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After Fifty Years.

IX. The Real Unity of the New Testament.

BY THE REVEREND CANON J. K. MOZLEY, D.D., LONDON.

THE New Testament represents and is a small library of books written by various authors in different places and covering, roughly, a period of rather more than half a century. The collection of the books as a library was completed, as far as the bulk of the literature was concerned, in about another half century. The decisive allocation to the library of a few more books took considerably longer; from the appearance of the first writing that we possess, whatever that may be, up to the time when the question of the sum total of volumes rightly belonging to the library was finally answered, three hundred years may be said to have elapsed.

It is obvious, therefore, that if we have the right to speak of a (or the) unity of the New Testament, we are not referring to something humanly contrived beforehand and carried out according to organized plans and with mechanical accuracy. The writers, as writers, were not concerned with one another; some of them made use of the same literary materials, and were aware of the work that others had accomplished. But they were not thinking of their books as forming a library, which would be added to, or be the second series of, that which already existed, composed of the books which the Jewish Church held as sacred. They were not in any way intent on the production of a literature that should take its place as the completion and interpretation of those books. They were, in fact, except possibly in one or two instances, intent only on the particular situation and need which had caused them to take up the pen. That what they had to say was relevant to the whole Church of God, in its various local manifestations, they would not have doubted; but they did not write with the purpose of expounding for the benefit of the Christian people the principles of the Christian creed, worship, and life. And they did not write as a group or team conscious of its mutual obligations and of the need for the expression of a unity which should impress readers by its revelation of so many writers agreed in saying the same all-important thing. They do say very different things in very different ways. Yet it would be true to say that those who have read and studied them most closely, scientifically, and sympathetic-

ally, have received the profound impression, not of difference, still less of discrepancy or antagonism, but of unity. And as to the character and explanation both of the unity which exists in the writings and of the consciousness thereof which the reader possesses, these are to be found not in the writers as persons who are trying to say such and such things, nor in the power of appreciation, interpretation, and synthesis, which the reader brings to his reading, but in the theme of the writings and in Him who is the Author of the theme. The unity is first of all the unity of Revealer and revelation. That precedes the writings which bear witness to it; it is possible to think of such written witness as never having been given; but since that witness has been given, the unity which is first of all that of Revealer and revelation appears, secondly, as that of Inspirer and inspired. To the original divine theme answers the divine setting forth of the theme. The unity of the writings of the New Testament exists as a result of the illumination and guidance given by the Holy Spirit: it is not man-made.

Thus in closest relation to one another stand the truths of the unity of the New Testament and the unity of God. At every point of the writings we are in the presence of the revelation of God in His Son Jesus Christ and of the witness borne to that revelation. The uniqueness of that revelation, with all that follows from it for the deeper knowledge of God, is the final overthrow of polytheism, since polytheism and any real revelation of God are contradictory one to the other. Of that real revelation the New Testament is the depository and guardian. The coming of the true and only Son of the one God means the twilight of all the false gods. It is not a matter of theological formulas, though already in the New Testament such formulas are above the horizon, but of a theme which never varies.

The unity of God, just as it is, in its full revelation, the destruction of all false gods and religions, is also the foundation of true and universal religion, from which no one need be excluded by any accident of earthly life and circumstance. St. Paul develops the essential character of this truth in the first three

chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, in which he shows first the guilt in which the whole world without distinction stands before the one God, and then the offer of forgiveness and justification to all, equally without difference, if they have faith in God who has revealed Himself in the redemptive work of Christ—the work that is God's work and God's gift. And this is no particular theologoumenon of St. Paul's. The emphasis that he lays on that which Professor Dodd in his commentary on Romans has described as 'the pure objectivity of that which God has done for men,' is the same as that which we find in the teaching of Christ, even to the final proof of God's graciousness in the sending of the Son and His sacrificial death—for it cannot be supposed that the references that Jesus makes to His death present a distinction between what Jesus does and what the Father sent Him to do.

The New Testament is at one in the witness that it bears to the one God; it is also at one in the witness that it bears to the one gospel of God. That gospel is centred, as any one who reads with his eyes open can see, in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. But whoever has gone so far as to find that centre, to confess with St. Paul that Christ died for our sins and rose again, will find much more. There is no gospel of Christ's work which is not also a gospel of Christ's Person, and, behind and with that Person, of God in His redeeming love; and, forwards, from and still with that Person, a gospel of the Holy Spirit and of the Church. The unity of the New Testament, which is the unity of the primitive Christian faith, is not truly discerned unless we note the recurring unities—one God, one Lord Jesus Christ, one sacrifice for all, one Spirit, one body.

