

GENERAL ASSEMBLY. PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA.

LARGE GATHERING OF MINISTERS AND ELDERS.

The first meeting since the union of the Supreme Court of the Presbyterian Church in Canada was held on Thursday last, in Knox Church in this city. The Church was well filled by ministers, elders and spectators. The Rev. Dr. Cook, Principal of Morris College, Quebec, retiring Moderator, preached the opening sermon at 11 o'clock. His remarks were founded on Ephesians iv. 11-13:

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

There are two books given to men to study, both coming from the same Divine hand, the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture. From the patient study of the former there is ever resulting the discovery of new truths, truths unknown before even to the wisest; and neither the number nor the greatness of the truths which have already been discovered affords any reason for doubting that more unspeakably shall yet be attained. Science, with all its past triumphs, is but in the beginning of its career, and it is reasonable to believe they are only the first fruits which have yet been reaped of that magnificent harvest which shall finally reward the application of human genius to the study of the works of God. Now some such discovery and development of truth, new and before unknown truth, there are also and equally in the study of the Book of Scripture. There are analogies doubtless, points of resemblance, between those two great Books of God—analogies such as were to be expected in works coming from the same Divine Author, and which it is in many respects important and interesting to remark and study. Is, then, this one of them, even to the diligent student; and as, from age to age, men are ever adding to the truths which have been drawn from the study of material nature, may they also be adding to the truths which have been drawn from the revealed Word? Now in dealing with this question it has to be admitted in the first place that the labours of those who have been most diligent and most successful in the application of their time and talents to the study—the critical and scientific study, that is—of the Divine Word, have seldom resulted in what may be called discovery. They have rendered some scriptural argument more clear. They have placed in a better point of view some scriptural truth or principle or character. They have cleared away some of the difficulties which attach to books written in ancient times, and in languages which have long ceased to be spoken. They have illustrated allusions to customs which prevailed in remote ages and distant lands. But after all, no great or leading truth unperceived before, unperceived from the beginning, or which was not patent to the apprehension of ordinary readers, has by means of them been attained; and when something new has been started, it has not unfrequently turned out that error was made to take the place of truth by the application of unsound and unwarrantable principles of interpretation to what had been more legitimately and rationally understood before. It is to be considered, in the second place, that Christianity, in its doctrines and principles has been in the Scriptures revealed plainly and fully to the apprehensions of plain men. Men needed such plain revelation to their attaining peace with God, and for the government of their lives; and the Gospel gives it so that they who run may read and understand. The corruption of man's nature by reason of sin, the evil and the danger of sin, the unspeakable mercy of God in the redemption of the world by Jesus Christ, the work of the Spirit of God in renewing and sanctifying the hearts of men, the future life, the future judgment, the future and righteous retribution—these have been, are, and always will be, the great truths and doctrines of the Gospel. It is not to be thought that any study or any time will ever evolve from the Christian Scripture truths greater than these, or even equal in rank to these. No such development of Christianity is to be expected. Nor is it needed for the great ends for the accomplishment of which the Gospel revelation was a variety. Nevertheless, there may yet be in a wide way, and growing out of a more intelligent study of the Divine Word, and that, too, in combination with a profound veneration for its authority, what shall, in effect, amount to discovery—discovery in some degree analogous to that which rewards the patient enquirer into the wonders of the material world, and which may be fitted to tell powerfully on the condition of the Christian Church, even as the other tells powerfully on the condition of mankind in general. And first, isolated passages of Scripture—particular texts—may be interpreted differently, and more soundly and justly, than has yet been done. We are naturally disinclined to think the correctness of our present interpretations questionable. But there is a lesson to be gathered in this matter from the history of the Church. Whatever others may think, no sound Protestant does doubt, or can doubt, that for many centuries the Church, undivided, or only divided into the Eastern and Western branches, did grievously misunderstand and misinterpret certain passages, and with most mischievous consequences—as, for example, our Lord's words to Peter, after he had acknowledged Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, or the words He used in the institution of the ordinance of the Supper, "This is my body."

