

Dr. Scott Lidgett's Proposal.

A GREAT deal of attention is very properly being given to the interesting article which Dr. Scott Lidgett has written in the *Contemporary Review*, partly because of its origin, for the writer is one of the foremost men among Free Churchmen, but more particularly because of its intrinsic value. For the benefit of those who have not read the article, it is necessary to call attention to its main argument, before passing on to comment upon it.

Those of us who have been striving for years to bring about a better understanding between the various religious forces in England, will have noted that a preliminary difficulty has frequently been the opinion that divisions and separation were not necessarily mischievous, that if we each ploughed our own fields and planted and tended our own vineyards faithfully the result would be quite satisfactory. A great change has taken place in recent years among Free Churchmen on this point. There has been a steady drawing together of their forces, which has brought into being the National Free Church Council. Dr. Scott Lidgett is one of the many who wish to see the extension of this unifying spirit in the direction of our Church. He expresses in the article under consideration the opinion that the witness of Christianity has been weak and has suffered loss, as well as causing scandal, through the divisions among Christians. He points out that political and social differences have been composed in face of the great national crisis, and pleads that, in view of the tremendous service which Christianity would render to the nation if it could present an undivided front, an advisory council should be called together under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury to pave the way for a better understanding between ourselves and the Evangelical Free Churches.

As we have indicated already, a great many Churchmen have for long held this opinion. We have felt the need of better understanding and of close co-operation and of frequent religious intercourse with those who are not of our communion. To us, the argument that religion has suffered gravely because of our mutual antipathy (for that is really not too strong a word) is so obvious that it needs scarcely to be mentioned, much less to be laboured. The desire for closer fellowship is growing rapidly, and despite the

various obstacles which lie in the path we feel that such suggestions as those made by Dr. Scott Lidgett are most helpful and designed to do great good. There are difficulties in the way, and to these we shall turn in due course. But first of all, it may be well to remind him that proposals akin to his own have been made frequently by the authorities in our Church. The suggestions made by the Lambeth Conference some thirty years ago and repeated since at each of its sessions, that Churchmen and Nonconformists should meet together in friendly discussion of their points of difference, has fallen largely upon deaf ears. In every place where the experiment has been made, it has been found most helpful and productive of better feeling. In some districts, it has resulted in united evidential lectures, which have done a great deal of good. But these places have been few, such conferences sadly unusual. The blame for this must be equally divided. The Bishops are most sympathetic towards this movement, one of them recently inquiring at his Visitation to what extent the suggestion of the Lambeth Conference had been followed out, and with what results. This particular Bishop's attitude is by no means an isolated case of genuine interest in the possibility of *rapprochement* between Church and Dissent.

To say that Dr. Scott Lidgett's suggestion is welcome to Evangelical Churchmen is to express very mildly and inadequately our feelings. We have worked and prayed for this better understanding because we have not only fully realized the loss which the Christian Church suffers in energy through misunderstanding and overlapping, but also because we recognize, despite the questions which separate us and which we do not in the least underestimate, that the orthodox non-episcopalians generally speaking are aiming to achieve the same purpose as ourselves.

Evangelical Churchmen have indeed not waited for a lead from elsewhere; for years past they have been working along the lines of reconciliation. The mention of the Keswick Convention, the Evangelical Week of Prayer, the Edinburgh Conference, and Kikuyu movements which either originated among Evangelicals or else were immediately backed by them, completely justifies this statement.

But unhappily Evangelicals are frequently inarticulate, or are, even more commonly, disregarded as not quite representative of

the Church of England. Their efforts along the line of Dr. Scott Lidgett's proposal have either been overlooked or else pooh-poohed, not only in the Church of England but also in Nonconformist circles. Whether it is an instinct, inherited from their ancestors of 250 years ago, or due to some other cause, the fact remains that High Anglicanism is usually regarded by Free Churchmen to-day as the genuine representation of the Church of England. Perhaps, however, it is attributable to the fact that the clamorous party wins the most attention.

This disregard of Evangelical endeavour is illustrated in the article under consideration. Dr. Scott Lidgett refers hopefully to certain cautious and guarded words uttered by the Bishops of Winchester and Oxford (which really amount to very little indeed), rather vague conclusions by the Conference of Faith and Order (which mean little if anything more), but makes no allusion to the most significant incident in this direction which has occurred during the last hundred years or more, the Kikuyu Conference.

Dr. Scott Lidgett, and those who think with him, are not helping the cause of reunion as much as they might do, while they delude themselves by exaggerating the empty ambiguities of High Anglicans and disregard the overtures of Evangelicals. We are the natural allies of the Evangelical Free Churches, and the Methodist Churches, in particular, should never forget what we are glad and proud to remember, that they and we have sprung from a common stock.

Coming now to a more definite examination of Dr. Scott Lidgett's suggestion, two questions emerge: Is the calling of a Council such as he suggests at all likely? If called, is it probable that it would produce any practical results?

To the former question we reply, that in the present and prevalent religious frame of mind if representative men among Free Churchmen were to approach the authorities in our Church, we cannot doubt that such a request would be answered in the most sympathetic way. The Council would most probably be called. The crisis which has made strong party men in political life subordinate their differences from one another to their points of agreement has had a similar effect in religion. Churchmen and Nonconformists have begun to see things in a different perspective, and the time is ripe for a Council which will consider how to bring about a genuine

and more dignified *modus vivendi* between the various Christian Churches in the land.

