

# Unity Among Churchmen

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I shall not waste the time of my readers with trite commonplaces about the priceless value of unity in a visible Church. We are all agreed, I presume, that in every Christian communion Unity is one grand secret of strength, usefulness, and comfortable working. We are equally agreed, I am afraid, that there is a sad want of practical Unity in the Church of England just now. Our parishes are often like islands in some parts of the Pacific Ocean, almost within sight of one another, but inhabited by distinct tribes, variously coloured and dressed, ruled by ever-quarrelling chiefs, and with a deep sea rolling between. The result of this state of things is not merely a degree of weakness in the Church, wholly disproportioned to our numbers, but something far more serious. The Holy Spirit is grieved, and the blessing of God is withheld!

I give notice at the outset that I shall spend no words on the idea of unity between loyal Churchmen and those within our pale who are striving to bring back Romish doctrines, practices, and ceremonial amongst us, and openly avow their dislike to the principles of the Reformation. Unity built on an amalgamation of Lambeth and the Vatican, so long as Rome is what she is, is the “baseless fabric of a dream.” Protestantism is the backbone of the Church of England; and any attempt to procure unity by removing or weakening Protestantism endangers the life of the Church. Peace between the Anglican and Roman Churches, unless Rome first makes peace with Christ and the Bible, I hold, with Bishops Jewell and Hall, to be objectionable and impossible. The parties were rightly divorced three centuries ago, and cannot be reunited. I, for one, shall never cease to forbid the banns.

Nor yet shall I waste words on the wild theories of those who wish to do away with all Articles and written terms of communion, and to make a vague “earnestness” a substitute for faith and sound doctrine. A house must have a foundation, and a Church must have a Creed. Unity purchased at the expense of distinctive truth, and built on the ruins of creeds and doctrines, is a miserable, cold, worthless unity. I, for one, want none of it.

The unity whose possibilities I desire to consider in this Paper is unity among “loyal Churchmen”—Churchmen who, while they occupy different standpoints, are honestly agreed on certain common fundamental principles. They love the Church of England; they love her Articles; they love her Prayer-book. They do not want her to be un-Protestantised, or to give up her Confession of faith. On these points they are at one. There are hundreds of such men, I am persuaded, at this moment, in each of the great schools of thought—men who have a common belief in the Trinity, the Atonement, and the Inspiration of Scripture; men reading the same Bible and using the same Liturgy—and yet men sadly estranged and separated from one another. And the one subject to which I propose to confine myself is this: “Can a greater degree of unity be obtained among these Churchmen?” I shall simply offer a few practical suggestions.

One preliminary remark I must make in order to clear my way. It is this. If any reader has imbibed the favourite modern theory, that unity would be attained if all clergymen would

abstain from handling all disputable and controversial subjects in the pulpit, I do entreat him to give up the theory for ever.

No doubt you might have an appearance of perfect oneness among the trees of a forest, if you lopped off all their bark; but you would see nothing but bare dead sticks left behind. No doubt a British army would look one homogeneous body, if you took away the horses from the cavalry, the guns from the artillery, the rifles from the infantry, and made all the troops strip to their shirts; but you would find your army was nothing but a naked, helpless mob.

Unity obtained in this crude fashion, by prohibiting all disputed subjects, and enjoining on the clergy a kind of doctrinal teetotalism, is simply worthless and absurd. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Better a thousand times for clergymen to disagree and be alive, than to exhibit a dumb show of unity and be dead and cold. Common sense might tell us that to muffle the mouths of a choir in order to prevent false and discordant notes is foolishness. It is the device of Rome to forbid free speech: *Silentium jubet: unitatem appellat*. I dismiss such theories as unworthy of Christians. The unity I want to promote is the unity of bold outspoken witnesses and not of tongue-tied serfs. To promote such unity among loyal Churchmen I now offer four suggestions.