the Protestant Churches, only thus far different, as it has been scoldingly said that we never do err. Is it not possible that still we may be under misapprehension of some portions of God's Word, on which light may yet be made to shine so as completely to carry the convictions of the Church in favour of another and better understanding of them? And such light on Scripture suggesting new and sounder interpretations, amounting almost or altogether to discovery, may still more be expected in the examination to which all humanly formed systems of religious doctrine will yet be—and before any large union of Christian Churches can take place must be—submitted. It has not pleased God to declare His truth to men in the form of creeds, and confessions, and catechisms. It has come to us in histories and biographies, in Psalms and prophecies, in proverbs and parables, scattered over the pages of many authors, and in works written with the usual variety of human taste and talent. It has not come to us in the form which human reason would have anticipated, as the least likely to give rise to misapprehension and division. In this, as in other things, God's ways are not as our ways. But in the study of God's ways there always shines forth the evidence of a divine and heavenly wisdom. The Scriptures, from their very variety, are suited to gain access into men's minds, however differently constituted. A mind which revolts from abstract truth may be won by the charm of a narrative in which the truth is embodied. One who has no sense of the pathos or the sublimity of poetry may be gained by a chain of connected reasoning, and one who cares little for the rules of logic may receive truth most readily when clothed in the forms which a lofty and passionate imagination suggests; while another may be reached most effectually by the point and terseness of a proverb or a parable. The Scriptures have all these, and are varying as the varying tastes and habits of men's minds, yet ever, and in all their variety of form and expression, containing the truth which it is man's greatest interest to know, to receive, and to obey. It is well that in point of fact such religion as we have is taken from them. We have a confession and catechism, which we greatly value and reverence, but which of us, for once he looks into them, does not look a thousand times, or ten thousand times, into the Bible? Yet it is no doubt the natural tendency of the mind to form truth into a system, or to seek that it be so formed. It craves that what of faith and practice is scattered over so large a surface and expressed in so many ways, should be condensed into shorter compass and put in plain words, and good purpose may be served by giving way to this natural desire. Truth so condensed is more quickly learned and more easily remembered. The relations of one truth to another are more readily apprehended, and there is opportunity afforded for protest against error; yet the difficulty is obvious of so summing up the truth on so many great subjects as are treated of in such a variety of ways in the books of the Old and New Testaments. The variety of the systems which have been drawn from the Scriptures, and their differences from one another, demonstrate the difficulty. Nor can the claim of perfect accuracy or of infallible authority be admitted to any of them; while there is this peculiar disadvantage in respect of them all—whether Protestant or Catholic, Socinian, Arminian, or Calvinistic—that whoever heartily adopts any of them is thenceforth too often and too much disposed to interpret Scripture in conformity with his system rather than to correct his system by a just interpretation of Scripture. Now, were this tendency changed, were this order reversed, it is reasonable to think there would be discovery not in regard of one system only, but of every one—discovery of error, discovery of truth in effect new to the adherents of each. Once more, in the patient study of Scripture, while it will be found that it is all profitable "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," and will also teach without importance, it is none its appearing more clearly and fully than heretofore, that all truths in it are not equally essential, and that in regard of many a difference of view does not imply any serious deficiency of Christian principle. Attached to the decrees of the Councils of the Roman Church there is anathema pronounced on whoever receives not implicitly whatever dogma is laid down, whether the matter be great or small, of little or of much importance as respects the duties of life or the way of salvation. And there was a disposition among the Reformers to consider precise uniformity of opinion on the subjects of their teaching as equally necessary to Church order and to the spiritual safety of the individual. But Christianity has produced a better and wiser spirit, more tolerant of difference in points not held to be fundamental, and less inclined to see ground of separation in such difference of sentiment. There has been much in this respect already accomplished. The articles of the Evangelical Alliance are few in comparison of those of most Protestant creeds. We Calvinists meet readily with our Wesleyan brethren who hold Arminian views, and join heartily with them in thanking God for the great and good work which they have been enabled to accomplish. Nor would any of us, I imagine, be disposed to think an entire concurrence in the articles of our confession on the Divine Decree essential to a man's being a child of God, a member of Christ, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. But more will in this regard be done as the Scriptures are more read, more prayed over, and more practised, and the true bond of brotherhood will be found, not in agreement on a multitude of points to which a non-scriptural importance has been attached, but in the presence of love to the Great Master Himself, and in the presence and power of those loving and gracious affections which He enjoyed and exemplified. But it is not so much in the discovery and development of new truth as in the new and better application of Christian principle to the duties of life that analogy will be found between the progress of science and of Christianity. Recent times have not been more or perhaps so much distin-

