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

**ROMANS-035**. **STILL ANOTHER TRIPLET by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Be of the same mind one toward another. Set not your mind on high things, but condescend to things that are lowly. Be not wise in your own conceits."*

*Romans 12:16 (R.V.)*

We have here again the same triple arrangement which has prevailed through a considerable portion of the context. These three exhortations are linked together by a verbal resemblance which can scarcely be preserved in translation. In the two former the same verb is employed: and in the third the word for wise is cognate with the verb found in the other two clauses. If we are to seek for any closer connection of thought we may find it first in this--that all the three clauses deal with mental attitudes, whilst the preceding ones dealt with the expression of such; and second in this--that the first of the three is a general precept, and the second and third are warnings against faults which are most likely to interfere with it.

**I. We note, the bond of peace.**

Be of the same mind one toward another. It is interesting to notice how frequently the Apostle in many of his letters exhorts to mutual harmonious relations. For instance, in this very Epistle he invokes the God of patience and of comfort to grant to the Roman Christians to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, and to the Corinthians, who had their full share of Greek divisiveness, he writes, Be of the same mind, live in peace, and assures them that, if so, the God of love and peace will be with them; to his beloved Philippians he pours out his heart in beseeching them by the consolation that is in Christ Jesus, and the comfort of love, and the fellowship of the Spirit-- that they would fulfil his joy, that they be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind; whilst to the two women in that Church who were at variance with one another he sends the earnest exhortation to be of the same mind in the Lord, and prays one whom we only know by his loving designation of a true yokefellow, to help them in what would apparently put a strain upon their Christian principle. For communities and for individuals the cherishing of the spirit of amity and concord is a condition without which there will be little progress in the Christian life.

But it is to be carefully noted that such a spirit may co-exist with great differences about other matters. It is not opposed to wide divergence of opinion, though in our imperfect sanctification it is hard for us to differ and yet to be in concord. We all know the hopelessness of attempting to make half a dozen good men think alike on any of the greater themes of the Christian religion; and if we could succeed in such a vain attempt, there would still be many an unguarded door through which could come the spirit of discord, and the half-dozen might have divergence of heart even whilst they profess identity of opinion. The true hindrances to our having the same mind one toward another lie very much deeper in our nature than the region in which we keep our creeds. The self-regard and self-absorption, petulant dislike of fellow-Christian's peculiarities, the indifference which comes from lack of imaginative sympathy, and which ministers to the ignorance which causes it, and a thousand other weaknesses in Christian character bring about the deplorable alienation which but too plainly marks the relation of Christian communities and of individual Christians to one another in this day. When one thinks of the actual facts in every corner of Christendom, and probes one's own feelings, the contrast between the apostolic ideal and the Church's realisation of it presents a contradiction so glaring that one wonders if Christian people at all believe that it is their duty to be of the same mind one toward another.

The attainment of this spirit of amity and concord ought to be a distinct object of effort, and especially in times like ours, when there is no hostile pressure driving Christian people together, but when our great social differences are free to produce a certain inevitable divergence and to check the flow of our sympathy, and when there are deep clefts of opinion, growing deeper every day, and seeming to part off Christians into camps which have little understanding of, and less sympathy with, one another. Even the strong individualism, which it is the glory of true Christian faith to foster in character, and which some forms of Christian fellowship do distinctly promote, works harm in this matter; and those who pride themselves on belonging to Free churches, and standing apart from creed-bound and clergy-led communities, are specially called upon to see to it that they keep this exhortation, and cultivate the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

It should not be necessary to insist that the closest mutual concord amongst all believers is but an imperfect manifestation, as all manifestations in life of the deepest principles must be, of the true oneness which binds together in the most sacred unity, and should bind together in closest friendship, all partakers of the one life. And assuredly the more that one life flows into our spirits, the less power will all the enemies of Christian concord have over us. It is the Christ in us which makes us kindred with all others in whom He is. It is self, in some form or other, that separates us from the possessors of like precious faith. When the tide is out, the little rock-pools on the shore lie separated by stretches of slimy weeds, but the great sea, when it rushes up, buries the divisions, and unites them all. Our Christian unity is unity in Christ, and the only sure way to be of the same mind one toward another is, that the mind which was in Christ Jesus be in us also.

**II. The divisive power of selfish ambition.**

Set not your mind on high things, but condescend to things that are lowly. The contrast here drawn between the high and the lowly makes it probable that the latter as well as the former is to be taken as referring to things rather than persons. The margin of the Revised Version gives the literal rendering of the word translated condescend. To be carried away with, is metaphorically equivalent to surrendering one's self to; and the two clauses present two sides of one disposition, which seeks not for personal advancement or conspicuous work which may minister to self-gratulation, but contentedly fills the lowly sphere, and the humblest duties on herself doth lay. We need not pause to point out that such an ideal is dead against the fashionable maxims of this generation. Personal ambition is glorified as an element in progress, and to a world which believes in such a proverb as devil take the hindmost, these two exhortations can only seem fanatical absurdity. And yet, perhaps, if we fairly take into account how the seeking after personal advancement and conspicuous work festers the soul, and how the flower of heart's-ease grows, as Bunyan's shepherd-boy found out, in the lowly valley, these exhortations to a quiet performance of lowly duties and a contented filling of lowly spheres, may seem touched with a higher wisdom than is to be found in the arenas where men trample over each other in their pursuit of a fame which appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. What a peaceful world it would be, and what peaceful souls they would have, if Christian people really adopted as their own these two simple maxims. They are easy to understand, but how hard they are to follow.

