

## What is Christian Union?

This article was printed in the *Central Presbyterian*, May 11 and 18, 1870.

### Robert L. Dabney

Robert Lewis Dabney was a native of Virginia, educated at Hampden Sydney College, Virginia, the University of Virginia, and Union Theological Seminary at Hampden Sydney. He was ordained to the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in 1847 and spent his first six years of ministerial life pastoring a church. In 1853 he was called to the Chair of Ecclesiastical History and Polity at Union Seminary. In 1859 he transferred to the department of Systematic Theology. Following the Civil War, during which he was a chaplain and also served as Chief of Staff to General T.J. (Stonewall) Jackson, with the rank of Major, he returned to Union Seminary and continued to teach in the field of Systematic Theology until 1883, when he moved to the University of Texas in the Chair of Mental and Moral Philosophy and Political Economy where he taught until 1894. His biographer said that he was entitled to "the first place among the theological thinkers and writers of his century."

The divisions of Protestantism have been often charged as its *opprobrium*. No one who is governed by the principles of the gospel can fail to deplore the bitterness and injustice of Christians towards each other, which have too often attended their unavoidable differences. Every right-minded Christian, accordingly, rejoices in the legitimate means for increasing and evincing the spiritual unity of the whole body of God's people. Where this can be done without compromising conscientious convictions, we hail it as an unmingled blessing to our common Zion.

The Utopian dream of the manifestation of the unity of spirit of the whole body of believers in a universal church union is, however, just one of the prevalent whims of our day. The modern, and especially the American mind seems to be prone to such epidemic distempers; and we now see the Christian world, in certain populous parts of this country, morbidly excited with the claim that Protestantism must manifest its Christian unity as popery does; or else be justly obnoxious to the charge of schism, and remain weak before its thoroughly organized adversary.

That all true followers of a common Lord should be one in aims, in spirit, in affection, no one can doubt. The question is, whether their reduction under a single church government and name is necessary to this Christian unity. Or, to borrow the current phrase of the day, whether *an organic unity* is necessary therefore.

I readily admit, at the outset, that this conclusion is not unnatural for those who regard it from a certain point of view. And a wide and intelligent survey of the history of the church will convince you that this conviction did actually haunt and pervert the thinking of the Christian world for centuries; and that it was one of the most difficult of tasks to make even the Protestant world unlearn it. Through all the ages of the prelatial fathers, and of popery, men not unaturally reasoned thus: "Since there is 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism,' must not the visible church be *one*? Christ is its head; the church is his body. Can one head be united to more than one body, except it be a formation as monstrous as the fabled Cerberus? Is Christ divided? This cannot be. If, then, any sect exists, it and the body from which it is sundered cannot both be Christ's church. The original body must say to its severed branch: Inasmuch as you refuse to be one with us, your claim to be a church of Christ must needs unchurch us. If you are Christ's, we cannot be. If we are Christ's, you must be an anti-Christian body; and so, guilty of the damning sin of schism." Such arguments received obviously a new enforcement when the patristic doctrine was developed, that the graces of redemption are transmitted only through the church sacraments, and that these cannot be administered at all save by the men who hold an unbroken official succession from the apostles, and their deputies. It was now urged in addition, that as the one Lord had but one college of apostles, who held the same office, and acted with the perfect unity of a common inspiration, there was but one line of succession, and one body in which the sacraments carried any vital grace. But as these ordinances were the only channels, they who had them not in their regular succession could not be of the church.

Now, when such reasoners looked back, it was not surprising that they should think they saw full confirmation of their conclusion. The Old Testament church had been *one*, in outward form as in principles, throughout the ages of the theocracy. The church formed by the apostles had been one, bound together by a certain organic unity, as well as by a common faith and love. The great Ecumenical councils, the glory of the clerical orders, had industriously maintained this outward unity. Their creeds and canons claimed the allegiance, not only of the conduct, but of the heart, from the Indus to the Pillars of Hercules, and were rendered into the several tongues of the East and West. To maintain this outward unity was the great object of these pompous and costly assemblages, of all the controversies and persecutions, the anathemas and the laws of patristic ages. And when at length the bishop of Rome usurped the title of Universal Bishop and God upon earth, it was chiefly to incorporate this visible unity in one office for all time. It is not strange, therefore, that to men whose minds were blinded by a false postulate, the idea of more than one visible church in one spiritual body should have seemed a self-evident absurdity.

