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OUR REDEEMER'S PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY.

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“That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”—JOHN xvii. 21.

A RECENT writer, referring to the prayer of Christ recorded in the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel, says, “We have here the words which Christ addressed to God in the critical hour of his life—the words in which he uttered the deepest feeling and thought of his spirit, clarified and concentrated by the prospect of death.” Melancthon, the great Reformer, speaking of it, says, “There is no voice which has ever been heard, either in heaven or in earth, more exalted, more holy, more fruitful, more sublime, than this prayer offered up by the Son of God himself.” In recent times more than one devout commentator has expressed the sentiment that when we stand within the precincts of this profound passage of God's word we are on holy ground, yea, in the very Holy of Holies. It becomes us, therefore, as we enter upon the consideration of a portion of this wonderful prayer, to take off the shoes from our feet, and to invoke the Spirit of all grace to bestow upon us that deep humility and reverence of mind we would need in coming into the very presence of God. As we proceed, let us also bear in mind the fact that this



prayer is a part of Christ's official ministration as our divinely authorized Intercessor and High Priest before the throne of God. The prayer consists of several distinct portions, and I shall now ask your particular attention to those four verses (20-23) which relate to the oneness or believers.

Never, perhaps, since the apostolic age, has there been manifested throughout Christendom at large so deep an interest in the subject of Christian union as has been witnessed during this latter half of the nineteenth century. The indications to which I allude are such as the following, to-wit: the growth, among Christians of widely separated faiths, of a larger tolerance of each other's divergencies of belief; an increased readiness on the part of various denominations to seek closer fellowship with brethren from whom they have long been estranged; the marked falling off in the number and acrimony of polemical discussions; and a more general desire for the obliteration of all separating walls not actually demanded by loyalty to essential truth. Whilst candor obliges us to admit that much which passes for zeal in behalf of Christian union has no better foundation than gross ignorance of the grave issues involved, or culpable indifference to sound doctrine, it is still true that the prevailing sentiment of the Christian world to-day in regard to the sin of schism is in closer accord with the mind of Christ than was that of former generations. Nevertheless, the moment one attempts to locate the blame for the numberless divisions now marring the body of Christ, or even to suggest a remedy, a storm of discussion arises at once, revealing only too plainly that the day for the complete healing of Zion's sorrows is yet far in the future. This fact, however, should not discourage those who pray for the peace of Jerusalem, for the real pro-

gress already noted within the last half century is full of promise for the coming years, and it may well stimulate the hope that Christ's prayer will surely be realized at last.

The first question to be considered is: What is the precise character of that oneness which our Saviour here has in mind? To what extent, and in what sense, does he desire all his followers to become one?

1. Whatever the oneness was to which he had reference, it was something which, at the moment he spoke, had not been realized in full perfection among his then living disciples. This seems to follow, not merely from the fact that he did not assert that it was then in existence, but because he asked his Father to create or bestow it. At the time Christ offered this prayer he had some hundreds of genuine disciples in Palestine, who for months or years had been savingly converted. These persons, from the very instant of their renewal by the Holy Spirit, and by virtue thereof, were unquestionably one in several vital respects. They were all one in their regeneration by the same divine Spirit; one in their union by faith with the same Redeemer; and one in their possession of an indefeasible title to the same inheritance of everlasting life. Surely, all these unspeakable precious features of a true spiritual oneness belonged to each and every one of those disciples before Christ offered this prayer; and by no possibility could that oneness be diminished, much less lost. There were other features of oneness, however, which they certainly did not yet possess, and which they would have to have before they could all be perfectly one. We know that at that moment the Christians then in the world did not even enjoy that oneness of external organization which our Lord gave them a few weeks later by the hands of his

inspired apostles. Not until after the day of Pentecost were the Christians welded into one body called the Church of Christ, having one set of officers and one set of rules and ordinances to serve as a common bond of union. But more than this, the Christians then living were very far, indeed, from being entirely one in their apprehension of the doctrines of the gospel. Neither were they completely one in harmonious, brotherly fellowship. Not to mention the unseemly self-seeking and contention among the apostles themselves in regard to the places of honor in Christ's kingdom, which he had had to rebuke, we learn from the sacred records in Acts and the Epistles that in a little while two factions arose within the bosom of the infant church, the one composed of Jewish and the other of Gentile converts; and before the first century is half gone we find the apostles consuming much of their time reproving schismatics, and trying to reconcile alienated brethren in various portions of the church. One need only peruse the several books of the New Testament in order to discover the humiliating truth that good Christian people can take diametrically opposite views of almost every doctrine of the Bible, and can divide the church into rival sects and factions until sensible men of the world are puzzled to understand how all these warring elements can possibly be one in any vital sense whatever. In view of these admitted facts, whilst we are unable to see why our Redeemer should take up the closing hours of his earthly ministry in begging his Father to make believers one in those respects in which they were already and necessarily such by virtue of their new birth, we can see abundant reason why he should pray that they all might be made one in their understanding of all the doctrines and precepts of the gospel, one in every essential particular of their church

