

A Lesson from the Great Conferences of the Church.

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THE intentionally ambiguous phrase, "Great Conferences of the Church," will suggest to some the famous succession during the four and a half centuries between 325 and 787 of seven Œcumenical Councils which have been appealed to since by all Christendom; perhaps, also, the thirteen Councils of the subsequent millennium (869-1870) which the Roman Church alone appeals to as authoritative. But others, to whom the Bible and the present day are more familiar than past ecclesiastical history, will think of various other gatherings; from that described in the Acts of the Apostles to that which was convened in Edinburgh in 1910. And if the main purpose of studying history is to interpret the problems of the present in the light of the widest possible experience in the past, we may surely bring together, in order to compare and contrast them, all these notable assemblies of Christians without confounding things which differ. The Councils have all been Conferences, though only some Conferences have been Councils.

For "Council" connotes a representative assembly of Bishops and other authorized delegates from different churches or dioceses, summoned to settle, by the decision of a majority, points in dispute. An Œcumenical or General Council originally signified one representing "the whole world" (*totus orbis*)—that is, the inhabited or civilized world, practically the Roman Empire, which was becoming synonymous with "Christendom" when the First Council met. Eventually, an Œcumenical Council implied one with legislative powers, officially summoned.

No one would dispute that the Conference at Jerusalem in A.D. 50 was one of the great turning points in Church history. But it cannot claim the title of "First General Council," often given to it. For Antioch seems to have been the only Church that sent delegates; there was no point in dispute between

church and church, and the decision to which "the whole Church" assented was based, not on the votes of a majority, but on the dictum of those who could say, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us."

Passing from the earliest to the latest great Christian Conference, the one at Edinburgh consisted of a far larger number of delegates, and was drawn from a far wider area, than any Œcumenical Council, but its unofficial and purely deliberative character was marked by the fact that it wisely avoided the designation "Œcumenical," which had been claimed by its predecessor at New York in 1900. Whether any Christian Conference that has ever met was literally entitled to the name of Œcumenical is, however, a question that thrusts itself on those who look closely into the Councils which form the pivots of early Church history.

Three groups of Conferences stand out, one for each of the three divisions of the historic Church — Greek, Latin, and Anglican; and we may add a fourth group of modern conferences, which will certainly be recognized hereafter as having made history not less than the rest.

Even at the risk of wearying many readers who are entirely familiar with their story, consideration of the relation of all these Conferences to each other must be preceded by a rapid enumeration of the most important of them, noting when and where each was held, by whom it was summoned and ruled and attended, and what was its main object and outstanding result.

The earliest Christian Conference met at Jerusalem in A.D. 50, just twenty years after the Ascension, about the time that the Romans were colonizing London. It was summoned by the Apostles, presided over by St. James, Bishop of Jerusalem, attended by the Apostles and elders and by St. Paul and St. Barnabas as delegates from Antioch. Its object was to settle the terms on which Gentiles could be received into the Church in days when it was harder to conceive of Christians who were not Hebrews than it has been at many periods since to conceive of Hebrews who are Christians. Not a very large

meeting probably, not acknowledged to be a great event even in the Christian world, it resulted in determining once for all that entrance into the Church need not be through the synagogue. And therefore our religion survived when the Jewish State fell in A.D. 70. Henceforth it could be recognized as potentially universal, and the first step towards making it actually universal had been taken.

The first Council summoned by a prince in response to an appeal to the civil power was the Synod at Arles in Provence, called by the Emperor Constantine in 314, ten years after the last and worst of the Ten Persecutions began, and ten years before his own public profession of the Christian faith. It was attended by 200 Bishops, including three from Britain, and dealt with matters of discipline rather than doctrine, and especially with the Donatist Schism.

Ten years later, at Nicæa in 325, the first Œcumenical Council met, summoned by Constantine, presided over by Hosius, Bishop of Cordova, attended by 318 Bishops, of whom 310 were of the Eastern and eight of the Western Church, and by other clergy, perhaps by 2,000 persons in all. It was the first example of a large assembly professing to represent the voice and conscience of the whole Christian community. Its object was to condemn the Arian heresy, and all Christendom now accepts its ruling as to the Deity of Christ and the magnificent Nicene Creed which it formulated.

The second Œcumenical Council met at Constantinople in 381, summoned by the Emperor Theodosius, presided over by the Bishop of Antioch, and later on by the Bishop of Alexandria, and attended by 186 Bishops, all of the Eastern Church. Its object was to condemn the Macedonian heresy and the Apollinarian heresy, affirming the Deity of the Holy Ghost and reaffirming the Deity of the Son. Incidentally, it settled rival claims to the See of Constantinople.

The third Œcumenical Council met at Ephesus in 431, summoned by Theodosius II., presided over by the Bishop of Alexandria, and attended by 200 Bishops, of whom two repre-

sented the Western and the rest the Eastern Church. Its object was to condemn the Nestorian heresy (that there are two Persons in Christ), and its result was the secession of the Nestorian or Chaldean Churches, still found in Kurdistan and Persia.

