

SPECIAL
ARTICLES

Our Contributors

BOOK
REVIEWS

CHURCH UNION.

By Dr. J. M. Harper, Quebec.

Article I.

During the late parliamentary debate on the Sabbath Day Observance Bill, there was no word uttered that ought to have brought more of a cheer to Canadians than the claim on the part of our legislators that Canada is a Christian country. In such a claim there is a warrant for the morality of the legislation which is legitimate, and for the gainsaying of the legislation which is illegitimate. And whatever are likely to be the inner oppositions to a movement in favor of church union among any of our Christian denominations, no outer opposition need be looked for against the issuing of a charter for the after organization of the church which shall include the Presbyterians, the Methodists and the Congregationalists of the Dominion.

In regard to these possible inner oppositions, it is neither "wise nor prudent to meet trouble half way." The preliminaries, pointing to an early consummation of such a union, have been favorably accepted by the higher church courts of the three denominations seeking for union. There was exception taken, it is true, to the movement at the last meeting of the Presbyterian General Assembly, and the surprise of our outspoken opposition, coming like a bolt out of a clear sky, may be taken by some as a precedent of further surprises of opposition, when the question comes up for special analysis by the minor church courts and the people themselves. It would appear as if there was going to be no very serious impediment to the union on the part of the Methodists and the Congregationalists, who are less hedged about, if it be not imprudent to say so, by the traditions of a church polity and creed incarnations than the Presbyterians. Yet it may safely be said that, if the objections raised by the minor courts of the Presbyterian body prove to be no more in line with a sound logic than were the objections raised by the mover and seconder of the amendment to the motion in favor of union at the London General Assembly, the negotiations that have been carried on so far are not likely to be called in question, having been, as they continue to be, strictly in line with the honestly expressed hope that gave birth to the movement. The objections raised at the late General Assembly must in no wise be treated with disrespect. Indeed these objections, had they been raised when the movement was at its earlier inception, would have been fairly in order as a test of the latent feeling among the members of the approaching churches that a closer association of some kind was desirable. But, all the same, the minor church courts ought not to allow themselves to be led astray by the action of those voting for the opposing amendment. To follow their lead is to assume the rather uneasy responsibility of combating what has been already warmly approved of, namely, that church union, even of wider compass than what the three negotiating bodies now contemplate, is a desirable thing. In fact, the amendment submitted involved an objection which might be impulsively raised to any enterprise whatsoever, just as it has been raised to the suggestion that an alliance between three or more of our Christian denominations in Canada is desirable. The time, however, has transpired for the raising of such an objection, especially on the ground that there might be less of a success in Christian work as an ethical corrective in the country at large under the contemplated union than what there has been experienced with no alliance. Only an assuring gift of prophecy, vouchsafed to the individual, would justify such a harking back to a phase of the question which has long been settled

in the minds of most of us. In fact, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that, outside of the unthinking and the heedless, there are few who would now care to assume the responsibility of maintaining, even with their traditions and church conventionalities seriously restraining them, that church union is not a desirable thing. Public opinion is at last with the Master in this matter. Canada is a Christian country, and Christian union of any kind cannot but be a desirable thing either in its narrowest or widest acceptation: The Church Union contemplated stands as a foretaste to Canadians of a coming Christian union. It is all that we can look for at the present moment. And, when the minor church courts once take up the details of the terms of the proposed union, for closer examination and analysis they will have to start from this initial patriotic standpoint that Christian union, in whole or in part, is a good thing for Canada,—a standpoint it would be well to keep in view in our further deliberations over the matter. The terms on which the union is to be consummated, are what we have now to discuss, with no leading from those who have been harking back to the main proposition which has already been all but accepted by the three negotiating churches. The actual union of these three bodies may be delayed, but the desirability of union cannot now be ignored, even should the discussions in the minor courts amplify the inner difficulties to be overcome. To repeat for the sake of emphasizing, as far as things have gone, there has been no uprooting of the public conviction that Canada being a Christian country, demands Christian co-operation as a necessity, if Christianity is to hold the place in our national life and ethical advancement which it ought to hold. In such Christian co-operation is our best guarantee for the assimilation of our national and pre-national sympathies, for the consolidation of a Canadian patriotism on the foundation lines of our duty to God and man, as set forth by the founder of the Christian Church himself.

