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THE CHURCHMAN

April, 1934.

NOTES AND COMMENTS.

Reunion.

THE Movement for the Reunion of the Churches seems to have slowed down considerably during the last year or two owing to a variety of reasons. Foremost among these reasons is the growth of the spirit of Nationalism which has developed so strongly through the exigencies of the political and economic situation. The Movement in South India is, however, slowly going forward in spite of the keen opposition with which it has been met by some sections of the Anglican Communion. Conferences are still being held between the representatives of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, but there seems to be little to report and the advance seems to make small progress. The prevailing tendency to regard the Church from the Institutional point of view presents the chief difficulty. It appears to indicate that the whole subject must be viewed from a fresh aspect and this has been suggested in several quarters recently. Various Movements are showing that there is an essential unity of all Christian people quite independent of the particular form of ecclesiastical organisation to which they may belong. As long as the chief emphasis is laid on methods of Church government the difficulties in the way of reunion seem to be insuperable. If the approach is made from the side of the common loyalty to Jesus Christ, there is hope that a new spirit will be infused into the endeavour to draw together the Christian people of the world into that unity which it is becoming more and more evident is absolutely necessary if Christian influence is to exert its full strength upon the perplexing problems that are before us in every land.

Church and State.

The Relationship of Church and State is still a subject of discussion in many quarters although the forecasts of the Findings of the Commission appointed by the Archbishops which appeared in some of the daily papers have proved premature. The Commission is still engaged in its task and is possibly finding considerable

difficulty in reconciling the conflicting views that are being put forward. The great majority of English Churchpeople have no desire for disestablishment. They have still less wish for disendowment, for they recognise that it would deprive large sections of the community of the spiritual opportunities at present provided for them. It is perhaps unfortunately true that the Church is living at present in far too large a measure on the generosity of the past. The incomes of the clergy in a very large number of parishes are derived from tithes and from endowments provided by generous Churchmen in days gone by, when the duty of supporting the ministry of the Church was more keenly recognised than it is at present. There is little hope that a disendowed Church would be able to maintain effectively the present parochial system. It is very difficult in many places even now to provide the stipends of the assistant clergy, although this is one of the most pressing needs of to-day. Those who are advocating disestablishment should recognise the dangers to the spiritual life of the country that may result from the achievement of their wish, for a large measure of disendowment must almost inevitably follow the severance of the present relations of Church and State.

The Significance of Establishment.

This is not, however, to be regarded as the chief disadvantage that may arise from the severance. At present there is some recognition that ours is a Christian State. Disestablishment would be the formal recognition that the State no longer regarded Christianity as the foundation on which our national life is based. This is a matter of serious import in days when Christianity has been definitely rejected in at least one land, and when atheistic Communism is seeking to destroy the Christian basis of life wherever it can assert itself. England has always held a unique position among the nations as representing the nearest approach to the ideal union of Church and State. As Lord Selborne said in his *Defence of the Church of England*—a book that deserves attention in the midst of the present discussion: "The Establishment (so understood) of the Church of England grew up gradually and silently, out of the relations between the moral and physical power natural in an early stage of society; not as a result of any definite act, compact, or conflict, but so that no one can now trace the exact steps of the process by which the voluntary recognition of moral and spiritual obligation passed into custom, and custom into law." This intertwining of the religious and civil life of the people is an heritage which cannot lightly be abandoned, or dissolved on the specious ground that the Church is in fetters and must have spiritual freedom. There has been nothing in recent years to warrant the demand for disestablishment. Many people do not recognise that the Churches which are described as "Free" are bound by legal enactments and have to comply with Trust Deeds that are documents relying upon the authority of the State.

Confession in the Church of England.

A persistent effort has been made for some years to spread the practice of Sacramental Confession in our Church. In some parishes candidates are required to make their confession to the priest before their Confirmation, and they are expected to continue to go to Confession as a regular practice. It is scarcely necessary to point out that these requirements go far beyond anything that can legitimately be deduced from the references to Confession in the Prayer Book. These references are familiar to all instructed Churchpeople and only provide for the very exceptional case of sick persons whose consciences cannot be quieted by any other means than opening their grief to a discreet and learned minister of God's Word. It appears from some recent episcopal pronouncements that regulations for the hearing of confessions are to be laid down as though the regular hearing of them was a recognised part of the ordinary routine of a clergyman's parochial duty. No unbeneficed clergyman is to be authorised to hear confession until he has been three years in Priest's orders. In order to become expert in the duty a candidate for the office of Confessor is to undergo a course of instruction, and supervisors are to be appointed to test the candidate's qualifications before the authorisation of the Bishop is granted. It is said that these regulations are not to be taken as authorising any teaching about Confession and Absolution which goes beyond or conflicts with that given or implied in the Book of Common Prayer. The whole scheme seems contrary to the spirit and even the letter of the Prayer Book. Our Reformers were familiar with the evils of the Confessional, its weakening effect on moral character, the power that it gave to the Priest over the lives of the people, and its assertion of the need of priestly mediation, and they wisely discarded the practice.

The Ministry of Reconciliation.

These pronouncements on Confession give a special significance to the Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen which is to be held at St. Peter's Hall, Oxford, on April 16, 17, and 18, when the subject to be considered will be "The Ministry of Reconciliation." The Letter of Invitation to the Conference says:

"The parish clergyman finds himself to-day called upon to deal with a very great number of people who seek for spiritual direction and the assurance of forgiveness. The War and its after-effects have gravely affected the religious and moral outlook of thousands, and to-day a much less reticent generation is much more ready to discuss its intimate problems. There are many systems and theories that claim to give relief to consciences, but the essential question is the problem of sin and reconciliation with God. It is in view of this urgent situation with all its pathos, its need of wisdom and its hope, that the Oxford Conference of Evangelical Clergy and Laity proposes to discuss the subject of 'The Ministry of Reconciliation.'"

The discussion has been arranged so as to give a full survey of the subject both from the historical and theological points of view and will embrace the consideration of the Evangelical interpretation of the Doctrine of Atonement, the development of the "Confessional" in history, the teaching of our Prayer Book on Confession, the latest developments of psychological research in its bearing on confession and sharing and the practical duties of the parish clergyman in dealing with souls feeling the need of assurance of forgiveness. The Conference promises to be of unusual interest, and a large attendance is expected.

The Rejected Prayer Book Again.

It is unfortunate that the Primate in his call to prayer for rain should have taken the opportunity to couple together the prayer in the Book of Common Prayer and that in "the Revised Book of 1928" as if they each had equal authority. There is no objection in itself to be raised against the prayer in the Book which was rejected for a second time by the House of Commons in 1928, for it is almost exactly the same as that in the Book of Common Prayer; but this very circumstance is an evidence that there was no need to mention it at all. It would appear as if the Primate was specially anxious to give a fillip both to the sales and to the use of the unauthorised book by a gratuitous advertisement when occasion offers; and loyal Churchmen may well feel regret at its introduction in this way. It is not a welcome task to offer criticism on the form of a Call to Prayer for a need which is felt throughout the country, but if references of this kind are made by Bishops and Archbishops, and are not from time to time challenged, it may be supposed that the opposition to the 1928 book is dying out. In the light of subsequent events it may safely be said that the opposition is as strong now as ever it was.