The fourth Œcumenical Council met at Chalcedon in 451, about the time that Hengist was landing in Kent, summoned by the Emperor Marcian, presided over by the Bishop of Constantinople and by the two envoys of Leo, Bishop of Rome, attended by 630 Bishops, all, except two from Africa and the two from Rome, being of the Eastern Church. Its object was to condemn the Eutychian or Monophysite heresy (that there is only one nature in Christ), and its result was the separation of the Coptic Church, and also, through an unhappy misunderstanding, of the Armenian Church, which really approved its condemnation of Eutyches.

The decrees of these first four Councils were raised by the Emperor Justinian to the level of Holy Scripture; and Anglicans generally would accept Bishop Taylor's statement that "besides the decrees of the four General Councils nothing is to be required as matter of belief necessary for salvation." On the three later Councils at Constantinople in 553, 680, and 879, and on that at Nicæa in 787, we need not dwell, for their decrees are seldom quoted by Reformed Christendom.

Geographically all these Councils took place within a limited area; Chalcedon was a suburb of Constantinople, Nicæa in Bithynia is within 60 miles of it, and Ephesus only 170 miles off; and although the Western Church had become powerful in influence and wide in extent in the fourth and fifth centuries, and in Leo I. Rome had one of her greatest bishops, the seven Councils practically represented the Eastern Church only.

We owe much to them for formulating the Faith clearly, and contending for it effectually, but they benefited the Church by what they asserted rather than by what they denied. Subsequent history has, indeed, abundantly justified their condemnation of Arius, by demonstrating that the Gospel of salvation is bound up with the Catholic faith, recognizing the Saviour as Perfect

God and Perfect Man, and that no form of Christianity which falters about this supreme truth has ever been permanent or aggressive. But remembering that heroic missionaries of the Nestorian Church carried the Gospel right across Asia; that Armenia was the first country to adopt Christianity as its national religion; that its Church in olden days was also actively missionary, and has in our days a noble roll of martyrs; that the Coptic Church won Abyssinia to the faith, and has survived extraordinary persecution and isolation, and that the Copts are still the brain of Egypt—we must regard as deplorable the action that drove these three Churches outside orthodox Christendom, depriving it of their evangelistic zeal, and depriving them of its support when the storm of Islam overwhelmed them. As years rolled on, their own lamps burned dimly, and little trace of their propaganda remained. But had orthodox Christendom been less ready to rail on Nestorius as “a new Judas,” to brand as heresy their efforts to express mysteries that baffle expression, these churches might have quickly recovered their swerve from Catholic completeness, and they and the rest of Christendom might have been saved from the loss that followed secessions due not more to persistence in error on one side than to lack of patience and charity and desire to understand on the other.

Gladly would one ignore the bitter, contentious and intolerant spirit of those early Councils. But one ought not to do so when there are in our midst those who like to think that all error starts from and centres in Rome, or that all sectarian strife dates from the Reformation. When we read of Constantine burning unread, at the Council of Nicæa, letters in which Bishops had penned fierce accusations against each other for him to adjudicate on, and appealing to these acrimonious ecclesiastics to refrain from recriminations; or of the six lay commissioners trying to still the tumultuous cries of militant parties at the Council of Chalcedon, we blush for the Church; especially now that the idealized Constantine “equal to the apostles” of tradition has given place to the historical Constantine, neither theologian nor saint, but an imperfect Christian, like

many both of high and low degree to-day who are newly won from heathendom.

Remote as they are from modern controversies, these early Councils may well teach our generation that nothing but harm and scandal to the cause of Christ can come from harsh thoughts and words or violent deeds.

Of later Œcumenical Councils which were as definitely Roman as the earlier ones were Greek, we need only recall three. The Fourth Lateran Council met at Rome in 1215, summoned by Pope Innocent III. and attended by over 2,000 persons, 412 of them Bishops. It stereotyped the dogma of Transubstantiation, destined to become the test question between Roman and Reformed in the sixteenth century.

The Council of Trent sat from 1546 to 1563 under three successive Popes, and out of the 800 sees Rome reckoned, 33 primates and 238 Bishops came to it, two-thirds of them from Italian States. It issued, as the authorized summary of what Rome adds to the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Pius IV., in the very year that our Thirty-nine Articles were set forth, and its outcome was the scission of the Mediæval Church into Tridentine and Reformed.

The Vatican Council met in Rome in 1870 under Pius IX., and included 589 Bishops from Latin countries and 14 from Germany. From this twentieth and last Œcumenical Council (as Rome reckons) the dogma of Papal Infallibility was promulgated, of which the Old Catholic Movement on the Continent is the result.

The Councils of the Anglican Communion may likewise claim a place in the story of the Universal Church. The first was held just three years before the Roman Church held its latest. The actual number of Bishops summoned by the Archbishop of Canterbury to Lambeth in 1867, 1878, 1888, 1897, and 1908 may seem small compared with the numbers mentioned for 451 and 1870. Archbishop Longley brought together 76, Archbishop Tait 100, Archbishop Benson 145, Archbishop Temple 194, and Archbishop Davidson almost

250. But then, no Church has ever had such large dioceses as our Church has. The 330 Bishops invited in 1908 represented not only the British Empire (which contains at least four times as many people as the Roman Empire contained at its largest, of whom quite sixty millions may be reckoned Christians), but also vast missionary Sees in China and Japan, while 330 of the Bishops who came to the Vatican in 1870 represented only Italy, with a population of about twenty-five millions.

