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Bishop Charles Wordsworth and the Union of the Churches.

BY THE REV. CANON COWLEY-BROWN, M.A.

BISHOP CHARLES WORDSWORTH has been described as having had a narrow escape of being a really great man. In any case he was a distinguished member of a remarkable family. But what entitles him above all to the consideration of his countrymen, and those of his adopted country, is the ability with which he formulated and the perseverance with which he pursued to the end, his plans for promoting the union of Christian Churches in this divided land.

Perseverance, it may be remarked, was a characteristic of Bishop Wordsworth. The writer of this paper was present at a lecture he addressed to a young men's society in Edinburgh on this very subject, which recalled the Irishman's remark, with its gay disregard of quantity—

Patience and perséverance
Made a Bishop of his Reverence.

All other details, however, of his long episcopate, must be passed by in order to bring into prominence the promotion of Christian unity in Scotland to which he devoted his very considerable powers.

Macaulay, in his "History" (iii. 257), dwells complacently on what he considers the advantage of having two Churches in one Kingdom. He says: "The Union accomplished in 1707 has indeed been a great blessing because, in constituting one State, it left two Churches." And, again ("Essay on Church and State"): "The nations are one because the Churches are two." To this may be opposed the words of Goldwin-Smith: "The State, led by political exigencies, accepted at the Union with Scotland the absurd and fundamentally sceptical position of establishing one religion on the north and another on the south of the Tweed." Bishop Wordsworth ("Scottish Church History," 37) points out one result of "this ecclesiastical

bi-formity. . . . It started with the anomaly that Scotch Presbyterians were henceforth to be admitted to legislate for the Episcopal Church of England, and English Episcopalians to legislate for the Presbyterian Church of Scotland."

In this paper, however, it may be assumed that the union of divided Christian Churches, without the sacrifice of any real convictions, is considered to be desirable by most Christian men. The question is how this union, "a consummation devoutly to be wished," can be carried out. There are, it would appear, two theories on the subject. One, which may be called the theory of absorption, consists in the attempt to draw all, by an absolute submission, into the re-formed ancient Church. This proceeding would, of course, involve the repudiation of almost all that the "converts," as they would be called, had hitherto held dear. The other, which was Bishop Wordsworth's plan, may be stated in his own words: "Can a reconciliation between Presbyterians and ourselves be effected upon the understanding that the adoption of the threefold ministry is eventually to be accepted as the basis of an agreement, the existing generation of Presbyterian clergy being left free to receive Episcopal ordination or not, at their own option; and that in the meantime we are to work together with mutual respect, and with no unkind or unbrotherly disparagement of each other's position?" In a letter to Mr. Hannay, editor of the *Courant* newspaper, the Bishop adds a suggestion that any Presbyterian minister might accept Episcopal ordination *hypothetically*, while any who should be advanced to the Order of Bishops would of course receive consecration ("Public Appeals," 387). Consecration *per saltum*, as in the case of Ambrose and others, was also in the Bishop's mind. Thus, though for a generation we might have a certain variety of ministers within the re-constituted Church, yet, all candidates for the ministry henceforward being Episcopally ordained, the amalgamation in a few years would be complete.

This plan, for which the Bishop claimed historical precedents both in the early Church and in our own country since the Reformation, may be called the theory of accommodation. The

Bishop states: "There can be no doubt that in Scotland at the Restoration (1660-1661) a large proportion of the clergy who had not received Episcopal ordination were allowed to remain in their parochial charges upon no other condition than that of acknowledging the office and authority of the Bishop of the Diocese." Dr. Grub writes: "None of the Bishops except Bishop Mitchell . . . insisted on re-ordaining ministers who had received only Presbyterian ordination, though they did not refuse to do so when asked. Burnet gives similar testimony ("History of His Own Times"). Even Keble (Preface to "Eccl. Pol.," lxxvi) admits that nearly up to the time when he (Hooker) wrote, numbers had been admitted to the ministry of the Church in England with no better than Presbyterian ordination." In the Bidding Prayer, in Canon 55, the people are bidden to pray "especially for the Churches of England, *Scotland*, and Ireland." The breadth of Leighton's sympathy may be seen from the characteristic story of his going to visit a sick Presbyterian minister on a horse borrowed from a Roman Catholic priest.