I. My first suggestion is this:—If we want to obtain more unity among Churchmen, we *must cultivate the habit of recognising the grace of God and love to Christ, wherever that grace and love are to be found.*

Admission of this principle lies at the root of the whole subject. That real saving grace in the heart is perfectly compatible with much error in the head, is a matter of fact which no well-informed Christian can ever think of denying. It is a phenomenon which it is hard to explain thoroughly. To what length of false doctrine a man may go and yet be a true child of God, and to what height of orthodoxy a man may attain and yet be inwardly unconverted, are two of the deepest practical mysteries in theology. But the proofs that a Christian may be very wrong in doctrine while thoroughly right in heart, are clear, plain, and unmistakable.

Think of the instance of the Apostles before our Lord's resurrection. Who can fail to see that their knowledge was most imperfect and their views of Christ's Atonement very obscure? Yet they were all good men.—Consider the case of Apollos, in the Acts. Here was a man who was "fervent in spirit, and spoke and taught diligently the things of the Lord." But he only knew the baptism of John, and needed to be "taught the way of God more perfectly." Yet he was a good man. There is many an Apollos, I believe, in England.—Look at Martin Luther, and the whole company of his fellow-labourers in Germany. They all held stoutly the unscriptural doctrine of Consubstantiation. Yet they were good men.—Examine the history of our own English Reformers. How dim and indistinct were their perceptions of the Lord's Supper in the days of Henry the Eighth! Yet they were good men.—Ponder well, above all, the records of the Church of Rome. Remember the names of such men as Ferus, Jansenius, Pascal, and Quesnel. They erred on many points, no doubt; yet who will dare to say they were not good men?—He that wants to see this point well worked out by a master mind, should study Hooker's first sermon.

Facts such as these teach a lesson which must not be overlooked. They show us that many Churchmen with whom we now disagree, may be real Christians in spite of all their errors. Their hearts may be right in the sight of God, though their heads are very wrong. However erroneous we may consider their views, we must charitably hope that they are in the way of

life and travelling towards heaven, and shall be saved by the grace of God, even as ourselves. Acts xv. II.

What good will the admission of this principle do to the cause of unity? some one will ask. I answer unhesitatingly, Much every way! It will teach us the habit of *respecting* many Churchmen of other schools of thought, even while we disagree with them. How can we refuse to respect those whom we admit we shall meet in heaven, and dwell with for evermore? Thank God there will be no imperfect knowledge there! As good old Berridge said, "God washes all our hearts on earth, and in heaven He will also wash our brains." Surely to have arrived at this stage of feeling is an immense gain. It is not unity itself, I freely grant; but it is one step towards it.

II. My second suggestion is this:—If we want to promote unity among Churchmen, *we must cultivate the habit of tolerating courteously diversities of opinion and practice about the non-necessaria of religion.*

We all allow that there are things which are not necessary to salvation, in the outer courts of Christianity—things which are wisely left open by the Church of England—things about which no hard and fast line has been drawn either by articles, rubrics, or canons—things about which men may be allowed to differ—things, in short, which are neither essential to salvation, nor to loyal Churchmanship—things about which we may hold as strong opinions as we please, but about which we have no right to anathematise and excommunicate our brethren.

The list of these "things indifferent," and the items it includes, will vary greatly according to the standpoint and school of the man who draws it up. My own list would include such points as the Calvinistic controversy, the precise meaning of certain phrases in the Baptismal Service, the voluntary religious Societies we support, the quantity of singing to be used in public worship, the use of the surplice or black gown in the pulpit, and the like. On all these points, you will understand, I have a very decided opinion, and I act accordingly. But they are all points which I have long regarded as non-essential, and I feel I have no right to condemn my neighbours who disagree with me about them.

Now what I am contending for is the immense importance of disagreeing courteously and good-naturedly, about such things as these. Nothing, I am convinced, divides and keeps Churchmen apart so much as the common habit of getting hot, and calling names, and throwing mud, and casting dust in the air about non-essentials. About things essential I hope I am as ready to contend for the faith as any one. I am prepared, for example, to gird up my loins and fight to the bitter end against any attempt to throw away the doctrine of the Trinity or the Atonement, or to un-Protestantise the Church of England, and reintroduce the Mass and the Confessional. But I do protest against the common practice of ramping and raging and using violent language about matters which neither exclude a man from heaven nor from the Church of England.