Thus what appears in the New Testament, as the fruit of God's activity manwards, is the one, true, universal religion. All half-way houses are for ever set aside; the equal rights of all men in the presence of God result from the universal range of God's work. A new human unity is made possible through those redemptive acts which reveal the one God in a relation to His world which is far closer than could be conceived, even when the most is made of those great conceptions of His Fatherhood and providence which, in the Old Testament, enrich the doctrine of God the Creator. The unity of response from men to the gospel, which is the other side of the truth that there is one gospel for all men, involves the exclusiveness of the true religion. It is exclusive just because it is comprehensive; and this, its essential nature, is in the most direct way of God.

From the New Testament standpoint there is no possibility of doing anything with modern notions of so many religions and creeds, which nevertheless, are fundamentally at one, since in all of them there is witness borne to the desire of man to enter into fellowship with God, and some illumination of the soul, with some consequent increase in the knowledge of God, can be gained through each one of them. When this position is adopted, it means that all religions are regarded as relatively true (and it must be added relatively false), that all differences between them are viewed as differences of degree, and that it is one of the chiefest offences against true religion to claim that there is a true religion. All such ideas are natural enough if the whole problem of religion is considered simply as an investigation of the various human approaches; and the belief that God has done something which makes all the difference to the whole situation, human ideas about true religion included, is ruled out in advance by no reference being made to it. The unity of religions as thus understood has nothing in common with the teaching and implication of the New Testament as to religious unity. Questions as to the relation of man's ideas about God, or about the divine unity, to the actual fact which is in no way dependent upon those ideas, belong to the field of the philosophy of religion, and need not be discussed here. The contrast between the New Testament and the kind of modern thought that I have had in mind would be more familiar than it is, if it were not that so much thought and talk about religion by-passes the New Testament. As a contrast it should be firmly maintained; but it does not carry with it the conclusion that all that is to be found outside the true religion, of which the New Testament is the final literary record and the Church the witness and guardian, is false and valueless because merely human. We have no right to say, 'Here and here there has been no revelation of God, and therefore no true religious knowledge and no true religious obedience.'

Again, the unity of response from the human side which the New Testament picture of the one body and of the fellowship of believers involves is not to be interpreted as though at every point a primitive model of Christian thought and practice existed and possessed binding authority upon all later ways of thinking and acting. Here, once more problems appear which are real problems both for the historian and for the theologian. That there has been growth and development in the history of the Christian Church beyond anything that the New Testament would immediately suggest is obvious;

and as to the view to be taken thereof there is no single undisputed Christian verdict. And just because all Christian communions claim to base themselves and their teaching upon the New Testament, it might appear as though stress upon the New Testament as providing anything of the nature of a sanction and norm must make for continued division and work against mutual understanding. I do not believe this to be the case. That scholars will reach agreement on disputed interpretations of New Testament passages which have a bearing upon Christian unity is certainly not to be easily prophesied. But in the fuller realization that all questions about anything distinctively Christian must be taken back to the New Testament and reviewed in the light that it has to give, there is the presupposition of all rightly directed inquiry into problems of reunion.

In relation to the human response to the revelation and grace of God, of special importance is the book in which, more than in any other, the unity of the New Testament is clearly manifested—the Acts of the Apostles. Acts is, indeed, the bridge-book of the volume; if we did not possess this book, we should find it a task of the greatest difficulty to reconstruct the process whereby the situations and problems which meet us in the Epistles had arisen.

The significance of Acts is threefold in this respect. First, it shows how the latent universal element in the Synoptic Gospels breaks through all Jewish limitations and is revealed as the true nature of the religion which Jesus proclaimed through His teaching and through His death. There is very little in those Gospels which involves the conscious intention of a religion in which Gentiles may share alike with Jews. In the Epistles, on the other hand, while the question is handled in a necessarily controversial manner by St. Paul in writing to the Galatians, it ceases rapidly to be a living issue to which attention needs to be given. In Romans St. Paul thinks it incumbent on him to show that the religious equality of Jews and Gentiles as sinners and as the objects of God's grace in Christ does not simply sweep away the whole notion of Jewish 'advantages.' But in most of the Epistles, whatever argument there may be, relevant to the nature of Christianity, it is directed to other dangers. A misconstruction of Christian universalism, leading to a theosophic syncretism, in which the importance of the actual earthly history of Jesus might be undervalued, is a more real peril than any simple relapse into a partially Christianized Judaism. The Epistle to the Hebrews cannot

rightly be quoted in criticism of this statement, since the community there addressed needed to be warned, not against the kind of attempt to combine the Jewish law with Christianity which St. Paul denounced in his letter to the Galatians, but against an apostasy which would have meant a definite repudiation of Christ as the Son of God.

