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THE COMITY OF THE CHURCHES ON THE MISSION FIELD.¹

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IT is a sad thing, from whatever point of view regarded, that at this time of day the matter of comity as between Christian Missions should need discussion. In this connection we must look beyond the literal sense of the word *comity*, which strictly taken means no more than courtesy, a friendly disposition and manner in social intercourse. Christian decency surely dictates so much as this. Amidst heathen surroundings missionary comity cannot stop at mere sentiment and civility, but passes into co-operation ; failing that, it is likely to give place to antagonism. It is scarcely possible for men under the conditions of missionary life to labour within the same community pursuing their separate tasks in isolation, as we mostly do in this country, and ignoring the work of fellow-labourers of other Churches. Their paths are constantly crossing ; their operations interlace ; they help or hinder each other at every turn ; the force of circumstances compels the representatives of one Church to recognize and utilize, or to disown and virtually oppose, the doings of the other. A polite neutrality is out of the question ; it is a case of " He that is not with me is against me." From all I know of the Mission fields of my own Church, I judge that fellowship is a warmer and heartier experience there than here. Missionaries feel themselves more closely interdependent and are more sensibly members one of another than we at home ; and where friction arises, it becomes more inflamed than in the atmosphere of a Christian land. And what is true in this respect of a single Church or Missionary organization, holds as between the Churches themselves.

The mere fact of being strangers in a strange land makes men interesting to each other. Englishmen who at home would not be on speaking terms, abroad become " chummy " (as we say) ; their social hunger draws them together. For lack of other comradeship and nearer kindred, they make acquaintance and discover how much they have in common. In the case of missionaries amongst the

¹ A Paper read before the Leeds C.M.S. Clergy Union.

heathen, the motives for communion are immeasurably stronger ; they are enforced by a common repulsion and horror, by combat with a common and powerful foe. The matters dividing the servants of the Lord Christ which loomed so large in the home country, before this monstrous antithesis dwindle into insignificance. How childish to contend over modes of Church-government or forms of baptism in the presence of the Brahman theosophist or the negro devil-worshipper ! In such a position men feel how great a thing it is, how binding a bond, to be fellow-Christians ; they hear more clearly the voice which said : “ One is your Master, even Christ ; and all ye are brethren.”

Such influences have operated from the first, in a quite spontaneous and informal way, on the foreign field. Nowhere, for example, has there been witnessed truer friendship and co-operation than existed between the pioneers of the Church Missionary Society and of the Wesleyan Missionary Society a century ago, in West Africa, in Australia and New Zealand. The warmth of heart generated by the Evangelical Revival, and as yet unchilled, contributed to this fraternity. At the same time, I am bound to say that in some other quarters—in the West Indies frequently, in Newfoundland and Canada—the first Wesleyan Missions suffered contempt and denunciation, even violent persecution, at the hands of clergymen of a different way of thinking ; there was a revival amongst Colonials in the early nineteenth century of the animus of seventeenth and eighteenth century State-churchmen toward Dissenters and Methodists, which had bitter political ingredients and was often bitterly reciprocated. Generally speaking, as the century advanced and as population became denser and more settled in England overseas, the relations of the Churches approximated to those familiar at home. Individual friendships, and contentions, between missionaries of different denominations, both became rarer ; a decorous indifference, a kind of armed neutrality, supervened. The separate Churches minded their own business, and went their own way.

The internal growth of the several Missions and the evolution of the rival Church-systems, while beneficial in so many respects, made against the continuance on these fields of inter-Church comity ; pre-occupied with the interests and the companionships of their particular Communion, the Church-leaders were less inclined to “ look on the things of others ” beyond the fence ; in short, the

missionary grew into the regimented Colonial clergyman or minister.

