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THE CHURCHMAN

July, 1934.

NOTES AND COMMENTS.

The Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen.

WE have the pleasure of offering our readers in this number of THE CHURCHMAN most of the papers read at the recent Conference of Evangelical Churchmen held at St. Peter's Hall, Oxford, on April 16, 17 and 18. The subject of the Conference was "The Ministry of Reconciliation." The programme was admirably arranged so as to give adequate consideration to the many important questions involved. It was felt that a fresh examination of the full meaning of "The Forgiveness of Sin" and all that is implied in it with regard to the work of the ministry should be undertaken by Evangelical Churchmen in view of many recent developments. The New Psychology has led to the practice of Psycho-analysis as a means of removing morbid mental conditions and restoring the sufferer's harmony and balance. As a large element in the treatment consists in a form of confession it was important to see if there was anything to be learnt from this new source, as it seems to have given a fresh impulse in some quarters to the use of private confession. In the Oxford Group Movement "Sharing" takes a prominent place and here again it was thought necessary to examine its usefulness. The history of the Confessional has been associated with many abuses and the endeavour to introduce the practice of systematic confession into the Church has been naturally viewed with suspicion and disfavour by all who recognise its dangers. It was therefore essential to examine the provision made in the Prayer Book for the relief of troubled consciences and to see in what way it could best be adapted to the needs of to-day.

Important Principles Involved.

Our readers will find that the various aspects of the subject have been treated in an able and scholarly manner, and will value the useful information given both on the history of the Confessional and on the principles that are involved. The recent proposals before Convocation for the appointment of special clergymen to act as Confessors has aroused considerable distrust concerning the future development of the practice of private confession as an ordinary and recognised practice in the life of Churchpeople. It is the first time that anything in the nature of official recognition of the practice has been suggested in any of the assemblies of the Church, and it is quite contrary to the emphatic condemnation of

the whole system which the Bishops have expressed on many occasions in the past. Fears have been expressed that it may be a step towards the re-introduction into the Church of a system from which it used to be thought that the English mind had freed itself for ever—the system which represents God as not being in general immediately accessible to penitents, but as requiring in almost every case the intervention of one of His ordained ministers to convey pardon. This was the chief feature of the medieval penitential system in which the sinner depended on the priest for the absolution of his sins, and he was thus placed in a position of dependence upon the ministry for his hope of salvation. The condition of spiritual slavery which this produced was deplorable and one of the chief results of the Reformation was its removal. It will be disastrous to the future of Christianity in this country if this medieval conception gains any general acceptance.

The Findings of the Conference.

The following findings were agreed upon at the final session. They are to be taken, as in previous years, as expressing the general sense of the Conference, and not as representing in detail the views of individual members.

1. There exists to-day, side by side with much indifference, a widespread desire for spiritual help and guidance. Youth is less reticent than formerly, and moral and spiritual problems are freely discussed. In view of this the Conference calls attention to the need of making full use of the adequate provision of the ministries of the Church for meeting these problems.

2. The Conference urges the clergy to put in the forefront of their ministry the preaching of the forgiveness of sins through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and not to be content until their people are living lives of direct confession to God, direct reliance on Christ, and direct communion with the Holy Spirit.

3. The Conference, recognising that sin destroys the fellowship between God and man, realises that the purpose of the Ministry of Reconciliation is the restoration of this broken fellowship. Through the death of Christ divine forgiveness is available for all who seek it, and its assurance is the proof of the Holy Spirit's work in the heart of the penitent believer.

4. The Conference would point out the ambiguity in the common use of the term "Confession" and desires to make clear the distinction between "Sacramental Confession" or the "Sacrament of Penance" and spiritual consultation for the relief of burdened souls.

5. At the Reformation the medieval conception of the relationship to God depending upon auricular Confession and Priestly Absolution was rejected. The acceptance of the central truth of Justification by Faith brought the soul into immediate contact with God, and gave immediate entrance into the full assurance of forgiveness.

6. History has demonstrated that the system of habitual auricular Confession is fraught with grave danger, alike to priest and

penitent, but the Conference holds that the special confession of sins, followed by absolution, suggested in the office of the Visitation of the Sick may be profitably used in such exceptional circumstances as are described in the rubric.

