

SPECIAL
ARTICLES

Our Contributors

BOOK
REVIEWS

CHURCH UNION.

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Article II.

History has been accused of being a great distorter of bottom facts; but its lessons are, all the same, a wholesome guidance when events are in the way of repeating themselves. The echoes of the late contention between the United Free Church of Scotland and the Dissociate F. C.'s. have hardly yet been hushed. When the contention was at its warmest over the allotment of the temporalities, an apology appeared in one of the Scottish newspapers, temporizing with the stridency of the demands of the "Wee Free," and pointing out how the people of the two churches entering the union, had been too indifferent to make a close and careful enquiry into the details of the terms of the union—having allowed themselves as was said, to be led pretty much as their church leaders had advised. And certainly there is some reason to believe that the genuine popularity of the union movement above referred to, did tend to promote a "laissez aller" polemic, the faith of the majority in the results of a consolidating denominational influence giving too little heed to the remnant of the people who were opposed to the union.

It is not easy to keep the restraint of patience on an overwhelming majority. There is always an inclination to depend more on numbers to gain one's end than on argument, and whether or not an intrinsic blame had to be laid at the door of the very latest church union party in Scotland, that has just gained its ends of a partial Presbyterian Union, there can be no doubt of the pertinency of the lesson which the movement, with all its historic "pros and cons," and mixed exaggerations of feeling and statement, has handed over to the very latest church union party in Canada that would have a partial union of our Protestant churches. The fineness of leadership does not always involve the bias of partisanship. Neither is a vice in itself. But it is certain that if the lesson of the campaign in favour of Presbyterian Union as an initial step towards a wider church union in Scotland is to be of full service to Canadians, all supercilious neglect of the leadership of the "smaller followings" should be frowned down from the very beginning. The canvases for any share of church union that is practicable ought to be in the very largest measure one of fair-mindedness, with a single eye to what is for the best of society. The warnings of professionalism and traditional prejudice should be warily treated in the discussions that are sure to follow the preliminary deliberations and findings of the Union Committees, now that the question has been sent down to the minor church courts and the laity for a final verdict. Nay, the frictional illogical plea and inflammatory appeal, borrowed as it may be from our political models, have to be gingerly dealt with for truth's sake, in face of an awakened opposition that gives utterance to those peevish words, even before the ball has well been opened.

"So ardent is the feeling of the friends of the Union that they are disposed to be impatient at the attitude of any one who calls in question the wisdom of the project or ventures to criticize the steps which have been taken in dealing with the subject."

Such a warning, premature as it is from the standpoint of fact, is one of the opening sentences of a pamphlet which has lately been issued, combating the findings of the Union Committees, not only in one phase, but in every phase of their argument. And any critic of the thesis of the pamphlet will certainly earn a confidence for an all-enduring patience, if he

can keep his equanimity while analyzing the special pleading and untenable logic indulged in by the author.

