**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ROMANS-029**. **MANY AND ONE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"4.* *For we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5. So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another."*

*Romans 12:4-5*

To Paul there was the closest and most vital connection between the profoundest experiences of the Christian life and its plainest and most superficial duties. Here he lays one of his most mystical conceptions as the very foundation on which to rear the great structure of Christian conduct, and links on to one of his profoundest thoughts, the unity of all Christians in Christ, a comprehensive series of practical exhortations. We are accustomed to hear from many lips: I have no use for these dogmas that Paul delights in. Give me his practical teaching. You may keep the Epistle to the Romans, I hold by the thirteenth of First Corinthians. But such an unnatural severance between the doctrine and the ethics of the Epistle cannot be effected without the destruction of both. The very principle of this Epistle to the Romans is that the difference between the law and the Gospel is, that the one preaches conduct without a basis for it, and that the other says, First believe in Christ, and in the strength of that belief, do the right and be like Him. Here, then, in the very laying of the foundation for conduct in these verses we have in concrete example the secret of the Christian way of making good men.

**I. The first point to notice here is, the unity of the derived life.**

Many are one, because they are each in Christ, and the individual relationship and derivation of life from Him makes them one whilst continuing to be many. That great metaphor, and nowadays much forgotten and neglected truth, is to Paul's mind the fact which ought to mould the whole life and conduct of individual Christians and to be manifested therein. There are three most significant and instructive symbols by which the unity of believers in Christ Jesus is set forth in the New Testament. Our Lord Himself gives us the one of the vine and its branches, and that symbol suggests the silent, effortless process by which the life-giving sap rises and finds its way from the deep root to the furthest tendril and the far-extended growth. The same symbol loses indeed in one respect its value if we transfer it to growths more congenial to our northern climate, and instead of the vine with its rich clusters, think of some great elm, deeply rooted, and with its firm bole and massive branches, through all of which the mystery of a common life penetrates and makes every leaf in the cloud of foliage through which we look up participant of itself. But, profound and beautiful as our Lord's metaphor is, the vegetative uniformity of parts and the absence of individual characteristics make it, if taken alone, insufficient. In the tree one leaf is like another; it grows green and broad and takes no care. Hence, to express the whole truth of the union between Christ and us we must bring in other figures. Thus we find the Apostle adducing the marriage tie, the highest earthly example of union, founded on choice and affection. But even that sacred bond leaves a gap between those who are knit together by it; and so we have the conception of our text, the unity of the body as representing for us the unity of believers with Jesus. This is a unity of life. He is not only head as chief and sovereign, but He is soul or life, which has its seat, not in this or that organ as old physics teach, but pervades the whole and filleth all in all. The mystery which concerns the union of soul and body, and enshrouds the nature of physical life, is part of the felicity of this symbol in its Christian application. That commonest of all things, the mysterious force which makes matter live and glow under spiritual emotion, and changes the vibrations of a nerve, or the undulations of the grey brain, into hope and love and faith, eludes the scalpel and the microscope. Of man in his complex nature it is true that clouds and darkness are round about him, and we may expect an equally solemn mystery to rest upon that which makes out of separate individuals one living body, animated with the life and moved by the Spirit of the indwelling Christ. We can get no further back, and dig no deeper down, than His own words, I am ... the life.

But, though this unity is mysterious, it is most real. Every Christian soul receives from Christ the life of Christ. There is a real implantation of a higher nature which has nothing to do with sin and is alien from death. There is a true regeneration which is supernatural, and which makes all who possess it one, in the measure of their possession, as truly as all the leaves on a tree are one because fed by the same sap, or all the members in the natural body are one, because nourished by the same blood. So the true bond of Christian unity lies in the common participation of the one Lord, and the real Christian unity is a unity of derived life.

The misery and sin of the Christian Church have been, and are, that it has sought to substitute other bonds of unity. The whole weary history of the divisions and alienations between Christians has surely sufficiently, and more than sufficiently, shown the failure of the attempts to base Christian oneness upon uniformity of opinion, or of ritual, or of purpose. The difference between the real unity, and these spurious attempts after it, is the difference between bundles of faggots, dead and held together by a cord, and a living tree lifting its multitudinous foliage towards the heavens. The bundle of faggots may be held together in some sort of imperfect union, but is no exhibition of unity. If visible churches must be based on some kind of agreement, they can never cover the same ground as that of the body of Christ.

