

# Church Union in South India.

By THE REV. P. J. HEATON, M.A.

WITH the publication of the seventh edition of the Proposed Scheme of Church Union in South India the final stage in a great spiritual enterprise has been reached. The period of negotiation, of drafting, amending, and perfecting has closed and the Scheme in its definitive form is now before the negotiating Churches for a final decision to unite on the basis therein defined.

The South India Provincial Synod of the Methodist Church has already resolved (with the approval of the Methodist Conference in England) that it "unreservedly approves of the Basis of Union contained in the Scheme, and is prepared immediately to unite on this foundation with the other negotiating churches."

Six out of the eight constituent Councils of the United Church of South India (itself a Union of Congregationalists and Presbyterians) have voted in favour of the scheme, which now comes before the General Assembly of that Church for a final vote.

The Episcopal Synod of the Church of India, Burma, and Ceylon has warmly commended the scheme to the diocesan councils for their consideration. If two-thirds of the thirteen diocesan councils give a favourable vote the scheme will then come before the General Council of the Province, which meets at the beginning of 1944. In the General Council simple majorities will be required in each House and a three-quarters majority of the whole Council. The consequence of the Scheme obtaining approval at each of these stages would be the separation from the Church of India, Burma, and Ceylon of the four dioceses in South India, those of Dornakal, Madras, Travancore, and Tinnevely, and their inclusion in the new "Church of South India," as the united body will be called.

The decision is primarily one to be taken by the Anglican Church in India, which since 1929 has been an independent Province of the Anglican Communion. There can be no dictatorship of Lambeth in these matters, but inasmuch as the Church in South India is still largely dependent for leadership and support upon the Church at home, it is important that the attitude of the Home Church be clearly defined.

Let us here remind ourselves first that this Union is the first to be conceived and come to the point of final consummation based upon the main principles of the famous Lambeth Quadrilateral—the Supremacy of Scripture, acknowledgement of the Creeds, acceptance of the two Sacraments of the Gospel, and the Historic Episcopate. Secondly, the Scheme has twice been before the full Lambeth Conference—in 1920 and 1930—and has received its cordial general approval. Thirdly, the Consultative Committee of the Lambeth Conference has thoroughly examined the alterations and additions to the Scheme that have been made since 1930, and has given its considered opinion that these have not affected the Scheme in such a way as to detract from the general approval given in 1930.

The way would thus seem to be clear and the stage set for a definite and unequivocal acceptance of the Scheme in its final definitive form by the Home Church. Yet it is just now that the latent Anglo-Catholic opposition to any union involving the recognition of non-episcopal orders and the inclusion of non-episcopally ordained ministers without a "re-ordination" or "mutual commissioning" (as it is now more euphemistically expressed) is beginning to make itself felt. Voices are to be heard urging that no final step be taken until the Lambeth Conference can meet again. And the appalling state of ignorance in the Home Church about the nature of this proposed union, in itself a sad reflection of the general indifference to missionary work throughout the parishes of our Church, bids fair to play into their hands. The plea of "no changes in wartime" is a potent one to conservative minds in Church as well as in State.

It is not that this agitation could *hold up* the Scheme and prevent it going through if the Anglican Church in India vote in favour of it, but should any considerable proportion of Diocesan Missionary Councils or Diocesan Conferences at Home reject the Scheme, it might influence the decisions yet to be made by the Church of India Burma and Ceylon.

It is important, therefore, that Evangelical Churchmen, to whom the cause of Foreign Missions has always been an intimate concern and who have always looked forward to Reunion with the Evangelical Free Churches, should closely study the Scheme and combine to educate the Home Church about it, so that when in the Providence of God the new Church of South India is formally inaugurated it may enjoy the support and goodwill of the Church of England.

