

WILLIAM REED HUNTINGTON

(1838-1909)



W R Huntington was never a bishop. But he had a tremendous impact on the Episcopal Church.

He was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1838, the son of a physician, studied at Harvard, and was ordained a priest in 1862. In each of the thirteen General Conventions that met between 1870 and his death, he was a Deputy.

In 1871 he moved for the restoration of the ancient Order of Deaconesses, which was finally officially authorized in 1889. His parish became a center for the training of deaconesses.

Huntington's was the chief voice calling for a revision of the Book of Common Prayer (completed in 1892), and his the greatest single influence on the process of revision. The prayers he wrote for it include the following, used during Holy Week and on Fridays:

Almighty God, whose dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

In his book *The Church Idea* (1870), Huntington undertook to discuss the basis of Christian unity, and he formulated the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, a statement adopted first by the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in 1886 and then, with slight modifications, by the Bishops of the world-wide Anglican Communion assembled at Lambeth in 1888. The statement set forth four principles which Anglicans regard as essential, and offer as a basis for discussion of union with other Christian bodies.

THE CHURCH-IDEA

An Outline and Compendium

“Unity is to be sought through the truth” [p. 15]

I. The Gospel of the Kingdom – [pp. 1-15]

Huntington begins with the observation that “Christenbdom” is characterized by a “wide-spread misgiving that we are on the eve of momentous changes.” “Unrest is everywhere.” A “spirit of change is in the air.” [p. 1]

He believes we are witnessing a need to grapple with the idea of the Church – and a desire to see the Church at one for the sake of reaching out into the world. He opines, “union is God’s work, and separation devil’s work.” [p. 2] Catholicity is the issue – but how may Catholicity be defined? It is to the “first principles” that he turns in his work.

The “Church-Idea” is stated briefly: “that the Son of God came down from heaven to be the Savior not only of men, but of man; to bring ‘good tidings of great joy’ not only to every separate soul, but also to all souls collectively. He died not only to save the scattered sheep, but to gather tem that they might be *scattered* sheep no longer.” The Gospel has by its very nature a “twofold significance, sent with a twofold purpose, freighted with a twofold blessing.” [p. 3]

This is not to say that there are two Gospels. “But this single Gospel has a twofold outlook,” namely the transformation of individuals and of society as a whole. [p. 3] “It is an injury to the balance of truth when either aspect is dwelt upon to the exclusion of the other.” [p. 4]

Noting that the words ‘Gospel’ and ‘kingdom’ are joined by Matthew to describe Jesus’ mission – he is preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. Of this, “the natural and straightforward inference from the statement would seem to be that He [Jesus] announced to the people the coming of a new and better social order.” [4f.] This new order will not simply displace the old, human order, but a “Divine polity fruitful of change and sure of triumph.” [5] Despite the customary spiritualized interpretation of Gospel as the promise and assurance of individual salvation, it is clear that the ‘Gospel’ (while including this) involved a larger vision. Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom centered, not on the atoning significance of his death as the teaching of the Apostles did, but on the relations and obligations pertaining to his disciples. “‘Follow me,’ He said. that was the side of the Gospel that fronted on the individual. Again, He spoke repeatedly to his disciples of the ‘things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.’ That was the side of the Gospel fronted upon society.” [7]

Only after Pentecost, “The death and resurrection of the Gospel-bringer threw a flood of light upon what He had said about his kingly claims. Men began to see why so large a measure of personal loyalty was demanded of them, when they were shown how He who

asked it had died to take away their sin. And they began to understand what was meant by the Gospel of a Kingdom, when they saw rising everywhere about them the walls and turrets of the new-found City of God.” [7]

This rising Kingdom is to be identified with the Church.

