
A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VII.

A STUDY OF THE CAUSES OF THE FAILURE OF THE RECENT EFFORTS TO SECURE ORGANIC CHURCH UNION IN JAPAN. [1]

"CHRISTIAN unity is one of the chief problems of our times," says Dr. Charles A. Briggs, in a recent article; and by "Christian unity," he does not mean "good fellowship, friendliness and co-operation in talk and work," which he characterizes as "superficial, transient, evanescent, and effervescent." "The only kind of Christian unity that is worth considering is organic unity or church unity." [2] Japan has been seeking for a solution of this problem of organic church union. In many respects she has been successful. The churches that have sprung up in connection with the various Presbyterian missionary boards have united in a single church, the Itchi Kyōkwai (The United Church). So also have the various Episcopal churches united. The various Methodist bodies are now negotiating with good prospects of securing a single Methodist Church in Japan. When, therefore, it was proposed to unite into a single organic body the Itchi Kyōkwai (Presbyterian), and the Kumiai Kyōkwai (churches that had grown up in connection with

tions comprising two-thirds of all the Christians in the empire, and with hopes of final union with all the other denominations, thus securing the ideal or true church, without divisions or sects. Everything seemed favorable. Every mail but confirmed the bright expectations. "Many circumstances combined to enhance the interest generally felt in this movement. There was its unique character,—unparalleled in the whole field of modern missionary experience. There was its remarkable spontaneity, earnestness, and dignity. There was the fresh and startling proof it gave that Christianity had struck deep root in the soil of Japan, and was identifying itself with all that was strongest in the newborn national spirit of that race. And, not the least remarkable, was the general unanimity with which the Christian missionaries from this country were willing to sink their individual and denominational preferences, and to help on the realization of what God himself seemed to have put into the hearts of the Japanese Christians." [1]

A missionary revered for many years of valiant service in many lands, Dr. H. M. Scudder, wrote: "It is a strong movement. It is not the weak, hot-headed, visionary, fickle men among the Japanese Christians who are heading, directing, and controlling this movement; it is the strong, calm, earnest, thoughtful, large-minded, and wise-hearted. . . . . Opposition is more likely to stimulate it than to arrest it. . . . . I believe that, in a way as wonderful as God's deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt, and in a manner as signal as the establishment of liberty in our own land, the spirit of our Master is here beginning a world-wide solution of the problem of all believers.[2] One who was a member

grand movement, to speak of, in Japan," says another.[1] And the *Christian Union* says,[2] "So far as the churches in that island are concerned, our advices are that an overwhelming majority are in favor of union."

What, then, was the astonishment and disappointment of the Christian world to receive the news that union in Japan was postponed. And when, after a second meeting of the churches, six months later, the news came, "Union is indefinitely postponed," it seemed utterly incredible. Christendom did not know what to make of it. From almost every quarter there came expressions of astonishment and keen disappointment. And those who felt it the most keenly were the missionaries themselves. Rev. Geo. William Knox wrote: "It is a very great disappointment. It was a noble effort, nobly planned and bravely attempted, but for the time it has failed. . . . . Everything favored success. There was personal friendship among the leaders on both sides. There was past association in united work. There was harmony of tastes. There was a strong perception of the folly and wastefulness of present methods, and the imperative need for union in the face of overwhelming unbelief. There were no strong inherited traditions and prejudices to be cast aside. There was general agreement as to the terms of union. There was the repeated acceptance of the plan for union in its details, by the strongest men, Japanese and American, on both sides. It did not seem possible that there should be a failure. But as the treaties have failed at the last moment through contingencies wholly unexpected, so was it with the union." [3]

When a reason is asked for this final postponement, an explanation for the failure of the many clear prophecies, the answers are not as clear nor as sufficient as they ought to be. One says it has come about through "a group of boys

[1] The Evangelist (editorial), Jan. 17, 1889. [2] Jan. 24, 1889.

