

THE NATURE AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

John 17:21

Luke 12: 36

Collected Writings of J. N. Darby, 1: 20-35, Dublin 1828

The writer of these pages – he trusts, not the author of them – would add whatever God might afford him in ministering to the progress of the Church through the various exercises to which its faith is exposed. He cannot doubt that much of the moral truth on which the following considerations depend has been realised in the minds of believers, of students of the divine Word; but he has felt in the little communion, though great intercourse, which such have with each other, that the expression of these thoughts might, by the blessing of God, direct the attention of believers to, and more explicitly manifest to the Church from the divine Word, its just objects; and consequently, by their reception, determine its character and conduct; ensuring, under God's blessing, more consistency of operation; stablish, strengthen, settle it in its own hopes, and make it exhibit with more clearness and power the grace of God to the world; lead believers to more explicit reliance on the operations of the divine Spirit, and to look less to the plans of men and human co-operations, or what will be found in the end to be human interests. While the aims and purposes of believers are very mixed in their nature, and fall far below the standard for which God has gathered them, and which He proposes as the influential object of their faith and consequently motive of their conduct, yet division, and sectarianism are, even in the mercy of God's providence, the necessary result, whether it assume the character of Establishment or of Dissent. I am supposing here, of course, that the great truths of the gospel are the professed faith of the churches, as they are in all the genuine Protestant churches.

For the just consequence of the reception of gospel facts by faith and its end in man is the purification of the desires in love – a life to Him who died for us and rose again – a life of hope in His glory. To suppose therefore unity where the life of the Church falls entirely short of the just consequences of its faith, is to suppose that the Spirit of God would acquiesce in the moral inconsistency of degenerate man, and that God would be satisfied that His Church should sink below the glory of its great Head, without even a testimony that He was dishonoured by it.

In truth it has never been so: judgments from without for a good while marked His displeasure while it was sinking, and when it was utterly sunk in apostasy, He raised His witnesses, who should sigh and cry for the abominations that were done in it; who, in much darkness of spiritual understanding, bore testimony against the moral corruption that had overwhelmed the Church; and who, in the acknowledgment of the redemption by the Lord Jesus out of this present evil world, testified the apostasy of the professing Church. When it pleased God to raise this testimony into the place of public sanction, while doctrinal truth – we may believe – was fully developed for the foundation and edification of the faith of believers, it by no means followed that the Church thereupon emerged wholly in spirit and power from the depression, and assumed the character which it has in the purpose of its Author, and became an adequate and distinctive witness of His thoughts to the world.

Such indeed, however blessed, as we are all bound most thankfully to acknowledge the Reformation to have been, was not the case: it was much and manifestly mixed with human agency.

And though the exhibition of the Word, as that on which the soul could rest itself, was graciously afforded, still there was much o