

## The Church—Her Unity in Life and Practice

- 1 The unity of Church is but  
The saints in oneness living;  
The Spirit which indwelleth them  
This oneness ever giving.  
Thus it is realized and called  
The unity of Spirit;  
'Tis based upon the common faith  
Which all the saints inherit.
- 2 This precious faith of all the saints,  
Is constituted solely  
Of Christ and His redemptive work,  
Which are unique and holy.  
In this the saints are truly one,  
Together all agreeing,  
And it is from this common faith  
The Church came into being.
- 3 The Church within the universe  
Is one as Christ's possession;  
The Church must therefore locally  
Be one in her expression;  
For all her elements are one—  
One God, one Lord, one Spirit,  
One faith, baptism, Body too,  
One hope all saints inherit.
- 4 This oneness is the Church's ground,  
The ground of common standing,  
The only ground of unity  
The Spirit is demanding.  
The Church in actual practice thus  
May keep her vital union,  
And her expressions locally  
Be built up in communion.
- 5 Lord, help us ever strive to keep  
This unity by taking  
The Church's ground of unity,  
The Body-life partaking,  
That all Thy heart's profound desire  
May fully be effected,  
And God's eternal purpose may  
Completely be perfected. (*Hymns*, #831)

This hymn, written by Witness Lee, is centered on the unity, or oneness, of all believers and the vital practice by which the church maintains this vital union. This hymn highlights the need for the believers to have a mind and heart to guard the oneness of the Body of Christ in their

daily living and actions in a local church. The language is simple and straightforward, but the truth conveyed is profound and worthy of much consideration. In its treatment of the oneness of the church, according to the objective revelation of the Bible and the subjective practice of the churches, it begins with a vision of the unity of the church:

The unity of Church is but / The saints in oneness living; /  
The Spirit which indwelleth them / This oneness ever giving. /  
Thus it is realized and called / The unity of Spirit; /  
'Tis based upon the common faith / Which all the saints inherit.

Oneness is defined simply as “the saints in oneness living.” The words are simple, but this kind of human living in a daily life of mutuality is profound. This oneness is based on the common faith of all believers, and it is an issue of the “Spirit which indwelleth them.” Thus, it is called “the unity of Spirit,” which is “the oneness of the Spirit” that the Word directs us to keep diligently in the uniting bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). The oneness of the Spirit in its composition consists of “One Body and one Spirit, even as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (vv. 4-6).

The unity of the church, the oneness of the Spirit, is absolutely different from political oneness, societal oneness, or even familial oneness. It is as deep as the Triune God Himself; it is the oneness of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit enlarged to include His chosen, redeemed, and transformed people. God cannot be enlarged, because He fills all in all (1:23), but His oneness can be expanded to incorporate all His people throughout the ages. God's heart's desire and eternal plan have been revealed: “Making known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself” (v. 9). We need a vision of the oneness of the believers in Christ as His universal Body. The goal of God's eternal plan is to join Himself to and mingle Himself with man so that God and man may become one in both life and living.

Such a oneness cannot be duplicated or manufactured by human effort or invention. It is impossible to negotiate a “oneness” among men with our vast array of cultures, philosophies, ambitions, and hidden agendas. In contrast,

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the oneness of the Spirit is imparted into those who receive the Spirit by faith. This oneness was the heavy burden in the heart of the apostle Paul when he wrote Ephesians. He prayed that the Father of glory might give us “a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him” (v. 17). We need such a vision. May we earnestly pray that the Lord would open the eyes of our heart to see the hope of His calling, the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe so that we could enter into the reality of the Body of Christ (vv. 17-23).

### The Unity of the Church, the Saints in Oneness Living

The hymn begins with a definition of the unity of the church, which is “the saints in oneness living.” Such a definition is weighty and thoughtful. It cuts through all our human ingenuity and inventiveness. It is simply the saints, the believers, who have been and are being sanctified (Heb. 10:10, 14), living in oneness. According to the revelation of the Bible, the saints are those who have been sanctified in and through their faith in Christ. Paul confirms this in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, saying, “God chose you from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.” The sanctifying Spirit sets the believers apart to God so that we might live to God. The operating Spirit dwelling in our human spirit not only separates us to God in an outward sense but also in an inward sense by enabling us to live by the life of God, which has been dispensed into us by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Through this dispensing, we are constituted holy and established in the divine oneness. In this life and living, we cannot be divided.

The oneness of the church is realized as the oneness of the Spirit. The Spirit is operating in every member of the Body of Christ to bring us into one heart, one mind, and one spirit, even into one organic entity. This oneness is based on the common faith which we all inherit; it is the objective faith, the sum total of all the things in which we believe. We have received this faith as our inheritance; it belongs to us. When these marvelous truths are received, they then become a subjective reality within us, making us one with the Lord and with one another.