[3] Missionary Review of the World, May, 1890.

without experience or reputation." "Sectarianism is not dead yet."[1] Another, "The obstructionists are few in numbers and young in years, but wonderfully assertive."[2] Again, the opposition consisted of a "small body violently antagonistic—led by a group of Doshisha students."[3] Another, Dr. M. L. Gordon,[4] makes the "anti-clerical spirit" an important cause of the failure, while another, Dr. William Imbrie, says, that explanation is "not accepted by the Japanese."[5] And still another writer says: " . . . our great body has allowed itself to be pulled one side into hesitation, and at last into gross carelessness by a pack of inexperienced youths, no one of whom has been a pastor a year. It is too bad that the whole body of able pastors . . . . . should be ruled out on this."[6]

On the other hand, we find these opposite explanations have been given. Rev. J. L. Atkinson wrote: "The Kumiai [Congregational] churches have been gradually stripping off the leaves of the tree of the Presbyterian system. They have now reached the point where they are trying to break off some of the branches. The Itchi [Presbyterian] brethren draw the line between the leaves and the branches, and, though resigned to the stripping off of the leaves, resist any attempt to break off the branches. The two systems now stand out quite distinctly, bare and clear. Whether the Kumiai churches care for union enough to yield their essential principle, is not absolutely clear."[7] Another, Rev. Sidney L. Gulick, writes: "I cannot believe that the difficulties in the way of union are properly traced to narrowness, big-

[1] Dr. George W. Knox, The New York Independent, July 4, 1889, and The Missionary Review of the World, May, 1890.

[2] The Interior (editorial), July 4, 1889.

[3] William Imbrie, D.D., in The Independent, July 4, 1889.

[4] The Christian Union, Oct. 17, 1889. [5] The Independent, July 4, 1889.

[6] Extract from a familiar private letter, published in the Christian Union, Aug. 15, 1889.

[7] The Advance, July 4, 1889.

otry, sectarianism, etc., but can be properly attributed only to the inherent nature of the problem. The problem is to unite two methods of church government having diverse and contradictory principles, into one which shall 'combine the better elements of both.' The impossible has been attempted. Either side must be willing to accept the essential principle of the other, or union must cease; neither side at present, ... seems quite ready for that."[1] The New York *Independent*, shortly before the final news was received, says in an editorial: "We earnestly trust that the union may be consummated, though we well know that difficulties of polity are much harder to overcome than those of creed, and that the Congregationalists, who will yield the most, will require the most grace."

More than a year has now passed since the matter was finally settled. The smoke of the conflict has cleared away. The air is freed of its electrical elements, and vision has become steady. It is now possible to see the real course of the efforts for union, as it was not possible at the time. We can now weigh the factors that determined the result, and perceive the silent causes that were at work. It is now possible to understand how it was that the leading actors by their deeds, and the observers by their prophecies, were preparing for themselves and for expectant Christendom a great disappointment. It is to the clear understanding of the unseen and unrecorded causes of the failure that we would contribute this "study." It is worth our while, nay, it is imperative, that we should know the true causes of failure. True union must not die. But, if it is to come about in our day, it will not be by ignoring the lessons of experience.

The influences that finally determined the result can be known and weighed only in connection with a clear statement of the facts.

[1] The Pacific, July 10, 1889.

HISTORY OF THE EFFORTS FOR ORGANIC UNION.

I. The Beginnings.—Although, from the earliest days of missionary labor in Japan, much thought has been given to the subject of union, both by the missionaries and by the ever-increasing body of native Christians; and though resolutions looking in the direction of union were passed at different times by the various religious and missionary bodies; and though there were actual organic unions secured between the branches of the native Presbyterian churches, and also between the various branches of the native Episcopal churches; the movement for the organic union of the Christians in the Kumiai (Cong.) and Itchi (Presb.) churches cannot be said to have really started until the early part of 1886. At that time the matter first began to be definitely talked of; and it was mutually agreed, by the leading members of both churches, that the annual meetings of both bodies should be held the following year at the same time and place, in order that the matter might be brought up simultaneously in both meetings, and the thought of both churches on the matter be readily exchanged. Resolutions to this effect were easily passed, and the movement may be said to have really started. During the succeeding year little, if anything, was said on the matter, either in the Christian papers or in the churches.

At the annual meeting held in Tōkyō in May, 1887, the matter was early taken up; committees were appointed to draw up a "basis" on which both meetings could agree, which, after adoption, should form the framework for a constitution. The work of this committee was promptly done, was presented simultaneously to both bodies, and was accepted by them as satisfactory for a tentative beginning. Both bodies thereon appointed committees of ten who should jointly draft the "standards of doctrine and government." The Kumiai (Cong.) body, however, provided that the drafting of the standards should not be begun until

"three-fourths of the churches entitled to a representation in the conference shall have notified the committee of their approval of the plan of union," as set forth in the proposed basis. During the following year, through sub-committees, and finally through a full meeting of the joint-committee of twenty, a constitution with by-laws and appendix was drafted and adopted by the joint-committee. This document was printed in full, in Japanese and English, and copies were distributed to the missionaries and to the churches in the latter part of May, 1888. The joint-committee at the same time called special union conventions of both churches, to sit in November of that year, to act on the standards which they had prepared.