There are two objections to this notion. The first is that Christ’s “kingdom” is essentially invisible, referring to his “spiritual supremacy” in the hearts of his followers. The second is that the “kingdom” refers to a new order, but one which will only come to visibility at the end “when the present world order passes away.” [8]

There is some truth, of course, to both views. But each is onesided and therefore in emphasizing one of the other, misleading. While it is undeniable that Christ said the “Kingdom is within you,” the Apostles following the Lord’s command, went out to form “visible and tangible” communities. [9] “There was nothing shadowy or uncertain about it. It was actual. It had a name. That name was the Church.” [9] And the fact is that even Jesus parables point both to the inward and the outward character of the Kingdom. So the first objection falls when we consider both the actual teaching of Jesus and the mission of the Apostles following him. Much the same thing can be said of the second objection: can it be shown that there is only one way to look at the Kingdom, namely that it is yet to come? Huntington points to two parables – the fisherman who brings good and bad fish into his nets, and the farmer who sows seeds in a field which bring forth wheat and tares. If the Kingdom is like either of these pictures, then it cannot refer to a future, yet-to-come kingdom alone, for that future kingdom – the kingdom fulfilled – is without “defilement.” [11-12] The resolution is to recognize that the kingdom has both an already and a not-yet character about it. Jesus “had in mind a Kingdom He meant to establish at once here on earth, but a Kingdom, nevertheless, which should find its fullest and ripest development in the world to come.” He laid a foundation upon which he would build a structure that “mount up to eternity.” [12]

“Let us beware of endeavoring to be more spiritual than He whose gift the Spirit is.” [12] Either view taken by itself is dangerously misleading. The Church is the present spiritual order that makes citizens fit for the eternal and perfect order that God intends.

Huntington turns next to considering how the Church-Idea has been handled historically.

“For a Christian to declare that his whole religion consists in watering and weeding his own spiritual garden-plot, and that he has no time to look beyond the hedge, is blank selfishness.” [14]

“The Church is the commonwealth of souls, and every Christian owes it fealty and service.” [14]

II. The Thought and its Clothing – [pp. 17-33]

How did the “Divine thought . . . from the mind of Christ . . . [take] on, at the hands of his immediate successors, the clothing of actual fact.” [19] This is the question to which Huntington next turns.

Building on the “illustration” or analogy of St. Paul, that the Church is the Body of Christ, Huntington delineates four “notes or characteristics of the Body:

- Visibility
- The Indwelling Spirit of the Lord
- Unity
- Capability of perpetual renewal

1. Visibility

“If . . . the Church is a body, in any real and satisfactory sense, the Church must be a society that is visible, open to the eye. . . . [a] union of men that confesses itself a union by having terms of admission and symbols of membership.” [20f.]

“Why, then, do we hear so much these days about ‘the Church Invisible?’ There certainly is no warrant for the phrase in Holy Scripture.” [21] Huntington points to the previous thoughts about Jesus’ teaching in the parables, and then turns to Paul. The fact is that the Pauline letters deal with real problems of a real and visible society. Nowhere does he speak of the real Church as an invisible society. Rather, in spite of the frailties and fallibilities of the members of the Church, they are still addressed as “the Church” in such and such a place. It looks “as if he regarded the whole body of the baptized as being the one Church of Christ on earth, a Church not without its unworthy and sickly members, even as the Lord has said should be, but still one Church, to be addressed as brethren, to be taught, to be guided, to be built up, to be ministered unto, to be led on in holy living . . .” [24-25]

The problem with understanding the Church as an “inner kernel” surrounded by an “external husk” is that it tends to make the Church abstract, indeterminate, and to make an elect elite of those who think of themselves as spiritually enlightened.

2. The Indwelling Spirit of the Lord

A body is animated, that is, driven by spirit. In the case of the Church, the animating force is the Holy Spirit of God. “here lies the distinction between the Church and any other society whatsoever.” [25]

“The wit of man can formulate the law that keeps the stars in their courses, but of the law that links body to soul, it tells us almost nothing. We can philosophize upon that mysterious union, and invent all manner of hard names to describe it, but we can get no nearer to understanding it by doing so.” [26]

The spirit of the animate body is analogous to the Holy Spirit of the Church Body.

3. Unity

The truths of the visible and spirit-animated character of the Church leads to the character of unity. Huntington points to common usage wherein we refer to a living man as a person, “but after he is dead, we speak of his ‘remains.’” [28] Just as unity is a characteristic of living bodies, so it is of the Church Body.