life, one in their harmonious, brotherly fellowship, and one in their plans and labors for the evangelization of the human race. Therefore, it becomes us to view with distrust all those interpretations of this great intercessory prayer which represent our Lord as asking his Father to bestow upon believers something they already possessed, and yet making no special requests for other important elements of oneness without which they could never hope to bring the world to his feet.

2. A second characteristic of the oneness for which Christ prayed is that it is the exclusive possession of regenerate persons. None but believers can either share this oneness or fully understand it. Our Lord wants men to know that true Christian unity is something divine and sacred. God may and does use men as his instruments in bringing it to pass, but it is a work of divine grace. Hence no man can bring himself into the charmed circle of Christian unity merely by uniting with a Christian church. Now, unless this simple truth is clearly seen, we are certain to fall into confusion of thought when we come to deal with the matter of Christian union. One great trouble arises from the well-known fact that the purest Christian churches on earth contain a good many spurious members. It is also true that in some of the most corrupt churches there is only a very small proportion of really regenerate persons. It is easy, therefore, to understand that mere oneness of outward organization might have no real connection with true Christian union. Hence the attempt of some good men in our day to bring together, in one grand world-wide church, all the scattered and opposing Christian bodies, regardless of their wide divergencies as to faith, polity and worship, is the very wildest of dreams. Such an enterprise, if carried out, would probably do no more

to further true unity than would the consolidation of a Christian denomination with some great political party. In order to unite two or more bodies to any good purpose, a large majority of the members thereof must be, in the judgment of charity, real Christians; they must be substantially agreed as to all essentials of the Bible; and there must be such a general degree of harmony in regard to the details of church life as gives promise of good results. The practical significance and use of this condition attached to true oneness which confines it within the circle of believers, is not to prohibit the union of now separate churches merely because some spurious members are on their rolls, but to admonish us that oneness of outward organization is not the synonym of Christian unity. This outward oneness is, at best, only one means to the true inward oneness, and it will even prove worthless in that respect unless, in our attempt to heal division, we are loyal to the whole truth of God, and exercise sound common sense.

3. The third and most wonderful characteristic of that oneness which Christ prayed the Father to bestow upon all true believers is an absolute completeness which has its analogy in the perfect unity existing between the Father and the Son. The language our Lord here employs to set forth the intimacy and divine perfectness of this unity of believers is altogether remarkable in its varied iterations. First, he prays for believers in every age of the world—"that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." Then a little farther on he varies the expression somewhat—"that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one." Of course all will agree that there is a mysterious sense in which creatures could not

become precisely like the Godhead, but it would seem perfectly clear that these words of our Redeemer contemplate a oneness of believers in respect to all the things of salvation which in its utmost reach must exclude all divergency of doctrinal belief and Christian practice, and everything akin to rivalry or division. Can we conceive of the Father and the Son as having opposite views of the plan of salvation, of church government, or of the methods for the evangelization of the world? Do they find two different sets of truths in the Bible? Is it even thinkable that they should ever come into the slightest collision in respect to any feature of church life? Surely not. But Christ's request is that his disciples shall be one even as he and his Father are one. More than this he could not ask. He does not ask that his people shall merely bear a general family likeness or be one in some essential respects, but that they shall become as completely one as the Father and Son are one. He does not ask merely that Christians of various bodies may learn to exhibit kindly tolerance of each others diverse beliefs, for his prayer contemplates the abandonment of all wrong beliefs, so that there will be no opposing beliefs needing our tolerance. But what view did the inspired apostles of Christ take of this matter? Did they make apologies for the differences they witnessed among Christians so long as they did not utterly subvert the fundamental doctrines of grace? Did they speak or act as if it were no sin to organize separate churches so long as the differences related only to the form of government, or the forms of worship, or the mode of baptism? Listen to the way Paul talked to the Corinthians who were disposed to array themselves in parties under the names of even inspired apostles: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord

Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." (1 Cor. i. 10.) A little farther on (1 Cor. iii. 1-4), referring to the same differences at Corinth, he says: "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. . . . for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?" It is but just to affirm that the differences to which Paul here refers were of no graver kind than some of those which now divide various evangelical denominations of Christians in our own land. That he would have condemned as "carnal" the persons who are responsible for these modern divisions as he did those schismatics at Corinth seems absolutely certain. And it seems equally certain that this blessed prayer of our Redeemer contemplates the complete obliteration of all these divisions to the end that his people may become one even as he and his Father are one. He did not specify the date at which he expected the complete realization of his heart's desire for Christian union; but we feel sure it will be realized in absolute perfection in heaven, and that the realization of it then will be the culmination of a long series of prayers and labors running through ages of faithful use of means on the part of his dear people, whom he hath made co-workers together with himself. In this vast enterprise, as in the matter of our own sanctification, and in that of the conversion of the world to Christ, the work is of God, and must advance by gradual steps; but each Christian has an important part to perform, and there can be no surer evidence of our own renewal than a con-

stant, longing desire to see Christ's people made truly one.

4. A single other feature of the oneness Christ prayed for will be mentioned, namely: It is not something concealed in the hearts of believers, but it is something which, like the fragrant ointment, bewrayeth itself; like the city set upon a hill, which cannot possibly be hid. The unbelieving world will be forced to take knowledge of it, and it will have a marvellous efficacy to convince men that the religion we profess is from God. Thus it will avail to achieve what ages of arguments and preachments have signally failed to effect—it will be a gigantic object lesson which shall be read of him that runneth. The plain inference is that the one hundred and fifty sectarian divisions of Christianity which we have in our own land to-day are fearful obstacles to the conversion of the world. Is it not a striking confirmation of the justice of this inference to note the fact that all the missionaries of the various churches who go out into the heathen world to persuade benighted men to turn from their corrupt faiths to Christ are generally embarrassed when intelligent heathen demand the explanation of all these distinct and rival organizations, and ask why it is that the servants of the one Redeemer must needs carry such diverse flags? And it is no matter for surprise that we find, in some instances, ministers, whose brethren at home stoutly oppose closer relations with other bodies of similar faith and order, driven by the very exigencies of the foreign work to trample their theories under their feet so as to hide from the keen eyes of perishing pagans the differences which, at home, may be even cherished as too precious to be allowed to vanish. Out there on the frontier the true soldiers of Christ see that in union there is strength; and the lesson which we at home need

to learn is that if the millions of unevangelized people in this so-called Christian land are ever to be savingly impressed, the church must present an unbroken front as the one army of the living God. In this republic, today, we have seventeen millions of voters. This, of course, leaves entirely out of view all the female part of our population, and all males under twenty-one years old. The later census shows that on the rolls of all the various churches, Catholic and Protestant, there are less than four and a quarter millions of these voters. That is to say, after generations of effort, and with all our church machinery, not much more than one-fourth of the people of this land are even church members. Christ teaches us that the oneness of Christians can answer the scepticism of men as nothing else can, provided it be visible and unmistakable. Our reliance, then, is not to be mainly on oratory, or learning, or fine churches, or even that "generous rivalry" of the several denominations of which we hear so much in so-called union meetings, but of which we find not one word of approval in the Bible—our reliance, I say, is not to be mainly on these things, but on that glorious heaven-born unity of the followers of Christ which is able to silence the voice of scepticism and usher in the millennial day.

Having endeavored to set before you a faithful representation of the Christian unity our Lord prayed for, I now desire to point out what seem to be the principal means we should employ in cooperating with God to bring that unity to pass. I assume, as beyond all dispute, that in this gigantic undertaking, as in that of extending Christ's kingdom to the ends of the earth, you and I and all other Christians are solemnly bound to use the means within our reach. It is not the sword of the Lord, much less the sword of Gideon, that is to smite to

the earth the confederated hosts of bigotry, pride, ignorance and hate, but it is "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon"—a sword which our puny hands must wield, but all whose efficacy is due to the power of Almighty God.

