

Wherein lies the unity of the church?

According to Knox, the unity of the church has "a double character and ground": it has "an empirical [*sc.* experiential] basis in a shared life" (or "shared experience") consisting of "a common memory" and "a common Spirit" (or "experience of the Spirit"); and it has "a more ideational basis in a shared faith [*sc.* a common way of understanding and interpreting the event that is the source and norm of its life]" (*The Early Church*: 43, 44, n. 1, 51, 52, 56 f.). Elsewhere in the same book, Knox speaks of the "threefold community which constituted, at the deepest level, the unity of the early church," by which he means, presumably, "the [twofold] community of memory and Spirit" and "the community of belief" (82; cf. 83: "this community of memory, of life, and of faith"). But in yet another passage Knox gives a substantially different answer in terms of a distinction involving "life, faith, and form." "By 'life' was meant the concrete reality of the early church as a community of memory and the Spirit; by 'faith' was meant the way in which the community explained its reality; and by 'form,' the outward institutional or organizational structures and procedures the community used to express, conserve, and communicate its life and faith." If "in the beginning unity was more characteristic of life and faith, as spontaneous responses to the event of Christ, than it was of form," by the end of the second century or the opening years of the third, a "common structure" had emerged, whereby the church achieved, in addition to its "unity of life and faith," also "institutional unity" (133 f.). So much for Knox's answer(s) to the question.

As for my own answer, I should prefer to say that the unity of the church lies in a common faith and witness—which is to say, in a shared explicit self-understanding and life-praxis—mediated, immediately or mediately, by experience of Jesus as being of decisive significance for human existence. All the forms through which this faith and witness are expressed, however, belong, not to the unity of the church, but to its diversity, if not, indeed, to its division. This is as true, I should insist, of forms of thought and belief as of practice and action or of social organization, so that one can speak, as Knox does, of "a common faith" only by somehow distinguishing, as he also does, between the "basic structure" of faith—which is to say, the assertion implied by the self-understanding of faith—and the historically conditioned

"formula(s)" through which it was expressed and communicated (cf. 74). If the first was indeed "common," the second was, as often as not, diverse from one tradition or community of faith to another.

But if even its forms of belief belong to the diversity of the church rather than to its unity, the same is true of its forms of practice and, *a fortiori*, of its forms of social organization. The "institutional unity" that Knox takes the church to have achieved during the last half of the second century and the opening years of the third was never universal, and it was not destined to last, being, as subsequent history proved, only one of a number of institutional "structures" or "forms" through which the essential unity of the church could and did find more or less adequate expression in different historical situations. In any event, the only authority any form may claim comes entirely from the substance of which it is the form; and "outward institutional or organizational structures and procedures," least of all, are authorized by the substance, and therefore belong to the unity, of the church.

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