

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

In that excellent series 'Translations of Christian Literature' there now appears *Saint Bernard: The Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride*, by Mr. B. R. V. Mills, M.A. (S.P.C.K.; 6s. net). The

'Introduction' by Mr. Mills and his excursus on Cistercian monastic life are very illuminating; and St. Bernard's little work here adequately made available for the ordinary reader repays study.

The Great Church Union in Scotland.

BY PROFESSOR H. R. MACKINTOSH, D.PHIL., D.D., EDINBURGH.

ON the second day of October 1929 there will take place, *Deo volente*, what it is not unfitting to call the greatest event in the ecclesiastical history of Scotland since the Reformation. There will then be consummated an incorporating Union of the two Presbyterian Churches of national dimensions. They are the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland. Neither, in becoming one with the other, will part with its identity, and the designation of the reunited whole will be 'The Church of Scotland.'

For centuries, Scotland has been a land of Church divisions and reunions. The Secession Church and the Relief Church, both dating from the eighteenth century, came together in 1847, to form the United Presbyterian Church; in 1867 the Reformed Presbyterian Church merged in the Free Church of Scotland; in 1900 the United Presbyterian Church combined with the Free Church to form the United Free Church, one of the two Churches covering the whole country, which are now to become one. These are only the largest of the unions in the past. And it is to be noted that even when breaking off originally from the Establishment, for reasons of conscience, none of the separating Churches would for a moment have owned that it was forfeiting its share in 'The Church of Scotland.' A difference of conviction had emerged, only for a time, as was hoped, with regard to the right relations of Church and State; but there was no divergence of doctrine. The question how State and Church are to be adjusted to each other has been the one great controversy which led to Scottish ecclesiastical divisions, and it is because this question has for all immediate purposes been solved—so far as any vast human problem admits of solution—that the great Union of to-day is possible.

Union has always been the declared policy of both Churches. To the Church of Scotland, formerly, union was conceivable only on the basis

of Establishment, in the main as then existing; to a large majority of the United Free Church, as of the Churches from which it sprang, union appeared something that could be achieved solely by Dis-establishment, such as had occurred in Ireland. But in the present century various motives began to alter the temper on both sides. The purely religious desire for Christian Unity awoke and spread widely. It was felt that the first step for Scottish Christians holding the Presbyterian order was to get *themselves* united. Keen observers of life called attention loudly to the fact that the distribution of religious forces no longer corresponded to the distribution of the people; new districts too often were nearly churchless; and something like a quarter of the whole population of the country was adrift from Christian fellowship. The sense of these evils was sharpened by a new feeling of shame over the Church's waste of its actual resources. Visitors to a country village could find, distressingly often, that three or even four different Presbyterian bodies faced each other across its streets or lanes, no one of them strong enough to provide an inspiring common life or to tackle urgent social tasks. The scandal of what seemed too like rivalry for rivalry's sake became intolerable. In addition to this, to some extent as its consequence, the Churches had to face a shortage of clergy. For some years it has been increasingly difficult for vacant congregations in the outlying parts of Scotland to secure ministers. 'In our combined Presbyteries, numbering twenty-seven charges,' said a representative of an island group the other day, 'thirteen charges are without a pastor.'

In spite of old divisions, it was less difficult than might have been supposed to kindle the beacon of Church Union and gather men around it in eager masses. Let it be remembered that in Scotland the contrast of Church and Dissent has counted for little. Those who loved to 'unchurch' their

neighbours, if only it could be done with a show of religious earnestness, were few. The members of different communions intermarried freely. Even those who lived outside it were aware that the Church of Scotland has often been violently opposed to Erastianism, and on occasion well knew how to keep the State in its proper place. And spectators of the United Free Church could see that it, not less than its neighbour, held the ideal of a Church which should bring the blessings of the Christian gospel to every door in the land. Thus, once the movement towards union had begun, the forces that must increase its speed and weight were powerful.

Nothing more can be attempted here than the briefest historical sketch of the negotiations which have led to the present position, with its incalculable potencies for good. In 1908, after pioneer work by Dr. Mair, and under the influence of Dr. Archibald Scott, of St. George's, Edinburgh, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland proposed to the United Free Church that the two communions should join hands in religious co-operation throughout the country, and was answered that not co-operation but union was the best thing to consider. Thereupon the Church of Scotland, taking its courage in its hands, with a public spirit which cannot be overpraised, definitely accepted this proposal for 'unrestricted conference'—that is to say, such conference about the impediments to union as should not presuppose that the rights and wrongs of 'establishment' were a forbidden topic. This proposal was accepted, and in 1909 negotiations began. The 'will to unite' was at last present.