II. The first six months of discussion.

A. The Itchi Kyōkwai (Presb.).—The work thus carefully done by the committees found general and hearty favor among the Itchi brethren. The chief objections to it were on the ground of alleged doctrinal meagreness, which "called forth some vigorous protests for a time, especially from two Japanese ministers who had been educated in America . . . . but the opposition which they represented seems to have entirely disappeared."[1] After careful study, the mass of the ministers and elders were ready to adopt the proposed constitution without any material changes. It was briefer than that under which they were living, but did not differ in any essential principle.

B. The Kumiai Kyōkwai (Cong.).—The report of the committee was rather slow in reaching some of the churches, especially the more distant ones. The number of copies of the proposed constitution, too, was rather limited, there being many members in every church who never received one. Furthermore, the very nature of the language and of the subject, requiring many technical Chinese words inevitable in such a document, rendered the ready reading and

[1] Dr. D. C. Green, Our Day, March, 1889.

understanding of what was proposed a matter of no little difficulty to all common people: only those could read the constitution readily who had received a good Chinese education, and even to them the unfamiliar, technical Chinese needed to be explained. These were the first of those unseen influences that finally brought about the failure. But there were other and more potent causes at work.

The Itchi Kyōkwai (Presb.) was familiar with a "constitution, by-laws, and appendix" in the conduct of their church government, and understood it, having received regular training in it; they thus knew the general meaning and uses of such things. On the other hand, the Christians in the Kumiai Kyōkwai (Cong.) had no such acquaintance with elaborate ecclesiastical written laws. What they had were very simple, each local church drawing up its own. These consisted of a few plain rules with a statement of belief and a covenant. These few pages, used chiefly on the admission of new members and in connection with the Lord's Supper, were extremely simple; they were understood by all. Again, the system of the Kumiai local and general associations had never been reduced to a written form; their constitution was an unwritten one; indeed, it was only in the process of being developed by themselves according to their needs and experiences; it had not been imported by the missionaries, and adopted in a body by the young churches. Not only had the matter of church polity been left to care for itself among the masses of the young Christians, but even in the theological seminary little, if anything, was said about it. The missionaries seemed to care nothing about polity. They confined their work to the teaching of the gospel. "Save one little tract of forty pages, containing the creed of the churches, and some rules for their guidance, the members of the [American Board] mission have published nothing on church polity, or upon the history or principles of the Kumiai churches. Save a few brief lectures, nothing has been

taught on these subjects in the theological department of the Doshisha school. Hence, now, when the subject of organic union with the Itchi churches is before them for discussion, it is but natural and right that the Kumiai churches should desire to know something of these subjects."[1]

Furthermore, the basis of union which had been proposed to the churches was exceedingly short, consisting of only six short sections, in forty-five lines, in the English translation of them.

The inevitable result of the several conditions just described quickly followed. Though up to the time of the presentation of the standards drafted by the committee, none seemed to be more eager for the union than the Kumiai Christians, as soon as the "Constitution, with By-Laws and Appendix," occupying ninety-nine pages, came into their hands, and much of it unintelligible to large numbers of the church members, that interest began to ebb.

These passive factors were not, however, the only ones that united to overthrow the union movement. There were also active elements in the storm-cloud that burst so unexpectedly a few weeks later. A month or two of waning interest was followed by gradually gathering but actual opposition to the plan proposed. This started among the young men of Tōkyō, and centred on the polity. At one of their meetings the proposed constitution came up for discussion; one criticised this point and another that; they soon found out that they disliked the whole scheme. These young men soon entered the lists as active opponents. They rapidly spread their ideas to the north and west, where they met with ready reception among some of the most influential

heard; one church and another was known to disfavor the union under the proposed constitution. The opposition now gathered head. Some of the churches of Tōkyō and Jōshū united in sending a delegate to the churches in the vicinity of Kyōto, to secure their pledges to vote for a postponement of the union convention, in order to gain time for a more thorough study of the whole subject. Communications to this same general effect were sent all over the country. This took place between the 15th and 25th of October. In view of the many requests of this nature, the Union Committee vacillated, first deferring the time of the appointed meeting, and then reappointing it for the same date. So late was the final decision reached to hold the conventions in November as originally appointed, that the more distant churches were in doubt and had to receive information by telegram.