guished by the discovery of new principles in science, new truths before unknown, as by the application of these principles to directly practical purposes. Such application of scientific principles to practical purposes, and the study of nature with the view of making such application, distinguish modern from ancient sciences. And in particular they have distinguished the science of our own age—the science of the long interval which has intervened from the close of the great revolutionary war. The powers of nature have in manifold ways, and to an extent wholly unprecedented before, been made subservient to the purposes of men. These powers always existed. Nay, many of them were long known to exist. It was the possible and proper application of them for useful purposes affecting the material enjoyments and the ultimate advancement of mankind which was unperceived. That application, in the extent to which it has gone already, has led to the most magnificent results—results affecting more or less directly the whole human race, and having added innumerbly to the means of increasing the happiness and advancing the improvement of mankind. But no one imagines, or has any right or reason to imagine, that there is an end now or henceforth to such application. On the contrary, we may be sure that the greatest, and, in point of fact, the most magnificent result of the successful application of the powers of nature to human purposes is the impulse given to continue such application—to seek at one and the same time for the more complete development of the powers of nature, and for the more perfect application of them to the purposes of men. We can hardly stigmatize as extravagant or chimerical any expectation of the results that are yet to flow from such application, after the wonders which have already been accomplished. Nor is it to be doubted that through the medium of science some portion shall again be restored to man of that original dominion which had been allotted to him in his state of primeval innocence and purity. Now, can any such development of Christianity take place, it may be said, as this of science—development, not of hidden truths, but of the right and proper application of known truths? The truths and principles of Christianity have respect to duty. They are, when honestly entertained in the mind, powers, forces, so to speak, acting on the soul, and disposing it to duty. Can they not only dispose to duty, but develop it, give extended views of it? May it not be possible so to apply the truths and principles of Christianity to the circumstances of human life and to the state of human society as to indicate clearly new duties—duties, that is, which had not heretofore been perceived as such, while yet retaining all their power as a moral force to lead to the discharge of these duties? I believe they may, and that they will, and that it is in this direction the application, namely, of the great principles of Christianity to human duty, not the discovery of new doctrines, or even an extended apprehension of the old, that the development and growth of Christianity are to be found. How possible such application is will best appear from an example. Among the names most honoured, and most deserving to be honoured, of those good men who were made instrumental in the revival of religion in the Church of England, which took place well nigh a hundred years ago, is that of John Newton—a man distinguished not only for his own labours, but for his close connection with two men, in their different spheres eminently useful to the Church and to the world, the poet Cowper, and Scott, the commentator on the Bible. In his early life this remarkable man had been to the last degree profligate and immoderate. But by a series of circumstances very peculiar in their nature, and no doubt graciously arranged by the Providence of God to that end, he was brought to repentance and to the saving knowledge of Divine truth. He became a sincere and devoted Christian—experiencing the power of Divine grace in his heart, and manifesting it both in his reformed life and in the spiritual experience of which he has left the record, and the latter part of his long life was spent in preaching the Gospel as a zealous and faithful minister of the Church of England. It is at, and for a considerable time subsequent to, his conversion—his, there is no reason whatever to doubt, genuine conversion to God—that he furnishes the illustration which our subject requires. Then he was the captain of a slave ship, engaged personally, engaged actively, in the most wicked traffic that ever disgraced mankind, and evidently not seeing anything in it inconsistent with the principles of that holy religion which yet, in heart and spirit, he had embraced. And so for a considerable period he afforded the extraordinary spectacle of a man of elevated devotion in the Word of God and prayer, and a man exercising himself to have a conscience void of offence—denying himself, and watching with earnest anxiety over his appetites and passions, lest he should be induced to abuse, either in the way of cruelty or of impurity, the unlimited power which he possessed over so many of his wretched fellow-creatures, yet blind utterly to the essential iniquity and hatredness of the traffic itself in which he was engaged. Subsequently he did regard it in the light of Christian principle—in other words, he applied it to the great principles of Christianity, the law of love, and then he saw it in its true character—then he renounced and abhorred it—and joined himself with the band of Christian patriots who succeeded, after the struggle of many years, in obtaining the Act of the Legislature in denouncing and abolishing it. Now what was true of one man in regard of one thing may be true of many men, yea, of the whole Church, and in regard of many things. He applied not the Christian principle, which yet he had honestly embraced, to the particular case, and so he was blind to the duty which lay upon him in regard of that case, and the Church generally, while yet holding true Christian principle—that is, truth in the abstract, and undisciplined sincerity, may yet have failed to apply that principle to a multitude of cases and circumstances of daily occurrence, and so may be blind to the true course of duty. There would be no development of new doctrinal truths, so-called—such

