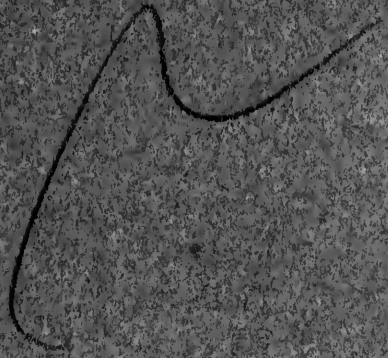
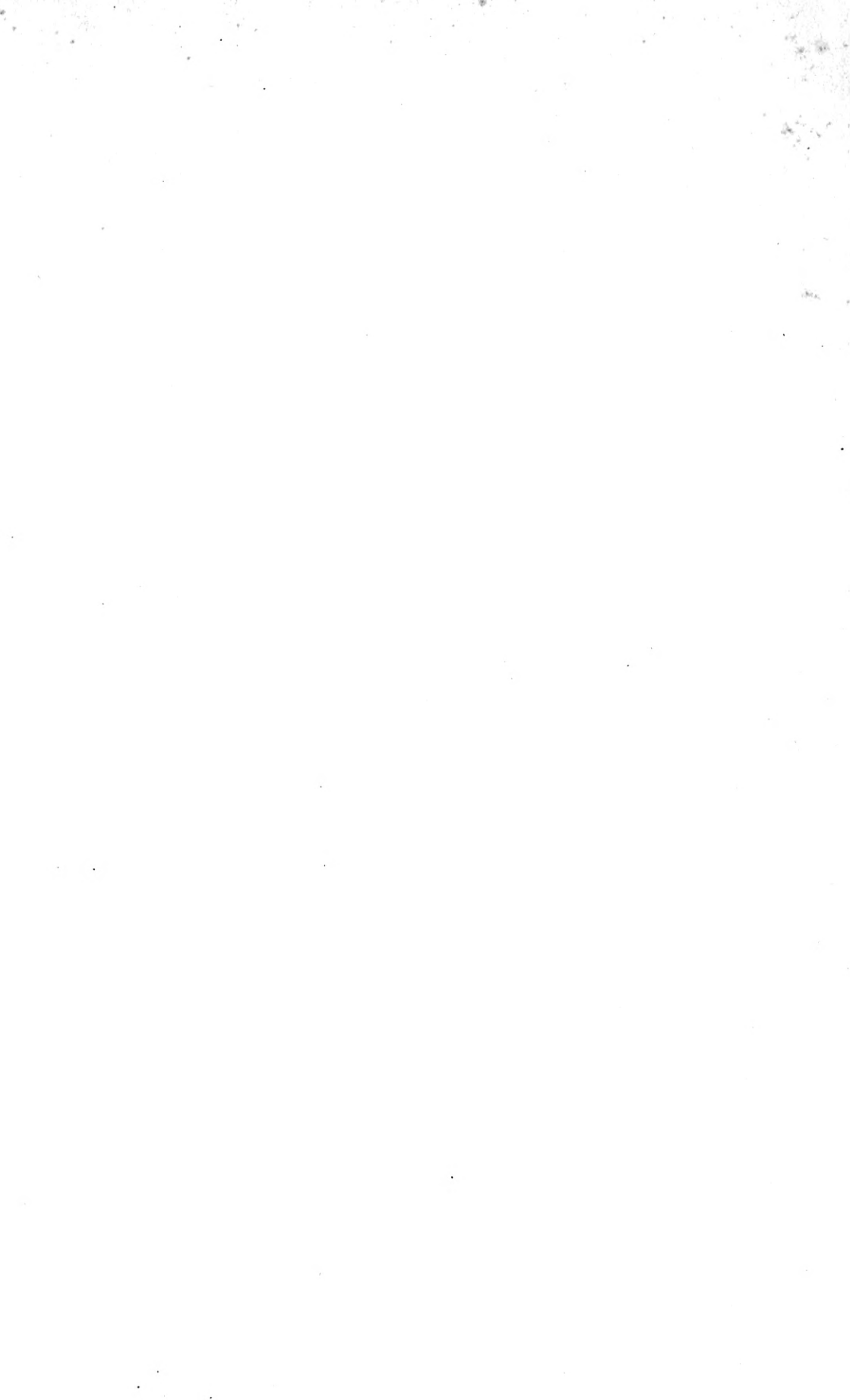






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HOME REUNION SOCIETY.

A SERMON

PREACHED BY THE

RT. REV. THE LORD BISHOP OF WINCHESTER,

AT

S. PETER'S CHURCH,

EATON SQUARE, PIMLICO, LONDON, S.W.,

ON THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT, A.D. 1876.