But “We are assured that there must be ‘diversities of operation,’ and hence sects. By all means let us admit the first proposition; by no means let us consent to the inference. Diversity is perfectly consistent with oneness; sectarianism not at all.” We may not use certain parts of scripture to justify the existence of sects. [28]

The idea of divisions in the Body of Christ would have been anathema – “wholly alien” – to the mind of the Lord. [28] Paul certainly did not think that the followers of Apollo and the followers of Cephas, as distinct entities, was consistent with being the Church. Visible unity is critically important to the functioning of any organized body – a university, an army, a commonwealth – in order to fulfill its purpose. Is it any less important for the Church?

4. Capability of perpetual renewal

Our physical bodies are characterized by an ongoing process of renewal, through the getting rid of waste and the acquisition of new building materials, and in the growth and healing of the body. So it is with the Church. “The identity of a man’s body is, [however], something quite different from that of a marble statue, for it is an identity that must, somehow, be consistent with perpetual change.” [30]

In any body, there come “crises” in its history. “We call them diseases.” [30] So the preservation of identity is a problem. But the need of renewal should not be doubted. In a sense the Church ought to be in continual reformation. But,

“Provided the historical continuity of the Church be kept, and the original deposit of faith preserved intact, it matters not how many reformations are experienced.” [31]

III. Romanism: The Idea Exaggerated – [pp. 35-49]

“Rome is arraigned upon the charge of having imposed upon the faithful, as essential to salvation, articles of belief that cannot possibly be proved by Holy Scripture.” [41] Thus the primary problem with Romanism is that the idea of the Church as a visible society has been exaggerated – in the belief that the Church itself can master and reinterpret the vision of its Master.

“A Revelation once given is susceptible to improvement at no hand save the Revealer’s. We may use our ingenuity in interpreting and applying its contents; but until it has been

superseded by a new revelation of paramount authority, our simple duty is to guard it alike from increment and loss.” (p. 35)

“... we ought to be equally sensitive to all violations of the principle that a revelation cannot be mended by man’s wit.” (p. 43)

“No ‘theory of development,’ skillfully wrought as it may be, can ever prove the mistletoe to have been in the acorn around the offspring of whose womb it clings. Like produces and develops like, and there are features of Romanism for the like of which we search the New Testament in vain.” (p49) [Here, he is speaking of Romanism. The analogy is somewhat stark: mistletoe is a parasitic plant which often fastens on trees. His point is that no theory of development can account for the mistletoe by dissecting and analyzing the acorn – the seed of the of the oak. The mistletoe is foreign to the plant as such.]

IV. Puritanism: The Idea Diminished – [pp. 51-66]

The problem with Puritanism is the opposite to that of the Romanists. The Church is deprived of its ability to move through change, and periods of change, because locked too narrowly into its interpretive principles.

Puritans believe that holiness is the mode of admission. “The Puritan is he who proposes to cleanse or make pure the Church of Christ by narrowing it to the circle of those whose acceptance with the Almighty there is perfectly satisfactory proof.” [52]

The Puritan is:

- dissatisfied with the actual Church as compared with the Scriptural ideal
- is convinced that fault lies with the structures that manage or control it
- urges more faithful discipline
- regards it as “impiety” that there be any “spot or stain” in the Church
- emphasizes the “little flock” over the “ten thousand times ten thousand”
- external unity matters little when compared to internal sanctity [52f.]

But, “The Church’s standard [of holiness] is one of aspiration, not attainment.” [53]

“thus it appears that the issue is between two ideas of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, comprehension and selection.” [53] The Puritan wants things straightened out now – the historic Christian thinks otherwise based on the teaching of Jesus, the practice of the apostles, and the larger history of the Church.

The early Church, following the example of Jesus, reached out to the imperfect in order to bring them into unity with Christ and instruct them in eternity. In this sense, they were more inclusive than the Puritan model. This does not, however, mean they were lax or latitudinarian in their approach to discipline.