The record of the earlier Lambeth Conferences (they were not termed "Councils") reminds one of the earliest Councils. In 381 rival claims to the See of Constantinople had been settled; so in 1867, the prominent question was the action of the Bishop of Cape Town in deposing Bishop Colenso from the See of Natal for heresy; and various questions of doctrine and discipline and episcopal jurisdiction had to be determined in 1878 and 1888. As we have seen, previous Councils had likewise defined doctrine, promulgated Creeds, and fixed the Canon of Scripture; had ordained rubrics and ritual; had regulated public worship and Church discipline; had adjudicated on claims to sees; had dealt with the relation of the Church to the State and of one Church to another; had condemned heresy and endeavoured to crush error by thrusting out heretics, and to compose differences by discussing them. But heresy had not been exterminated, differences had often been accentuated, and deeper division, instead of reconciliation, had come of discussion.

For absorbed with the thought that many of their fellow-Christians held unsound views, Churchmen generally had altogether lost sight of the more clamant fact that the great majority of their fellow-creatures were not in any sense Christians. When the Council of Chalcedon met, Ninian and Patrick were evangelizing Scotland and Ireland; when the Fourth Lateran Council met, Francis of Assisi was preaching Christ to the Moslem in his own camp at Damietta; three years after the Council of Vienne met in 1311, Raimund Lull closed his long and heroic missionary career by a martyr's death in North Africa; the earlier years of the prolonged session at Trent coincided

with the dauntless pioneer labours of Francis Xavier in India and Japan ; a few years before the second Lambeth Conference the illustrious Bishop Patteson was martyred in the South Seas ; three years before the third, Bishop Hannington laid down his life in Central Africa. But not one of these Councils, nor any of the others we have recalled, seems to have made any attempt to bring home to the Church that the purpose for which it was founded was that it might win the world to Christ.

It is true that the Archbishop's invitation to the Conference of 1867 was "to consider together many practical questions, the settlement of which would tend to the advancement of the Kingdom of our Lord and Master," but the extension of that Kingdom found no place in Pan-Anglican discussions until we come to what may well be termed the epoch-making Resolution of the Lambeth Conference of 1897—a Resolution inspired by Archbishop Temple and the present Bishop of St. Albans. Here it is, and, so far as we know, it has no parallel in the records of any previous Council of the Church of Christ: "We recommend that prompt and continuous efforts be made to arouse the Church to recognize as a necessary and constant element in the spiritual life of the Body, and of each member of it, the fulfilment of Our Lord's great Commission to evangelize all nations." Thirteen similar Resolutions followed, and one-quarter of the whole Report of the Conference is occupied with missionary topics. Moreover, the Encyclical Letter spoke of Foreign Missions as "the work that at the present time stands in the first rank of all the tasks we have to fulfil." We all remember that the note struck thus loudly and clearly in 1897 sounded yet more loudly and clearly in 1908.

And while the responsible leaders of the oldest Church and strongest force in Reformed Christendom have urged this duty, so obvious yet so long neglected, upon her whole world-wide Communion, it has been set forth in another series of Conferences, initiated at New York in 1854, continued at Liverpool and Mildmay in 1860 and 1878, attaining conspicuous size and widely representative character in London in 1888, and in New

York in 1900, and culminating in the memorable World Missionary Conference of 1910. Nearly 1,300 official delegates met at Edinburgh, over 500 from Great Britain, over 500 from the United States; over 170 from nine European countries, nearly 30 from South Africa, nearly 40 from Canada, and 20 from Asia, first-fruits of the Indian and Chinese and Japanese and Korean Churches that are to be. It was not summoned by a prince or a primate, though King George V. wrote a gracious message of Godspeed and goodwill, and both the English Archbishops took part in its proceedings, together with many other Bishops. No Church, as such, sent official delegates, but all the Reformed Churches were represented, and individual Greek and Roman prelates sent greetings. It had no legislative power, but one already sees its effectual influence working in many directions. Censure of other people is always as cheap as it is gratifying to our own self-complacency, but here was a truce to controversy, and a complete absence of contention and recrimination, because we met to carry out the marching orders of the Church. We cannot name any Council avowedly summoned to promote unity which has given so much diligence to keeping the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace as this assembly, called, not to compose differences, but to promote obedience to the plain command of the Master.

We Anglicans should learn from past and present great Christian Conferences not merely that the Greek and Roman communions failed to fulfil their early promises, and fell short as pure and strong and overcoming forces in the world to-day, because their Councils were concerned with defending rather than with extending the Church, but that we, living in an age when the missionary obligation on the Church is obvious as it has never been before, shall be far more blameworthy than our predecessors if we disregard it. With all the experience of this long past to guide and warn, our highly privileged Church can be pure and strong, can justify its claim to God's grace and man's allegiance, only as it strives with all the powers of all its members to overcome the non-Christian world and to win it to Christ.