

I found it encouraging to think that so long ago—sixty years before the birth of Paul Tillich, and one hundred and thirty-seven years before *Honest to God*—a British North American child had pondered on such a clear affirmation of God as the omnipresent Ground and Sustainer of her being. It seems likely that many other simple expressions of the good sense of long-departed Christians are waiting to be noticed.

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SAMUEL DWIGHT CHOWN AND THE METHODIST CONTRIBUTION TO CANADIAN CHURCH UNION

CURRENT INTEREST in church union has caused many to re-examine the past in the hope of finding guidance there for the future. Unfortunately, many treasures of the past are neglected because they have no spokesmen in the present. This is the case with the Methodist contribution to the 1925 union of the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches in Canada, which was a milestone in church union activity. In these notes, I want to present a brief résumé of that contribution, which is often sadly neglected or forgotten, even in Canada. One man, Samuel Dwight Chown, figured largely in the Methodist movement towards church union and was the leading personage in the final phase of the drama. I propose, then, to consider the life and work of S. D. Chown, his activities in the fields of social reform and evangelism within the context of Methodism, and his labours for interdenominational church union.

Samuel Dwight Chown was born in Kingston, Canada West, in 1853, and was educated at the Kingston Grammar School. On the death of his father in 1867 he left school and, after a short time, joined the army, in which he served during the Fenian raids. After leaving the army he worked for a time in the family hardware business, but was dissatisfied. Even before the death of his father he had become interested in the Methodist Church, through the influence of Edward B. Ryckman and Salem G. Bland. He now became convinced that he was called to the ministry, and in 1874 he was accepted on probation in the Wesleyan Methodist Church. (At that time Methodism in Canada was divided into seven branches, which reflected the national origin of their members and/or their preferences in church polity.)

During the first two years of his probation, Chown was appointed successively to the charges of Melbourne, Quebec, and North Gower, Ontario. In 1874 union was achieved between the Wesleyan Methodist Church in

Canada, the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Eastern British America, and the Methodist New Connexion, the new church taking the name of the Methodist Church of Canada. One result of this union was a new vigour in the Methodist colleges, and it was at the height of this outburst of vitality that Chown was sent by the Montreal Conference to Victoria College, Toronto, in 1876-77. At Victoria College, he came under the influence of Nathanael Burwash, who was to become extremely influential in the intellectual life of Canadian Methodism.

Chown spent the final year of his probation (1878) in Lancaster, Ontario. In 1879 he was ordained and received into "full connexion." One of his major interests in this period was Christian missions.

Chown's pastoral career from 1879 to 1902 can be divided into two periods. The first period, 1879-93, was devoted to service in relatively small centres and to work for social reform. The second period, 1893-1902, was marked by service in urban charges and by a strong emphasis on the administrative aspect of church life.

In 1879 Chown was reappointed to Lancaster; soon afterwards he married. In 1880 he moved to Maitland, Ontario, and in 1883, thanks to the revived interest in the mission of the Church which stemmed from the Ecumenical Methodist Conference of 1881, the remaining divisions in Canadian Methodism were overcome. Chown's first appointment after the union was to Kemptville, Ontario, where he remained from 1883 to 1885. He then served successively at Sydenham and Spencerville, Ontario. In 1890 he moved to Almonte, Ontario, where the first phase of his work for social reform ended.

From its beginnings, Canadian Methodism was marked by interest in social problems. For example, it concerned itself actively with the Church-State question and with public education. Unofficially, Methodists were also involved in the temperance movement, in youth work, and in associations designed to resist the spread of Roman Catholicism. In these activities Methodists often co-operated with other Christian denominations, and even with secular organizations. From 1870 onwards the temperance interest became prominent, until it finally became a part of the official Methodist program. At first, Chown's work in this field was limited to his own circuits, but in 1885 he became active in the temperance movement at the Conference level, where he quickly achieved a position of leadership. In effect, by 1891 he had not only won a reputation for outstanding service to the cause of social reform, as it was then understood in Canadian Methodism, but had also gained insights into both the strengths and the limitations of co-operative church activities.

In 1893 Chown turned to urban work. After a brief period in Montreal he moved to Toronto, where he served in Carlton Street Church and other important charges. This phase of his career was marked by a wide range of activities in the field of church administration, which introduced him to the broader problems of evangelism. Within a decade he served in all the

important offices of his District and Annual Conferences; he also represented his Annual Conference at the General Conferences of 1898 and 1902. This achievement is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that during this period Chown moved through four District Conferences and two Annual Conferences. By the end of the decade he was both well versed in the mechanics of Methodist administration and well known in the Methodist community.

I turn now to consider Chown's deepening involvement in the movement towards church union in Canada. During its first century in this country Methodism experienced a number of unions and reunions, as the members of its various branches sought to meet the demands of evangelism and (to a lesser degree) of social reform in the Canadian situation. However, even the complete union of Methodism inevitably left many problems of evangelism unsolved, and Methodists responded eagerly to the invitation to union discussions, issued by the Anglicans to the Presbyterians and Methodists in 1889. While Anglican insistence on the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral made any union which could include Anglicans impossible in the near future, the conversations stimulated the Methodists to undertake a serious quest for satisfactory principles of union and to seek a solution for the problem of evangelism on an interdenominational basis. The principle of earlier Methodist unions had been a common commitment to the Church's work of evangelism and social reform. The experience of 1889 led the Methodists to add the principle that all "essential truth," both biblical and experiential, must be preserved. They spent the next decade searching for a satisfactory method of applying these principles. Organic union, involving a broad grouping of denominations, was attempted, but the idea failed to gain support. The Methodists then turned to a plan of co-operation, involving a narrower range of denominations. While this effort met with only limited success, it was evident that the ideal of organic union was still unattainable. New attempts to achieve it were, however, soon to be made, and in these attempts Chown was to be deeply involved during the next phase of his ministry.

