

Union of the Protestant Churches in Canada.

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FIRST INSTALMENT.

1. THAT Union of Denominations is desirable—Union of all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ as the one Saviour of humanity—to this, as an abstract proposition, no right thinking man can possibly give any answer but one. The prayer of our Lord—the consecration prayer—dictates the sentiment which must actuate all who love Him;—"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."

The question assumes a different aspect when it is asked, What do or should we understand by Union? To be real, to be effective in the sense and for the purpose intended by our Lord, ought it and must it needs be corporate? Does it demand oneness in relation to such particulars as form of giving expression to our doctrinal beliefs; manner of administering discipline; ceremonies, customs, rites deemed essential in worship; Method of Church-government? Or, is it possible to agree to regarding a variety, a great variety of points embraced under the foregoing propositions as unessential, and still to arrive at a basis, building upon which Christians may fairly speak of themselves as one, may, too, and shall act towards each other in the various relations of ecclesiastical activity as being really one?

For my own part, my experience leads me to question the possibility of achieving what a Union including what is thus outlined would imply. And further, I am hardly prepared to contend that such a Union is, in present circumstances, desirable. It is not clear to me that the religious fervour of our communities has reached such an energy of life as (humanly speaking) to permit of the Christian Church dispensing with the stimulus to its efforts arrivable or resulting from the combative tendencies of our complicated being,—from rivalry,—from "preaching Christ out of envy and strife." My fear is that, as human nature is, were the whole stress of "carrying on the work," suddenly entrusted by Providence to the spirit of "good-will," that work would collapse, and upon the missionary and evangelizing movements of our age,—yes, upon the very pulpit—the church-life of our most healthily organized denominations, a blight would descend akin to that of the Dark Ages, or of the eighteenth century in Europe.

No one, looking over whether the past or the present aspect of the Christian Ages, can fail to see how largely evil has been overruled for good,—how the Lord has "made the wrath of the wicked to praise Him,"—how profoundly the Church of Christ has been indebted to controversy, to rivalry, to the polemical, and the competitive. All of these statements could be abundantly illustrated from history. But meanwhile, I must be content to state my present conviction as to the desirability. Should outward, visible, corporate Union ever be arrived at, it will be the issue and result, in my belief, not of deliberation aiming at setting forth carefully clipped statements of points of agreement, and points upon which denominations may be persuaded to "agree to differ." It will come, rather, from the effect of "a rushing mighty wind" from heaven, creating a tide of "the love of God shed abroad" in "all hearts by the Holy Ghost," so overwhelming that it shall sweep our petty differences out of sight and out, we may hope, of existence forever, leaving us face to face with "none but Jesus only." On any other supposition or method, I am unable to regard Union among the denominations as either desirable or practicable.

2. Passing away from this phase of the subject for the moment, though it would be easy to occupy pages upon the varied questions, aspects, aspirations it embraces, let me, from my own experience, deal for a little with the "deriving of a basis of Union."

Open before me are the minutes of a series of meetings, five in number, held in my house during 1890. In that year, a beloved and most highly respected, broad-minded clergyman of the Episcopal Church, proposed that we should come together, inviting ministers of all the denominations represented in St. John, to discuss this very question. Accordingly three representatives from each of the following bodies were invited:—Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist and Presbyterian, together with the only Congregational minister residing in this city. Twelve responded;—although, after the first meeting the Baptists ceased to attend, and the Congregational minister (who was most thoroughly and intelligently in sympathy with our movement) had immediately after our third conference gone to Europe.

The chair was taken at each conference, by a different minister, without regard to denomination,—the first conference being presided over by the senior minister present;—an Episcopalian canon.

We agreed to take for basis of discussion the resolutions known as those of "The Langham Street Conference." And, at our second conference, we unanimously accepted the resolutions relating to Christian faith, Christian morality, and Christian discipline, without amendment. With reference to Christian worship, for the resolutions of the Langham brethren, was substituted the following, which was drawn up by a Presbyterian and endorsed by all present (including, besides Presbyterians, a Methodist brother, and a very advanced Ritualist, an Anglican and the broad-minded clergyman to whom, mainly, the holding of these meetings of ours was due):—

- (1) "That rigid uniformity in public worship is undesirable.
- (2) "That, on one hand, the treasures of devotion in hymns, collects, liturgies, etc., may by the Christian church—may with due regard to doctrinal purity, be freely used by all Christians.
- (3) "That, on the other hand, the use of extempore prayer in

"public worship is legitimate, and indeed commendable, where custom or special circumstances render it more to edification."

On the Christian sacraments, the Langham resolution was adopted with the amendment of the first clause so as to read: "That while it is the duty of every one to seek to know," etc. On the Christian Church and ministry part one, section first was accepted, and section second amended by emitting the words "a special" in both clauses, and substituting the article "the" before "indwelling."