Even the great Reformation failed to disabuse the minds of many Protestants of this delusion, although the precious principles which were its source should have exploded it at once. The notion that Christian unity could not exist unless all Protestantism was compressed within one church government, evidently complicated itself with Luther's almost frantic opposition to the Zwinglians. In 1527 the great Swiss Reformer addressed the German leader in a fraternal exposition of their disputes touching the Lord's supper, sustaining his own views and criticising those of Luther temperately; and while he

intimated that he and his brethren were not prepared to abandon their conscientious convictions, he cordially offered a similar right to the Lutherans, and proposed that the two should maintain a Christian unity and peace amidst these lesser diversities. Luther's answer was in these words: "Well, since they thus insult all reason, I will give them a Lutheran *warning*. Cursed be this concord! Cursed be this charity! Down, down with it to the bottomless pit of hell! If I should murder your father, your mother, your child, and then, wishing to murder you, I should say to you, 'Let us be at peace, my dear friend!' what answer would you make? It is thus that the enthusiasts who murder Jesus Christ, my Lord, God the Father, and Christendom, my mother, wish to murder me also; and then they say, 'Let us be friends!'" How many inconsistent and scandalous persecutions Protestants have since employed against brother Protestants, in the vain attempt to enforce outward conformity, I need not remind you.

All who hold the scriptural principles of the Reformation, at least, should have remembered that Judaism was a religion for one little nation, while Christianity is for all continents and languages. They should have bethought themselves, yet more, that there was a practical agency existent in the Hebrew Church and in the apostolic for preserving an organic unity consistent with fidelity to truth, the presence, namely, of the infallible Spirit of revelation, speaking through the Urim and Thummim, and through the prophets in the one, and through the inspired apostles in the other. Then, indeed, there may have been reason for holding that even a diversity in unity was without excuse, because there was present in the church an infallible umpire, the spirit of prophecy, to which disputants on any point of theology or church order, however subordinate, might appeal, and from which they would receive the answer of God himself, which made farther difference inexcusable. But now that the Spirit of infallible revelation is confessedly withdrawn from the church, and God has seen fit to leave Christendom to the guidance of the Bible alone, enjoining at the same time sincerity of conviction and a sacred respect for the spiritual liberty of every soul from every authority in divine things save his own, how inevitable, how obvious, is it that a diversity in unity must emerge and must be tolerated? The wish to enforce a universal organic unity deserts the foundation principles of the Reformation. Does not Rome prove it? She claims the right to enforce that outward oneness; she holds that it is essential; her system is precisely the legitimate result of the delusion I combat, and she tacitly admits, by the claim of infallibility, that the presence of this gift in the visible church is the only reasonable foundation of uniformity.

But the history of this delusion is especially instructive, as it shows us that its advocates from the first were chiefly led astray by disregarding the scriptural distinction between the visible and invisible church. In the controversies of the early ages against the Montanist, the Novatian, the Donatist sects, as in the pretensions of Rome now, this difference is quietly but totally omitted. Those Scriptures which do beyond dispute teach us that the invisible and spiritual church of Christ is one, "even as he and the Father are one"; that it is his body; his spouse and bride; catholic; *i.e.*, the fulness of him that filleth all in all; that it is holy; that it is indefectible; all these Scriptures were quoted as though they applied to one organized, visible body of believers, and thence were drawn the tremendous and false consequences of the damning sin of all formal diversity, the

necessity of outward conformity, the propriety of pains and penalties to enforce it. Search and see! It is the same false logic which inspires this modern furor for *unification*.