truths as that of the atonement, or the work of the Spirit of God in men's hearts, did it make such application. But there would be a marvellous development in all its apprehensions of duty—in its view of all that which God requires, and to which Christian principle prompts, and fairly allowed to speak and to work in the souls of men. And this is the development of Christianity which after ages are to see when the great purpose for which God hath "given apostles and prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, even the perfecting of the saints," has been accomplished, or brought at least to a far higher pitch of advancement than has yet been attained, and believers have come "in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." We might take another illustration of the same thing from the history of the Church itself—more particularly of the Churches of the Reformation. For how long a period of time did those Churches, almost without exception—certainly without the exception of the Church of Scotland, which however distinguished, and as deserving to be so for other things, was in respect of this as dark and dead as any of them—for how long a period did these Churches continue utterly indifferent, at least utterly inactive, in regard of the extension of Christianity in the world? It scarcely appears as if this had been contemplated as an end which men were to pursue by active exertion. It seems as if it had been supposed that the way of human instrumentality, which God had used in propagating the Gospel and in reforming the Church from the corruptions into which it had fallen, was no longer to be employed in the extension of Divine truth among men—nor was the law of love felt to require that the believing soul acknowledged to be to itself God's best and richest blessing should be communicated as far as possible to others. It cannot be denied that there were as true and genuine Christians in those days as in ours—that they loved the truth—that they held it in sincerity, and were sanctified and saved by it. But neither will it now be denied by almost any, that in regard of this great subject there was a deplorable absence of the application of right Christian principle, that the Church did not only fail to do its duty, but that it was blind to it—that it did not know it—know what was not only a duty but should have been regarded as an honour and a privilege. Neither in the individual case with which we began, nor in this affecting large numbers, and for a long period, do we at all question the genuineness of their Christian principle. They knew that principle. They had embraced it. Many of them would have died for it. Some of them did die for it. But they applied it not to the particular points which I have mentioned—and the fact, undoubted, that they did not, renders it quite a possible thing that the Church now may, without any imputation on the sincerity of its faith, be blind in regard of other points of duty affecting materially the well-being of mankind, and the approach of that time when believers are to come "unto a perfect man; to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." There is a vast difference, no doubt, between knowledge of what is duty and the discharge of it, and often these are miserably divided, the knowledge of duty leading to no practical discharge of duty. Yet while this is so in individual cases, and while the knowledge of duty and the discharge of it can scarce be said in any to keep pace together, so much do the temptations of the world and the remaining corruption of our nature impede the moral progress even of the best, yet usually and on the great scale there is a connection between the knowledge of what is right and the doing of it. There is power in the consciences of men, and above all there is a power in that which commends itself to the consciences of Christian men—of men under the influence of the truth. When, therefore, the general mind of the Church is enlightened in regard to any duty, there follows on the whole, though not, it may be, to the extent there should, nor even approaching to it, yet a great change of conduct in the right direction, and the continual testimony borne to the discovered duty tells at last even upon others who are less influenced by Christian principle. It was the application of Christian principle to the odious traffic in slaves which first demonstrated its evil, and showed to Christian people what was their duty in regard to it, but the ranks of those who opposed it were ultimately swelled by multitudes who acquiesced in their conclusion without having cordially embraced the Gospel principles which had led to it. And so it will be, and it has been, in similar cases. The application of Christian principle to duty raises everywhere the standard of duty—even among those who are not in the strict sense of the word Christians. And what at first it required the exercise of high and pure Christian principle to do, comes to be done generally, and as a matter of course, by all. Such is the importance of the Church rightly applying Christian principle to the circumstances and relations of human life. Not only its own, but the general conduct is ultimately guided thereby. This is the government of the world which is given to the saints. It is not the government of force, it is the government of opinion—the power wielded by the declaring and maintaining right moral views and principles—a power greatly beyond that of the mightiest of kings or statesmen. This government is to be traced in the history of the world from the first introduction of Christianity. It was this government—the government of Christian opinion, boldly maintained—which put an end to the cruelty and the impurities of idol worship, which abolished polygamy, and raised the female sex from degradation and oppression, and rendered crimes, which the wisest and best of the heathen seem to have practised with but little remorse, impossible even to be named. It was this which abolished the cruel shows of the gladiators, in which hundreds of unhappy beings massacred each other, or were torn in pieces by wild beasts, for the amusement of a fierce and ignorant populace. It was this which extinguished throughout Europe the system of domestic slavery, which extinguished slavery through the dependencies of the British Empire and in the neighbouring great Republic, and which is

