

## ORGANIC UNION OR FEDERATION.—WHICH?

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The next twenty-five years will be the most critical period in the history of Canada. By the end of that time the nature of Canada's influence on the future history of the world will have been largely determined. Beyond all other agencies the churches under the Headship of Christ will be responsible for the moral condition into which the Dominion will have settled during this fateful quarter century, and that moral condition will decide whether or not our country is going to mould for God and righteousness the world that she will then be influencing immensely. Hence this is the most inopportune time in our history to thrust forward the explosive question of the organic union of certain of the churches. Viewed in the most favorable light the question is one that would inevitably involve years of debate and unsettlement which, in a crisis time, would divert the attention and energies of the churches from their supreme work of evangelization at home and abroad. That the union would be a protracted question is told us in so many words in the statement issued recently by the Joint Committee of the negotiating churches, their closing words being:

"In the event of the negotiating Churches agreeing to unite upon the basis herewith submitted, a number of matters will have to be considered, and many arrangements made for the carrying on of the united Church before the union can be finally consummated."

One matter may be instanced as having been discussed by these committees, viz., that of the Superannuation and other Benevolent Funds of the uniting churches. This is so immense a problem that even the Committee felt unable to see a solution of it and hence they handled it only far enough to say that they would leave it over to be dealt with by the "United Church by such amalgamation or modifications of existing methods as may be found practicable." True, they make some suggestions, but they are very vague and generally hedged by the conventional but unsatisfactory proviso "if practicable." These Benevolent Funds as well as the Colleges and other departments of the work are now heavily endowed on conditions made with the donors of gifts, and on this account, and others, one can easily see what confusion would result from efforts made to throw them into some new form. We all know how difficult it is to re-arrange organizations and funds in any one denomination and we wonder at the proposal of brethren who, knowing this, persist in asking us to face questions of amalgamation and re-adjustment in regard to the enormous interests of separate denominations hemmed in by all manner of antecedent regulations. This is not to impugn the honesty of these brethren, but it is to wonder at their judgment. Will our people allow themselves to be thrust into this dense jungle of complicated problems at a time when their own work is going forward splendidly and when that work is so greatly needed if this new land is to save herself and help save the world?

The one thing that would compel us at all hazards to take this step is a conviction that organic union of the churches is the will of God. Some indeed have professed to read in our Lord's intercessory prayer in John 17, "that they all may be one," a clear intimation that all His disciples should be in one ecclesiastical organization. If that were the case, then those who hesitate about going into organic union would be plainly disloyal to the Master. But few believe that our Lord there enjoins, even by implication, what we call organic union.

Those who have given much study to this matter say that Christ would not express that desire and at the same time tell His disciples not to interfere with people who were doing Christian work, even though they were not following with them. He seemed there to indicate that people could be doing the same work without being in the same company, and hence we are not to lament too much because Phillips Brooks and D. L. Moody or the Archbishop of Canterbury and General Booth were not in one organization. To have forced them into one organization and method would have spoiled their work, and it is the work that is important. When Christ prayed that all believers might be one as He and the Father were one He did not pray for the abolition of individuality but for unity of aim and purpose and will. There are many who honestly believe that unity of aim in doing the will of God is more impressively manifested by the co-operation of men who belong to their chosen organizations than by the sometimes doubtful harmony of men who, though in one denomination, find it impossible to work together. There is much said about church work in the interests of the mission field, but Methodists in Japan and Presbyterians in India know that harmony is not always conspicuous in fields where one denomination is supreme. And the same is true of our own country. It is an actual fact that there is often much more co-operation and less rivalry between two Churches of different denominations in some of our own towns than between two Churches of the same body. Unity of spirit between the former is much more impressive for good than the lack of it between Churches that are nominally and outwardly one. For these historical reasons many believe in a variety to suit different kinds of people, and they do not believe that Christ prayed for the organic and outward union of all believers in one fixed body.