It would perhaps be deemed a little presumptuous for any one layman to examine in open criticism the details of the terms of the proposed union. There has seldom been such a union as these three bodies would fain have consummated in their behalf, without friction and subsequent segregation of a part from the whole. The misfortune, of an after separation has been more frequently to be traced to the asperities of the discussions indulged in than to conscientious scruples. The impudence of over-haste in reaching conclusions not altogether unimpaired with impatience and even intolerance has been too often the cause of the segregation referred to. The "Wee Frees" and the so called "Pietou Church" had possibly their origin in such imprudence. The details of the terms of the union ought therefore to be placed in the hands of the laity and the minor church courts with a fair and above-board urbanity. There is going to be no one more benefited by the union than another. The great benefit is to go to the country at large, our own "Canada first."

Lately we have been told the true story of our Canadian confederation as having been accomplished by too much of a betrayal of principle in the preliminaries which led up to it. We want no such a story ever to be told of the preliminaries of any Canadian enterprise involving Church Union. There should be no hiding up, no explaining away, no taking for granted, no unseemly finesse of any kind, in our deliberations over the details of the terms of the proposed union. The history of the movement so far should be rehearsed by our pastors as a preliminary to final action. The pulpit should be taken advantage of in elucidating these

terms. The union should be as "blessed a doctrine" as may be selected for a Sabbath's exordium, and a practical one too, dealing directly with the life and conduct of the people, in relation with the final solution of a transcendently important subject.

The writer of this preliminary article would know more of these details for himself than has so far come casually in his way as the member of a Presbyterian congregation. And there are thousands of others who would know all about them. There should be a literature of the "new standards" in the hands of every member, manager and elder. The clergy should see to this. They should be up and showing wherein the new policy differs from the old, and how the concentration of creed involves no sacrifice to principle, no disrespect to the memories of those who fought and died for what we have so long enjoyed, no treason to the faith that is within us. The exercise will be beneficial to all of us. Should other communications follow this one from the present writer, they may be taken as being written more from a desire to learn than to teach. Indeed it is the duty of every Canadian Christian to enquire into the differences amongst us that stand in the way of church union on a wider basis even than the partial one contemplated.

There is such a spirit of enquiry awakening among the Anglicans of Canada, and possibly within other denominations, as to these differences. There has been a measure of ironical gratification lately expressed on the part of a Halifax Presbyterian divine that "there is at least one Rector of the Church of England so anxious for Church Union, that he has taken the trouble to write several letters to the newspapers in favor of it." The venerable Archdeacon Armitage of Halifax, Nova Scotia, has certainly been advocating in the newspapers lately a closer Christian co-operation among all churches, as have also the Primate of All England and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster. The Presbyterian divine above referred to says that he greatly desires to see the Anglican Church take its place in the United Church that is being spoken of as a possible consummation in the near future. "Such a supplementary consummation," he proceeds to say, "in my judgment, is greatly to be desired, for many reasons; and I, for one, am willing to go a considerable length in bringing this about. I hope that Dr. Armitage's letters may work largely in this direction, though there are some things in them which I regret." And it is needless to say that these things to be regretted get pretty well entangled about and around the great "bugaboo," as seen from both sides of the ecclesiastical fence, namely, the Historic Episcopate, and that in the terror provoked by them, the argument is finally brought to grief on the brink of a "cest impossible."

The Rev. Dr. Armitage, it may be said, has got no further in his pleadings in the press than have the three churches that are in the way of being united, with the preliminary confession that there is no insurmountable "bugaboo" to frighten any of the contracting parties out of their better judgment. That Christian co-operation is a desirable thing the elderly prophets and pastors of the three contracting churches have decreed more than a year ago, and Church Union has in the light of that decree at last become with them a venture worth exploiting. Dr. Armitage has got no further than the preliminary pleading in his excellently sensible letters to the press. But now that the details of the terms of the proposed compact between the Presbyterians, the Methodists, and the Congregationalists have been sent down