Now, more attentive inspection of sacred Scripture will show us that the word “church” (ἐκκλησία) there bears two meanings, related, but not identical. In its higher, truer sense, the church is the body of the called of the Holy Spirit, the aggregate of Christ’s redeemed and regenerate people. Its bond of union is not outward, but inward — a living faith and love. Its attributes are not the organic forms and canons and offices which man administers, but the graces which the divine Spirit in-works in the sanctified souls. As the soul of a man is the true man, so this spiritual company, which cannot be numbered nor bounded by human hands, is the true church of God. But as the intelligent soul, for a time, inhabits and uses a body inferior to itself, animal, even material, characterized by dimension and figure, so it is the divine will that this true church shall inhabit an outward form, a human society, which it makes the rude and imperfect instrument of its corporate functions. And as we naturally speak of a corpse as a dead man (although, apart from the informing spirit, it is no *man*, but a clod), so the same word, “churches,” is also applied to the aggregate of these societies which the church universal and spiritual now on earth inhabits. You may remind me that still, as there is this relation, there should be some resemblance between the visible shell and the spiritual body. I freely concede it. The perfection of any one visible church, or the perfection of the great aggregate of visible churches, is to approach as near as may be to the qualities of the invisible church. They cannot possess these qualities, for reasons similar to those which forbid the shell *to be the kernel*, the body *to be the intelligent spirit* within it; but they will properly strive towards those attributes, so far as the body may towards the properties of the soul it contains. As the invisible church is truly holy, the visible will seek, by a scriptural discipline, to be as holy as its outward nature permits. As the invisible church is one and catholic, the visible will strive towards the same unity. But as the bond of union in the invisible church is a common faith and love, and no outward organism, so the unity of the visible church will evince itself in ties of affection and brotherhood rather than in external conformity. You will pardon my borrowing from an old book the following words, which express my meaning better than my own:

I. “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 it is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”

II. “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 those throughout the world that profess the true religion,” etc.

But let us not rest this important distinction upon mere assertion. I refer to the New Testament to find the meaning of the word church, and I there find clear evidences that, in its true and full sense, the church is the spiritual and invisible company of true believers. The word church is the “out-called” (ἐκκλησία). But the true calling of God is

not an outward procession, or the assumption of outward forms, but the work of the Holy Ghost in the heart, bringing men to Christ in true faith. 2 Tim. i. 9: "God hath saved us, and called us with an *holy calling*, not according to our works, but according to his purpose and grace." Heb. iii. 1: They are "partakers of the *heavenly calling*." Rom. viii. 30: "Whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified." Now, the argument seems almost as plain as a truism that the church (ἐκκλησία) is the body of the called (κλητοί); and as this call is the grace which converts, the church is the company of the converted.

The church is "the body" of Christ. (Eph. v. 29 and 30; Col. i. 24.) Christ is the source of spiritual life. The influences by which he animates his body are gracious and spiritual. The body must then be a gracious and spiritual one. Who can tolerate the assertion that any member of this body, united to this divine life-giving Head, is yet dead in trespasses and sins? Is the sacred whole infected with gangrene? It would be impiety to think it.

The church is the temple of Christ. 1 Pet. ii. 4, 5: "To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood," etc. And this figure of speech Peter uses after the example of his Redeemer. Matt. xvi. 18: "Upon this rock will I build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now, since the church is a spiritual house, and its members living stones, it is plainly an invisible and spiritual company. It is also here declared to be an indefectible body: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." It is Christ's sheepfold, "which none is able to pluck out of his Father's hand." But a part, alas! of every visible church, according to our Saviour's own testimony, does perish. Of the ten virgins who outwardly went to meet the bridegroom five were foolish and were shut out. Hence this true church must be the hidden company of the redeemed. See also Acts xx. 28.

Again, this church is the bride and spouse of Christ. Eph. v. 23: "For the husband is head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church," etc. Does Christ unite impurity or death to himself in this intimate and spiritual union? Surely this spouse can be none other than the sanctified! But let the apostle settle this, vs. 25-27: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish." Now, as there is, and can be, no visible body of professed Christians, on whatsoever theory organized, which is without spot, wrinkle, or blemish upon its holiness, but the purest of such bodies include many men who live and die in sin, this church, which is the spouse of Christ, must be the spiritual company of the regenerate. Let the Apostle John decide this. He witnessed in prophetic vision the day when the "marriage of the Lamb came, and his wife made herself ready. And to her it was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white; and the linen is the righteousness of the saints." (Rev. xix. 7, 8.)

And once more; the spiritual and invisible nature of this body is proved by the definitions of its character. Luke xvii. 21: "The kingdom of God is within you." Rom. ii. 28: "He is a

Jew who is one inwardly," etc. Rom. xiv. 17: "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

The church of God in its true sense, then, is not a society of men separated from the world by the hands of man, through outward governments and forms, but the hidden company of the regenerate. This is the glorious body, completely visible to the eye of God, partially discernible by the eye of man, but impossible to be strictly separated and defined by any human marks; this is the church, which is catholic, which is one, which is holy, which is indefectible; out of which there is no salvation. It is by seizing these attributes of the immortal, spiritual body of Christ, and attempting to apply them to the poor earthly shadow, a particular visible church, that all the mischievous errors of spiritual despotism have been evolved.

