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# The Deeper Life

On Church Councils By Rev. S. G. Bland, D.D.

D URING the last two weeks I have been attending a Dominion-wide ecclesiastical assembly. I have had the pleasure of attending many such great church councils representing different denominations, in both Canada and the United States, and am tempted to draw some comparisons bet you en these councils of our own day and the great councils of the past.

I will attempt none in regard to intelligence. Debates in modern councils would show far greater range and accuracy of knowledge and more reliable and efficient methods of reasoning, but he would be bold who would claim for them greater intellectual power. Councils in the early Christian centuries and in the reformation period grappled with great questions

centuries and in the reformation period grappled with great questions
and in some cases with
enduring results. Some
of the thinking in all these past times
seems to us childish, but the thinkers
were not. It was the deliberate judgment of Mr. Gladstone that the men
of the middle ages were intellectually
greater men than the men of today—
in sheer brain power above us.
But, I think, there is no doubt whatever of the religious and ethical

But, I think, there is no doubt whatever of the religious and ethical advance. Modern ecclesiastical assemblies are far more deeply and intelligently Christian than any in the past. They understand the nature and aims of Christianity better. They show more of the Spirit of Christ. In frankness and candor and courtesy and brotherliness they far excel. Something of warmth, occasionally even of anger, there may be, and possibly something of intrigue and what we may call politics, but nothing compared with the bitterness and the scheming we find in great councils in the past, unless possibly in the very earliest days of Christianity.

I question whether there is anywhere

Christianity.

I question whether there is anywhere in the world to be found, a body of similar size and representative character which debates with such an open mind and such a general and disinterested desire to find the right solution ested desire to find the right solution as one of our modern church councils. Macaulay once said that he had never known a single vote changed in the British House of Commons by any debate. I fancy it is a rare event in our own legislatures. I have seen our ecclesiastical parliaments swung from side to side by sheer force of reasoning. But while I think, comparisons between the present church councils and those of the past are almost wholly to the advantage of the former, there is one point where at least one of those earlier councils seems to possess a superiority.

one point where at least one of those earlier councils seems to possess a superiority.

The fifteenth chapter of Acts gives an account of what is sometimes called the first church council. The primitive Church was in danger of being divided over the question of the introduction of Gentile converts. Paul and Barnabas through their missionary labors had converted to Christianity large numbers of the heathen. The question was, whether these non-Jewish converts should be required to submit to the same ceremonial regulations as the rest of the Christians who were practically all Jews. There was a strong feeling among the older Christians that these new Christians should be required to become Jews as well as Christians. Paul was determinedly opposed to this as an infringement of the liberty which he, almost alone at first, saw to be an essential principle in the new faith. He saw too, no doubt how the new faith would be handicapped in the great conquest which he saw awaited Christianity if divested of all the Jewish peculiarities which the first disciples had naturally and inevitably carried into it.

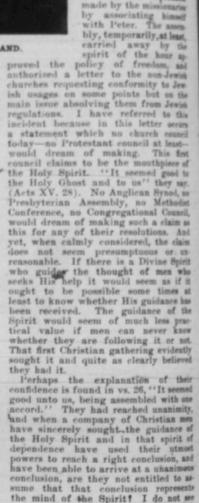
The great question, one of the most

into it.

The great question, one of the most momentous the Christian Church has

ever confronted, was referred to the headquarters of the new religion at Jerusalem. The apostles and elders, as indeed practically the whole mother Church at Jerusalem, assembled to da cuss it.

Feeling seems to have run high, and there was strenuous debate to Peter, the acknowledged leader of the Jewis Church, took the desire step of anaouncing that he favored the policy of liberty for the non-Jewish convert. This bold and most lenorable stand made a possible for Paul and Barnabas to tell the story of their wanderful success among the heatstory of their wanderig success among the head-en. Then James, the brother of our Lost, elinehed the impression made by the missionaries by associating himself with Peter. The assen-bly temporarille at her-

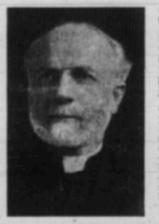


have been able to arrive at a unanimous conclusion, are they not entitled to assume that that conclusion represents the mind of the Spirit! I do not see how such an inference can be denied. Humble dependence in the guidance of the Spirit of God, due consideration of the question, unanimity of decision, seem to me the three conditions which quarantee the rightness of the decision.

the question, unanimity of decision, seem to me the three conditions which guarantee the rightness of the decision.

Our modern Church Councils do not speak with confidence; they would not venture to claim for their decision divine authority, because, however they conform to the first two conditions they disregard the third. Church councils follow the Parliamentary rules of order, and if the presiding officer is of a strict and legal turn of mind, they follow these rules very rigidly. The apostle Paul, except by a permitted irregularity, could not speak after the vote had been called for, nor move an amendment after an amendment to the amendment after an amendment to the amendment had already been moved, and a majority of one settles a question as completely as if it were a majority of all but one. Familiarity with the rules of debate, ingenuity and quickness in taking advantage of them sometimes count for more than wisdom or high character. Decisions reached by various majorities after such discussion may express the mind of the Spirit, but Continued company to the continued com

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Dr. BLAND.

societies.

This is the women of the platform, and it to with a gre. In confederatic Council of Worthe Home E Women's Section and the Local Damphin, Porta and Virden. drafted and is the different a been discussed published in finanters—to be importance to country. A seach other is wo result from sufference. The of the women

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