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The Deeper Life

The New Reformation

By Rev. S. G. Bland, D.D.

MOST of the business transacted in the General Conference of the Methodist Church, which met in Hamilton, during the first two weeks of October, was naturally of purely or chiefly denominational interest. But there were episodes which were of far wider interest and especially to such a constituency as the readers of *The Grain Growers' Guide*. Two of these I would single out as significant of the trend of religious thought in Canada, and, it may be said, in western Christendom. These two episodes were two of the four most notable debates that occurred during the sixteen days of the session.

The first of these arose over an effort to facilitate the trial of college professors on versey charges. Between eight and nine years ago one of the sweetest-spirited, most evangelical and most evangelistic of Methodist ministers, the Rev. George Jackson, formerly of Edinburgh Mission, then of Sherbourne Street Church, Toronto, and later, of Victoria College, aroused a great stir by some expressions which seemed to some to be at variance with what they held to be the orthodox view of the scriptures. Among the extremists there was a wish to bring him to trial. It was found impossible to reach him, however, since he was not a member of any Canadian Conference. Only the Regents of Victoria College could take action, and they were not disposed to do so. A considerable section of the delegates to the General Conference which met at Victoria, B.C., in August, 1910, were determined, consequently, to amend the discipline in such a way as to make it possible to bring any theological professor to trial independently of the governing body of the College. Another large section of the Conference was strongly opposed to any such changes. Eventually, as a compromise a procedure was adopted by which a theological professor in any of the Canadian Methodist colleges could be tried for heresy. The procedure was rather elaborate and lengthy and, it may be added, has never been used in Professor Jackson's or any case. Recently, however, a charge of heresy was brought against a professor in one of our eastern theological colleges, but in the ordinary way in which such a charge may be preferred against any minister, and a trial according to the ordinary procedure was held. On appeal, however, the judgment was set aside on the ground that the disciplinary procedure in the case of a theological professor had not been followed.

As an outgrowth of this a recommendation was brought before the recent Conference at Hamilton, to restrict the lengthy and elaborate procedure to professors who were not ministers of the Methodist Church, and where they were, to make it lawful to proceed against them in the simple and direct method in which a minister may be tried.

This recommendation, after a very thoughtful debate was overwhelmingly defeated. It was made clear beyond any shadow of doubt that the Methodist Church, as represented in that genuinely representative body, was averse to heresy-hunting, that it was determined not to encourage or in any way facilitate such a spirit, that while theological professors as well as ministers must be under the control of the Church and responsible to the Church for their teaching, it is absolutely essential to the proper work of theological colleges in training ministers and guiding the thought of the Church that the professors should be protected from incompetent and irresponsible criticism. In short, to the complaint that the trial of a theological professor had been made a difficult and slow process the Conference replied that it was entirely proper that it should be so.

That debate showed that the Methodist Church has moved a long way in the direction of that coming Christianity, the only Christianity which our soldiers will accept, the only Christianity which the common people will accept, the only Christianity which the scientists and the scholars will accept—the Christianity which leaves religious opinion free and asks only uncompromising loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ.

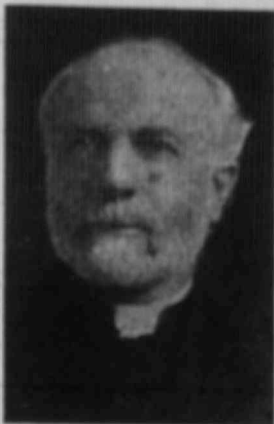
The second episode was still more significant. It was the debate on that section of the report of the Committee on the Church in relation to War and Patriotism, which dealt with the Leadership of the Church in the Era of Reconstruction.

It was the deliberate and unanimous judgment of that Committee that if the Church is to exercise that leadership which those, at least, who believe in her Divine origin and mission, hold she ought to exercise, she must take a bold and definite stand as to the true course of the nation in the confused and stormy period on which all the western nations are entering. Accordingly, they endeavored to go to the root of the matter and declared first that labor troubles can only be remedied by the ever-enlarging application of the principle of democracy—the right of the workers to a share in the control, and second, that the war has exposed the waste, the inefficiency, the greed that are inevitable and incurable in an economic system where profits are the motive and competition the means, and that it has revealed at the same time the efficiency and harmony and the economy that can be secured by national control and co-operation.

They held, therefore, that "the triumph of democracy, the demand of the educated workers for human conditions of life, the deep condemnation the war has passed on the competitive struggle, the superior efficiency of national organization and co-operation, combine with the unfulfilled, the often forgotten, but the undying ethics of Jesus to demand nothing less than a transference of the whole economic life from a basis of competition and profits to one of co-operation and service."

The committee did not assume to determine the precise steps and processes by which this goal should be reached, but it tried to exclude a hasty or superficial acceptance of its report by pointing out that "the acceptance of this report commits this Church, as far as this representative body can commit it, to nothing less than complete social reconstruction," and it appealed to the men whom God has endowed with the great gifts of organization and leadership to exercise those gifts in organizing life and resources in the service not of a section but of the nation.

As soon as this section of the report was read it was moved by a prominent manufacturer, of Hamilton, that it be struck out. Then followed the ablest and the noblest debate of the whole conference. Delegate after delegate, ministerial and lay, rose to declare that the Church must speak out on these vital questions or cease to speak on any that it she could not lead in this crisis she would lose leadership for ever, that no Christianity could win a hearing today that could not translate itself into economic and political expression. Not three delegates spoke in reasoned opposition. Some slight modifications in phraseology were accepted by the committee as not touching the substance of the recommendation, and when the vote was taken, only four delegates were found in opposition. Some have doubted whether the Churches of our day, organized under other conditions, would have the vision and the courage for the great task to which the Spirit of God is calling. They have thought there might be a rupture, and the formation as at the Reformation, of a new Church,



DR. BLAND.

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