The proposed Union is no sudden hurried move dictated by political pressure, as have been the recent "unions" of Christian bodies in Japan and Japanese occupied territories; but it is the fruit of long and patient labour, and prayerful consultations which have lasted twenty-three years, by a Joint Committee whose personnel has continually changed as old leaders have retired and new ones come to take their place, who have had to be initiated into its large generosity of spirit and educated in its intricate discussions. The urge towards union arose in the first place among Indian Christian leaders of various denominations, who though realising their spiritual unity in Christ found themselves divided by ecclesiastical barriers that held no meaning for them as Indians. Their faith and zeal have sustained them and others through the disappointing delays and postponements that have occurred during these protracted negotiations. The unhurried nature of the deliberations and the absence of any external constraint encourage us to accept the claim of those concerned in the negotiations that they have been guided and controlled throughout by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The Scheme before us, then, merits sympathetic study in grateful humility. The Christians of South India have pioneered a way for themselves out of divisions of Western origin, and their way to Union may well prove ours as well. They have hammered out a Constitution which they believe will preserve the essential elements of the four different types of Church Order imported from the West—Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, Congregationalism and Methodism—within one

living organism, and without compromise of vital principles. Within the framework of this Constitution and in reliance on unity of fundamental belief they have reserved "wide freedom of opinion" and "wide freedom of action" in non-essentials. The Constitution is not thought of as final or static; on the contrary its authors expressly declare their hope that the United Church "will always be ready to correct and amend (its provisions) as God's will becomes more clearly known through the growing together of the several parts of the now divided Church into a common mind and spirit under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

The points in which the proposed united Church will differ from that of the Churches of the Anglican Communion in the "practice of Episcopacy" have been admirably summarised by Bishop Western (formerly of Tinnevely) in an article in the *East and West Review* for October 1942. He does not, however, offer any opinion as to their acceptability, but leaves that to the reader's judgment. He enumerates three points, which we may examine from the Evangelical standpoint.

The first is that in the consecration of bishops three presbyters may join with the three consecrating bishops in the laying on of hands. It is laid down that the three presbyters must belong to the diocese for which a new bishop is being made, thus symbolising the acceptance of the new bishop by the diocese concerned, and associating the diocese itself in the central act of the service. Any diocesan council wishing to dispense with this provision is at liberty to do so. No reasonable man could take exception to such a practice and research might well discover a precedent, or an analogy in "Catholic practice."

The second is that Confirmation, while being recognised and practised within the Church, will not be a compulsory rule. Alternative forms of reception into full membership will be allowed, not involving the laying on of hands; but such must include prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Bearing in mind the considerable variations within the "Catholic" branches of the Church with regard to Confirmation no Evangelical could condemn the freedom of practice here allowed. The criterion whereby we should judge this is surely to be found in Article xxxiv *Of the Traditions of the Church*. "It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one or utterly alike . . . so that nothing be ordained against God's Word." It was on the "authority to ordain, change, and abolish ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority" claimed in this Article that the Church of England herself at the Reformation radically altered the corrupt Roman practice of Confirmation. We may well believe, however, that the manifest benefits of episcopal confirmation will commend it to the Church of South India and result in a more general use of it.

The third point is at first sight more serious. The Constitution admits the possibility of the clergy and laity in the Synod—the supreme governing body—over-ruling the bishops even in matters of doctrine. Such an elaborate procedure has been laid down, however, before such a startling event could happen, that the likelihood of its ever occurring is remote indeed. Nevertheless, a Church which has solemnly declared (Article XXI) that General Councils (whose voting member-

ship was always exclusively episcopal) " may err and sometimes have erred even in things pertaining to God " can hardly quarrel with a Church that has foreseen the possibility of its own bishops erring in matters of doctrine !

But it is possible that the main weight of opposition to the Scheme will not be directed against any such details as the above. It is quite likely to be directed against (i) the lack of any " mutual commissioning " of ministries at the inauguration of the Union, and (ii) against the safeguards in the thirty years' *interim* period of mixed ministries.