Shortly before this last move of the gathering opposition two other elements entered into the problem, whose influence was very great, for the time being at least. They both sprang from foreign sources, the one in the United States, and the other in Japan. "Certain papers that had appeared in *The Pacific* and *The Advance*, together with the action of the State Association of California and Nebraska protesting against the plan [of union under consideration], and intimating that there was danger of the withdrawal of funds," were translated into Japanese and had considerable circulation. These were followed by a series of papers by two of the missionaries of the American Board, Rev. Sidney L. Gulick and Rev. Oramel H. Gulick. They consisted of seven letters or tracts issued at short intervals from October 18 to November 3, 1888, and were entitled "Questions on Union." The first paper presented the practical question of the rela-

Board on this union had been sought, and whether the Board would continue, after the union, and to aid the two native organizations just named. These were presented as practical questions needing consideration before union should take place. This first letter was translated and introduced to the "Pastors and Leaders of the Kumiai Churches," by one of the strongest of those leaders, himself a member of the union committee, urging attention to the questions proposed. With such an introduction, it at once secured serious consideration. The succeeding letters were translated and sent out in the same way. They presented a strong plea for Congregationalism, because of its peculiar advantages as seen both in its history and in its essential nature (closely following Dr. Dexter's work). They presented the dangers of "church courts," the defects of the proposed constitution (arguing that it was essentially Presbyterian), and the history of union movements (arguing that absorption of one body by the other is the teaching of history). These letters awakened a wide discussion among the churches. A foreign missionary writer, Dr. D. C. Greene, says of the authors of these letters: "Their picture of the evils of Presbyterianism as they viewed it was very vivid, and staggered some of the best friends of union for a time."[1] Another, Rev. J. H. Pettee, says of these foreign elements: "The late reaction against the union was caused by the severe criticisms of Dr. Holbrook and Mr. Hammond, and others in America, and the circulation among the churches, just before the meeting, of a series of papers in both English and Japanese, taking the strongest conceivable position against the advisability or even possi-

expediency of the union. Chiefly, however, it was due to two other causes. Articles hostile to the movement had appeared in some of the Congregational papers in America, and two gentlemen had distributed a series of cautionary circulars among the churches."[1] These statements would appear to be misleading in attributing the rise of the opposition to these foreign influences. In view of the fact that they made their appearance in Japan but shortly before the convention met, and only after the changing attitude was fairly under way, these inferences are manifestly incorrect. But there is no question that these expressions of foreign opinions and strong preferences had an influence in strengthening the opposition.

But by far the most potent and lasting influence exerted against union was that of the late Dr. Joseph Neesima, than whom there was not a more beloved man or influential Christian in Japan. "Mr. Neesima had become greatly impressed during his residence in America with the value of freedom; he felt that Japan needed freedom, and that it could come most safely only gradually, and among those institutions which, like Christian churches, were under the leavening influence of strong moral convictions. He wanted to retain the leavening influence of Congregationalism. . . . He felt that the plan proposed by the committee sacrificed that principle of freedom too much, and hence he said that he must oppose it; . . . . . he could not yield this principle, even at the risk of severing his connection with the Doshisha and with the Kumiai churches. He even suggested that, if the union was perfected on the basis first proposed, he might go to the Hokkaido and work alone."[2] As soon as it became generally known that Dr. Neesima questioned the wisdom of union and the proposed "constitu-

respectability, and many were ready to follow the active leaders. Dr. Neesima himself, however, took but little part, being in a precarious state of health. His influence was exerted in private channels,—by letters to friends, and counsel to those who sought him. Furthermore, Dr. Neesima was a man of peace: few things grieved him more than the "union fight." Even had he been in health, he would not have entered the strife; but he would, on the contrary, have poured oil on the troubled waters. His constant advice and desire was, that union should not be hastily decided; the great mass of the church members were ignorant of the matters on which they were asked to vote; it is not wise, said he, for union to be accomplished chiefly by the pastors and evangelists, for it should be settled by the church members themselves. "I do feel," said he in one of his letters, "that we must not lead the blind, but attempt to open their eyes and let them see it themselves. This is my present attitude toward the union question, and I would like to make it known to you all." How deep and widespread his influence was, none probably realized until the day of his death, when those who loved him gathered by hundreds, nay, by thousands, from all parts of the empire, to pay their last, sad tribute to him who had been the means of bringing so many of them into the kingdom, and whom all felt to be a personal friend, from the noble and the cabinet minister beside the throne, to the despised jinrikisha runner in the street. So deeply and constantly did he have the welfare of the church and of the country on his heart, that, but a few days before his death, months after the vexed union question had been settled

dred and fifty miles away, to be borne in the funeral procession. It was perhaps the most conspicuous banner of the many that were thus contributed. Thus, only at this late date, is it possible to measure that mighty though almost unappreciated influence which Dr. Neesima exerted over the Christians, and its consequent bearing on the final result.