So far our Conference got on swimmingly. One of the brethren present, the advanced Ritualist, seemed somewhat amazed at learning what the sacramental views expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith actually were. They were, he thought, sufficiently "pronounced" to satisfy him.

At last we reached our final consideration of the Christian Church and ministry.

In regard to this subject, the minutes before me read as follows:—"The Non-Conformist strictures appended to Part I. of the resolutions on the Christian Church and ministry were further discussed, and the following resolution regarding them was adopted: "That, inasmuch as we are unable to perceive the reason for the insertion of these clauses 'they be omitted.' A very full and frank discussion of Part II. as a whole followed, after which section I. was agreed to. The consideration of the remaining clauses was postponed to a future meeting," which has not been held, nor is it likely to be, for reasons which will presently appear.

From the foregoing it will be observed that our little Conference was of one mind with regard to what most of us—I mean, most Presbyterians—would deem "the Fundamentals." Doctrine, discipline, worship,—the word sacraments and prayer,—as to our views of one and all, in principle, we were a unit. Our absolutely irreconcilable differences arose when we reached the points bearing chiefly upon human authority,—upon man's official place in the administration of the Church of Christ.

What is the ministry? Who are entitled to ordain, dispense sacraments, preach, etc? Here, two of our Episcopalian brethren, if they will tolerate the word, simply refused to admit of any possibility of compromise.

One of these two was quite willing to discuss the questions of "Holy Orders," "The Historic Episcopate," "Apostolical Succession," etc., at any length—his own mind upon the subjects being, of course, definitely settled—the other virtually or overtly alleging that room for discussion there was none. "My belief is," he said in effect, "that, during the 'forty days' elapsing between the Resurrection and the Ascension, one, if not the chief employment of our Lord was,—instructing his disciples as to the form which the church, in its doctrine, ritual, and, above all, its government, should assume,—speaking of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God—and that the result was the Episcopal Church of England." "In short," I at length said, "you believe that the Church of England system, as it now is, like the New Jerusalem, came down out of Heaven from God." "I do," was the instant reply. And so ended the matter. Further remarks as to the changes actually undergone by that Church during the centuries, as to the divisions now existing within her ranks, and the curious comment furnished by these divisions upon the heavenly origin of her system, etc., were, of course, precluded by courtesy.

It will thus be gathered that the distinctio separating denominations have been and, therefore, are likely to be more concerned about side issues (so most of them seemed to me to be) than about the great underlying verities of the Gospel. While the Baptists, e.g., will persist in averring that Baptism means chiefly "a mode" of doing a certain thing, instead of denoting mainly "a state declared or effected,"—persist further, in insisting that the only "mode" tolerated in Scripture is by "dipping," and the only subjects thereof, adults,—and while, though they will tolerate public prayer and preaching from ministers of other denominations, they refuse, the majority of them, to admit these same ministers to Communion at the Lord's Table, thus belittling the really loftiest work of the Christian ministry,—we may expect that they will continue to treat all overtures towards Union as our invitation to our little conference was treated by our Baptist brethren in St. John. And equally, while the Episcopals insist upon their belief about the Episcopate, the Three Divine Orders, and all the rest of it,—the inner meaning of all which is, the trying to give a mystic substantiality to mere Human Authority, they will naturally decline fellowship with those "Democrats," the Presbyterians.

For my own part, sometimes, I feel almost disposed to be irritated at the baseless assumptions thus propounded,—or, always, to ridicule them,—to say; concede your Historic Episcopate, your Apostolical Succession, your Mystic Ordination, flowing down through the Channel of Tactful Officialism, what then? Do you preach more effectual sermons? Do you labour more diligently? Do you and your people display a more abundant zeal and liberality? Are their lives more virtuous, consistent, Christlike? "By their fruits, etc."

Before me lies a letter by a certain Rev. John Langtry, who, some years ago, attacked a Mr. Wade for permitting Dr. McMullen to preach in his pulpit. Mr. Langtry, in his desperate quest for arguments to bolster up his position, likens the Christian church to "any other organized society, e.g., the Freemasons or Orange Society,—it has power over itself—has its own prescribed method of extending, . . . and of continuing . . . It matters not," he alleges, "whether we believe them to have been appointed by Christ, . . . or by the Body itself." All is "entrusted to certain officers chosen and authorized for that purpose, just as in the Orange or Freemasons' Society." According to all which, the Christian Church is essential and actually, to all intents and purposes, a merely human organization, with which Christ is only accidentally connected! It is a curious exemplification of the common adage that "extremes meet." The extreme of the assumption of Divine Right with the extreme of human assertion, but mani-