This development in the Colonies coincided with the Oxford Movement in England, which brought about a powerful renewal of High Church principles and claims and set the clergy very generally in a pronounced polemic attitude toward Nonconformity. The new temper soon made itself felt on the Mission field. In New Zealand, for instance, the advent of Bishop Selwyn—that accomplished and high-minded man and devoted missionary, but uncompromising High Churchman—transformed the inter-Church situation. The brotherly relations between Anglicans and Methodists in that growing Colony were broken off. Intercourse was discouraged; mutual consultation ceased, co-operation became a thing of the past. Churchmen stood aloof from Dissenters; Christ's people were divided, in the face of the heathen, into two opposite camps. Ecclesiastical policy neutralized the instincts of the Christian heart and overbore the sense of a common citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

The age of what one may call unreflective and informal comity in British Mission-work, manifesting itself in private friendship and sporadic unorganized co-operation, passed away, as the Colonies filled up and their Churches grew out of the stage of pioneer adventure into that of regularised ecclesiastical life. Up to the middle of the last century the main strength of the modern British Missionary Societies was spent on Colonial fields; our Missions to non-Christian lands were, in most regions, too small and isolated to give rise to serious questions of comity and co-operation. But with the progress of the century, after the crisis of the Mutiny in India, the opening of China and Japan to foreign intercourse, and the exploration of interior Africa, the British and American Churches took up the great problems of the evangelization of the Far East and the Dark Continent. The drawbacks of Protestant sectarianism now came into evidence as they had not done before, in face of the great organized Pagan systems, and the massed Paganism and Muhammedanism of those immense countries. The disabling effect of Christian divisions—the scandal and perplexity they caused to the heathen folk, the contempt they provoked amongst Moslems, and at a later stage the resentment they excited in the Native Churches as their corporate national consciousness developed—these and the like influences have forced the question of unity upon the missionary bodies; they are occasioning deep searchings of heart to all who

are concerned with the world-progress of the Gospel and the future of the Kingdom of Christ in Asia and in Africa. The missionary situation to-day resembles that of the armies of the Entente on the Western front, as this appeared at the spring of the present year. Brought up against the fortress-walls of Hinduism, or the solid and deep-dug entrenchments of Chinese bigotry, our scattered ill-equipped forces were comparatively powerless. The necessity for economy of material, sub-division of labour, co-operation in study, prayer, counsel, concerted action of all kinds and in the employment of every arm of the Christian warfare, were forced on the minds of the most unwilling ; men who at home had been complacent in the self-sufficiency of their own Church and impatient of dissent—disposed, as the eye or hand in the body of Christ, to say to the foot, “ I have no need of thee ”—were brought to a humbler mind ; they were compelled to feel the weakness of isolation under the stress of their labour on the larger and more critical Mission fields.

Hence the inter-Church Conferences, Councils, Boards, Committees, which have become a growingly dominant feature of missionary work in those lands—a feature more developed and elaborated in proportion to the development, social and intellectual, of the type of non-Christian religion to be dealt with, in proportion to the solidity of its resistance and the intricacy and difficulty of the problems it presented. At the same time, with the multiplication of Missions and missionaries upon the field, the necessity for collaboration, and the opportunities for mutual help and furtherance, increased in still greater ratio. The waste involved in overlapping, and in the duplicating of institutions for parallel purposes, became glaringly evident. The evils resulting from unadjusted standards of membership, and from the uncontrolled migration from Church to Church of converts under discipline or of dissatisfied agents—rascals, some of them, who exploited our divisions—pressed on the attention of missionary pastors. These and the like difficulties accompanying disunion enforced imperiously, on Indian and Chinese missionaries most of all, the need for a common understanding and concerted action. Not merely an *entente cordiale*, but an effective working alliance amongst Evangelical Churches was called for in the Far Eastern, and perhaps less urgently in the West and South African fields. Such alliance is taking shape, and is bearing fruit.

This trend of circumstances has given to comity on the Mission

field a practical import, and a positive content, of great significance for the future. Out of common sympathies and counsels common institutions have inevitably grown, especially in the departments of medical, educational, and literary work. The Christian College of Madras, which is said to be the largest modern educational institute in Asia, is a conspicuous product of this movement; founded by the Free Church of Scotland, it is now supported and manned by a combination of some half-dozen missionary bodies, of which the Church Missionary Society, I believe, is one. Some years ago I had the opportunity, when in India, of visiting this noble institution, and observed with delight its imposing structure and its commanding and beneficent influence, pervading the whole south of the Peninsula. Co-operation is extending itself there even to the field of theological study and training for the ministry; witness the recent establishment of the united Theological School in Bangalore.

