

“C. O. P. E. C.”—A LANDMARK IN CHURCH HISTORY

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CONFERENCES are many, and they are often held in an atmosphere of cheap excitement and to the accompaniment of much rhetoric which will not bear close scrutiny. It is not to be wondered at that hard-working and sober-minded men and women are dubious as to their value. Many of us whose duties take us to numerous conferences know well enough their dangers, and the discount which must be put upon the enthusiasms of their little day. Yet conferences have their serious value, especially to those who do not attend many of them, and once in a way a conference stands out in character and is of real importance. Such was the great Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, and such, in the minds of many well qualified to judge, was the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics, and Citizenship (a title which has been abbreviated in popular reference to C. O. P. E. C.) held at Birmingham in April of this year.

It marked the culmination of a long and difficult change of thought within the Christian Churches; it had been dreamed of and talked about for a good many years, and the actual preparation for it occupied four years. It was a call to the Christian Church to bear a clearer and more effective witness on social questions. During the nineteenth century religion had been to a deplorable extent individualistic and other-worldly. There had been many exceptions: notably, the great work of Lord Shaftesbury, and the strong protest of Frederick Denison Maurice and the Christian Socialists in the middle of the century; and, later on, the profound disquiet which led to the formation of university settlements and other pioneering work. But still the main interests of the Christian Churches were elsewhere, and to many all such effort seemed a distraction to be watched suspiciously. In 1889 Dr. Charles Gore and Canon Scott Holland founded the Christian Social Union, a society whose purpose it was to make members of the Church of England realize the social task of Christianity. Other denominations followed suit, and within the next twenty years there were founded a number of Social Service Committees, sometimes official

organs of denominations, and sometimes free-lance societies of the enthusiasts within a denomination. In 1911 there was formed a United Council of Social Service Unions of the Christian Churches—a body with an appalling title and a most useful function. It was this body which, nine years later, was to plan the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics, and Citizenship.

Christians who cared passionately about social reform had been conscious for a long time past of two great difficulties. In the first place they were a minority: the great majority in the Churches, including those in official position, were far from having any real belief that the transformation of society was a task to which the Christian Church was called. They were prepared for palliative work, but for little more. In the second place, the social reformers themselves were not clear as to their message. This has been felt very acutely of recent years. It was a reproach formerly that the Christian Churches had little or nothing to say on great social questions. During the last couple of decades a great deal has been said on this subject from the pulpit and elsewhere by Christian men. But their witness has not agreed. One man has denounced Socialism as mere robbery; another has preached it as the true righteousness. Christianity has been appealed to in support of Free Trade and in support of Protection. And so on many other questions. There has come from the Christian Churches not a voice, but a babel; and the rank and file of Christians have been puzzled, whilst the man in the street has naturally paid little heed to such conflicting advices. There was a time in the Middle Ages when the Christian Church had a social philosophy. There was no Christian social philosophy now which had any authority or any general acceptance.

The War forced the pace here, as in so many other directions. It became clear that mankind had missed its way, and that our civilization was in the gravest peril. Men had no use for a religion whose adherents had no answer to give to their questions and no counsel to give them in their desperation. There was also the phenomenon of a vivid social hope in the very darkest days. Men did believe in 1917 and 1918 that great advances would be possible after the War. Some of these hopes were extravagant; some of them might have been realized, but they were defeated by the folly and selfishness and cowardice of the post-war years. Many of them are only deferred. At all events this widespread hope made men in the Christian Church, and without it, more ready to listen to those who held that Christianity is a way of salvation for communities as well as for individuals.

The various Social Service Unions, established by the denominations or by groups within them, were for the most part feeble bodies. They were seldom adequately maintained or adequately staffed. Much social work has been of such a nature, often diletante, and more often earnest enough, but on too small a scale to be effective. The social reformers have been a ragged army, doing their work under the greatest difficulties and continually hampered by lack of resources. Most of the thinking and planning has been done by tired men in their odds and ends of time. Even such slender resources as they have had were to a considerable extent wasted by lack of co-ordination of effort. In this respect the foreign missionary societies have offered a contrast and a model. Since the great Edinburgh Conference of 1910 they have had a common policy, and in many matters a pooling of resources. They have, for instance, combined for the production of literature, and they have thus obtained a quality which no single missionary society could have afforded. For years past the social reformers have been saying to one another that what they needed was a Conference which should do for Christian social effort what the Edinburgh Conference did for the foreign missionary effort of the Christian Churches.