In 1902 the Methodists felt it necessary to create a more efficient organization to confront the problems of social reform. A department was established at the General Conference level, in order to integrate Methodist activities in the area of social reform, to develop new techniques and programs and put them into effect, and to act as an agency for co-operation between the Methodist Church and other organizations with similar concerns. Chown was elected as the first General Secretary of the Department of Temperance, Prohibition and Moral Reforms, and during his term of office, which lasted until 1910, it made remarkable advances. While at first Chown was influenced by the ideas of Alexander Sutherland on social reform, during the later years of his term his work reflected his own creative thoughts on the subject.

Throughout this period of involvement in the task of social reform Chown was also active in the search for a solution to the problems of evangelism. The Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational churches had appointed committees to explore the possibility of organic church union. In five sessions, held between 1904 and 1908, the Joint Committee on Church Union prepared a "Basis of Union," which, in the judgment of its members, preserved "essential truth" while preparing the way for a united church specifically designed to undertake the evangelization and social reformation of Canada. The detailed work of the Joint Committee was carried on by sub-committees on Doctrine, Polity, Ministry, Administration, and Law. Chown's special contribution was made in the sub-committee on Administration, where he was one of three members, representing the three denominations, who prepared the report. The "Basis of Union," embodying the final consensus reached in the Joint Committee, was approved by the Methodist General Conference in 1910.

As we have just seen, in eight years Chown had made significant contributions to the solution of the two most pressing problems of Methodism: first, the development of a new instrument and program of social reform; and second, the formulation of a new pattern of church life, adapted to the requirements of the evangelistic task. Further responsibilities, however, were soon to be entrusted to him. In 1910 he was elected to the office of Associate General Superintendent of the Methodist Church. This election was unusual, since it meant that, for the first time since 1889, two general superintendents were in office simultaneously. While many other factors may have been considered, the main reason for this arrangement was clearly the desire of the Methodists to provide a counterweight to the arbitrary and extremely conservative General Superintendent, Albert Carman, who had held office since the General Conference of 1883.

In his new post, Chown was faced with three tasks: first, to determine the relationship of Canadian Methodists with the Ecumenical Methodist Conference in the light of the impending union with non-Methodist churches; second, to gain and maintain Methodist support for the projected union; and third, to prevent any developments that might jeopardize the plans for union. As early as 1911 Chown presented the case for the union movement to the Ecumenical Methodist Conference so effectively that little more had to be done when the Conference met in 1921, and after 1925 the new United Church of Canada maintained membership in world Methodism without difficulty. As for Canadian Methodism, by 1912 polls had been taken at all levels, and the effective presentation of the case for union by the Church Union Committee, of which Chown was a member, had been reflected in strong support for church union. Division in the Presbyterian ranks, however, prevented the early consummation of union, and during the succeeding years Chown was repeatedly called upon to rekindle Methodist enthusiasm for the cause of union. His task was a delicate one, since he

had to promote the union movement without in any way crippling the existing Methodist programs of evangelism and social service. His chief contribution was, in fact, a program of public relations, designed to show that Methodism was theologically sound, active in furthering the mission of the Church, and socially responsible. (With the last point in mind, Chown did extensive work in support of the Canadian war effort during the years 1914–18. It should be added, however, that he subsequently became an ardent pacifist.) The success of Chown's work in this period was eventually attested by the church union of 1925. That the value of his services to the cause of union was widely recognized is apparent from the conferring of four honorary doctorates on him and the naming of a mountain in his honour.

Chown's crowning contribution, however, was still to be made. At the time of union, before a ballot was taken in the election of a Moderator for the new United Church of Canada, he addressed the General Council, asking for the unanimous election of George C. Pidgeon, the distinguished Presbyterian leader, as a sign of unity of spirit in the new venture. As everyone knows, this action was in fact taken.

During the remaining eight years of his life, Chown served on those committees and in those capacities where the General Council of the United Church believed he could best make a contribution to the development of the new church. In 1930 he published a book, *The Story of Church Union in Canada*,¹ in which he recorded many of the events leading to church union, with a view both to explaining the union of 1925 to outsiders and to gaining the sympathy of those who had held aloof from the union plan.

As a Methodist leader, Chown believed that essential Christian truth involved both biblical and experiential factors, and that religion, as the involvement of human lives with essential truth, should be reflected both in reformed individual lives and in a Christian social order. He was convinced that Methodism must develop a new approach to the problems of social reform, and he played a prominent part in the early stages of the development of such an approach. He was further persuaded that Methodism and other Christian denominations must together find a new, long-term approach to the problems both of evangelism and of social reform. To his mind, the obvious solution was church union. His work in framing the "Basis of Union" and in facing the problems that threatened both Methodism itself and the union plan in the years before the consummation of church union was, therefore, in evident continuity with the concern for social reform and evangelism that had marked his ministry from the beginning.

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1. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1930.