That oneness is independent of our organisations, and even of our will, since it comes from the common possession of a common life. Its enemies are not divergent opinions or forms, but the evil tempers and dispositions which impede, or prevent, the flow into each Christian soul of the uniting Spirit of life in Christ Jesus which makes the many who may be gathered into separate folds one flock clustered around the one Shepherd. And if that unity be thus a fundamental fact in the Christian life and entirely apart from external organisation, the true way to increase it in each individual is, plainly, the drawing nearer to Him, and the opening of our spirits so as to receive fuller, deeper, and more continuous inflows from His own inexhaustible fullness. In the old Temple stood the seven-branched candlestick, an emblem of a formal unity; in the new the seven candlesticks are one, because Christ stands in the midst. He makes the body one; without Him it is a carcase.

**II. The diversity.**

We have many members in one body, but all members have not the same office. Life has different functions in different organs. It is light in the eye, force in the arm, music on the tongue, swiftness in the foot; so also is Christ. The higher a creature rises in the scale of life, the more are the parts differentiated. The lowest is a mere sac, which performs all the functions that the creature requires; the highest is a man with a multitude of organs, each of which is definitely limited to one office. In like manner the division of labour in society measures its advance; and in like manner in the Church there is to be the widest diversity. What the Apostle designates as gifts are natural characteristics heightened by the Spirit of Christ; the effect of the common life in each ought to be the intensifying and manifestation of individuality of character. In the Christian ideal of humanity there is place for every variety of gifts. The flora of the Mountain of God yields an endless multiplicity of growths on its ascending slopes which pass through every climate. There ought to be a richer diversity in the Church than anywhere besides; that tree should bear twelve manner of fruits, yielding its fruit every month for the healing of the nations. All flesh is not the same flesh. Star differeth from star in glory.

The average Christian life of to-day sorely fails in two things: in being true to itself, and in tolerance of diversities. We are all so afraid of being ticketed as eccentric, odd, that we oftentimes stifle the genuine impulses of the Spirit of Christ leading us to the development of unfamiliar types of goodness, and the undertaking of unrecognised forms of service. If we trusted in Christ in ourselves more, and took our laws from His whispers, we should often reach heights of goodness which tower above us now, and discover in ourselves capacities which slumber undiscerned. There is a dreary monotony and uniformity amongst us which impoverishes us, and weakens the testimony that we bear to the quickening influence of the Spirit that is in Christ Jesus; and we all tend to look very suspiciously at any man who puts all the others out by being himself, and letting the life that he draws from the Lord dictate its own manner of expression. It would breathe a new life into all our Christian communities if we allowed full scope to the diversities of operation, and realised that in them all there was the one Spirit. The world condemns originality: the Church should have learned to prize it. One after this fashion, and one after that, is the only wholesome law of the development of the manifold graces of the Christian life.

**III. The harmony.**

We being many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. That expression is remarkable, for we might have expected to read rather members of the body, than of each other; but the bringing in of such an idea suggests most emphatically that thought of the mutual relation of each part of the great whole, and that each has offices to discharge for the benefit of each. In the Christian community, as in an organised body, the active co-operation of all the parts is the condition of health. All the rays into which the spectrum breaks up the pure white light must be gathered together again in order to produce it; just as every instrument in the great orchestra contributes to the volume of sound. The Lancashire hand-bell ringers may illustrate this point for us. Each man picks up his own bell from the table and sounds his own note at the moment prescribed by the score, and so the whole of the composer's idea is reproduced. To suppress diversities results in monotony; to combine them is the only sure way to secure harmony. Nor must we forget that the indwelling life of the Church can only be manifested by the full exhibition and freest possible play of all the forms which that life assumes in individual character. It needs all, and more than all, the types of mental characteristics that can be found in humanity to mirror the infinite beauty of the indwelling Lord. There are diversities of operations, and all those diversities but partially represent that same Lord who worketh all in all, and Himself is more than all, and, after all manifestation through human characters, remains hinted at rather than declared, suggested but not revealed.

Still further, only by the exercise of possible diversities is the one body nourished, for each member, drawing life directly and without the intervention of any other from Christ the Source, draws also from his fellow-Christian some form of the common life that to himself is unfamiliar, and needs human intervention in order to its reception. Such dependence upon one's brethren is not inconsistent with a primal dependence on Christ alone, and is a safeguard against the cultivating of one's own idiosyncrasies till they become diseased and disproportionate. The most slenderly endowed Christian soul has the double charge of giving to, and receiving from, its brethren. We have all something which we can contribute to the general stock. We have all need to supplement our own peculiar gifts by brotherly ministration. The prime condition of Christian vitality has been set forth for ever by the gracious invitation, which is also an imperative command, Abide in Me and I in you; but they who by such abiding are recipients of a communicated life are not thereby isolated, but united to all who like them have received the manifestation of the Spirit to do good with.