Yet it is of divine appointment, as well as of necessary consequence, that visible organized societies shall exist, for the gathering together and inhabitation of this spiritual company; and to these societies the same holy name is by accommodation given in the plural number. The Scriptures call them *churches*. As with the true body, of which they are shadows, their highest bond of union is not an outward organism, but a bond of faith and affection. They together constitute the visible church catholic. None of the parts are perfect. Some of them have from time to time become so corrupt as to cease to be true parts of Christ's visible kingdom. The more they approximate the Bible standard, the more will they approach each other, not only in community of faith and love, but even in outward form. Meantime, their separate existence beside each other does not mar the catholicity of the visible church as one whole, but is the inevitable and designed result partly of the separation of the human race by seas, continents, civil governments and diversity of languages, partly of the excusable limitations of the human understanding, and partly of the sinful prejudices of the heart; prejudices which, although not justifiable, will assuredly continue to operate as long as man's nature is only partially sanctified. The native good sense of the people has happily expressed the truth here, by calling them different societies, not sects, nor schism, but *denominations* of Christians. Pounds and guineas, shillings and crowns are all money, the lawful coin of the realm; these are only different denominations of money. Cavalry, infantry and artillery are but different denominations of soldiers, making one patriot army. The fact that some fight on foot and some on horseback makes no necessary schism; but all cooperate. This is the proper conception of the distinction between us as Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, in the one visible church catholic. We are but different denominations of citizens in one kingdom.

And this I hold to be the conception of the visible church which the apostles designed to convey; this I hold to be the development of the visible church which they expected and designed. The very symbols of prophecy confirm it. Under the old dispensation, the candlestick or lamp which symbolized the church was one. In the Revelation there are seven (i. 20), "And the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are seven churches"). The nomenclature of the New Testament is significant of the same truth. So long as the word "church" is employed as the name of the spiritual body of the redeemed, it is always in the singular number; and when applied to a visible society of Christians living

in one city, and capable of having actual communion with each other in public worship, the word is also in the singular number. But the moment it is used to denote any wider aggregation of Christians in organized bodies, it always, save Acts ix. 31, becomes plural. We read of the seven *churches* of Asia, not of the church of Asia; of the *churches* of Galatia, the *churches* of Macedonia, the *churches* of Judea; but the New Testament says nothing of, any visible national church.

But did not the organized bodies of Christians of the same nation and language, soon after the apostolic times, have a more comprehensive bond of outward connection? They did. And I am not unwilling to admit that the liberal and modest rule of the early synods and councils was a legitimate substitute for the regulative authority of the apostles, now removed by death. But two things are admitted touching these synods: that in the purer ages of the ancient church they neither claimed, nor did the Christian people concede to them, any power of enjoining duties or making moral laws beyond the authority of sacred Scripture, and that each Synod was coordinate with and independent of all the others. No governmental tie bound them together; they were united by no other ties than those of mutual respect and affection; yet members or ministers from one province received admission to free communion with the Christians of another. It is a striking fact that even after metropolitan powers were generally conceded to the bishops of Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria, there were large communions, those of North Africa, Persia, Chaldea, and Britain, for instance, which did not send delegates to the archiepiscopal councils nor pay allegiance to their canons; yet were they not regarded as schismatic, but were considered as parts of the church catholic until a more corrupt age. The associated Christians of different provinces then presented practically very much the aspect which is shown by the evangelical sister denominations of the Protestant world. They did not observe a complete outward uniformity, but were distinguished by differences in different countries at least as broad as those which separate us. They did not pretend to preserve any organic unity. Yet they never dreamed, during the purer ages of Christianity, of charging each other with schism; and they considered the aggregate of the whole, united only by Christian courtesy and community of principles, as the visible church catholic. The most learned Christian antiquaries will be least inclined to dispute this view of early Christianity.

And this structure of catholic Christianity, I assert, is the designed development of the apostolic institutions, because there are causes, beyond the power of man to remove, which render it unavoidable. These causes existing, the attempt to compel an organic unity only results in greater mischiefs. To evince this I only have to compare three facts. One is, that the church has among men no infallible expounder of that Bible which is its sole rule of faith and order. The second is, that God hath left the conscience of his people free from the doctrines and commandments of men, and requires of believers that conduct which is dictated by their own intelligent and conscientious convictions. And the third is, that men, being fallible, always have differed, and always will honestly differ in details. How vain is it to expect anything else, when we look soberly over the past history of opinion; when we remember that the different races are reared under different climes, languages, political institutions, and social usages, all of which have an unavoidable effect upon their habitudes of thought; when we consider the limitation and

weakness of man's understanding; and, above all, when we bear in mind that he is at best a sinner, imperfectly sanctified, with passions and prejudices still subsisting. Men cannot be made to think exactly alike, if they think honestly, and this simply because they are men. In those communions which enforce an external unity, the differences of belief are wider than between any two evangelical Christians in this hall, and if those divergencies are suppressed, it is only at the cost of a grievous tyranny over the conscience.