It needs scarcely be noted that the temper condemned here destroys all the concord and amity which the Apostle has been urging in the previous clause. Where every man is eagerly seeking to force himself in front of his neighbour, any community will become a struggling mob; and they who are trying to outrun one another and who grasp at high things, will never be of the same mind one toward another. But, we may observe that the surest way to keep in check the natural selfish tendency to desire conspicuous things for ourselves is honestly, and with rigid self-control, to let ourselves be carried away by enthusiasm for humble tasks. If we would not disturb our lives and fret our hearts by ambitions that, even when gratified, bring no satisfaction, we must yield ourselves to the impulse of the continuous stream of lowly duties which runs through every life.

But, plainly as this exhortation is needful, it is too heavy a strain to be ever carried out except by the power of Christ formed in the heart. It is in His earthly life that we find the great example of the highest stooping to the lowest duties, and elevating them by taking them upon Himself. He did not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets. Thirty years of that perfect life were spent in a little village folded away in the Galilean hills, with rude peasants for the only spectators, and the narrow sphere of a carpenter's shop for its theatre. For the rest, the publicity possible would have been obscurity to an ambitious soul. To speak comforting words to a few weeping hearts; to lay His hands on a few sick folk and heal them; to go about in a despised land doing good, loved indeed by outcasts and sinners, unknown by all the dispensers of renown, and consciously despised by all whom the world honoured--that was the perfect life of the Incarnate God. And that is an example which His followers seem with one consent to set aside in their eager race after distinction and work that may glorify their names. The difficulty of a faithful following of these precepts, and the only means by which that difficulty can be overcome, are touchingly taught us in another of Paul's Epistles by the accumulation of motives which he brings to bear upon his commandment, when he exhorts by the tender motives of comfort in Christ, consolation of love, fellowship of the Spirit, and tender mercies and compassions, that ye fulfil my joy, being of the same mind, of one accord; doing nothing through faction or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself. As the pattern for each of us in our narrow sphere, he holds forth the mind that was in Christ Jesus, and the great self-emptying which he shrank not from, but being in the form of God counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God, but, being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death.

**III. The divisive power of intellectual self-conceit.**

In this final clause the Apostle, in some sense, repeats the maxim with which he began the series of special exhortations in this chapter. He there enjoined every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; here he deals with one especial form of such too lofty thinking, viz. intellectual conceit. He is possibly quoting the Book of Proverbs (iii. 7), where we read, Be not wise in thine own eyes, which is preceded by, Lean not to thine own understanding; in all thy ways acknowledge Him; and is followed by, Fear the Lord and depart from evil; thus pointing to the acknowledgment and fear of the Lord as the great antagonist of such over-estimate of one's own wisdom as of all other faults of mind and life. It needs not to point out how such a disposition breaks Christian unity of spirit. There is something especially isolating in that form of self-conceit. There are few greater curses in the Church than little coteries of superior persons who cannot feed on ordinary food, whose enlightened intelligence makes them too fastidious to soil their dainty fingers with rough, vulgar work, and whose supercilious criticism of the unenlightened souls that are content to condescend to lowly Christian duties, is like an iceberg that brings down the temperature wherever it floats. That temper indulged in, breaks the unity, reduces to inactivity the work, and puts an end to the progress, of any Christian community in which it is found; and just as its predominance is harmful, so the obedience to the exhortation against it is inseparable from the fulfilling of its sister precepts. To know ourselves for the foolish creatures that we are, is a mighty help to being of the same mind one toward another. Who thinks of himself soberly and according to the measure of faith which God hath dealt to him will not hunger after high things, but rather prefer the lowly ones that are on a level with his lowly self.

The exhortations of our text were preceded with injunctions to distribute material help, and to bestow helpful sympathy. The tempers enjoined in our present text are the inward source and fountain of such external bestowments. The rendering of material help and of sympathetic emotion are right and valuable only as they are the outcome of this unanimity and lowliness. It is possible to distribute to the necessity of saints in such a way as that the gift pains more than a blow; it is possible to proffer sympathy so that the sensitive heart shrinks from it. It was when the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul that it became natural to have all things common. As in the aurora borealis, quivering beams from different centres stream out and at each throb approach each other till they touch and make an arch of light that glorifies the winter's night, so, if Christian men were of the same mind toward one another, did not set their minds on high things, but condescended to things that were lowly, and were not wise in their own conceits, the Church of Christ would shine forth in the darkness of a selfish world and would witness to Him who came down from the highest throne in glory to the lowliest place in this lowly world, that He might lift us to His own height of glory everlasting.