### The Shining of the Light to Dispense Light

Stanza 2 further defines the church’s unity by clarifying the constitution of the common faith and its effect on our experience of the oneness of the church. The common faith is “constituted solely of Christ and His redemptive work.” Everything that Christ is, has, has accomplished, has obtained and attained, is the content of the common faith. This means that through our believing into Christ, we are brought into the person and work of Christ in a spontaneous way. In 2 Corinthians 4:6-7 Paul says,

Because the God who said, Out of darkness light shall shine, is the One who shined in our hearts to illuminate the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not out of us.

The word *faith* is not used in these verses, but the shining of God in our hearts equals the operation of faith in us. God shines, and we believe. In the beginning of the Bible, God spoke things into being. The first thing He commanded was for light to shine in the darkness. God’s shining in our hearts is a corresponding experience in the heart of every believer. We were in gross darkness, having no light. We ourselves were darkness, but God spoke light into our being, not only enlightening us but also constituting us as children of light and even making us light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8). The function of faith changes our very essence from darkness to light.

By the Lord’s mercy and grace, He has come to shine not only upon and around us but into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Through His shining within us, we who were once darkness are now luminaries in the world, providing others with the light of life so that they also may be delivered from the darkness (Col. 1:12-13; Phil. 2:15-16).

When the realities of the common faith shine in our hearts, there is a corresponding operation that coordinates and experientially incorporates us into the church as the Body of Christ: “In this the saints are truly one, / Together all agreeing. / And it is from this common faith / The Church came into being.” We are made one through the operation of God within us according to the contents of the faith.

Regrettably, in the church today, this oneness is nearly nonexistent in terms of actual and practical expression. Ecumenical efforts cannot produce this genuine oneness. There may be minor points of compromise and accommodation, but there is little reality of the church as the Body of Christ with all the saints and all the churches standing in mutual love and harmony. Denominations, free groups, and independent believers exist in stark contrast to the Lord’s aspiration in His prayer recorded in John 17:20-23:

I do not ask concerning these only, but concerning those also who believe into Me through their word, that they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me. And the glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one; I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected into one, that the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.

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It is an utter contradiction to speak of the oneness of the church while justifying practices that demonstrate our condition of division. We desperately need to reconsider, study, and pray over our practices in the light of the Word of God concerning the oneness of the Body of Christ. The condition of the church today cannot convince the world concerning the Lord and His being sent by the Father. The Lord prayed that we all may be one even as the Father and the Son are one. By seeing this enlarged oneness, it is possible for the world to believe and know that the Father has sent the Son. In contrast, the impact of the gospel among us today is severely restricted by the divided condition of the church. May the Lord grant us a thorough repentance and genuine opening for His fresh shining for the sake of the oneness of the church, His Body.

### The Nature and Standing of the Church

Stanza 3 declares the nature of the church that was produced by the victorious Christ in His resurrection. She is *one* as Christ's possession. The Lord declared that He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). The flock which the overseers are to shepherd is the church of God, which He obtained through His own blood (Acts 20:28). The church is the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:23); it is the house of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6); the church is the bride of Christ and the warrior to defeat God's enemies (Eph. 5:25-27; 6:10-18). In all of these revealed aspects, the universal Body of Christ, the church of God, is one in life and nature and in calling and function. It should be abundantly clear that the church must locally "be one in her expression."

**T**he Bible clearly shows that the Body of Christ is constituted with all the believers in Christ both in time and in space; the church as such stands in the oneness of the Triune God as expressed in John 17. We must in good conscience ask, "How is this Body expressed in a practical way?" The Bible shows that the expression must be seen in the local churches based on the oneness of the Body.

Although the believers are one, based on the impartation of the life of God through regeneration, we have not yet been perfected into this oneness (John 17:23); therefore, we need the restriction of the Spirit within our spirit, together with the clear teaching of the Word of God to guide our understanding and practice. We need to come back from the splintering effects of the denominational standings and seek to enter into the genuine expression of the oneness of the Spirit reflected in the hymn: "For all her elements are one— / One God, one Lord, one Spirit, / One faith, baptism, Body too, / One hope all saints inherit." The seven factors of oneness listed in this hymn are the seven factors constituting the oneness of the Spirit cited by Paul in Ephesians 4:3-6:

Being diligent to keep the oneness of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace: one Body and one Spirit, even as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Witness Lee provides an excellent note in the Recovery Version of the Bible concerning the oneness of the Spirit:

In exhorting us to safeguard the oneness, the apostle pointed out seven things that form the base of our oneness: one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. These seven "ones" are of three groups. The first three form the first group, that of the Spirit with the Body as His expression. This Body, having been regenerated and being saturated with the Spirit as its essence, has the hope of being transfigured into the full likeness of Christ. The next three form the second group, that of the Lord with faith and baptism that we may be joined to Him. The last of the seven forms the third group, the one God and Father, who is the Originator and source of all. The Spirit as the Executor of the Body, the Son as the Creator of the Body, and God the Father as the Originator of the Body—all the three of the Triune God—are related to the Body. (v. 4, note 1)

The Body of Christ is constituted with every true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ joined to and mingled together with the Divine Trinity. These redeemed sinners, having been regenerated by and saturated with the Spirit, have the goal and destiny of transformation and transfiguration into the full likeness of Christ and of being built up together into His unique Body. They are chosen, redeemed, regenerated, and transformed to form His one unique Body as His testimony and expression in the universe. This is the Body of Christ, and it must have an expression in the world for the fulfillment of the eternal purpose of God.