1. I sincerely believe that the very first important means of furthering this glorious oneness is to bring ourselves to see clearly that schism in all its forms is a high-handed sin against God. When can we be fairly said to be guilty of the sin of schism? We commit this sin whenever we teach or sanction ruinous error, or lay unjust burdens upon the consciences of our brethren, so as to drive them out of our communion. We commit this sin whenever we withdraw from the church and create a new sect by reason of our having cherished unchristian feelings towards brethren, or adopted unscriptural opinions. We may also commit this sin by throwing our influence against an honorable settlement of differences which could be healed but for our obstinacy or resentment. The sin of schism is distinctly pointed out and condemned in the New Testament. This is true even where the errors referred to did not involve the surrender of fundamental truth, but consisted mostly of the display of a spirit of strife and dissension. Paul refers to this sin in his closing exhortations to the church at Rome (Romans xvi. 17, 18). He says: "I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly." In his enumeration of "the works of the flesh" (Galatians v. 20) Paul mentions some of the very evils which have been at the bottom of almost every division that ever occurred since the ascension of our Lord, namely, "hatred, variance,

emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, . . . they which do such things cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Sin or culpable ignorance, one or both, have been the causes of all the divisions now disfiguring the Bride of Christ. The degree of guilt greatly varies, we doubt not, but somebody's folly or sin has in every case been responsible for the creation of new sects. Yet we often hear the prevalent divisions of Christendom spoken of in terms of great praise, as if they were in themselves quite desirable. We are told that for men of different tastes and diverse mental structure, etc., rival denominations are beneficial. If it were only contended that so long as men remain blinded by sin and prejudice these divisions are far better than compelling all men to join one outward organization, we could agree to the statement. The trouble is that much of the talk we hear directly encourages schism by depriving sectarian separation of its repulsive ugliness. This argument, however, proves too much. If the one hundred and fifty existing divisions of Christians in America be desirable, and if it is unwise to have any one remain in a church because he happens to cherish some views unlike those of his brethren, then each of the existing denominations could profitably be subdivided, and instead of a paltry hundred and fifty sects we could easily have a thousand, with their multiplied machinery and consequent waste of energy. Here, as often elsewhere, it behooves us to turn away from the theories of men to God's word, and to inquire how this matter was practically handled by the inspired apostles whom Christ chose to organize the church a few weeks after his departure from this world. We know that the apostles at Pentecost and soon after had thousands of new converts to deal with, representatives of both Judaism and Paganism, and from every

nation under heaven. There were men of all races, and classes, and civilizations, and religious antecedents. If ever there was a motley crowd on earth it was that one. If ever there was an occasion when the beauties of separate denominational lines would have been visible, it was then and there. But those earnest apostles proceeded to organize but one church for the whole world, and as the work of organization and moulding went on they built up in all parts of the vast Roman empire churches with but a single creed, and precisely alike in every essential particular. Nor was this all: they jealously guarded this one church to preserve it intact; and as soon as the apostles discovered signs of schism, they boldly denounced the guilty parties as the enemies of Christ, and urged all the brethren to hold fast to the faith once delivered to them, and remain in the church Christ's apostles had founded. That was the apostolic method, and it was as unlike the methods of modern schismatics as the day is unlike night. I grant that fidelity to essential truth does demand separation, and the innocent parties are not schismatics. Our Saviour did, indeed, say: "It is impossible but that offences will come," and yet he added, in the same breath, "but woe unto him through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he cast into the sea." Until Christians shall have made vast progress in both knowlege and holiness the church is going to be marred and crippled by denominational rivalries and divisions; but the only consistent view to take of these divisions is that they are, at best, necessary evils—necessary only for the guiltless ones who could not heal these divisions without compromising essential truth, and excusable even as to them only so far as they maintain their blamelessness by

standing ever ready to do everything consistent with loyalty to truth in order to come into closer relations with all brethren from whom they now are separated.

2. A second means of advancing the cause of true oneness among Christians is to school ourselves habitually to think of every believer under the whole heaven as our brother and fellow-heir, entirely regardless of his church relations. No matter where men live, and no matter of what race or religion they may be, if they do really love our Saviour they are united to Christ by indissoluble bonds, and we are unspeakably near to each other, and are to spend eternity together in loving fellowship in the perfected kingdom of God. They and we may be far apart as respects our training, habits, feelings and religious activities, but we are completely and forever one in several most vital particulars, and the time is absolutely certain to come when we shall look into each others faces with joy, and wonder how we could ever have had any other than the utmost tenderness of feeling towards each other, or been unwilling to bear patiently with each others blindness and follies. I love to think that even in the most corrupt communions of Christendom there are those who are looking for eternal life to that very Jesus who is the only hope of my own sinful self, and who rejoice with me in the hope of that same glory which is to be revealed when he comes again. The very thought of this blessed tie, binding us to all others who believe, will help us to stifle the ungracious and spiteful words which sometimes press for utterance, and cause us to welcome every occasion when we may, without dishonor, get closer to them. The prevalence of such feelings in the hearts of Christians generally would soon awaken longings for the removal of every needless wail of separation, and prove the harbinger

ger of a more glorious day for the church of Christ on earth.