And they will tell you that the best New Testament scholarship is against interpreting the prayer of Christ as a prayer for organic union. They will tell you, for instance, that there is no man living who stands higher than Prof. Marcus Dods of Edinburgh as a skilled master in New Testament exegesis, and they will read you the following extract from his great book on John, where, commenting on John 17, 21st verse, he says: "This text is often cited by those who seek to promote the union of the Churches. But we find that it belongs to a very different category and much higher region. That all Churches should be under similar government, should adopt the same creed, should use the same form of worship, even, if possible, be not supremely desirable, but real unity of sentiment towards Christ and of zeal to promote His will is supremely desirable. Christ's will is all embracing; the purposes of God are wide as the universe and can be fulfilled only by endless varieties of dispositions, functions, organizations, and labors. We must expect that as time goes on men, so far from being contracted into a narrow and monotonous uniformity, will exhibit increasing diversities of thought and of method, and will be more and more differentiated in all the outward respects. If the infinitely comprehensive purposes of God are to be fulfilled it must be so. But also if these purposes are to be fulfilled, all intelligent agents must be at one with God and must be so profoundly in sympathy with God's mind as revealed in Christ, that however different one man's work and methods may be from another's, God's will shall alike be carried out by both. If this will can be freely carried out by separate Churches

then outward separation is no great calamity. Only when outward separation leads one Church to despise or rival or hate another is it a calamity. But whether Churches abide separate or are incorporated in outward unity the desirable thing is that they be one in Christ, that they have the same eagerness in His service, that they be as regiments of the one army, fighting a common foe and supporting one another, diverse in outward appearance, in method, in function, as artillery, infantry, cavalry and engineers, or even as the army and navy of the same country, but fighting for one flag and one cause and their very diversity more vividly exhibiting their real unity."

This is now the generally accepted view of the famous text and hence there seems nothing in history or Scripture that specially urges us to accomplish organic union. In addition to this it might be helpful, to many to have on the general question, the opinions of men who have for years given special study to the life and work of the Church and so we quote from a few whose words ought to have great weight. The first is Prof. James Denney, who in a recent article in the British Weekly on the Church, has this paragraph without qualification:

"The standing criticism of the Church's unity is by no means so serious. It is a sin and a scandal, undoubtedly, when Christians are divided from one another by unchristian tempers—when, either as individuals or as communities, they regard each other with suspicion, jealousy or dislike—when they treat each other as rivals, whose interest is to cut each other out of neutral markets, instead of as allies whose primary duty is to combine under the same Leader against a common foe. It is unhappily true that such unchristian tempers do prevail. They break the unity of the body of Christ, and are a sin which nothing can excuse. It is a scandal when those who call Jesus Lord unchurch each other. But the criticism of the Church by those who have none but the Papal idea of unity in their minds is beside the mark. It is not a sin that while some English Christians are Episcopalian, others are Congregationalists, Presbyterian or Methodist. The unity of the Church is not to be achieved by gathering all these into what the law would recognize as one entire morale; they may be one in the only sense which the New Testament cares for without having one and the same legal constitution. They may be one in the unity of the spirit, one in participation in the same supernatural life, without being one in organization. The body of Christ in the New Testament is vitally one; all the members in it live in each other, co-operate with each other, share each other's joys and sorrows; but there is no such thing in the New Testament as one all inclusive Christian corporation. Varieties of organizations are the necessary counterpart to the unity of the Spirit; the unity is shown to be real and effective in proportion as it subdues all these varieties to itself, knitting men through them and over them in brotherly love to each other, and in devotion to the common ends of the gospel."

In view of Prof. Denney's pre-eminent place as a New Testament scholar the above statement is of unusual value.

Another name of special significance the world over is that of Dr. Robertson Nicoll. Few men have read so widely or observed more closely the trend of history and there is perhaps no man whose opinions on all matters pertaining to the church are more extensively quoted. We find in the British Weekly a little over a year ago one of the famous letters of Dr. Nicoll over the signature of "Claudius Clear." He had invited his readers to comment on the following verse which had been a favorite verse of Prof. Masson:—"If all the world were of one religion Many a living thing should die: But I will never forgive my true love, Nor in any way his name deny!" Of the papers sent in, Dr. Nicoll