If, for instance, a High Church neighbour, of the school of Andrews and the late Archbishop Longley, is denounced as a papist, because he preaches in a surplice, and has the Psalms chanted, and turns to the East in repeating the creed, and has daily services, I think he is unfairly used. I do not agree with him. But he is a Churchman, and I consider he has a right to feel aggrieved.

If, on the other hand, a Broad Churchman, of the school of Burnet and the late Archbishop Whately, is dubbed a sceptic because he does not think that St. Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, and dislikes the Church Association, and tries to see some good in all denominations, I think again he is harshly treated. I do not agree with him. But he is a Churchman, and I consider he has a right to feel aggrieved.

If, once more, an Evangelical, of the school of Usher or the late Archbishop Sumner, is sneered at as dishonest and no Churchman at all, because he agrees with Canon Mozley about the baptismal controversy, and is ready to meet Nonconformists on the platform of the Bible Society, I think again he is dealt with most unjustly. He is a Churchman, and has a right to feel aggrieved.

For Christ's sake let us all try to give up this wretched, narrow, illiberal, practice of savagely condemning, anathematising, and even excommunicating, our brethren about things indifferent. Let us try to disagree pleasantly, civilly, and like Christian gentlemen. Let us each believe, if you please, that we have more light than others. But why cannot we have "sweetness" as well as "light?" By all means let us be honest, and stick to our own opinions, like limpets to a rock. But if we want to promote internal unity, let us draw a broad line between things essential and things non-essential in religion, and judge one another accordingly.

III. My third suggestion is this:—If we want to obtain more unity among Churchmen, we should *cultivate opportunities of meeting men of other schools on neutral ground.*

Prejudice, or unreasoning dislike of others, is probably one of the most mischievous causes of division in the present day. Nothing is more common than to find one Churchman disliking another, without ever having seen his face, heard his voice, or read one line of his writings! To dispel prejudices, the best plan is to get men together, and let them look at each other face to face. They say in the City that when they want a business matter pushed they seek an interview, and that one interview will do more than a score of letters. I can quite believe it. I suspect if some of us could have a quiet walk, or spend a quiet evening in the company of some Churchman we now dislike, we should be surprised, when we got up next morning, to find what a different feeling we had about him. We should perhaps say, "I like that man, though I do not agree with him." Great is the power of the face, the manner, the voice, and the eye. Seeing is believing.

At present, many of the clergy seldom or never see each other, except at ruri-decanal synods and visitations; and then, I often think, we look at one another with as much curiosity as if we were looking at the last new beast in the Zoological Gardens. The natural consequence is an immense amount of floating misconstruction and misunderstanding. Far be it from me to say that meeting one another will put an extinguisher on our divisions, melt down all our differences, and make us, like the fabled Corinthian brass, a body of one homogeneous consistency. I expect nothing of the kind. The prismatic colours of our Church's theological rainbow will never fade away and vanish in the cloudy atmosphere of this world. Nothing is colourless but perfect light, and the day of perfect light will never arrive until the Lord comes. I believe there will be High and Low and Broad schools in the Church of England as long as the world stands. But yet there is room for much more approximation; and surely we might lessen the distance that now divides us, and get within hail of one another.

How we are to get opportunities of meeting men of other schools on neutral ground is a point of detail on which every one must judge for himself. But I may be allowed to say that to my mind here lies one use of Congresses and Diocesan Conferences, and one reason why we should attend them. They enable men of different schools to see one another; and if they do nothing else, they help to rub off corners and lessen prejudices.