In a first article of mine, lately published, reference was made to the partial union that might or might not be a prelude to a general union. The possible and the practical in a minor proposal should not be stultified by the impossible and the impracticable in a wider proposal. Union gave us our enduring wider con- The hint in the proposal for Maritime federation of provinces, just as the hint in this partial union of Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists may save the way for a general Protestant Union. But had the wider union involved in Confederation been found to be impossible and impracticable, the project of a Maritime Union would have had to be dealt with, all the same. Our failing to secure what cannot be secured does not inhibit us from securing what can be secured. One thing at a time is the keynote of a right process. Unit to unit is the simplest problem in arithmetic. And whatever reasons are likely to be uttered over the fact that only three of our Protestant denominations in Canada have been counselling themselves into a union, those reasons can in no way be logically advanced as argument against the virtue of the movement now afoot. Unit to unit is the easiest problem, especially when to all appearances, it is the only possible one. The Anglican body has a problem of unification of its own to solve, before it can present itself as a unit waiting to be added to a unit, as also have the Baptists here. The Presbyterians and Methodists have already passed through the process of self-unification, and now present themselves to be added as units to one another and to the Congregational body. If there were to be found any word in the report of the sub-committees on Union or in their schedule of terms, which could be taken as a barrier to a general Protestant Union, when the time comes for such, the plea, that the aim in favour of partial union is too narrow to be entertained, might have had some little force. But not one word is to be found in the reports on doctrine, on polity or on the ministry, administration and law, which can be turned into a stumbling block in the way of the Anglicans and the Baptists negotiating for union with the new United Church. It is to be hoped, therefore, that no prejudice will take the place of sound reasoning, when the empty assertion is made that the proposals for union do not go far enough. The history of the movement so far shows, in the most unmistakable way, that there has been neither haste nor any inclination to discontent in the confines of the negotiations to these churches. A treaty with the impossible may be a thing of interest to the theological dilettante in his elaborations of what might be, if things were only otherwise. But the same of such treaty making is, none the less, looked upon as a folly by the practical age in which we live. Of course the responsibility of proving that there is a moment impossible in the way of a wider union rests with those who justify the negotiations on the narrower basis adopted—a task which will no doubt be undertaken "in extenso" if necessity demands it before the laity have made up their minds on the nearer elements of the details of the terms of the union under consideration. Indeed, there can now be adopted no safer plan on the part of the laity than to analyse with conscientious care, what the sub-committees actually say in their reports before taking up with the pleadings of those who are opposed to the proposed union on the strength of the rather untenable argument advanced by the supporters of the amendment that was lost in the last Presbyterian

General Assembly, namely, that the united church may not realize the success that has been vouchsafed to the three churches working in the cause of Christ independently.

An examination of the report of the sub-committee on Doctrine reveals a wonderful simplicity and comprehensiveness in its nineteen articles. There may be an over-hastening to do well in the spirit of the present age as well as a hastening to do ill. Theories have to be curtailed, it has been said, to meet the practicalities of life. But we all know how church standards become sacred things from age and how, even when they fall into disuse as conduct canons, the faithful are reluctant to take any steps towards their remodelling. Creeds, however, at their best are but incrustations, embodying or preserving the fundamentals of gospel truth within them. The gospel was made for man and not man for the gospel; and, as man changes in his slow hereditary way, so must man's creeds change for gospel needs. The suggested confession of faith for the proposed United Church presents a document much needed, as some would say—that involves only a very few secondary losses. The gospel needs have certainly not been impaired by any verbal limitations of the projected creed-incrustation. The divine absolutism as set forth in the older standards has been sublimed into the grace of God in Christ, as the fundamental of fundamentals in the Christian faith; and from article to article the theme of God as a Father, and Christ as an example of the perfection of human life, indwelling and reconciling, is judiciously developed in the phraseology of a current Christian experience, until, in the nineteenth article it presents a summary of duty that rises to something like eloquence, and, as the Rev. Dr. Macrae has said in his excellent discourse on the proposed union of the churches in Canada "glows with a fervor of homage to the practical and with a hope that the Christian faith, as a living power in the movements of conduct and history, shall finally be triumphant and universal."

In a document whose most marked feature is its brevity, there cannot but be omissions to be noticed by the older members of the churches composing union. The committee on doctrine has already been possessed of a desire to deal with what could be agreed upon as a common faithfold than with all that might be included in the most concisely comprehensive statement of a creed possible. As it is, the new creed is a marvel of conciseness. This in itself is a great gain to the Christian world. Speaking of the omissions that have already been detected Dr. Macrae good-humouredly admits that it omits all mention of slavery, infanticide, the virility of fore-ordination, the representative covenant with Adam, the doctrine of election and the perseverance of the saints. And whatever he thinks of the loss of these, he has every sympathy with the burying of the distinctions between Calvinists and Armenians, and the literature of the reprobation denunciations indulged in by the polemics of other days. Conduct and service, in this revised enunciation of gospel needs, are made to take no second place amid theological dubieties, that tend to promote division more than communion. The greatest thing in the world—love to God and charity towards man—has its deservedly prominent place in the new creed; and while some may find too much in the so-called Nineteen Articles and others too little, altogether the proposal, like church union itself, may be taken as being in keeping with the spirit of the times and the zeal of the members of the church of Christ, under any denomination, to further the uplifting of the people into line with the highest morality there is.