“The Church, as the Apostles present it, is a training school into which all are to be received who honestly desire to come. . . .In this school the very highest standard of attainment is to be constantly held up in both the departments of character and scholarship, but at the same time a wise patience must be exercised with those who fail to reach the standard, and even the risk of retaining some unworthy member is to be incurred rather than that any sort be too hastily excluded.” [58]

V. Liberalism: The Idea Distorted – [pp. 67-84]

“Liberalism in religion is the spirit that is impatient of anything like authority, whether in the line of doctrine or discipline.” [69, emphasis original]

“. . . Liberalism is not a system. Its very characteristic is its want of system.” [68]

“A dogma is simply an article of faith received and held as certain. . . . [But Liberalism works] by persuading men to preface every article of faith with a ‘Perhaps’.” [70]

“If the world can be taught to throw all its religious thinking into the form of hypothesis, and to begin its creed with ‘I conjecture,’ instead of ‘I believe,’ the victory of Liberalism over dogma will be complete.” [70]

But the Church takes, and always has taken, a very different view of this whole matter. The Church accounts herself to be a custodian or trustee of what was at the beginning committed to her to keep. The very existence of the Church rests upon the revealed truths she holds like family jewels in her charge. Take away the facts in which Christians say they believe, and the fabric we name the Church becomes at once no better than a tottering shell, unfit to stand against a breath of wind.” [71]

“This constancy of the Church to her belief is a perpetual irritation to Liberalism.” [71]

True liberty, indeed, is to be found in Christ, and in the Church which he founded. The “free-thinking” man takes it for granted that freedom means freedom *from* authority and dogma. But if we take the Christian Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty” what becomes of Christian Liberalism? First, we question the existence of God, about which Scripture is certain. Second, we begin to doubt the character of God as Father – intruding other, abstract ideas of God. Third, doubt regarding whether and how God is “Maker of heaven and earth.” Far from being freed, such a Christian is suddenly thrown into controversy and confusion. [73-74]

“Now the ground that the Christian Church occupies is perfectly intelligible and distinct. The Church says, ‘This is the first article of our belief. We regard it as settled and unchangeable. We are ready to defend it, with the weapons of argument, against attacks from without, but we cannot and will not allow it to be questioned from within; for such a permission would be nothing more or less than a breach of trust. The faith has been given to us to keep, and we must keep it, or else turn traitors to the Head.’” [74]

“Error is bondage. Truth is freedom.” [75]

“If God has revealed truth to men in Jesus Christ, which truth without such a revelation could not have been discovered, is it not plain as it can be that those who refuse to receive this truth are the bondmen, and those who gladly receive it the free?” [75]

VI. The American Problem – [pp. 85-103]

[Not outlined here]

VII. Reconciliation – [pp. 105-157]

Anglicanism – “The word brings up before the eyes of some a flutter of surplises, a vision of village spires and cathedral towers, a somewhat stiff and stately company of deans, prebendaries, and choristers, and that is about all.” (p. 113)

“The true Anglican position, like the City of God in the Apocalypse, may be said to lie foursquare. Honestly to accept that position is to accept:

1. The Holy Scriptures as the Word of God.
2. The primitive Creeds as the Rule of Faith.
3. The two Sacraments ordained by Christ himself.
4. The Episcopate as the keystone of Governmental Unity.” (p. 114)

“Anglicanism is pledged to no special philosophy of inspiration. . . . Holy Scripture, according to the Anglican view, is the treasure house of God’s revealed truth. How far and in what precise manner the divine and the human elements coexist there, it is idle to surmise, because manifestly impossible to determine. It is enough to know that in a sense peculiar and unique, differencing it from all other books, the Bible is God’s word or message to us.” (p. 115-116)

“To the mind convinced that the ‘Word was made flesh,’ nothing seems more natural than that God should have provided and protected the memorial of so transcendent an event.” (p. 116)

“But the Church must have some guarantee from its members that the cardinal truths enshrined in Holy Scripture are indeed received. Hence the necessity of a creed.” (p.116)

“The principle of dogma is the cornerstone not only of Church life but of all social life whatever. Dogmas are simply first principles, and without some agreement upon first principles the very beginnings of society are impossible.” (p. 117)

“Christianity as a religion rests upon a basis of alleged fact. Discredit this foundation, destroy people’s confidence in its strength, and the whole fabric will tumble to the

ground in a hundredth part of the time it has taken to rear it. When the Church renounces the principle of dogma, she will simply be committing suicide.” (p. 118)

“Between Arianism and Humanitarianism there is no stopping place, and between Humanitarinsim and Christianity there can be no peace.” (p. 124)