

[*Cheltenham Conference Paper.*]

EVANGELICALS AND THE NATIONAL CHURCH ASSEMBLY.

I.

BY THE BISHOP OF BARKING.

LIKE several Church measures which hung fire for years, the scheme for Church Self-Government has passed into law at the last with exemplary rapidity. Parliament shook off its accustomed lethargy, and whether from a desire to be relieved of Church business, or from a sincere wish to give the Church of England a chance, the House of Commons welcomed most readily the Enabling Bill. Members of Parliament tumbled over one another in their offers of support, and the Bill was passed almost in the precise form that the Representative Church Council had desired.

There have been murmurs of discontent in various quarters, but the present is no time for complaint. The Enabling Act is now a fact. It is suicidal to refuse to carry out its provisions. For years we have been clamouring for a share in the control of the Church to be given to the laity. This has now been done. Our duty then is to be the first to throw ourselves with enthusiasm into the effort to make the Act work.

The old policy of isolation is hopeless. In days gone by some Evangelicals have refused to share in diocesan work because of their disagreement with Churchmen of other views. They have retired into a corner and sulked, because they could not have everything their own way. Then they have complained, not always truly, that they were ignored in diocesan administration. Such a policy is indefensible. The generosity, the freedom, the elasticity, the frankness, and the attractiveness, which are the natural outcome of that indwelling of the Spirit which is precious to us, must be strangely wanting, when such an attitude is taken up. The day for such a policy is, however, past. We are now forced into the open.

If we are to make any contribution to the effectiveness of the National Assembly, we must be at unity amongst ourselves. Of late years there have been signs of disunion among Evangelicals, and though the serious dangers which threatened our work in the world three years ago have been averted, the omens to-day are not wholly favourable. Our traditions on this score are not unimpeachable. In the early days of the Evangelical Revival there was not only disunion, but recrimination. . . . We see now the folly and wickedness of it all, and we have long outgrown such language. Still the spirit of disunion is not wholly exorcised, and the disdain and the suspicion which such a spirit breeds should be burnt right out under the rays of the love of Christ. "Sirs, ye are brethren."

The unity of believers in Christ was very near the heart of our Lord. That ought to be enough for us, enough to make us desire unity with those from whom we differ, and demand unity with those with whom we agree. With such unity we may hope to make some contribution to the work of the National Assembly, but we have to get there first.

We claim that a large majority of the laity are, if not in vociferous or even vocal sympathy, at least in latent sympathy with ourselves. We might hope, therefore, that the representation of the laity in the National Assembly will be mainly Evangelical; but there is this disturbing factor. The clergy largely control the situation. We cannot pretend to claim a majority amongst them. They control the type of churchmanship in their churches, and they affect the character of the representation on the governing bodies of the Church. Some representatives in sympathy with us will be elected in some parishes or deaneries where the clergy are not of our way of thinking, and a limited cumulative vote will help, but we can hardly look for that majority which we claim would fairly represent our position amongst the laity of our Church. One might hope that a desire for the adequate recognition of all sections of the Church in the National Assembly might prevail, but there is ground for fear that the attempt will be made to obtain as large a share of the representation as possible and to swamp other sections. Parliamentary government and party politics are not the best models, and those who copy them in Church affairs must be a little less ready to bandy the charge of Erastianism than heretofore.

If we are to find our way to the National Assembly, we must have adequate organization. For this end we cannot do better than utilize the good offices of the National Church League. Some of our friends have looked askance at it, but it has done good work, by which many outside its ranks have profited, and it deserves well of us. The dear Bishop of Durham, who has left us so recently, felt of late years the value of the League, from which he had stood apart for long, and he became a Vice-President of the League some time ago. If we attach ourselves to the League, we do not join it with any wish to accentuate party divisions. There has been a breaking down of these divisions of late years. The different sections of the Church of England have learned from each other. Each school has assimilated certain of the principles and adopted certain of the methods of each other school. We admire the heroism and self-sacrifice of many who wish to capture and commit the Church to a pre-Reformation and mediæval position. We appreciate much in their work. We are drawn to the Christ that is in them. But we must defend the Evangelical and Protestant character of the Church of England, and we entertain some fear that an attempt may be made to exploit the grant of self-government with a view to change the character of the worship of the Church of England. We have been styled No-Churchmen; we have been told that we were out of place in the Church of England, but we desire no change in the doctrinal balance or in the ritual directions of the Book of

Common Prayer. We are keen on Prayer Book Revision, but we wish to modernize rather than to antiquate our national liturgy.

