them:

"I entreat you to live up to your calling. Be humble always and gentle, and patient, too. Be forbearing with one another and charitable. Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives."

"The unity which the Spirit gives". This is where we begin. God sees his church as one. It is one Lord whom all true Christians seek to serve. And as each Christian, as each Church draws near to that Lord, they will discover themselves to be nearer to one another.

This is how Christians both can and do unite. As we become more aware of the Spirit's presence, as we are renewed and revived in our own measure of faith in Christ and his ways, we shall then be forced to take the next steps to make that unity more open, more expressive, more apparent to the world. We shall not be content with the walls that have been built. We shall be more aware that those walls do not reach to heaven. We shall not tolerate a situation of mere co-existence with others who own the same Lord, and are animated by the one Spirit. Christ, himself, is the highest common denominator which brings us toward the unity we seek which is ours already in Him.

A REFORMATION

Might this not be the great Reformation of the 20th century. A new listening to the Scripture together in humility. A new conviction of the presence of the living Spirit. A fresh understanding of what the mission of the church really is. An overwhelming sense of the Lordship of Christ - personally, socially, nationally, internationally. There are some signs that this is happening, but there are also other more distressing signs of indifference and despair. When we are tempted to feel discouraged about the unity of Christians, remember this: in the last fifty years the tide has been turning. The period of divisions has given way to the coming together. There have been far more unions than splits in the Christian Church during this century. There has emerged a World Council of Churches as an instrument whereby Christians declare their essential unity and seek to extend its realization. While the deep dividing lines between Protestants and Roman Catholics remain, there has been a revolution of charity and new feeling in our treatment of one another.

"Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives". This is the order of the day for Christian people. Christian unity begins at home. It concerns the local church. It concerns the community of churches in your neighborhood. Do you care about that unity and would you like to see it extended and strengthened. There is something that we can do, and if you would like to involve yourself in some way in ecumenical concerns, please let us know. For our church needs to strengthen its support - not only in terms of giving, but also in terms of giving people - to the various ecumenical thrusts of our community and city. It must happen on the grass roots level if it is to be realized.

Let me bring this together then by reminding you of two things: one, the world is just too strong for a divided church. Two, the walls that divide us, built across the centuries by other generations, do not reach up to heaven. They can, with patient and persistent effort, be removed. Let us then, on this Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the "birthday of the church", let us renew our pledge of loyalty to the church of Jesus Christ and open heart and mind to the leading of the Holy Spirit in these adventurous days of challenge and change.

LET US PRAY

O Lord our God, as we look to thee from many homes this day - some in happy faith, some in deep despair, some confident and strong, some weak and stumbling - help us to know that we are not alone, but bound together as the family of thy love. Kindle in our hearts the flame of confidence and trust, and remove from us all fears and feelings of self-pity.

O thou who hast called thy Church out of darkness into thy marvelous light, we thank thee for the rich variety of worship and service that is being offered in every land and language. We thank thee for what we learn from one another, and for every sign of increasing unity and charity and common loyalty to our Lord. We pray this day for all who are seeking to heal the divisions of thy Church, for all who are working in conference and council that they may have the guidance of thy Spirit. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ in whom exists our oneness. Amen