3. Among the most powerful of all the means we can employ for the furtherance of true Christian union is prayer. The inspired Psalmist exhorts us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and adds the promise that they that love her shall prosper. In one of the Beatitudes our Saviour has declared the peace-makers to be peculiarly blessed, for they shall be called the children of God. The transformations which must precede the realization of true oneness are so vast that as we contemplate them we are led to exclaim, "Behold, if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be?" But the ear of our God is not dull of hearing, neither is his arm shortened that it cannot save. When Carey, the great Baptist missionary, took leave of England a century ago to attempt the conversion of India to Christ, even good brethren shook their heads as though the task were too great even to be considered at all. But lo! what hath God wrought in one century, even with his church all disabled and hampered by endless divisions and unbelief! That almighty power, which has already moved mountains in the foreign field, can cause mountains here in Christian lands to depart and be removed into the midst of the sea; and when we reflect that above and behind us stands the Great Intercessor perpetually offering that same prayer for the oneness of his people, and pleading the merit of his infinite sacrifice, our hearts may well take courage. Let us accustom ourselves to pray often and earnestly to God for the enlightenment and sanctification of his people in every one of his churches; that every false conception of the truth and every mistaken policy may be abandoned; that all of us who are in the wrong may not only have eyes to see it,

but the grace and courage to confess it; and that all of us may, when constrained to contend earnestly for what we sincerely believe to be the faith once delivered to the saints, seek to be scrupulously fair, and always speak the truth in love. Who can believe that such prayers as these would be in vain? No doubt the changes which must pave the way for the reunion of Christendom will be gradual, and all of us now living must die without being permitted to witness the full consummation of our hopes, but it could surely add no thorns to our dying pillows to reflect that we had loved the church for which Jesus died, and had done what we could to make her a praise in the earth.

I might, if time permitted, dwell upon yet other means of advancing the cause of true oneness; as, for example, joining heartily in every worthy Christian and philanthropic enterprise with our brethren of other denominations, in which no compromise of principle would be made; recognizing, as far as we consistently can, the ordinances and churchly character of all evangelical bodies; and abstaining, as far as possible, from all ungracious interference with the enterprises of other churches. But I must conclude this discourse with two needful cautions, to-wit: The first caution is that we should never, for one moment, imagine that the interests of Christianity can be furthered by hiding our colors or obscuring any doctrine of the gospel for fear that some whom we wish to conciliate may be offended. Be assured that when at last unity shall be perfectly realized in heaven it can have no other basis than the truth of God as we have it in the Bible. And the attempt to keep in the background any doctrine of the Holy Scriptures would not only be a cowardly artifice, but would, in the end, prove an obstacle to real oneness. You might as well

seek to harmonize the solar system by blotting some of the planets from the universe; you would only introduce new complications, ruinous in their results. Whatever we do, let us, with the apostle, shun not to declare the whole counsel of God with frankness and fairness, and out of loving hearts. The other caution, close akin to that, is to beware of allowing our desire for Christian union to render us lifeless and half-hearted in our efforts in behalf of the denomination to which we belong. It has been the observation of many pastors that the amiable people who say they love one church as well as another, soon reveal their emptiness by loving no church well enough to be willing to render it much service. It is possible to be warmly devoted to one's own church and at the same time to love the whole of God's scattered family. The ancient Spartans had this motto: "Sparta is thy portion; do thy best for Sparta"; and so long as yours is, all in all, the best church you are acquainted with, you will do well to make that motto your own. In all our labors, however, in behalf of the church of Christ let us never lose hope in regard to the final realization of Christian unity. The faint streaks of light already visible give promise of the coming day. The Great Intercessor ever lives to plead; and as sure as God's promise stands fast, every wall of separation must crumble, and all the followers of Christ be made one.