But when we pass on to ask whether such an advisory body would be able to achieve much, we are on more difficult ground. The kind of conference which we love but little is that which results in a series of high-sounding but really meaningless ambiguities, which are useless in practice. Of pious exhortations to work together in social work, padded with hackneyed and somewhat fulsome phrases of appreciation of the excellent work done by those who differ from us, we have had more than enough. These polite platitudes leave us quite cold.

If something really helpful and practical is aimed at then certain facts must be clearly borne in mind from the start. Dr. Scott Lidgett quite recognizes that the extreme men on either side will be a source of difficulty. This is beyond all doubt, but there need be no fear that opposition from such quarters will wreck the scheme provided the main body of sane opinion on both sides is determined that such a disaster shall not occur. The essential preliminary to the success of such a Conference is to gauge the mind of "the vast body of the men of good-will, who constitute the majority in every Church." If they are in earnest something will result, if not nothing can come of it.

Now it must be frankly recognized that there are certain obstacles to a good understanding which lie at the back of the minds of this "vast body of men of good-will" on both sides. There is no sense in blinding our eyes to these things. Frank statement of these questions is the first step to their removal.

First of all, the Free Churchman is made suspicious of the Church because of the general attitude of superiority and patronage assumed towards him. He resents the terms in which he, and his institutions, are spoken of. He dislikes his places of worship being called "chapels," and he is deeply offended when his communions are described as "religious bodies," or "sects." He has selected as his title the term "Free Churchman," and the refusal to call him what he calls himself is a constant irritant.

The wisdom of the selection of a new name may be questioned. "Nonconformist" is a grand old word: it has gathered around it fine and noble traditions of sacrifice for the sake of principle and conscience, and in the ears of people who have read history, it is a

word which has no little romance attaching to it. Many people would shrink from discarding a name with such historical associations; we may be unable to appreciate why the name by which Bunyan, Baxter, Calamy, Howe, the Pilgrim Fathers, and all the saints honoured among English Non-episcopalians, were known, should be cast into oblivion, but that is their business, not ours. "Free Churchmen" they call themselves; then so let us call them.

There is some gain in the new title. It emphasizes that those who bear it are members of the Church of Christ, and if we use it in sincerity it means that we so recognize them, and acknowledge their status and Baptism. This sincere appreciation of their position and standing as Christians and members of the Church Catholic is a fundamental necessity before any hope of the establishment of a really good understanding is possible. These are but illustrations of the things which make Free Churchmen suspicious of our Church. There is nothing very tangible of which they complain, but a general attitude which suggests that they are regarded as only quasi-Christians of doubtful credentials.

English Churchmen, on the other hand, find very concrete reasons for doubting the sincerity of all offers of friendship from Free Churchmen. We cannot enter into the large questions of Education and Disestablishment in detail. The former is not acute at the moment, and in any case it is overshadowed by the latter.

Churchmen are able to understand the desire for "religious equality," whatever that may mean. The claim for a fair field and no favour always meets with sympathy in the English heart. In demanding the removal of all "the unfair privileges of the Church" Free Churchmen are taking a legitimate line, and one which should not arouse any feelings of bitterness. We are of the opinion that these privileges are largely imaginary, or else rest upon a prestige which cannot be destroyed by any Act of Parliament; we are in pretty general agreement that Disestablishment would be a grave blow at national religion, and equally confident that the expectation that it would produce religious equality is quite illusory. But the point we wish now to make clear is, that if Free Church demands stopped short at Disestablishment, however much we should differ from them, and fiercely though we should fight them on the point, we should not lose our respect for them, nor regard them as really hostile to us. We should fight, but if we

lost the fight we should not lose our respect for an honourable foe.

But so long as Disestablishment carries with it Disendowment, the matter is quite different. The ordinary rank and file Churchman cannot see how those who call themselves friends can wish to see us weakened or impoverished. The argument that we hold endowments to which we are not entitled does not impress us when coming from a so-called friendly quarter. We are convinced that we have a good title to these moneys: we are using them to the best of our power in the cause of national religion; we, in common with the whole Church, need desperately more money than we have. And when those who call themselves friends originate and foment the demand that we shall be forced to surrender what we honestly believe is our own, and that our money shall be diverted from religious work to the formation of public libraries and swimming-baths, it is not surprising that we lightly esteem a friendship which shows itself in such a curious way.

If Free Churchmen would only abandon finally the Disendowment policy, they would prove their sincerity in the most convincing way. As things are, every attempt made by broad-minded Churchmen to bring about good feeling among their fellow-worshippers towards Free Churchmen is met by a caustic reference to the brotherly love which has clamoured for Welsh Disendowment, and fiercely opposed all concessions to that persecuted Church.

We would not like Dr. Scott Lidgett to misunderstand us for a moment. His suggestion is assured of the hearty support of all Evangelical Churchmen; we thank God for his large spirit and helpful suggestion. But the success or failure of such project rests, as he acknowledges in his article, with the vast body of worshippers on both sides, and we think it is only fair and honest that we should describe what the vast proportion of English Churchmen think and say concerning Free Church policy regarding their Church.

The present writer may be allowed to say that he is one who has worked in the cause of reunion for some years and still will continue to do so. He has arranged conferences for friendly discussion between the contending parties, and done all that can be done at this stage. And he is bound to confess that these efforts are always hampered among Churchmen by the feeling that Free Churchmen "speak friendly to their neighbours but imagine mischief in their hearts."

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