

The Pending Union of Three Canadian Churches

[Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational]

A Presbyterian Minister's Difficulty in Decision as Presented to a Divided Congregation

NOTE.—While it is probable that there are people in some of the Churches of Christendom who hold that salvation in this life or any other is inseparable from acceptance of the creed of their particular Communion or Denomination, we believe most folk in all the Churches—and outside of them—recognize that Christianity is bigger than any Church or Denomination, and that acceptance, in practical experience of the Spirit of Christianity, and an endeavour, however

faltering, to live in the light of the injunctions thereof, are the outstanding essentials to individual Christian progress in this world.

To such citizens it may be matter for regret that the pending union does not include more than the three churches named, and that the Anglican and Baptist communions are not also associated in it.

On the other hand, it is known that here and there many members

of the present Presbyterian Church, for one reason or another, are not satisfied to go into the union.

We believe the subject is of sufficient community interest to warrant our giving space to this exposition by a Vancouver minister, whose congregation is known to be divided on the subject. We have omitted a personal introduction and other local references, and the title and sub-titles are inserted by us.—(Editor, B. C. M.)

I have been a Unionist from the inception of the movement, before I entered the ministry; and yet perhaps some of you will remember that, following the decisive action of the 1923 Assembly, I said: "I don't know whether I am glad or not"—and I meant it.

On the general policy of Union I never wavered. That it was the proper goal for the church to strive for, as early as possible, I never doubted. It was the speed that troubled me. About the basis of Union I had no misgivings. Perhaps it was my simplicity that made me be so easily pleased; but I feel justified, when I know what my friend Dr. Ephraim Scott (a strong opponent of Union) wrote about it a few years ago in the *Record*: "Its excellence must impress every thoughtful reader. It is full, simple and Scriptural. There are few Presbyterians who can find any substantial difference between it and the Shorter Catechism, and the Confession of Faith. Even if Organic Union be delayed, the work of the committees has not been in vain. It will be a standing testimony to the essential unity of the Protestant evangelical churches. It may also serve as a model to other Protestant churches contemplating Union."

The doctrinal statement did not stand in my way, and I saw no great departure from the Presbyterian system of polity. Some departures are an improvement at points where Presbyterianism is weak, e. g., the making provision for the removal of a minister, against whom no charges of misconduct can be laid, but through whose inefficiency the work is manifestly suffering in a congregation, and the Presbytery is helpless.

As a recent convert to Union said: "Presbyterianism is an ideal system for ideal people." The new polity is on the whole so like Presbyterianism that the Pan-Presbyterian Council of the World has officially expressed itself as giving a place to the United Church of Canada, in the counsels of world Presbyterianism. Dr. Fraser, president of the Presbyterian Association, in the *Harvard Review* of a few years ago, said: "The statement of polity is practically Presbyterian, and provides substantially for congregational freedom." Explanation for this, is well expressed by Rev. W. T. Gunn, the Congregational Church representative on the Union Committee: "In general the polity is essentially Presbyterianism with amendments, for the representative democracy of the Presbyterians, coming half way between the semi-autocracy of the Methodists and the direct democracy of the Congregationalists, provided the best framework." I saw long ago, however, that there were strong sentimental reasons which might prove to be such a barrier as no doc-

trinal agreement or similarities in polity could overcome, and as a result my enthusiasm was not what it might otherwise have been.

In the matter of church life and tradition, I glory in my church's past. I love the Presbyterian Church. From boyhood, when on any occasion I had to tell to what church I belonged, I felt my soul expand as I said Presbyterian. I was conscious of an heirship to a great inheritance.

"A Scottish Celt—A Proud Canadian— A British Subject."

According to the flesh, I am a proud Canadian and a British subject, but I belong only to one strain of the diverse elements that make up the British peoples, even if one of the most ancient and perhaps the most romantic, the Scottish Celt. I have no other blood in my veins unless it be a dash of Norse, through the McLeods of the Hebrides. I feel an unconquerable pride in my race, even if you practical Saxons may wonder why. But I have not impoverished myself in national tradition by being a constituent member of a nation of such diverse origins—the British. I have rather enriched myself—mentally and spiritually. I have annexed the inheritance of the Saxon Scot and claim the whole culture of Scotland as my own by right of birth. I even claim as my own the glories that England won before she joined hands with Scotland and the ancient Celtic line of kings assumed the English sceptre. From boyhood I might one day gloat over the victory of Bannockburn, be in rebellious mood against England for the sake of Flodden Field, but next day I could eagerly take sides with Henry at Agincourt, make common cause with the great sea kings of Elizabeth's England, and claim as my own the valor that resisted the Great Armada.

The union of the kingdoms that came later on led to the pooling of our traditions and sentiments, making us not poorer, but richer in the process.

National Life and Spiritual Inheritance.

There is thus in our national life a spiritual inheritance into which we have entered, which is not of blood, but spiritual adoption. So I am initially convinced that when the Presbyterian Church merges its name in the United Church of Canada—a church which will be still reckoned of the family of worldwide Presbyterianism—her traditions and spiritual inheritance will not be left behind. My heart beats faster at the remembrance of what the Covenanters of Scotland have contributed to the enrichment of our church's life; but to be strictly true, my forefathers were not Covenanters. I wish they had been. In the days of the Covenanters they were,

like a large part of Celtic Scotland, not distinguished for Presbyterian zeal, more Roman Catholic than Covenanters or perhaps Episcopalian, after the fashion of the "Bloody Mackenzie." But later on the Gospel that made the Covenant swept the Highlands, and the Covenanting stream became merged with the stream of our church's life, and by spiritual adoption we annexed the Covenant as our own by spiritual right.

So will it be in the United Church of Canada. We shall not cease to glory in the tradition of Knox, the Covenant, and Chalmers, although we shall share them with others. We shall carry them with us and reach out hands to add to our inspiration in the names of Milton and Cromwell, of Wesley and Whitfield, and be richer, not poorer, for the change.

The Pain of Separation—the Price of Union.

I have had no difficulty along the lines I have indicated; but as the years came and went, with their Union agitations a perennial thing, I found myself a strangely divided self. My head said "Yes"; my heart lagged. And why? It was the contemplating of this very thing that is going to happen, this possibility of separation from my brethren, who bear and will bear the name I love, and that, as the price of Union. I have felt hesitant about paying such a price, and would almost welcome any good reason with which my conscience could make terms, to remain with them. It was for that reason that I have not been an enthusiast in the Union cause, for I felt the end could be attained in another way than that followed, without the loss involved. Not co-operation, for that was only makeshift. I have no time to explain the plan I thought best, nor would it be of any value to discuss it; but I took every opportunity to try and press its merits with leaders on both sides. I still believe it would have been the better way. I was glad last year I was not a Commissioner to the Assembly, for I had no clear leading on what ought to be done, and while the Union debate was in progress I watched anxiously the signs of the times in the press, and was not able to rejoice wholeheartedly at the outcome, although the proposal of the opponents was still less to my mind. All these years I never shirked a vote on the question, and always my conscience forbade a vote against Union, for I believed it was of God, even if not pursued in the way I thought best.

When the (Presbyterian) Assembly finally decided last year, there were only two courses to choose from. I could not find a little denomination of my own around my idea of