For some years progress was slow and doubtful. Both sides stood more or less on the defensive; each was anxious to state its own case, to expose weak points in the other's armour, to give nothing away. There was a good deal of able but rather barren dialectic, which perhaps did no great harm but led nowhere. Members of the 'Two Hundreds,' as the conferring committees were popularly styled, could tell of days when the utmost pessimism prevailed and men began to ask, half in despair, whether it was worth while to go on. As Dr. Alexander Whyte one morning set out for a critical meeting between the representatives of both Churches, he said to his companion sorrowfully: 'This is the end.' They seemed to be up against a blank wall, in which even the optimism of faith could perceive no door.

Then came an abrupt change. In 1912 appeared a Memorandum, the authorship of which has been

widely ascribed to Lord Sands,¹ now an eminent Judge of the Court of Session, and which the best minds at once felt must clear the air and open up new possibilities of action. It suggested a fresh method of approach. Hitherto the United Free Church had felt it to be a fatal difficulty that the constitution of the Church of Scotland was prescribed for and conferred upon it by the State; and with a Church so constituted, it declared, it could not unite. The Church of Scotland with perfect sincerity refused to acknowledge that its constitution could be thus described, holding that its relation to the civil power was of quite another kind. Now came the epoch-making Memorandum. There the proposal was made that instead of endlessly debating so controversial a point, on which agreement never could be reached, the Church of Scotland should adopt another course. Let it first of all set down the constitution which it believed itself to possess by inherent right, identifying itself as in creed a branch of the Holy Catholic Church, stating its adhesion to the fundamental principle of national religion and not less its full spiritual independence as a Church of Christ; and, with this self-expressed constitution in its hand, let it next approach the State through Parliament, and request that this constitution should be not conferred but *acknowledged*. What both sides held the State cannot give, since it has no authority in spiritual matters, the State none the less may recognize as existing. It may take cognizance of that which it cannot bestow.

It was resolved to pursue this path. The Church of Scotland was, of course, entirely willing that the State should admit publicly its possession of intrinsic powers it had been accustomed to claim for itself, and the United Free Church was quick to mark the difference between a State-imparted and a State-acknowledged constitution. Things do not change in character by their character being confessed; and if a Church is convinced of its own freedom, it is not the less free because the State admits the fact. Manifestly the new road was full of promise. Accordingly, with care and gravity, the Church of Scotland set itself to the task of thinking out afresh, and formulating in unambiguous terms, the constitution by which it meant to live. In the main the task was not difficult, but it demanded the utmost care, and it took time. The work had not proceeded far when in 1914 the tragedy of war overwhelmed the world.

¹ It certainly owes most to his courageous wisdom.

The influence of the Great War upon negotiation between the Churches was almost paradoxical in character. On the one hand, in the tumult and perplexity of the time, the business of Union had perforce to be almost completely suspended. More urgent affairs absorbed the mind. On the other hand, the anxieties and labours of war-time drew men and Churches more closely together than had been the case within human memory. Thus, while conference for the moment ceased, the ministers and members of the two communions entered into a more warm and intimate fellowship, sharing each other's sorrows, tasting of the same consolations, helping each other out in similar fields of duty. In scores of parishes, during the absence of one minister in France or Gallipoli, his colleague of the other Church took over the whole work, and the congregations worshipped together for months at a time. It was not merely that they prayed under the same roof; they came to know each other; and ignorance of what the other side is thinking and feeling has been one great reason why divisions in the Christian Church have persisted. We misinterpret what is seldom or never before our eyes.

At last the War ended, and in an atmosphere hallowed by the universal memory of sacrifice and valour the Union conferences were resumed. All along the Church of Scotland had been at work on the domestic task of framing its constitution, and in 1919 the final draft of the Articles¹ in which that constitution is set forth was made public. Nine in number, the Articles affirmed the essential adherence of the Church of Scotland to Trinitarian and Evangelical Protestantism, and in unequivocal words asserted its right to do such vital things as formulate its own subordinate standards of doctrine, constitute its own courts, and add to the Articles themselves. The document is an impressive one, and has frequently been described as affording a better statement of the spiritual principles for which the United Free Church stood than that Church itself had ever succeeded in giving.