In February, 1920, at a meeting of the United Council of Social Service Unions, the proposal was made and accepted that such a Conference should be attempted. It was realized that the task was more difficult than that which the promoters of the Edinburgh Conference had undertaken. The objective of the foreign missionary societies is more limited and better defined. Conversion of the heathen abroad is an enterprise which does not suggest unpleasant possibilities, as does the establishment of social righteousness at home. Social righteousness may mean interference with men's privileges and pockets. Moreover, what is social righteousness? It was here that the poverty of Christian thought was apparent.

About forty men and women, all of whom had been active for years past in Christian social effort, met shortly afterwards for a couple of days to decide on the main lines of the Conference. This was to be an appeal to the Churches by a section of the Churches. It was felt that it must be, therefore, a free-lance effort of self-appointed people, not in any sense an official undertaking of the Churches as such. The latter would not have been possible at this stage. But every effort was made to prevent the Conference from being the work of a mere clique. A great variety of societies and institutions were asked to appoint representatives to the Council promoting it; all the great denominations were consulted, and

expressed their interest in the proposal and their approval of it.

At this same time a first attempt was made to survey the ground to be covered. One great object of the Conference was to discover to what extent Christian men were in agreement on social questions, and where they disagreed. A cause of much confusion was early perceived. It is the easiest thing in the world for Christian men to get their ideas from their age and from their social set, or to adopt one of the many political creeds which are being preached, and then to find re-inforcement for this in their religion. Almost any kind of social creed can be supported by arguments from the Bible, if recourse is had to isolated passages, and if some aspects of its teaching are emphasized to the neglect of others. It was felt that the reverse was the true and helpful procedure,—to go to our religion and to see, if possible, what kind of human society it demands and proclaims as the will of God. Of course this is not an easy thing to do; we are sure to read our Bibles and to interpret our creed with some sort of bias; but it is an ideal to be striven after. And it is certainly true that men differ in their social philosophies because they differ in their thought about God. We need a clearer theology for our social gospel; and an attempt was made to formulate this in preparation for the Conference.

Some other parts of the field to be covered fell into obvious divisions. Questions of property and industry were agitating this and most other countries. Education would naturally form another subject for consideration. Sex relationship was a subject which must not be shirked. The treatment of criminals was arousing a great deal of interest, and there was a new conscience on that matter. A little reluctantly it was decided that the vast, difficult, and controversial field of international relations must be considered: a merely domestic treatment of social problems is of small value to-day.

One other subject was clearly indicated from the first; indeed it was a large part of the reason for holding the Conference at all. Granted that there is a social task committed to the Christian Church by its Lord, how is the Church to accomplish that task? How is it to bear effective witness for social righteousness, to educate its members for social service, to advise and to discipline those who are going astray? The Christian Churches have fallen into contempt in recent years for their ineffectiveness, and not, it must be acknowledged, without some reason: how can they be made effective?

Commissions were set up to prepare reports on all the subjects

indicated. A good many other subjects came up at later periods for discussion. A Commission was appointed, for instance, to prepare a report on the Christian ideal of the Home; and another Commission prepared a report on the history of the Christian Church in relation to social questions. There was also a Commission on Leisure: it is true, if unsatisfactory, that the report of this Commission was made the convenient place for dealing with all sorts of questions which could not be dealt with elsewhere. To this Commission was referred, for example, the examination of the alcohol question; and to it also, one blushes to say, was given the enquiry into the relation between religion and art.

The Commission set up for the purpose of preparing reports consisted in most cases of about twenty men and women who were known to have special experience or to have given special thought to some aspects of the particular subject. Different denominations, different schools of thought, different experiences were represented in every case. In the matter of denomination the range was from Unitarian to Roman Catholic. In political creed members were anything from left-wing Socialist to right-wing Conservative. In social status they ranged from peers of the realm to artisans. The weight of opinion, it is only fair to say, was middle-class, liberal in theology, and moderate left-wing in politics.

Questionnaires were issued for each division of the subjects of the Conference, and they were widely distributed and used. About 250,000 of these went into circulation. They were made the basis of study by small groups, and they were valuable in this way as a preparation of mind and interest for the meetings. Replies and memoranda were also sent in by individuals and by groups, and were of use to the Commissions in the preparation of their reports.