7. The Conference earnestly recommends the clergy to afford greater facilities for perplexed and troubled souls to open their grief and discuss their spiritual problems with them. It urges that this personal and pastoral ministry should be made more prominent.

8. The Conference welcomes the light which psychology is throwing on the knowledge of mental processes and recognises the assistance it may afford in the ministry of reconciliation. At the same time it is convinced that purely psychological treatment cannot adequately meet the deepest needs of the soul.

Christian Unity.

The reports of the Conferences between the representatives of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland on the subject of reunion have been in many respects satisfactory as far as they go. There was agreement as to the fundamentals of belief in the Creeds; and as to the mutual admission to pulpits as occasion serves of the ministers of either Communion. Communicants of either Communion when out of reach of their accustomed ordinances were to be welcomed in the other as members of the Catholic Church of Christ to the Table of the Lord. The negotiations are, however, to be terminated for the present, and it would seem that no progress is to be made until the whole subject has received further prolonged study and examination. This is disappointing in view of the measure of agreement already reached, and apparently reached in face of the declaration on the part of the Church of Scotland that "any agreement, with regard to the orders and sacraments of the conferring Churches can only be based on the recognition of the equal validity of the orders and sacraments of both Churches, and of the equal standing of the accepted communicants and ordained ministers in each." Dr. Archibald Fleming, speaking in connection with this, pointed out that the Anglo-Catholic Press would exert its utmost power to oppose this agreement, and he added: "Many clergy will try to work it, though it will need great courage on their part, for they may have to choose between farewell to promotion and farewell to individual freedom of thought and action." This is unfortunately true, but it is little to the credit of the Church that those who uphold its true position should be subjected to this boycott and be so often pilloried as "No Churchmen."

Disarmament.

The failure of the Conferences on Disarmament has been a source of grave disappointment to Christian people. Most of us hoped that some definite steps would be taken to put an end to the competition in armaments that should have been the natural

outcome of the Kellogg Pact. The fear and suspicion which characterise the relationships of some of the nations are the obstacle to any hope of agreement. Many people are unfortunately becoming sceptical as to any advance being made to happier relationships among the peoples of the world, and the cynics are enjoying their opportunity of expressing their views on the weaknesses of human nature. It must be recognised that no power can bring about better relationships among the nations except the spirit of Christ, and this is the one means that has so far received no adequate consideration, although many in all lands recognise the truth. In the days succeeding the War many entertained high hopes that the united forces of the Christian Churches would have been able to bring about some satisfactory result, but those hopes have proved vain. The Churches have themselves not been able to reach any substantial measure of agreement and they have lost the opportunity of showing the world what a united Christendom could do. We cannot expect the nations of the world to come together for the maintenance of peace when the Christian Churches maintain an attitude of aloofness from one another on matters that appear to large numbers of Christians to be of secondary importance and to concern questions of organisation and not the essentials of the Faith. The Christian Churches must lead the way if they desire to see the nations united in the cause of peace.

The German Church.

Religious affairs in Germany are being watched with great interest and with some anxiety by Christian people in other lands. The resolution recently adopted in the Canterbury Convocation expresses the feelings of English Churchpeople. There is no desire to interfere in the internal affairs of the German Church, but the struggle that is going on between the official element in pursuit of the ideals of Hitler for a united Germany—those who are known as the "German Christians"—and those who have refused to accept the dictation of the Nazi régime as to their religious beliefs is a matter that concerns the whole of Christendom. As the resolution proposed by the Bishop of Chichester stated: "The present struggle in the German Evangelical Church is a struggle which in essence is concerned not merely with organisation but with the actual substance of the Christian Faith, in which all Christians have an interest." The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church which represents the old faith of Germany, at its meeting at Barmen, gave warnings "against certain tendencies regarding revelation, race and the State by which the Christian Faith is imperilled." This is the danger that has to be faced. The Archbishop of Canterbury summed up the situation in his speech in Convocation when he said that there were currents of thought in German life which were in their essence contradictory to all that they meant by Christianity, and if these opinions prevailed and captured the whole Christian Church in Germany it would mean a surrender to something hardly distinguishable from Paganism.