IV. My fourth and last suggestion is this:—If we would obtain more unity with Churchmen of other schools of thought, *we must co-operate with them whenever we can.*

Co-operation for objects of a temporal or semi-temporal kind is clearly a possibility. For the relief of poverty and distress,—for giving aid to sufferers from war, pestilence, or famine,—for supporting the maintenance of a Scriptural system of education against a secular system,—for maintaining the union of Church and State,—for promoting measures of Church reform,—for all these ends I see no reason why loyal Churchmen of all schools should not heartily work together. I go further. I think they *ought* to work together. It would smooth down many asperities, narrow breaches, heal wounds, and induce a kind and genial feeling between men. Nothing so unites as real work. I should be ashamed of myself if I would not help to launch a life-boat to rescue shipwrecked sailors, or to work a fire-engine when lives were in peril, because I did not like my fellow-helpers. And I should be ashamed if I refused to assist works of mercy, charity, patriotism, or philanthropy, unless on condition that all who co-operated with me were Evangelical Churchmen.

But co-operation for *direct spiritual work*, for teaching religion, for direct dealing with souls, appears to me a very different matter indeed. Here, I must honestly say, co-operation with Churchmen who differ from you seems open to grave objections. It may be my dullness and stupidity that at present I am unable to see the answer to these objections. But it is my deliberate conviction that if High, Broad, and Low Churchmen are sincere, outspoken, hearty, and earnest in their several views, it is difficult for them to work comfortably together in direct dealings with souls.

Can they preach in one another's pulpits, except on rare occasions, with comfort and profit? That is the best and most practical way of putting the subject. A young, enthusiastic, and unreflecting mind may fancy that they can. I contend, on the contrary, that, as things are at present, they cannot. What decided High Churchman would like a decided Evangelical to occupy his pulpit and pour out his soul about regeneration? And what Evangelical clergyman would like a High Churchman to address his congregation, and say all he thought about the sacraments? And where is the preacher, in such a case, whatever might be his desire for unity, who would not feel himself fettered and muzzled, and hampered, and unable to speak freely and fully, for fear of giving offence? And where is the English congregation that would not feel perplexed and annoyed by hearing conflicting doctrines and arguments to which it was entirely unaccustomed? It is easy for shallow thinkers to sneer at the divisions of the English clergy, as "divisions about trifles," and to ask us why we cannot unite in trying to "evangelise" the neglected populations of our large towns! But what do such men mean when they talk of *evangelising*? What do they suppose an evangelizer ought to say and teach? Why, here is precisely one of the very questions on which "schools of thought" are opposed to one another! What one calls evangelising, another does not. What one would think wholesome milk, another perhaps would think little better than poison. In short, co-operation of schools for direct spiritual work seems to me impracticable at present. It may come some time; but the Church is not ripe for it yet. Bishops may sigh for it, and newspaper writers may talk glibly of it as the easiest thing in the world; but it is not easy. If preachers of different

schools, following each other in one pulpit, were to throw heart and soul into their sermons, the result would be a Babel of confusion—a diminution, not an increase of unity—quarrelling and not harmony—strife and not peace. If we love unity and want more of it, I am quite certain that at present in direct spiritual work each school of Churchmen must be content, as a general rule, to work on alone. The acids and alkalies must be kept separate, lest there be effervescences and explosions, and a general blow up. Better days may be in store for us, but they have not come yet.

Some of our Bishops, I observe, are very anxious that the various schools of thought should co-operate in the work of Foreign Missions. “Surely,” men say, “you might all agree to work together about the poor heathen.” A beautiful theory, no doubt! A very pleasing vision! But I take leave to say that the idea is utterly chimerical and unpractical, and the thing is impossible. It looks very fair at a distance, and sounds very grand in Charges and platform speeches. But when you begin to look coolly at it, you find it will not work.

How are missions to the heathen to be carried on unless the managing Committees are agreed about the men they ought to send out, and the doctrines those men are to preach? Where is the likelihood of a Board of Missions consisting of High, Low, and Broad Churchmen, agreeing harmoniously about points like these? Is it likely that men who cannot agree about curates will agree about missionaries? Can we imagine such a Board getting over its difficulty by resolving to ask no questions of its missionaries, and to send out anybody and everybody who is an “earnest” man? The very idea is monstrous. If there is any Minister who must have distinct views of doctrine it is the Missionary. The whole scheme in my judgment is preposterous and unworkable. The difficulties of missionary work under any conditions are immense, as all who give their attention to it know well. But I can imagine no scheme so sure to fail as the scheme of uniting all schools of thought in a land of joint-stock board to carry it on. The certain consequence would be either a helpless feebleness or a scandalous quarrelling, and the whole result a disastrous breakdown of the movement. Co-operation in Missions, whatever our Bishops may think, is, in my humble judgment, an impossibility. There is no wiser course, if we love peace, than to let each School work on in its own way.