We must remember, also, that each visible church is a *witnessing body*, "it is a pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim iii. 15; see also Isa. ii. 3; lix. 21; Matt. xxviii. 19, 20; Acts xx. 24; Ps. lxxviii. 5; Rev. xii. 11, 12, 17; xix. 10). The great duty and function is to testify for God, and bear his message to an apostate world. To fail of this is to cease to be a church at all. But I ask emphatically, how can men testify for God unless they testify what *they understand* God to say? They *must* speak; to be silent is treason. And in honesty they can only speak what they honestly believe. Hence it is, to the fair mind, the plainest thing in the world that the only practicable scheme of church association is that which unites in one denomination those who are honestly agreed, while it leaves to all others who differ from them the same liberty of association and testimony. Does a certain separation of the parts of the visible church catholic result? I answer, it is the least of the possible evils.

Especially would I protest against the remedy for this partial separation which is proposed by that latitudinarian view now called *Broad Churchism*. This is an expedient only less unprincipled and mischievous than persecution. "Why," asks this masked infidelity, "may not the same visible church embrace within its pale me and the man who believes wholly unlike me, allowing us both our equal liberty?" I answer: Because then the church bears no testimony for her God. The great, the sacred, the exalted, I had almost said the sole, organic function for which the visible church exists, witnessing for saving truth, is gone. No man could propose such an expedient seriously who had not already imbibed a Sadducean contempt for divine truth and become blind to its preciousness. And no church can commit itself to this dishonest policy without being infested with a blank and sardonic infidelity. History and common sense have both spoken on this point too plainly to be misunderstood. Commend me for ever to an honest, wrong-headed bigot, with all his faults, rather than to a Broad Churchman. The one has at least reverence and manhood enough in his nature to value truth, and when he supposes he has found the priceless jewel, to do it hearty homage. The other is so coldly and meanly indifferent to its sacred claims that he is as willing to lend his associated power to sustain its foul enemy, falsehood, as truth itself. Broad Churchism delights to hurl the charges of Phariseism, hypocrisy and malignity against the honest votaries of truth. But examine its *animus* and you will find that it is as hypocritical and bitter as it is cold. Selfish indifference does indeed make it very tolerant of all that which, if it had any sincerity, should excite its moral indignation; the only thing erroneous enough in its eyes to arouse its intolerance is honest conviction and zeal for God's truth. And against this it harbors all the gall and bitterness which it imputes to us.

I advance also this consideration: that the advocates of ecclesiastical amalgamations in our day show neither the temper, nor the success to encourage our confidence in them. We see no proof that their zeal for organic unity is prompted by true Christian charity. Let it be clearly understood that we except a number of well-meaning Christians, whose kindly hearts, more kindly than considerate, are beguiled by the professed cry of peace. But the spirit of the major part appears to be anything else than that moderation, fairness, and gospel affection, which promise a real union among Christians. We see no evidences of that catholic wisdom and justice which are large enough to embrace the whole kingdom of God on earth; but while the pretense is catholicity, the action has sometimes been as fanatical, as full of narrow prejudice, and as divisive as that of any sect which has ever really marred the unity of Christ's body. Thus we saw the great Evangelical Alliance of Protestant Europe, as it proudly styled itself, while sufficiently latitudinarian to embrace parts of the Reformed Church of France, which flout the most sacred principles of the gospel, the divinity and vicarious satisfaction of the Lord Jesus Christ, the fall of man, the work of the Holy Ghost, spurn American churches, the purest in creed and membership on earth, because they would not declare that relation of domestic servitude criminal in which all the patriarchs and prophets lived, and which Christ and his apostles authorized! Such pitiful follies and wrongs as these give little promise that those hands will be the ones to heal the breaches of Protestant Christendom. At a later day we have seen a journal which called itself the *Christian Union*, circulated with vast zeal and expense, avowedly to advocate this cause of peace and love. But its tone was the most truculent and threatening which has ever been heard in America.