Thus equipped, the Church of Scotland next addressed itself to Parliament. Suffice it to state that as a result there was passed in 1921 an Act the importance of which cannot possibly be rated too high. This measure did not enact the Articles—but it removed the legal obstacles to that Church adopting those Articles as its constitution. It did more. Not only was the constitution of the Church of Scotland thus made explicit, but there was on

¹ The first draft appeared in 1914.

the part of the State a new recognition of the Church's right to exercise powers which previously it could not have exercised without the consent of Parliament. The Act of 1921 was, indeed, a great event in the history of jurisprudence. For the first time the State now acknowledged the Church in its full and proper character as a Church, that is to say, as a spiritual reality possessed of inherent powers of self-government and self-development. Not the least satisfactory feature of the Act was its express declaration that nothing in its provisions was to prejudice the position of other Churches. It was a worthy issue of centuries of argument, sacrifice, and faith. Now, at last, was abolished what had been the chief source of all the cleavages in the ancient Church of Scotland—the unwarrantable interference of the State in the Church's spiritual affairs. It was now possible to see the Church in 'the right relations to the State'; in relations, to express it otherwise, of recognized freedom and autonomy which could also be entered into and enjoyed by other Churches at their will.

There still remained a second obstacle to union. The United Free Church had from the first explained that union was possible for it only on the condition that the one Church was in as full and untrammelled possession of its property as the other. This brought up the question of the *teinds* (roughly equivalent to the English *tithes*). For long a keen debate had been in progress on the question whether the teinds were public property or represented the gifts of pious donors long ago, so as to form in strictness 'the patrimony of the Church.' The debate had led to no clear result, and few sensible men believed it would ever lead to any. In that case, why should not the matter be laid before Parliament for a decision which should be final? The Church of Scotland resolved upon this step. Accordingly, at its instance a Parliamentary Committee was set up, presided over by Lord Haldane, and charged with the duty of reporting upon the civil endowments of the Church. The outcome was an Act, passed in 1925, which brought the present system to an end, and vested the Church of Scotland in these ancient endowments as its own legally unchallengeable property, to be used ever after for the religious good of Scotland. The endowments, unfortunately, were not converted into or commuted for a capital sum, as had been done more or less in Ireland and Wales, as Lord Haldane's Committee had recommended, and as the Church of Scotland itself had strongly desired. For financial reasons this was found to be imprac-

licable. But the land-charge which still remains is wholly different from the teinds. It can be redeemed at any time; it can be bought and sold like a feu-duty; and, in addition and most important, it is subject to the central free control of the Church and only in part tied up with a particular parish, and even there not with any single congregation.¹

These Acts having been placed on the statute-book, thus removing the main causes which had kept the Churches apart, the two Churches were free to take up the task of negotiating the actual terms of union. This has occupied the last three or four years. The upshot of ceaseless discussion and statesman-like adjustment may be seen mainly in two documents of fundamental importance for the new united Church. These are the 'Basis of Union' and the 'Plan of Union.' Broadly, but not inaccurately, it may be said that the 'Basis' deals with matters of constitution, the 'Plan' with administration. As it lies before us, the 'Basis' contains the vital constitutional documents of both Churches, e.g. the Act of Union (sometimes called 'the Uniting Act'), the Articles of the Church of Scotland as described above, the United Free Church Act anent Spiritual Independence dating from 1906 (this was passed after the famous House of Lord's decision of 1904, and gave fresh and unambiguous expression to the Church's claim to autonomy as well as its right to develop its own constitution), the Declaratory Acts of 1879 and 1892 regarding the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Questions and Formula to be used at the ordination of ministers in the united Church. Provision is also made in the 'Plan of Union' for the establishment of a central fund for the Maintenance of a Gospel Ministry from end to end of Scotland. As might be expected, the 'Basis and Plan' are coloured throughout by the two profound spiritual principles for which the Churches have worked and suffered—the national recognition of religion, or the doctrine that nations as such, and not individuals only, owe obedience to Christ; and the spiritual freedom of the Church, or the doctrine that the civil power has no jurisdiction in her spiritual affairs. In future years, it is certain, these two great convictions, in defence of which not much ink merely but blood has been spilt, will continue to inspire and guide the reunited Church of Scotland.

¹ Over this transaction the Church of Scotland lost about one-sixth of the whole annual revenue from teinds, but in return gained an unfettered control of her entire property.