There is thus a possibility that the exercise of self-government by the Church may revive and deepen the previously declining party divisions. Even if it does, and this we should deplore, the National Assembly is worth the risk, and we enter it with the cause of the Gospel and humanity at heart, and with an eye not to any sectional interest, but to the welfare of the whole Church.

Our positive contribution to the work of the National Assembly will be along the lines of what have been our distinguishing marks in the history of the last two centuries, - to go back no further. We have stood for the preaching of Christ as the Saviour of men; for the place of faith in the personal acceptance of Christ; for the continuous contact with the indwelling Saviour; for the direct touch with Him without any human mediation; for the primacy of the Ministry of the Word; for the gift of the Ministry to help men's joy rather than to have dominion over their faith; for liberty to all the Lord's people to prophesy; for the place of the laity in Christian work. Our best traditions tell of devotion to missionary enterprise. The work of Missions Overseas tends to become more difficult. There is a danger that with new and coming difficulties this work may be relegated to a subordinate place. We shall try through the National Assembly to keep what we may still call Foreign Missions in the forefront of the Church's interests. Our earliest modern Evangelicals were marked by keen interest in social problems. The emancipation of slaves abroad and virtual slaves at home was effected mainly by Evangelical Churchmen. Injustice has sometimes been done to the Evangelical school on this score, but the Gospel which our forefathers preached was an emancipating, uplifting, and ennobling influence. Its new wine burst many an old bottle in its time. Return to these traditions will mark our policy in the National Assembly.

Our influence will be exerted in the great cause of Re-union. While some long for reunion with the Eastern Churches, or even with the Church of Rome, we begin nearer home. We hope for a reunion with the Nonconformist Churches; and not for a reunion which will mean mere absorption of these Churches by the Church of England, but one which will preserve their self-respect, recognizing their position as Churches, and retaining what is of special value in the contribution of each to the Catholic Church of Christ.

We shall have a special eye to the place of the laity in the councils of the Church. We shall favour all that tends to place more power in their hands. The records of early Church history remind us that the divergence between the clergy and the laity was not so strongly marked as it is to-day. Mr. Rackham, in Bishop Gore's *Essays on Church Reform*, tells us that the laity were entrusted with wide powers, even in the election of bishops and the settlement of Church doctrine. Bishop Gore himself says, "To co-ordinate the laity with the clergy (and let it be said, Presbyters and Bishops) in regulating the affairs of the Church is only deliberately to return to the

primitive ideal of the New Testament and the purest Christian centuries." Again he says, "All through the Nicene troubles, the informal influence of the faithful laity who would not accept Bishops or teachers who represented alien doctrine, was so great a counterpoise to imperial pressure that it is the opinion of well-informed contemporaries that in that great crisis the laity saved the Church."

The present constitution of the National Assembly needs considerable amendment. The laity deserve fuller powers than are accorded to them. There is no reason why measures which relate to worship should emanate only from the House of Bishops, or why amendment of such measures should be denied to the laity. To discuss details would open up some large questions, so I merely urge that Evangelicals should aim at developing the powers of the laity in the government of the Church. We need courage and confidence. The laity have saved the Church before. They may do so again.

Our policy in the National Assembly will be to help, not to hurt ; to impress, to co-operate, to improve, to advance ; where necessary, to repress, to prevent ; to foster the freedom of the Spirit rather than the narrowness of ecclesiasticism ; to emphasize the inner life as well as external order ; to develop spiritual rather than ecclesiastical power ; to make the Church of England the minister rather than the master of the English people. Our power in the Church assemblies does not depend even mainly on the number in which we go there. "Was Canon A. there to-day?" asked a clergyman of his friend in a Church assembly where there was scarcely another Evangelical. "I do not think he was," the reply came, "for there is something about him, that you are always conscious of his presence, even if you do not see him in the room."

II.

BY ALBERT MITCHELL, Member of the National Church Assembly.

THE National Assembly of the Church of England is not created or constituted by Act of Parliament or by any action of the State. The Act of Parliament that we call, for convenience, "The Enabling Act" (although its full title is the "Church of England Assembly (Powers) Act, 1919"), did not create the Assembly, as the heading and preamble to that Act clearly recognize ; nor does the fact that the constitution of the Assembly is included in the schedule to the Act imply that it is given to the Church by the State. "The Enabling Act" recognizes an accomplished fact, and makes provision in respect of the "powers in regard to legislation touching matters concerning the Church of England" which the State recognizes ought to be conferred on the Church Assembly . . . "constituted in the manner set forth" in "addresses presented to His Majesty" by "the Convocations of Canterbury and York."