The statement and discussions upon Missionary Co-operation and Unity which appears in the published reports of the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910, show how numerous and manifold are the activities on foot in this direction, what vital questions they raise for the whole Church, and how far their scope reaches beyond mere comity and friendly recognition. The Edinburgh Conference signalized the second step—the great stride, one might venture to say—in the advance toward reunion of the Churches which is in progress on the Mission Field. The Missionary Societies have entered now on the stage of deliberate and comprehensive collaboration, of scientific co-ordination (as one may say). In seeking to fulfil Christ's last and largest command, to "disciple all the nations," the Christian Society is in the way of rediscovering and re-asserting its lost unity.

I had the privilege of taking part in that memorable meeting at Edinburgh—the greatest assemblage of the world-Christian forces ever gathered, the most ecumenical since the Councils of the undivided Church. Speaking for myself, let me say, that I was never present in any ecclesiastical assembly where the overshadowing power of Christ appeared to be so deeply felt, and the guidance of His sovereign Spirit so strongly realized from first to last. I remember well the introduction of the Report of the 8th Commission, upon Co-operation and Unity—the tense feeling that prevailed, the sense resting upon us all that this was the critical moment of the Conference, the

fear lest some counter-demonstration might arise, some manifestation of disunity which would go far to discredit the Conference and reawaken the spirit of jealousy and division on the Mission Field. The Church of Rome, to be sure, was not represented in the Conference-hall, though one of her most revered Bishops sent us a friendly and affectionate greeting. But there were those who felt no little shyness and hesitation in endorsing the prevailing sentiment, who feared committing themselves to some step which would compromise their Church-principles. It was a great satisfaction to the promoters of the Conference, and an earnest of its success, when the Committee of the S.P.G.—not without demur and division of opinion in its ranks—accepted the invitation to join the Conference and that venerable and important Society (as I heard some one express it) was “roped in” with the rest. The event may prove epoch-making; it was at any rate momentous for the Conference itself. The High Church leaders present—such as Bishops Gore and Talbot, Lord William Cecil (now Bishop of Exeter), Bishop Montgomery, then Secretary of the S.P.G., and Dr. Frere our neighbour at Mirfield—while frankly expressing their reserves and cautions and at some points obviously embarrassed, were amongst the most brotherly and cordial of the delegates in their sentiments and the most valued contributors to the discussions of the Conference.

As a parallel example of the progress made on the foreign field toward the confederation, and of the way in which the old middle walls of partition are yielding under the pressure of missionary exigencies, I may refer to the experience of my own brother for many years a Methodist missionary to India. He was the organizing Secretary, some twenty years back, of the South India Missionary Association, which for the first time brought all Christian Missionaries in that region, with the exception of the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans, into open fellowship. He told me of the long correspondence and difficult negotiations he had with missionary clergymen of High Church views, the scruples, in most cases courteously and regretfully expressed, which a number of these excellent men felt about associating with Dissenting ministers, his deep thankfulness that these hindrances were at last overcome and that the Association was made complete by the adhesion of the missionaries of the S.P.G. They brought to the common stock elements of discipline and training, with a standpoint and habit of mind, of unique

value and which their fellows in the service of Christ could ill dispense with. The linking up with the rest of this detachment of the missionary host in South India he felt to be a triumph for the common cause.

Occurrences like this are bound to react on the Church of God here at home. That reflection I will not venture to pursue. But I wish to add one word upon the part the Native Churches are likely to play in the question before us. The ultimate decision, after all, must rest with them ; sooner or later they will take the settlement out of our hands. The more advanced Churches are growing impatient of our delays, our obstinate prejudices and misgivings toward each other, our persistent aloofness, our tedious diplomacy in this matter so vital to them. Nothing I heard at the Edinburgh Conference impressed me more than a speech of a few sentences coming from the lips of a Chinese delegate, who spoke with a quiet decision and a dry humour adding to the force of his words. " We thank you," he said, " from the depth of our hearts for bringing us your Christ ; but we do not thank you for importing your Church-divisions and shibboleths along with Him. Anglican and Nonconformist, High Church and Low, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and the rest—these names are very significant to you, they are rooted in your soil and are a part of your history ; but they fail to interest us Chinese. We can ill understand them ; we have no use for them. They narrow and impoverish our communion ; they weaken us in the face of the heathen. We Chinese Christians will not remain permanently boxed up in the compartments of British Christianity." That is a certainty we shall have to reckon with on every foreign missionary field, in some of them at no distant date. It may be in God's plans that China shall point the way to reunion for British Christendom, and once more " the things that are not shall bring to nought the things that are."

GEORGE G. FINDLAY.