III. The Union Conventions.—The question now passed into its third stage, with all these influences just coming into active operation. The delegates of the Itchi and Kumiai churches gathered in Osaka from all over the empire to hold their simultaneous conventions in neighboring buildings. They began work on November 23, 1888.

A. The Itchi Convention, or Synod.—"The discussion continued for three days, and a number of amendments were proposed. Finally, however, the whole document was adopted with only three or four changes. Nor was this conclusion reached because the Synod did not appreciate the full significance of the various points of the new constitution. For six months these points had been earnestly discussed, in private and in public, and it was only after careful consideration that some were at last satisfied that the price paid was not too great. . . . . With the exception of two, every member of the Synod rose [in the final vote], and even those two were content simply to refrain from voting."[1] A committee was then appointed to confer with the Kumiai committee, with powers to make arrangements for the consummation of the union. These results, so speedily secured, were doubtless due to a variety of reasons, of which the following have been mentioned: "They had a long start, discussion with them having been unintentionally precipitated at their meeting six months ago. Moreover, they had received formal permission from their home boards, and, what was probably the weightiest of all, they had had experience in the line of union, their party already representing five dis-

[1] Dr. Wm. Imbrie, The New York Evangelist, Jan. 17, 1889.

tinct elements, and they knew that instead of proving fatal, it adds new life and power." [1] But the main reason for this prompt result is doubtless to be found in the fact that the proposed constitution did not differ, in any essential principle of church government, from that to which they were accustomed. There were, of course, great modifications of the *forms* of applying these principles; in allowing these changes of form, the Itchi brethren thought they were making their full share of concessions.

B. The Kumiai Convention.—Quite different were the conditions of the Kumiai body. Some churches had refused to send any delegates; some delegates came late; of the pastors and delegates who did come to the meeting, many brought no authority from their churches to vote for union, but even had orders to postpone the convention for simply considering it, anywhere from six months to five years. "Moreover, all sorts of rumors were afloat as to a cablegram which had been received by the mission from the Prudential Committee of the American Board in Boston. It read, 'Committee suggest, delay final action on union.'" [2] With this last element of supposed opposition added to, and enhancing, those already mentioned, "there was little else than suspicion and misunderstanding on the whole question at issue." [3] After "every shade of thought and positive objection, theoretical and practical," had been presented in "a very heated discussion," it was voted to postpone further action for six months. The convention then "resolved itself into a committee on the whole, and settled down for a full, free, frank discussion of the whole question. The missionaries were called on for speeches, and afterwards were sharply catechised on church history, ancient and modern, the relations of missionaries and Japanese churches to the American Board, of the Board to the Congregational churches in

[1] Rev. J. H. Pettee, The Congregationalist, January, 1889.

[2] Rev. J. H. Pettee, The Congregationalist, Jan., 1889. [3] *Ibid.*

the United States, the nature of the American government, and every other subject that could be thought to bear on the matter under discussion. Then followed half a day of packed, pithy, Japanese speeches, covering the whole ground, but, in the main, taking a high position, and pleading for unsectarian churches in Japan. . . . . The council sent a committee to wait on Mr. Neesima, to learn his views, he being too ill to attend."[1] His reply was, "Hold fast to the democratic principle." Finally a committee was appointed to receive from the churches such amendments as they might desire in the proposed constitution, to work them over, to confer with the Itchi committee with reference to securing their consent, and to present the results to the annual meetings the following May for final action. The convention closed with profound feelings of relief. Suspicions had been removed, and mutual good will was felt on all sides, both within each body and between the two bodies. It was felt by all, that, on the principles which had been outlined in the speeches of the leaders, and that had been advocated by the leading men in both bodies, the proposed constitution could and would be so changed and simplified, that union would be acceptable to all, even to those who had been the most radical opponents. Thus the threatening storm-cloud bursts; doing apparently little damage, while clearing the air, and preparing the way for a more leisurely and thorough study of the question by the churches.

[1] Rev. J. H. Pettee, The Congregationalist, Jan., 1889.

[*To be concluded.*]