A *tertium quid*, indeed, is entertained by some who suppose that unity may consist in a sort of federation of Churches—that a federal union would suffice. This, however, can hardly be called *unity*. It would not be the confluence, but rather the course, of independent streams, trickling each in a restricted channel of its own, instead of the full and fertilizing volume of a united river.

But now, without further anticipation, it will be best to follow the orderly sequence of events and to note how the idea of the work to which he devoted himself arose in the Bishop's mind—to note the first step towards the desired reunion. It will be best to record the successive steps in his own words. He says (*Annals*, 160): "I had not been long in this country before it struck me how urgent a call there was for some attempt to be made to correct this evil"—that is the making light of our unhappy divisions. "And I could not but ask myself whether I might not be able, in dependence upon the Divine help, to contribute somewhat towards its correction . . . I did not under-

rate the difficulties in the way. I did not expect that much progress could be made speedily, or even perhaps during a lifetime; but nevertheless I was convinced that a beginning ought to be made by endeavouring, through public lectures and frequent letters in the newspapers, to leaven the minds of the more intelligent portion of our population, and especially of ministers themselves, with sounder principles."

With this view we find him addressing a temperate and courteous letter to all the Presbyterian ministers in his diocese. This was followed at certain intervals with learned lectures in St. Andrews and elsewhere. Two interesting facts may be mentioned in connection with these lectures. At Perth, the Bishop's servant going round to the principal tradesmen to request permission to place notices of them in their windows, received this answer from a highly respectable bookseller, an elder of the Established Church: "The Bishop is quite welcome. He is only doing what our ministers themselves wish; but they have not the courage to tell their people so." The other fact is amusing, as occurring in connection with one of his lectures. It must be told in the Bishop's own words: "After going on for some time, I was much annoyed by a gentleman sitting at a little distance in front of the platform, who talked so loudly that I fancied he must be some violent Free Churchman, determined to show his disapproval of the views I was maintaining. At length I stopped short and said, 'I think, ladies and gentlemen, we are met upon the understanding that I am to speak, and you are to be so good as to listen to what I have to say. But there is a gentleman present who has been talking so loudly that he disturbs me, and I think he must have disturbed those who are sitting near him.' The applausive reception given to the words showed that I had hit the mark. The gentleman started up. I went on to say that I should be quite satisfied if he would only resume his seat and remain quiet. However, he preferred to act otherwise. He took up his hat and left the room, and I proceeded with my lecture. When it was over and I descended from the platform, several of the audience, mostly ladies, came about me and said, 'Do you know what you have done?' 'No,'

I replied, 'I hope I have done nothing wrong.' 'Oh no; quite the contrary. You could not have done anything better. That was Sir Alexander Grant, and he was explaining to the young lady who sat near to him, to whom he is engaged to be married, the merits of your lecture.' . . . I must add, to Sir Alexander's credit, that he called upon me the next morning to make an apology. He told me he had been a pupil of my brother's at Harrow. . . . We never met again but once, and that was many year afterwards, at the table of Dean Ramsay in Edinburgh. He had then returned from India, and become Principal of Edinburgh University" (*Annals*, p. 201).

