

[*Cheltenham Conference Paper.*]

FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCHES :

(a) PROBLEMS OF THE HOME CHURCH.

II

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DIFFICULTIES constitute either a challenge or a warning. The human problem is to discover their purpose. If God has opened a door, then difficulties obstructing our immediate entrance are a challenge to faith and effort, to loyalty, imagination and courage. If God has closed a door, then no man shall open it. To us it seems there are two doors. The one behind us, the other before. The one opening out the prospect of wider horizons and more spacious fellowship: the other receding into the narrow channels of the old exclusiveness. We speak humbly and for ourselves when we say that there can be no turning back; we stand by the findings of the former Cheltenham Conferences. The door *behind* us is closed. So it remains, that the difficulties which confront us are a challenge to faith and courage. For God, we believe, has opened *that* door. If not at Jordan it is at all events at the Red Sea, and this door of hope must finally bring us to the Promised Land. If God has led us, as we believe He has, to face these difficulties with which the pathway to greater fellowship is strewn, in His own way and in His own good time He will discover to us their solution if we are faithful in the quest. We may not know how or when the solution may come, but we do know that it will never come unless we prepare for it by study and instruction and concentration. We must prepare the way of the Lord: we must strive to enter in. The question for us is, as has been said in another connexion, "Have we let the Spirit lead us into hard problems? Have we let Him urge us into tasks for which we ourselves have not the capacity, except as we rely upon Divine wisdom and power?" The spirit of fellowship is, finally, the fellowship of the Spirit. God is pointing the Churches to fellowship by the logic of facts. There is the realized fact of the unity of the world. "The world is one and the world is small"; the manifest need of a common front in the face of united foes, the felt weakness of divided armies, and the imperilled position of religious education in the day schools. On the other hand, there is the renewed emphasis of to-day on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the consequent renewed desire in many hearts for fuller fellowship, which is not a matter of accommodation but revelation. God has given the vision; we must not let it fade. But even in this light our difficulties, which have the promise of dissolution in them, remain anxious and perplexing.

If I refer in my brief allotted time to those aspects which seem to constitute but minor difficulties, it is because they are, neverthe-

less, very real difficulties, and also such as we can contribute something towards their solution.

1. *The wide Divergence of View within our own Church.*—Such divergence swings from the stiff and impossible position of Absorption, which says, The door of fellowship is ever open—but it is plain that the return may only be made on the rigid terms of those who still regard every Nonconformist as a Schmitist, to that of the free lance who over-leaps all difficulties in his laudable ambition to reach the goal, but still leaves those difficulties unsolved. A stable condition of fellowship with others can only rest upon a sound fellowship amongst ourselves. We must welcome, therefore, all that makes for greater unity within our own Church, as an aid to the greater fellowship. There is place and space for propaganda work at home. Much, it is true, has been done, but much still remains to be done. The fruits of corporate thinking are very evident in this movement. A well-organized effort of conference has drawn in and carried forward a considerable body of clergy to a mutual understanding, whilst the educational work of this and similar conferences has been of proved value. But the circle of instructed opinion is still too small. To use a phrase, We have got the expeditionary force, but we need the whole army—or as much of it as we can enroll. This constitutes a difficulty we must seek to remove. Our laity are still largely untouched. One way of approach has been opened through the parochial councils which will be sadly misused if they are stultified by finance or merely kept in reserve as business advisers, when they might become receivers and transmitters of matters relating to live issues of modern Church life. Let us make the attempt to carry our councils with us in the matter of fellowship, for the laity will have much to say in moulding the future of the Church. We can thus advance our pioneer work. It has been remarked that all that can be said has been said on this subject. This is not true. We have faith to believe that the Lambeth Conference will say something more and something new, and even if it were true, my point is what has been said has not been said to all.

2. *The Difficulties on the other Side.*—It is a truism to remark that all the difficulties are not on our side. We need to cultivate an intellectual and spiritual sympathy with those who are not of our communion, and to appreciate their difficulties. If there is some room for disappointment that their response has not seemed to us at all times to be as whole-hearted as we could have wished, it is for us to remember that the problem presents difficulties to them as it does to us, though their difficulties are of a somewhat different order. I hope I may say without offence that the more one seeks to enter into sympathetic comprehension of the difficulties on the other side, so far as they spring out of past history and present outlook, the more one realizes that it is the responsibility of the Anglican Church to play a very active and persuasive part in preparing the way for a better understanding.

3. *The Laity are not Abreast of the Clergy.*—I suppose it is true

beyond question that, whilst the man in the street, if I may be allowed the expression, waving aside all difficulties, demands somewhat peremptorily that we shall close up our ranks, the lay-members of the various bodies are far behind their clerical leaders in their desire for closer fellowship. The difficulties here are not, perhaps, mainly theological or ecclesiastical. Are they not rather, to state the case as smoothly as possible, inherited and traditional? If this is an approximately correct diagnosis, we are encouraged by the thought that such a spirit represents the past and not the present. The new democratic feeling is inimical to aloofness. I believe one honest fear that lurks in the minds of many good laymen is that, if walls of separation were broken down, the result would be not gain but loss. It may be that their emphasis in Church matters is somewhat misplaced. We clergy must apply the corrective.

4. *Complacent Contentment.*—But is not our chief difficulty embodied in the complacent contentment with things as they are? We need a divine discontent. A keen realization that the desire, the passion for fellowship, is not the outcome of amiable feelings, nor generous good-will, nor noble emotions alone, but the conviction of the faith that it is the will of the Invisible Head whose body in its component parts cannot receive the fulness of His Grace except they be compacted and fitly joined together. As the Bishop-designate of Pretoria says in his recent book, “Everywhere the question must be faced, Do the separated Churches need one another for the knowledge of their God and for the fighting of His battles?” That question is a keen challenge to thought, and a sad implication with respect to the Church’s experience. But it has the further merit of reminding us that we must keep to first principles. If we can secure the recognition that unity is the will of the Head for the well-being of His Body, then there is no room for complacent contentment with things as they are.

In Conclusion.—This conference has a history. For us the resolutions of the past stand good. The door of retreat is shut. Neither can we stand still. We trust that the findings of the present conference will carry us further. By every means in our power let us reduce any remaining barriers of pride and prejudice: by every means which imagination can suggest let us spread the conviction of the profound basis upon which we believe fellowship rests, and stand as men ready for immediate and courageous action, praying that God will show us quite clearly what He would have us to do.