The plans likewise of these men do not appear to be the result of devout faith and reliance on God, but of an arrogant worldly wisdom and unbelief. They manifestly have little faith in the power of the truth, unsupported by material power, to subdue the world to Christ. They have forgotten our Saviour's declaration that "the kingdom of God cometh not with observation;" they wish to have men cry, "Lo, here; and lo, there." They are anxious to exchange strict integrity of conviction and purity of doctrine, and the secret but mighty power of the Holy Ghost through his words, for human *eclat*, numbers, wealth, combination and power. They expect and prepare to convert the world as they built the Pacific railroad, and as they conquered our country, by a mighty aggregation of money and numbers. There is, my brethren, more of the lust of power than of disinterested love in these overtures for fusion.

And this suggests the last point which I propose to urge in this discussion. Pretensions, which so plainly betray the cravings of ambition, are ominous of danger to religious liberty. The employment of force to produce conformity has always been the natural corollary of the principle these men assert. Consider: They say that the visible oneness of church government is necessary to realize a Christian unity. Outward conformity, then, becomes an imperative Christian duty. He who refuses it rends the body of Christ. All separation is schism, according to them, and the tendency of their premises is, of course, towards the extreme conclusion that schism is a sin that necessarily damns the soul. Now, the dangerous trait of this creed is that it obviously sets the sin of division, as they term it, in such a light that its forcible prevention and punishment becomes

reasonable. For the practical argument against the persecution of errorists, supposing them really in error, was not that men are irresponsible for the false opinions they sincerely entertain; they are responsible to God. Nor was it that the crime of heterodox belief is not mischievous; it may be infinitely mischievous. Why, then, supposing the crime of false belief clearly ascertained, why may it not be as reasonably suppressed by force as horse-stealing or murder? The answer which Protestantism gives is this: That the man of evil belief is responsible, but to God only, and not to man, because God is the exclusive Lord of the conscience, and that a belief which is not intelligent and sincere is worthless to God and man, whereas the stocks, the rack, the scourge, have no tendency to reconcile the mind and heart of the sufferer to the creed of those who are persecuting him. But now see how the dogma of the necessary unity of the visible church evades all this just logic. It replies: Very true, the stocks, the rack, the scourge are not means to produce light in the understanding and love in the heart for a creed before rejected and hated, but they are very proper means to compel acts of outward uniformity. And, according to this system, *these* are as necessary to the salvation of souls as faith and sincere conviction. Again, if a visible church claims this exclusive and necessary supremacy, *fure divino*, who can fail to see how natural will appear to it the claim of authority to enforce it? Such a church assumes to be, in a certain sense, an earthly redeemer; it will no longer admit that men are responsible only to their Redeemer in heaven for their opinions.

I beseech you here, my brethren, to ponder well the lessons of your church history; they are most instructive. You will there learn that whenever the church has condescended to argue her right to persecute (many religious persecutions have been the license of mere blind hatred and fury, or of ruthless and unmasked ambition), the claim has always been argued from the false postulate that the visible church must necessarily have an external and organic unity. Was it not on this plea that the bishops of Rome crushed out the primitive churches of Britain and Ireland? But the most significant fact to my mind in the whole history of religious liberty is this: That the first assumption of the right to persecute by the Christian church itself was made against the Donatists of North Africa in the fifth century, and on the arguments of the great Augustine. These sectaries, as they were called, were charged by the Catholic Christians with no error of doctrine; they held the same creed. They had separated themselves from the rest of the church on points of church government. The division was finally suppressed by persecutions at the advice of the father I have named. He was a man by no means cruel or arrogant in temper, and few of any age have doubted his eminent piety. He was also committed by his own published declarations, as well as by his generous feelings, *against* the employment of force in religious disputes. But at length the erroneous principles of the age as to the necessary unity of the visible church asserted their natural force over his conclusions, and he convinced himself and the rulers of his day that force was reasonable and useful. From that day to this these arguments of Augustine have been the most plausible pleas of religious tyranny, and all the more mischievous because of the deserved honor attached to his venerable name.