The part Bishop Wordsworth took in this matter of Christian unity, from first to last, may be seen in his "Public Appeals," a series of twelve papers, in which the subject is comprehensively stated. From time to time during his Episcopate of forty years we see him coming forth in complete armour to defend his cause. On the occasion of the Jubilee of Queen Victoria we find him writing an able letter to the Editor of the *Times* newspaper, proposing to signalize her reign "by completing, through an ecclesiastical union, what was left undone by the political union accomplished in the reign of Queen Anne." Up to the last fortnight of his life on earth we find him engaged in his labour of love, justifying the words of his own epitaph, in which it is recorded that :

Remembering the prayer of his Divine Lord and Master
 For the unity of His Church on earth,
 He prayed continually and laboured earnestly
 That a way may be found, in God's good time,
 For the reunion of the Episcopalian and Presbyterian bodies,
 Without the sacrifice of Catholic principle
 Or Scriptural Truth.

The Bishop, as it has been seen, was in favour of making such temporary concessions as, while the principle of Episcopacy was preserved, might make the reconciliation less difficult to a Church which could claim only a Presbyterian succession. He saw the supreme advantage a really National Church would be in Scotland. And he was persuaded that not only might such an amalgamation as he proposed be lawfully permitted, but that the

history of the Church showed that it had been actually put in practice. In other words, that an ordination, though not strictly regular, might yet have been valid. He quotes the well-known words of Bishop Andrewes to the famous French Protestant du Moulin, and cites the authority of Hooker, of Bishop Cosin, of Archbishop Wake and others, to say nothing of the action of the greatest of his own predecessors in the annexed diocese of Dunblane, the saintly Bishop Leighton, himself originally a Presbyterian minister, and the other Bishops of the Restoration.

The Bishop was particularly anxious that his action should not be misunderstood. He would have no one imagine that, while pleading for a considerate treatment of Presbyterianism, he ignored the antiquity or undervalued the importance of Episcopacy. This, indeed, he defended with a wealth of learning which could not be confuted. The present writer was favoured with more than one letter from him, in his clear and beautiful handwriting, on the subject. In one of these he refers to the suspicion that he had fallen into the error, which an ignorant writer in a newspaper had imputed to him as a merit, "of failing to maintain the distinctive principle which separates Episcopacy from Presbyterianism, which," he says, "I have never done, though I have argued the matter with studied forbearance."

The whole question, indeed, turns upon the distinction between the *esse* and the *bene esse* of a Church. This latter—*i.e.*, the value of Episcopacy for the well-being of a Church—no one could set forth more learnedly, or hold more firmly than Bishop Wordsworth. The former, however, or the absolute necessity of Episcopacy to a Church's existence, he held, with the great authorities before mentioned, to be not equally demonstrable.

On the subject of our differences, perhaps one may be allowed to take a physical illustration: A man who has had the misfortune to lose a limb is still a man, and sometimes even a finer specimen of humanity than others who have managed to retain all their limbs. Still there has been a loss. There is little doubt, however, that, as Mark Pattison says in his

“Life of Casaubon”: “Before the rise of the Laudian school, the English Church and the Reformed Churches of the Continent mutually recognised each other as sisters. Perhaps, we might say, more exactly, step-sisters.”

With regard to reunion, the chief difficulty in the minds of some well-informed and well-affected Presbyterians, seems to arise from the promise exacted from all candidates for the ministry and for eldership, “never to endeavour, directly or indirectly, the prejudice or the subversion of the Presbyterian government and discipline.” This seems a really immoral requirement. If wider knowledge, larger experience, honest conviction, lead men in riper years to a more liberal view of things than that which they took in their uninstructed youth, are they to be precluded for ever from giving it effect? The Council of Trent could hardly go beyond this. It would seem that religion which was meant (as some suppose the word signifies) to bind us together, had been made a sort of wedge to split us asunder. After all, the fact remains that more than two-thirds of the people of Scotland were living together in one National Reformed Church little more than two centuries ago. Is it a hopeless task, a mere “ecclesiastical dream” to attempt to bring us together again?