This is a humbling conclusion, I grant. The theory of exhibiting the unity of all zealous Churchmen by co-operation is a beautiful one, no doubt; but it is useless to ignore facts. It is a simple fact, which nobody is able to deny, that no clergyman of any school, as a general rule, ever dreams of engaging a curate who does not agree with him. And why? Simply because there cannot be complete and entire co-operation without complete agreement. Why, then, ignore facts in the Church which you admit in the parish? There is a gradient beyond which no locomotive engine will draw a load: its wheels turn round on the rails, and the train comes to a standstill. We must remember this in our zeal for unity among Churchmen. We must strive to co-operate with one another where we can; but we must not attempt to do it when we cannot, lest we damage our cause.

Suffer me now to conclude my suggestions with two words of caution. They are, I venture to think, cautions for the times.

(I) For one thing, let us all take care that we do *not underrate the-importance of unity* because of the apparent difficulty of obtaining it. This would indeed be a fatal mistake. Our want of unity is one great cause of weakness in the Church of England. It weakens our influence generally with our fellow-countrymen. Our internal disunion is the stock argument against

vital Christianity among the masses. If we were more at one the world would be more disposed to believe.—It weakens us in the House of Commons. In every debate about Church matters our watchful rivals and foes parade our divisions before the world, and talk of us as “a house divided against itself.”—It weakens us in the country. Thousands of educated laymen are annoyed and disgusted, and cannot understand what it all means.—It weakens us among the rising generation of young men in the Universities. Scores of them are kept out of the Ministry entirely by the existence of such distinct parties amongst us. They see zeal and earnestness side by side with division, and are so puzzled and perplexed by the sight that they turn away to some other profession, instead of taking orders.—And all this goes on at a period in the world’s history when closed ranks and united counsels are more than ever needed in the Church of England. Common sense points out that this is a most dangerous state of things.

If disestablishment ever comes (and come it will, many say), the Church of England will probably go to pieces, unless the great schools of thought can get together and understand one another more than they do now. “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” A self-governing Church, unchecked by the State, with free and full synodical action, divided as much as ours is now, will very likely split into sections and perish, unless tribulation and persecution bring us together as they united Hooper and Ridley in Queen Mary’s times. To avoid such a consummation as this, for the sake of the world, for the sake of our children, for the sake of our beloved country, Churchmen ought to strain every nerve, deny themselves much, and make every sacrifice, except that of principle, to obtain more internal unity.

(2) Finally, let us all remember that, however much we may value unity, *we must beware of the temptation to sacrifice truth on the altar of peace.* We may buy gold too dear; and we shall make an enormous mistake if we barter away one jot of the Gospel for a mess of pottage under the name of unity.

By all means let us long for unity, work for unity, make many sacrifices for unity with all loyal Churchmen. But never let our thirst for unity tempt us to forsake the great foundation principles of the Bible and the Church of England. The more faithful we are to these principles, the more good men of other schools will respect us, even while they disagree with our views. Trimmers and compromisers are never respected, and carry no weight with them. John Bunyan’s “Mr. Anything” in the “Holy War,” was kicked by both sides. Boldness and honesty are always respected, and especially when they are combined with courtesy and love. Then let us strive so to live, so to preach, so to work, and so to love, that if other Churchmen cannot see with our eyes, they may, at any rate, *respect* us. Above all, let us never forget to pray, in the words of our Liturgy, that “all who profess and call themselves” Churchmen, as well as “Christians, may hold the faith in the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life.” Prayer for unity is prayer according to the mind of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

## **J. C. RYLE**

### Endnotes:

- 1) This Paper is Mr Ryle’s Swansea Congress Paper; it contains some important passages which want of time made it impossible to read on that occasion.—ED.