ever advancing with bold and hopeful step to the abolition of slavery in every form in which it is found in any land. It was this which erected those asylums for the sick, the poor, the destitute, the widow, and the orphan, which now abound in all Christian countries; and set upon innumerable means now in operation for the education of the ignorant, for reclaiming the vicious, and raising and purifying the whole of society. Nothing can be of greater consequence to the world than that the Church should rightly understand its duty—rightly apply, that is, the Divine principles which it has received, and which it holds, to peculiar cases and circumstances. For it has in the motives of the Gospel the moral force which leads to the manifestation of what it knows, and the practice of it, and with it the government of society—the government of opinion in matters of duty, from which the greatest and happiest results proceed, does always ultimately flow. Now this application of Christian principle by the mass of Christian men—whom set not any body of ecclesiastics, or any sect into which Christians have been divided, we call the Church—has always been gradual. The principles of Christianity were the same when spoken by the Apostles that they are now. And they remain unchanged, and unchangeable in the written Word which they have left us. But the application of these principles has been progressive, and often like the application of the powers of nature under the direction of science for the ends of human life and enjoyment, a matter of discovery. The duty of toleration, for example, of allowing men to worship God in their own way, which surely was involved most plainly in the Christian precept that we do to others as we would have them do to us, what was it, but a discovery about three centuries ago? No other Protestant nor Papist acknowledged it. It had been as little known or thought of as the power of electricity was thought of, a few years ago for the purpose of communicating thought from one distant place to another. And there is no more reason to think or to believe that a period has been put to such moral discovery, to discoveries of duty, made by the right application of Christian principle to the affairs and circumstances of human society, than there is to believe that a period has been put to the further application of the physical powers of nature. The Church is not yet so enlightened as to need no more light. Still are believers far from having reached "in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." And just as the triumphs of science in the natural world give glorious reason to expect progress and advancement in subjecting the powers of nature to the dominion and the uses of man, so do the triumphs of Christianity already gained, give token of more and greater yet to come, when its principles shall not only have increased power in regard of duty that is now acknowledged, but shall have received a far wider and juster application to the circumstances and necessities of society. What if these principles, for example, were as openly and consistently applied in the case of nations, and their intercourse, as in the case of individuals? What if they were applied to the honours of war? Would they sanction the hale which both history and poetry throw around the greatest, or almost the greatest, course with which nations can be visited? Would it not appear, may it not yet appear, a duty to put it down, as evident as it was to be put down the traffic in slaves? Is there not everywhere growing up a higher application of the principles of Christianity to the duty of temperance? May there not yet grow up a sounder and juster application of these principles to the establishment of educational and religious institutions under the authority of Christian governments, free from the evil on the one hand of restraining such governments from using the most powerful of all means for good, and on the other, from the evil of permitting them to render such institutions inefficient for the means of gratifying an intolerant spirit? May there not grow up sounder views in regard of the application of wealth, making the application of it directly subservient to the laws of love, instead of the principle of selfishness? May it not hereafter appear, not to individuals here and there, but so generally as to constitute in regard of that matter a new standard of morals guiding the general opinion and the general action, that all power, the power of station, the power of intellect, the power of wealth, should be used directly to promote the general good, and not personal or family aggrandizement? May it not hereafter appear just as wrong and foolish to spend all life in acquiring wealth, to be spent only in selfish objects of some kind or other, or accumulate for a family, as it now appears wise and right? May not a clearer understanding of the great law of love, the law that we should love our neighbour as ourselves, introduce a far greater community in the possessions and the enjoyments of mankind, and Christianity become, as it only can become, the author of that real socialism and brotherhood for which so many apart from Christianity are now blindly striving? Once let the duty of Christian principles be shown, shown to the apprehension of the general mind of the Church, and then the change—great as it must needs be on society and the world—will come. In this, as in all things, truth is great, and will prevail—truth backed by the influence and the motives of Christianity. For Christian duty never stands naked and alone. It is not like the maxims of worldly wisdom or of heathen sages. It is attended with the constraining power of Gospel truth. Whatsoever the duty to which Christian principles clearly call, there are always motives sufficiently great to urge to the performance of it. What will constitute such motives if not the love of God in Christ, if not the hope of a glorious immortality? The change, therefore, to which higher views of duty point will be affected. And from a higher standing point in moral Christianity of future days will wonder as much how true and genuine Christians could act as and so in relation to themselves, and in relation to their brethren, as is common now, as we wonder when we look on John Newton converted to God, and praying, and wrestling with tempta-