### The Local Church on the Local Ground

Stanza 4 gives us the key to the standing of the local church as an expression of the universal church:

This oneness is the Church's ground, / The ground of common standing, / The only ground of unity / The Spirit is demanding. / The Church in actual practice thus / May keep her vital union, / And her expressions locally / Be built up in communion.

**I**n the local churches, the reality of the organic oneness of the church as the Body of Christ must be expressed in an actual and practical way. The oneness of the church must be expressed locally in the simplicity of one church in each locality, that is, with all the believers within any particular city composing the church in that place. As a scripturally revealed principle, the oneness of the believers

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is safeguarded practically by the unique standing of every local church according to the boundary of locality.

In the Bible we find the principle of one church for each city—no more, no less. In the entire New Testament this principle is never violated. Whenever a church in a certain city is mentioned, it is always in the singular number. Whenever reference is made to the churches, in the plural number, it is always in relation to an area or district that is larger than a city, such as a province. There is nothing in the Bible about street churches, school churches, churches in a home, or, on the other hand, national churches or world churches. There are only churches in cities. You may say that there are some instances recorded in the Bible of a church in a home. But if you read carefully, you will see that in every case these simply refer to the home in which the entire church in that city met. The boundary of the church is not limited to a home; neither is it expanded to a district or nation. In the Bible it is always according to the size of the city. A church that encompasses the whole city meets the qualification of the unique oneness. (Lee, *Vision* 9-10)

#### A Prayer for God's Heart's Deep Longing—the Body

The final stanza is a petition to the Lord to strengthen the believers to carry out God's eternal purpose:

Lord, help us ever strive to keep / This unity by taking /  
The Church's ground of unity, / The Body-life partaking, /  
That all Thy heart's profound desire / May fully be effected, /  
And God's eternal purpose may / Completely be perfected.

It is a cry to the Lord to help us to strive to keep the unity by embracing the ground of oneness and by partaking of the reality of the Body life. The prayer of the Lord Jesus in John 17 conveys the aspiration and deep longing within the heart of the Divine Trinity that the chosen ones of God would enter into the oneness of the Triune God. The eternal Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit—are forever, eternally, and uninterruptedly one. There is absolutely no difference, no shadow to mar the perfect harmony that exists in the very nature of God. The Son's interceding cry to the Father is that we would all know, experience, and express this absolute and unique oneness. Our hearts should echo the cry of our Savior: "That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me" (v. 21).

This oneness exists only in the Triune God. In order to participate and express this unique oneness, we must be in the Triune God. This is the secret of our oneness—we must be in Him. The oneness of the church is impossible to attain by any doctrine, aspiration, effort, or

program. It is an organic oneness, a oneness based on the life of the Triune God that moves within every believer. May we rise up to pray that this oneness would be realized among us on the earth today so that the Father may be glorified in the church (Eph. 3:21).

#### The Intrinsic Reality of the Body of Christ—Oneness

The final stanza returns to the intrinsic significance of the oneness of the church, which is the oneness of the Body. We must strive to keep this oneness in order to partake of the Body life. The vision of the Body is central in the teaching of the apostles in the Epistles, notably in Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Corinthians, and Philippians. In *Further Talks on the Church Life* Watchman Nee shows the importance of the oneness in relation to the church's standing as the Body of Christ.

The church of Christ is the Body of Christ. If we only consider it as the church, we may not feel that it matters whether or not there is some division, thinking that little harm is done even though there is a little division here and a little division there. If we only consider it as God's people, again it may not matter whether or not there is some division here and there. If we only consider it as God's army, it may not matter whether or not there is some division. Finally, if we only consider it as the house of God, it may be all right if it is divided into several houses. But the Word of God also tells us that the church of Christ is the Body of Christ. With a body, division is absolutely impossible...Once the body is divided, it becomes a corpse... The children of God cannot be divided, just as the body cannot be divided. The church cannot be divided. Yet today, God's children have become insensitive to divisions; they do not consider them as a serious matter. Please remember, a body cannot be divided! The church is the Body of Christ. In nature it is the Body, and one Spirit dwells in it. Therefore, the unity of the church in the Scriptures is the unity of the nature of the Body, which is indivisible. (99-100)

The lack of oneness is not a trivial matter. It is a central issue that must be considered and pursued by every member of the Body of Christ.

by Gary Kaiser

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