The first is only the demand for " re-ordination " in a more attractive guise. The offer of the Anglican Bishops of the uniting dioceses, made in all humility and sincerity, to receive a fresh commission at the hands of the leaders of the other uniting Churches at the inauguration of the Union, was rightly rejected (though with equally sincere expression of sympathy and admiration) by those leaders. For such an act would be open to the subsequent—if not contemporary—misconstruction of being a bait to secure the conferring of unimpeachable episcopal orders upon the whole ministry from the very start, and involving in consequence the admission of the inferiority, or invalidity of their own orders by the non-episcopal ministries. While admitting that such a deduction is not logically necessary, the fact that the demand for mutual commission is almost exclusively Anglican is bound to raise suspicion as to motives. Indeed there is no need for any such act if the fundamental Basis of the Union is accepted honestly and unreservedly. The Union is based upon a frank acknowledgment by the uniting Churches of " each other's ministries to be real ministries of the Word and Sacraments, and thankfully recognise the spiritual efficacy of sacraments and other ministrations which God has so clearly blessed," and they declare that " all the ministers of the uniting Churches will from the inauguration of the union be recognised as equally ministers of the united Church without distinction or difference." This is to be achieved by the act of faith and love displayed in the act of Union itself without the adventitious aid of a ceremony which could be interpreted in a sense inconsistent with the basis of mutual acceptance, for which indeed Scriptural authority might well be claimed, Romans xv. 7. Moreover, the Basis of Union has twice received the general approval of Lambeth, and so may claim an impressive weight of Anglican authority.

The second object of attack—the mixed ministries of the interim period of thirty years and the general provisions for their exercise—boils down to a lack of trust in those with whom Anglicans will be uniting. The " mutual pledge " which lies in the heart of the Basis of Union should surely dispel the unworthy fear and suspicion behind such assertions as " It would be possible for a Congregational minister to hold a service of bread-breaking in Madras Cathedral." Here is the pledge: (the uniting Churches) " pledge themselves and fully trust each other that the united Church will at all times be careful not to allow any over-riding of conscience either by Church authorities or by majorities, and that it will not in any of its administrative acts knowingly transgress the long established traditions of any of the Churches from whom it has been formed. Neither forms of worship

or ritual, nor a ministry, to which they have not been accustomed or to which they conscientiously object, will be imposed upon any congregation; and no arrangements with regard to these matters will knowingly be made . . . which would either offend the conscientious convictions of persons directly concerned, or which would hinder the development of complete unity within the united Church or imperil its progress towards union with other Churches."

When a pledge in such terms has been given and received, any distrust is a sad reflection on the honour of the one who entertains it and on the sincerity of the pledge he himself has given! The pledge has received the approval of Lambeth. If its operation will need "watching," that need will be far more on the part of the non-Anglican sections, for Anglicans will constitute fully one half of the total membership of the united Church.

Ultimately the whole Union rests, as it should, on the spiritual qualities of faith, hope, and love. As Evangelicals we could ask for nothing else.

If at bottom the opposition to the Scheme is due to the fear that its provisions may form a basis for further attempts to achieve Reunion at Home then we may well declare our joyful acceptance of any such desirable development. Only the spiritual unpreparedness of the Home Churches would make it premature. May we catch the spiritual fervour of South Indian Christians and humbly accept from their hands the key to the door of Christian Reunion!

## On Non-Communicating Attendance.

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"HOW things have changed!" was the remark made by one who had returned to his home town after an absence of forty years.

Many landmarks had disappeared. New areas had been built. Modern buildings had replaced the old. However, the man remarked that the old Church remained the same, with its usual worship and witness.

This is not the case in every Church of the land. The services to which our parents and grandparents were accustomed have been greatly changed. Some of the changes have been made for the sake of brevity whilst not altering the character of the services. Others have been so drastic as to render the services unintelligible to those accustomed to the use of the Book of Common Prayer. The customary service of Morning Prayer, often attended by whole families, or at least by a large part of the family, and which is specially suited to the needs of family worship, has disappeared for what is termed a "Sung Eucharist," or a "High Mass." These services are in line with neither New Testament examples, Early Church tradition, nor the teaching of the Church of England. They are not suited to the English character, which is another consideration. Such services have often been thrust upon unwilling congregations by self-willed