W. WELLS GARDNER,

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A S E R M O N .

“Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.—ROMANS XIV., 1.

HIS Church was the one visible legacy which the Lord Jesus left to the world. These words seem to be strange when we have with us the Scriptures of the New Testament. Strange, yet they are true. Christ did not leave the New Testament behind Him ; not one Gospel nor Epistle can have been written till nearly thirty years after the Ascension ; the whole was not written till perhaps seventy years had gone ; it was not collected into a volume, still less universally received as a standard of faith for at the very least one century, that first great century of Christian labour and suffering and success. The Bible is rather the gift of the Spirit than the legacy of the Saviour. But the Saviour left the Church to us, and ordained it to be our home upon earth. It is indeed too often said or hinted at, that the Church is a theory of later days, a phantom raised by fancies of men, not traceable to the words of Christ. Yet I venture to say that under its various titles of Church, or flock, or sheepfold, or kingdom, it is oftener spoken of by our Lord than is any other single subject except God Himself. The word *Church* indeed, though occurring frequently in the Acts and the Epistles, meets us only seldom in the Gospels : but the name which Jesus mostly gives to His Church, viz., Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven,* is

* He uses this name, simply and obviously, because it corresponds to that prophetic description of the Church which the Jews delighted in, the Kingdom of Messiah, the Kingdom of David, the Kingdom of the Son of David, who was to come to them in the name of the Lord.

spoken by Him, and discoursed of by Him not less than sixty times ; for I believe that the only other name He uses so often is the sacred name of Father. This Church or Kingdom He left indeed as a great Spiritual Body; called by the Apostle “the Church of the first-born enrolled in heaven ;*” like the first-born of Israel, consecrated to the Lord, enrolled in the Registry of “Jerusalem which is above.” Yet no proof has ever been given, no, not a semblance of proof, that the Church was to be a company known only to the eyes of God, to which men could not join themselves in visible society. Those who were saved from the corruptions of outer heathenism, and who were to be guided by faith unto Salvation, the Lord added daily to the Church; added them by the public profession of their faith, and by the solemn baptism of water.

If language can be trusted at all, it was the will of Him Who thus set up His Kingdom upon earth, that that Kingdom should be one—one in spirit that it might have fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ—one in body, that the world, beholding its unity, might believe that the Father had sent the Son. (John xvii. 21.) Truly our Lord had sheep in the fold of Israel, and He had sheep *not* of *that* fold, sheep to be brought in from the Gentiles (there was a Jewish and a Gentile fold); but when by His death He broke down the middle wall of partition which divided the Gentiles from the Jewish worshippers, He made both one ; so that there was to be thenceforth but one flock and one Shepherd.† (John x, 16.) Early, alas ! dissen-

* Heb. xiii. 23. The interpretation of all the best commentators is that this “Church of the firstborn” is the visible Church of Christ on earth, enrolled in the registry of Heaven, as earthly citizens are enrolled in census tables and registers of earth (see Luke ii, 1, 2) the *πολιτεία* and *πολίτευμα* of the Church being heavenly.

†The argument drawn from our Lord’s use of *ἀνλη* and *ποίμνη* in favour of a variety of sects is utterly untenable. In His eternal foreknowledge He knew that He had sheep in the Gentile fold as well as sheep in the Jewish fold; and He purposed to bring both together into one flock under the One Shepherd. At the most, this would point to a distinction of national Churches, not to an endless diversity of persuasion.

sions sprang up : men ranked themselves with men, and called themselves by the names of men : but the warning voice of Apostles denounced all this as proof that a carnal spirit prevailed ; nay, even bade Christians to mark those that caused such divisions and to avoid them. The flock was to be one, but they were to be folded in different lands and to be composed of different nationalities, not surely, if language has any significance, to be divided into hostile communities.

It admits of no question that this care for visible unity taught by Christ and enforced by His first followers was frequently and earnestly insisted on by the chief teachers in the early Church. Some tell us indeed that the divisions of Christians were as rife then as they are now ; that unity was always a dream, pleasant to think of, but never realized in waking hours ; and that the diversity of early days was but the natural prelude to the divisions of our own. Surely those who say so have never really learned the lessons of those times. For centuries no doubt there was a life struggle between expiring heathenism and adolescent Christianity. The vigorous infant had to struggle with the death-snakes which twined themselves around its limbs, and tried to penetrate to its heart. It suffered but it conquered. Not chiefly by outward persecution did heathenism strive to arrest the progress of the Church and Faith of Christ. Its worst assaults were when, under the names of Gnosticism and Manicheism and Arianism, and the like, it assumed the form of Christianity, but denied its power. This is what missions among an intelligent and philosophic people is well-nigh sure to encounter. We do not speak of the Brahmosomaj in India, or the Mahommedism of Arabia as divisions of the Christian Church ; yet the chief of the early heresies were in truth as much external to Christianity as these more modern forms of faith or of unbelief.