The reports, twelve in number, were ready in the early spring of 1924. They are naturally of very unequal value; but they do together compose a body of Christian social philosophy without parallel in our time and for several centuries past. As a member of two Commissions I can testify to the care and labour which went to their preparation; they were drafted and re-drafted, discussed in great detail, submitted to outside criticism. They have the defects almost inevitable in joint composition; there is repetition in reports, and overlapping between the reports (for instance, there are two treatments of the question of compromise), and sometimes a Commission succumbed to the temptation to cover up a real disagreement under a vague formula. But usually the better course

was taken; and where a Commission could not agree on a point, majority and minority views are frankly stated. That is surely what is wanted at the present time: we Christians should know on what we are agreed and where we disagree; the disagreement should, of course, stimulate us to further mutual discussion. As a matter of fact, it was the experience of all the Commissions that the amount of agreement was surprisingly great.

It would be useless to attempt to summarize the reports in a paragraph or two. They are worth the reading. It will be found that there is a remarkable unity about them, though they were produced by groups working—for the most part—independently. There runs through them all the same conviction that there is a plan for human life ordained by God, and that it is our problem to find it. Much of the misery and disgrace of the world's life to-day comes from the fact that large tracts of human activity are *irredente*; they must be claimed and won for God's Kingdom. Of international relations it has been said that they are the "dark continent of Christian ethics." There runs also through all these reports a sacramental view of life, that is to say a belief that material things can be made the vehicle and the instruments of spiritual forces. But there is no shirking the difficulties. It is fully realized that spirit cannot become master and user of material things without struggle, pain, and sacrifice. And in every report will be found an insistence on the worth of each individual; insistence, too, that the individual can come to fullness of life only through fellowship.

That the same moral principles apply to communities as to individuals, is one of the far-reaching statements made and illustrated in a number of ways, especially in the report on international relations. The reports do not hesitate to enter into considerable detail in some of their recommendations, though they realize that pronouncements on concrete questions and on method must of necessity be less dogmatic than statements of general principle.

In many ways the report on the social function of the Church is the document which is likely to produce the most obvious and visible changes in the near future. It lays great stress upon the need for discussion within the organized life of the Church. At present the Churches arrange for preaching, for worship, for instruction, but scarcely at all for discussion. Yet the Church ought to be the society within which men of many views can meet and exchange opinions frankly. Much good has come of recent years from the innumerable study circles and small group conferences which have become a feature of religious life, and in less degree of

life outside the Churches. The report urges that much greater place should be found for such discussion, that it should be recognized as one of the most valuable methods of accomplishing the task to which the Church is called. It also criticizes the quality of the instruction given by the Churches to their members, and proposes a fuller and more intelligent scheme. But if the Churches are to take seriously their social task, they will need better equipped leaders. The report has a great deal to say about the training of the clergy, and about the need for specialized ministers. There came from many quarters during the preparation for the Conference the demand for a central bureau which might act as a clearing house for ideas and as an *Intelligence Department*. Such a body would collect information, arrange for the publication of literature, give advice as to reading, and certainly provide for continued discussion of social problems,—especially of newly emerging social problems. If the recommendations of this report were carried out, we should have a well-informed Church, with adequate machinery for its social task.

The preparations for the Conference lasted just over four years. The second of these four years was a time of great difficulty. There had been in Great Britain, and indeed over practically the whole civilized world, a tremendous reaction from the excitement of the War, and the post-war boom in trade had come to an end. There was a pronounced trade depression; and, worse than that, there was a pronounced *spiritual* depression. Money was hard to get, even the very modest amount needed for carrying on the preparation for the Conference, and many of those active in that work found themselves pre-occupied with the keeping afloat of other organizations. It would not have been surprising if the scheme had come to an end then. It managed to survive; and towards the end of the third year there was abundant evidence of growing interest and expectation in many quarters. It was clear that a Conference of this kind would meet a need vaguely felt by great numbers of Christians.

When the fifteen hundred delegates assembled at Birmingham in April, 1924, there was a sense in which it might be said that the work of the Conference had been done before the Conference actually began. The years of preparation had made their mark. Some thousands of men and women had made use of the questionnaires, and given to social problems a sustained consideration which they had never given before. The attention of the Churches had been gained. And the Commissions had drawn up their reports.

It did not seem likely that much would be added in the speeches, and in the kind of discussion which was possible in an assembly of that size. There was some fear that the Conference itself might fall flat. But I have not found anyone who was present who did not feel that the Conference was a remarkable and inspiring experience in which it was a privilege to take part.