Bishop Wordsworth, we may be sure, would have rejoiced to see the day which it has been agreed between ourselves and our Presbyterian brethren to observe as a day of special intercession for Christian unity. No one would have hailed more heartily the formation of the “Christian Unity Association,” in which Episcopalians and Presbyterians, Bishops and Moderators, Clergy and Laity, meet together once a quarter for joint devotion and conference. Such a sight would have been impossible a few years ago. Less than three centuries ago we were flying at each other’s throats. Covenanter persecuted Episcopalian, and Episcopalian retaliated on Covenanter. For to say that in those troublous times one side were all lambs and the other side all wolves, would be an utter misreading of history. As Jeremy Taylor said: “They preach for toleration when themselves are under the rod; who when they got the rod into their own hands

thought toleration itself to be intolerable" (*Via Intelligentiæ*). There were doubtless faults on both sides. But now, happily, we see their descendants uniting in conference and in prayer, with a view, sooner or later, to ultimate unity.

Is it, we may ask, a vain vision? Is it the Utopian idea some have called it? Let us look back for a moment to our own national history. What did we see in this country only a century and a half ago? A people divided in two. Some following one king, and some a rival claimant to the Crown. What do we see now? The same people loyally united under the same Sovereign. Why should it not yet become so in the Kingdom and Church of Christ? Is it not refreshing, after long years of controversy and mutual misunderstanding, to read the noble utterances on this subject of unity by leading men on both sides—that aspiration after a united Church in a united Empire which rises in various minds; to find Principal Tulloch, for instance, readily admitting that "Episcopacy has a certain historic root in Scotland," and a Moderator of the Established Church declaring that no union of Churches in Scotland would be complete in which the Episcopal Church could be left out? Who, after this, will call it "an exotic," "an alien on Scottish soil," and other flowers of rhetoric which wither in the light of history? Though our present condition may resemble the picture Coleridge has drawn of those who have become divided—

They stood aloof, the scars remaining,
Like cliffs which had been rent asunder,

does not this imply that we were once united? Does it not hold out the hope that we may be reunited? We cannot but deplore the spectacle of a divided Christendom. We cannot fail to see the hindrance it causes both to the spread of true religion and virtue at home, and to the progress of Christian missions in foreign parts. The policy of the Prince of this world has ever been, "Divide and conquer." What should be the conduct of the servants of Christ in view of the gathering forces of unbelief, with all those attendant evils with which we are confronted in these dangerous days? Is it not our wisdom,

no less than our duty, to draw together, to do all that in us lies to unite "all that call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, both their and ours"? The more a man imbibes the spirit of his Master, Christ, the more will he be drawn towards all who, with whatever unequal steps, are followers of Christ. The more single becomes the spiritual eye, the more clearly will it come to discern between what is essential and what is non-essential in the religion of Christ. The more his heart is enlarged, the more ready will he be to "look not only on his own things, but also on the things of others." There must be a union of hearts before there can be any satisfying corporate union. In any case, we must listen to the Divine voice within us: "Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?"

Unity, no doubt, is not to be hurried. "There would be no surer way to spoil the effort," as the Archbishop of Canterbury said in a recent sermon in Edinburgh Cathedral, "than by a rough-and-ready handling of the splendid task, or to attempt to effect by rushing what can only come by growth." "One soweth and another reapeth." "The work be thine, the fruit thy children's part" ("Carpent tua poma nepotes").

In view, then, of all these encouragements, and the thoughts which are now exercising the minds of large-hearted Presbyterians as well as of members of our own Church, we will not cease to cherish the hope that what each has to offer the other may come to be accepted by the other; that what we, for our part, are in a position to contribute by way of completeness may yet commend itself to those who feel that they would not be losers but gainers by linking themselves more closely with the great Catholic past; and that we may readily adopt, to our own enrichment, the many practical advantages which are to be found among those whose ecclesiastical polity has hitherto differed from our own. Nor will we cease to pray, after the pattern of the Bishop who more than any other has prepared the way for it—to pray for the time when, without any real sacrifice of principle, those who, unhappily, have become divided may yet be able once more to work together in one really National Church.