False principles, like leaven in the meal, always tend to work out their logical consequences, and to lead their votaries to all their results. These may be very

unexpected; they may be very unpopular; they may be bitterly repudiated, even by those who are unconsciously tending towards them. But in due time they come, and are at last boldly avowed. Unless the seminal errors are purged out, this must be so; because the human mind must reason connectedly from its postulates. Persecution for opinion's sake is disavowed in theory by all, in this age and country. Whether the persecuting *temper* is not present already, the observant man can judge. But let this project of church union advance to a certain stage, and the claim will be again avowed. The ground on which the work of fusion is urged, remember, is that the true church *must be visibly one*. It will not be hard for the growing party to convince itself that it alone is the true church. It will be equally clear in its eyes that those perverse people who refuse to conform to it are very great sinners, because they obstruct the approaching glorious unification. And now, as the character of this great mass is corrupted, and its arrogance inflated by wealth, numbers and conscious power, it will not fail to persuade itself at last that as it has the might, it has the right to compel our allegiance.

For all these reasons, then, I am convinced that a general organic union is no means to promote Christian union. As I began, so I end by affirming the inestimable value of the latter. A true Christian union, which should make the parts of the visible church catholic "first pure, then peaceable," would indeed increase the moral and spiritual power of God's people for good. I do not look to the mere increase of numbers and wealth as any power whatever for the world's conversion. The true union of principle and love would make Christians holier and happier. It would economize much effort now expended in the rivalries of Christians against each other which should be directed to aggressions against the common enemy. It would remove the dishonor sometimes done to the gospel, not by the necessary existence of denominations, but by their unnecessary contentions.

How then may this worthy object be now furthered by us? The answer will indicate my views of what is practical and practicable.

First, Where denominations of Christians exist separately in the same regions of the church, which are really agreed in principles, and are kept asunder only by unessential differences of usage, they should fuse themselves into one organization. In such case the inconveniences of separation are compensated by no gain of peace or of conscientious integrity. The testimony of the two is the same, and they may properly join in uttering it.

Second, Where the differences are such that there cannot be a peaceable and honest fusion into one, each denomination should recognize in the others a valid church character, and concede to them the same right of independent and conscientious testimony, within the pale of the visible church, which they claim for themselves.

Do you ask how far this recognition shall be extended? I answer, *to all communions which retain those features which are the marks of a visible church — the word, the ministry, and the sacraments of Christ, even to that degree which is fundamental to the*

*great end of the church, the redemption of souls.* We all admit that, of the doctrines and instrumentalities of Christ's kingdom, some are fundamental in a sense in which others are not. Some may be unknown, or even disbelieved or disused, without destroying the soul. Others are so essential that without them salvation is impracticable. Now, we should receive those communions which honestly hold and employ the latter as 'valid, though imperfect parts of the visible church catholic.

Do you ask again, Who is to decide, in a particular case, which doctrines and ordinances are essential to the being of a true visible church? I reply, *each communion must, as far as its intercourse with others goes, decide this for itself.* If it decides too strictly, and refuses to recognize some whom the Scriptures recognize, this is their error. There is no human remedy.

This, their uncharitableness, though their error, does not unchurch them, and should be treated by other communions as other lesser blemishes are treated. And as long as these others refrain from retaliation, and stand prepared to reciprocate the communion of saints as soon as it can be done on equitable terms, the responsibility of the separation thus made rests exclusively with the first party. We thus see that it is not the right of conscientious differences on the lesser points, and of denominations formed thereon, which incurs the guilt of schism; but rather the refusal of that right on unscriptural and inadequate grounds.

Third, Each denomination should recognize the validity of the ministry and sacraments of every other evangelical denomination. The intercommunion of their ministers as ministers, and their members as members, should manifest this brotherhood on all suitable occasions.

Fourth, The disciplinary acts performed by one communion should be held valid by every other. All denominations having agreed on these two prime principles, that the church has no statute book binding the consciences of God's children but the Bible, and no penalties for transgressions but the moral and spiritual, a sentence passed on these principles by one denomination upon its unruly member should be respected by all others. Just as a man under censure migrating from one Presbyterian congregation to another cannot be reinstated by the second against the verdict of the first, but is required to reconcile himself to the same body which he had offended, so should it be throughout the church catholic.

Last, and chiefly, *all Christians should study moderate and charitable feelings towards others, and should sincerely seek to grow in the knowledge of revealed truth.* As they approach nearer that infallible standard they will approach nearer to each other. "The wisdom which is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace, of them that make peace." (James iii. 17, 18.) "Let us therefore be thus minded; and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing." (Phil. iii. 15, 16.)

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

### **Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine**

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).