I have written of the latent universalism which is to be discerned in the Gospels. There are, of course, passages which make that universalism explicit; the East and the West are to take part in the Feast of the Kingdom, the vineyard is to be given to another nation than that of the Jews, the gospel is to be preached among all nations, and from all nations disciples are to be made. But even apart from such particular sayings, neither the character of the religion to which the Gospels point, nor the central Figure of the Gospels, naturally suggest an interpretation which would confine it and Him within the limits of one exclusive, because nationalistic, tradition. Seeley's *Ecce Homo* would need to be rewritten to-day in the light of modern research into the Gospels, but his conception of a universal Christian commonwealth as involved in the teaching and in the 'laws' which Christ gives, in which every 'partition-wall' is broken down, is not out of date as an interpretation of Christ and the Gospels.

It is this Christian commonwealth which the Epistles bring before us. It is the Book of Acts which shows how that which the Gospels more often imply than definitely announce became an established reality. It gives us the background of St. Paul's conviction that all divisions are done away in Christ, and is a corrective of any tendency to ascribe the idea of a Church in which Gentiles should be on a level with Jews to St. Paul alone. The preaching of Jesus as Lord, of which we hear from the beginning of Acts onwards, could begin within the framework of Jewish religion, with its restrictions and its oppositions to any truly universal religion, but it could not long continue to abide by Jewish limitations. It is clear in the Acts that the old wine skins are not adequate to the new wine. The implications of the Synoptic Gospels are being worked out in the rise of a Catholic society open to all on the basis of repentance and faith.

And what kind of a faith was it to which converts pledged themselves, and which was linked with the act of baptism? This is the second point at which the unifying character of Acts is to be discerned. It was a faith directed to Jesus as the crucified and risen and exalted Christ and Lord. However the terminology of the Lordship of Jesus grew up

(and students of New Testament criticism and theology are aware of the controversy that has developed around this question), it is in line both with the evidence that we possess in Acts and with natural probability that with the breaking away from the religious observances and restrictions of Judaism, emphasis upon the Messiahship of Jesus, as affording the finally satisfactory account of His Person, should decline. Moreover, the Cross was a most formidable obstacle to any narrowly Jewish interpretation of the Person of Jesus. Christian apologists did indeed contend that the idea and expectation of a crucified Messiah were present in the Scriptures of the Old Testament; but without doubt, this was not what anyone had looked for in connexion with the coming of the Messiah, while there was nothing from the Christian standpoint to be said in favour of the view that the death of Jesus, as something that was neither accidental to His mission nor simply the manifestation of the wickedness of the Jews, was of benefit to the Jews alone.

In the Epistles the Cross of Jesus is viewed as having a universal significance. All the writers who speak about it, whatever differences they may show, are therein agreed. And that is true also of the Person. Jesus is the Son of God, and the gospel about Him is a gospel for all men. Once again, we may see the unfolding of the deeper meaning of His earthly life and teaching. The Jesus of the Synoptist is not a Person of partial significance; He is to God and to man what no other is; and one does not press the case too far, if one adds or can be. In Acts we are conscious, not of a developed theology but of a preaching of Jesus, and of the place of Jesus in the religion which is being built up, which calls for a theology. With the movement towards that theological interpretation of Jesus and His Cross we associate St. Paul, during the middle years of the first century, with a sureness that is not possible for us in connexion with any other name. But that does not involve the conclusion that St. Paul stood alone or that he forced a theology of his

own upon a reluctant Church. He never writes as though that were the case, and there is no good reason for supposing that he did anything of the kind. It was not due to St. Paul in any isolation from the rest of the Church that the religion which followed upon the Crucifixion and Resurrection was centred in Jesus Christ.

Finally, the unity of the response of faith was a unity created by the Holy Spirit. The response was not regarded as an unassisted human response. Christians are the people who have received the Spirit, and whose lives are in the Spirit. Pentecost is the event without which a new and living way would not have resulted even from those great preceding events, the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. No theology developed in closer contact with a living religion than that of the Holy Spirit. Yet if we were to come straight from the first three Gospels to all the literature that in our Bibles comes after Acts we might be surprised at this fact and find it hard to understand. Acts is the book across which, as a bridge, we pass, and as we do so we understand how it is that Christian self-consciousness became the consciousness of the Church and the individual believer as sustained and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

If we want to sum up the whole truth of the unity of the New Testament in a phrase, we may say that the unity lies in the uniqueness, in the difference which, both in its totality and in its parts, separates the New Testament from all other religious literature. Even if we think of the Old Testament that is true; for while the Christian conviction that the Old Testament is patent in the New and that the New is the fulfilment and completion of the Old, is fully justified, yet in the fulfilment the New goes far beyond the Old into regions where the presence of God with man and the communion of man with God are of an unprecedented and unimaginable character. It is this which distinguishes the religion of the New Testament; and of that religion the theology of the New Testament is the continual exposition and interpretation.