One problem of no little significance which has had to be tackled within these last years, as a rider to the general settlement, is the relation of the Church's Theological Colleges to the national Universities. Hitherto the Church of Scotland, without setting up separate Divinity Colleges of her own, has utilized the Theological Chairs in the Universities for the training of her students. She did not appoint the professors, though they must be members of her communion, and her power to remove them, for any grave fault of life or doctrine, was questioned. In the United Free Church the professors of theology are appointed, controlled, and salaried by the Church itself. Two such systems, it is obvious, cannot simply be amalgamated, and a revision of methods is indispensable. But wisdom and goodwill have not been lacking, and three general principles which should govern any re-arrangement have been agreed to. 'The *first* is that the existing University Theological Chairs, while they should be freed from the statutory (theological) tests now imposed upon the holders of such Chairs, should be continued in some form of which they would still be serviceable for the instruction of the students of the Church. The *second* is that the relations between the Theological Colleges and the Universities should be as close as possible. The *third* is that the Church must retain effective control over those to whom the doctrinal instruction of its Ministry is to be intrusted.' In harmony with these conditions, it is now proposed that future appointments to the existing University Theological Chairs (possibly with some modification in the subjects assigned them) should be made by an Electoral Board equally representative of the Church or Churches and the University. Further, the professors of the United Free Church Colleges holding office at the date of Union are to become professors in one of the University Faculties of Theology, the Church guaranteeing payment of their salaries; and on the same terms their successors will be appointed by the Church. As teachers of the Church will thus acquire the status of University Professors, so students preparing for the ministry will be matriculated students of the University. This general scheme, though it has gained the substantial assent of Churches and Universities, cannot be put in force until there has been obtained the legislation necessary to abolish tests, the relinquishment by present patrons of their rights of patronage, and the approval by the Universities' Committee of the Privy Council of the conditions of tenure attached to the new Chairs. But the framework of the scheme is fixed. It is a vital element in its value

that it implies no monopoly for the Church of Scotland in the new Theological Faculties of the Universities. Powers, for example, are to be taken to admit of other Churches being represented on the Appointments Board.

As we look back and summarize our impressions of these great changes, we are entitled to say that the Christian communion about to be formed will rightly bear the name of 'the Church of Scotland'—national and free. It will be, in the language of the Articles, 'representative of the Christian Faith of the Scottish people.' With respect to her possession of the intrinsic freedom without which no Christian Church is equal to its idea, no doubt can exist in any unprejudiced mind. The language of the Articles is unambiguous. 'This Church,' we read in Article V., 'has the inherent right, free from interference by civil authority, but under the safeguards for deliberate action and legislation provided by the Church itself, to frame or adopt its subordinate standards, to declare the sense in which it understands its Confession of Faith, to modify the forms of expression therein, or to formulate other doctrinal statements, and to define the relation thereto of its office-bearers and members, but always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession, *of which agreement the Church shall be sole judge*,¹ and with due regard to liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith.' Could anything be more lucid, straightforward, or sufficient? The united Church will be free, as soon as it may judge it wise, to draw up a simpler statement of its Faith, and put it in place of the Westminster Confession. But the new doctrinal statement, as Article I. makes equally clear, must be Trinitarian, Evangelical, and Protestant in character. It must not be, for example, Unitarian or Romanist. And if it be replied that Article I. binds the Church to an outworn doctrine of the Trinity by its use of the term 'substance,' in the phrase concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost which runs, 'the same in substance, equal in power and glory,' the question may well be asked in rejoinder, why the term 'substance' should alone of all ancient theological words, be incapable of re-interpretation. If 'substance' at one time did imply what was less or lower than personal or

¹ Italics mine. The phrase recurs in the Preamble to the Questions for Ordination.

spiritual, it may now be read in a higher sense. It may be read in the light of the conviction, taught us by Christ Himself, that the 'essence' of Godhead is Holy Love.

The hope had been cherished that the United Free Church, like the Church of Scotland, might pass into the Union with unbroken ranks, leaving not a man behind. But this hope, apparently, is not to be fulfilled. As there have been conscientious objectors at other points of history, so now there remains a Minority, of uncertain and dwindling size, the members of which insist on the abandonment of all aid from funds derived 'from public sources,' as well as on freedom to alter Article I. in the Church of Scotland's new constitution. The first of these conditions offends against the sense of justice, for it has not been the habit of this country to deprive people thus peremptorily of property they have held for centuries, nor is it in harmony with the feeling, prevalent in the United Free Church from the outset, that the question of endowments was a domestic affair to be settled, as in fact it has been settled, between the Church of Scotland and Parliament. As regards freedom to change Article I., it has always proved impossible to discover in what sense the Minority desire to be free from the doctrinal particulars actually stated in the Article, interpreted by the free judgment of the Church, not to speak of the fact that the United Free Church is itself bound by precisely the same doctrine. It hardly appears as if the position of the Minority would enable them to address a call, vivid and compelling, to the best religious mind of Scotland.

The Union of the Churches will not of itself, it may be freely granted, bring in the Kingdom of God in Scotland. But the failure of this effort to bring Christians together would have struck a dire blow at the religious prospects of the country. It would have led many to turn from organized Christianity with a natural resentment. Union, we cannot too often remind ourselves, is an act of faith and duty. 'One step enough for me' is a motto which has served well in the past, and still serves. No Church can be free except as it dares to be free, and puts its freedom constantly in operation. At this hour prayer is going up from unnumbered devout hearts that the experience of Union may enkindle our love to Christ, inflame our zeal, and enable us so to discern the will of God, and so faithfully to perform it, that His name may be glorified, and His Church built up in faith and hope.