In its very composition it was interesting. There were about one hundred foreign guests. Of the British delegates about one half were appointed by various social service societies, whilst the other half were appointed officially by the various denominations. The Principals of all theological colleges were invited to be present; regrettably few accepted the invitation. What has been said already about the composition of the Commissions applies in the main to the composition of the Conference: it was on the Left in religious and political thought, though representatives on the Right wings were by no means lacking. And it was in the main middle-class. What was significant, however, was that it was not the stage army which so often appears at Conferences. There were the conference hacks, of course, those of us who had been speaking up and down the country for years past; but there were present also in large numbers the rank and file of the Christian Churches—the man in the pew whose sympathy we had always wished to gain.

It is difficult to convey to those not present what it was that made the greatness of the Conference. It was certainly not the general level of the speaking, though there were some very fine speeches. The discussions varied much in quality; one or two of them, for instance that on education, were distinctly poor. On the other hand, two discussions were of very fine quality and illustrated precisely that method of Christian controversy which the report on the social function of the Church so warmly commended. Very contentious subjects were discussed frankly, on a high intellectual and moral level, and with Christian courtesy and real endeavour to understand an opponent's view. These two subjects were birth-control and war.

With regard to the first of these, it was an unforgettable experience to watch a subject of such delicacy handled so firmly and yet so reverently. The Conference was clearly divided, and remained divided: no resolution was taken, except that further enquiry was desirable. With regard to the question of war there was a certain amount of confusion. As it was made worse by bad

press reports, it is well to state carefully what really happened. In the Conference, as on the Commission, there was division of opinion on the question of pacifism. Both points of view were stated, that of the pacifist minority and that of the non-pacifist majority. But a resolution was put and carried that "all war is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Jesus Christ."

There has been much misunderstanding as to what this resolution meant, and certainly the wording is far from happy. It was not intended to be a declaration that the individual Christian should in no circumstances take part in war: on that question the Conference had no common mind. It was intended to declare that war as an institution ought to be superseded, and that its persistence was a scandal to the Christian nations: it left open the question as to the right course for the individual until communities have accomplished its disappearance. In the same way, to offer parallels without discussing the rights and wrongs of them, a Conference might condemn slavery a century ago or capitalism to-day without prescribing what an individual slaveholder or an individual capitalist should do as long as society was ordered on those bases. It is a great thing that the Christian conscience is coming to the point of condemning war as an institution: not so long ago recurring wars were taken very much as a matter of course.

The exaltation which most of those present at the Conference undoubtedly felt was due in large measure to the sense that it was evidence of the new tide in Christian thought. It registered how far that tide had already flowed; it was the assurance that it would advance much further. The Conference is only a beginning. But it has already forced a space in the thought of the Churches. The social aspects of the Gospel will not be neglected in the future as they have been in the past: more time, more thought, more money will be devoted to them. The reports of the Commissions are of interest and of value, but they will be superseded in a few years' time by more scholarly, more detailed work.

Next year there will be held the kindred American Conference on the Christian Way of Life. There is also to be at Stockholm a World Conference on the Life and Work of the Church. The Christian Churches are resuming the task, never more than imperfectly attempted, and almost abandoned since the sixteenth century, of thinking and continually re-thinking a social philosophy and commending it to the conscience of their adherents and of the world. We are bold to think that it has been given to us of God's grace to witness a signal working of His Holy Spirit.

APPENDIX

C. O. P. E. C. DOCUMENTS.

Commission Reports, published by Longmans, Green & Co.

- Vol. I. The Nature of God and His Purpose for the World, 3/.
- II. Education, 3/.
- III. The Home, 3/.
- IV. The Relations of the Sexes, 3/.
- V. Leisure, 2/.
- VI. The Treatment of Crime, 2/.
- VII. International Relations, 2/.
- VIII. Christianity and War, 2/.
- IX. Industry and Property, 3/.
- X. Politics and Citizenship, 2/.
- XI. The Social Function of the Church, 3/.
- XII. Historical Illustrations of the Social Effects of Christianity, 2/.

The Proceedings of C. O. P. E. C., Longmans, Green & Co., 3/6.

Christian Citizenship: The Story and Meaning of C. O. P. E. C.,
Longmans, Green & Co., 3/6.

The Message of C. O. P. E. C. A Summary of the Reports. Student
Christian Movement, 1/6.