Within the Church itself, at least if we except the stout and terrible struggle with Arianism, there was a general uniformity both of faith and discipline. Gnostics, Ebionites, Manicheans,

Arians, never were acknowledged members of the Church; they were in fact professors of heathen philosophy, or of perverted Judaism, incorporating with their creed such portions of Christianity as could be made in any measure to fit in with it. Very truly the early ages were ages of contention. Men had then to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the Saints. It was not wonderful that they too soon forgot to fight with none but spiritual weapons; that they too soon borrowed the tactics of their persecutors, and sought to restrain by the strong hand of earthly power those who were threatening to corrupt and to divide the Church. It was, perhaps, not wonderful again, that with unlawful lessons of coercion men learned unsound lessons of belief. Coercive power needs very gentle handling. It can keep false coinage from the mint, but it can stamp it too with approval, and then insure its currency. We have all read this in the middle ages; power gradually absorbed; false decretals forged to sustain it; false teaching growing up along with it; and then the world groaning under a burden which it had long been helping to heap up.

The Papacy was a marvellous structure; there has been nothing like it in the world either as to its strength or its weakness. With a mixture of much that was earthly, we need not doubt that the great motive of those who raised it up was, in their own consciences at least, an honest and a pure motive, viz., care for the faith and for the unity of the faith. Yet it has failed in both its ends; overlaying the faith and rending the Church. History has made many a charge against the Papacy; it will yet make many more. The heaviest charge that can ever rest upon it must be, that by imposing unlawful terms of communion, and by asserting undue supremacy over conscience, it rendered Christian unity impossible. This is the great charge against the Papacy, this the great apology for the Reformation.

I have never doubted to confess my conviction that the

Reformation was either the direst necessity, or the most dreadful crime. I can well believe that even the boldest reformers would have trembled and hesitated if they could have "looked into the seeds of time," and seen the growth of discord in the harvest field of the future. But the string had been strained too tightly—it was doomed to be broken. Twelve articles of faith added to the creeds of Christendom, and unfaltering subjection claimed for a fallible authority, could not bear the test of reason, of Scripture, or of history. Terrible as the result has been in disunion and discord and distrust, it could not but be right to throw away accretions which overlaid the truth, and to refuse a subjection to man which could be given lawfully to none but God. Not one of the great reformers ever contemplated that utter severance of Christian bodies which we witness now. Lutherans stood apart, not willingly from the universal Church, but from the supremacy of Rome, appealing confidently to a general Synod of Christendom for a future agreement in the faith. English reformers restored or strove to restore the Church of their country, claiming at least national rights, if universal restoration was denied them. Calvin was the last to dream of an universal liberty of each man to choose his own communion and to follow his own fancies; he, indeed, carved out a system (hitherto unknown to the Church, but as he thought long buried in the Scriptures) which should unite all men in a society, and a bond of faith, as strong and infallible as the Papacy itself. It was to substitute this for the old system that he laboured and fought; not to throw open all questions, and give all freedom. No union of the civil with the ecclesiastical, was ever stronger than Calvin's. The Genevan Church was the truest and strictest State Church ever known in Christendom. Not a priest, a preacher, or a schoolmaster, dared enter the sacred city that was not certificated by the dictator, autocrat both of body and soul.

Let us look at home. We know the troubles of the reign of Edward, of Mary, and of Elizabeth: we are used to think that

they were great struggles for freedom of conscience and principles of general tolerance, against intolerance and arbitrary power. Was it so? Everyone that was down, indeed, cried for leave to rise up again; but everyone that could rise only strove to keep others down. The true belief still held on, that Christians ought all to be one; the false practice still prevailed that unity could be enforced by coercion. The Puritans, adopting the stern creed and the strong Church polity of Geneva, desired to substitute them for the ancient creed and the Episcopal government of England. They had no thought of secession, they did not ask simply to be borne with, they sought as Calvin did before, for entire substitution. None of the leading Puritans acknowledged the right of separate Christians to form systems for themselves. It was not Cartwright or Baxter, it was the High Churchman Hooker, who could plead for tolerance, for fair freedom of thought and worship. It was Bishop Jeremie Taylor, who asked for "Liberty of prophesying"; not Cromwell or Owen who conceded it. When the Puritan worship and the Presbyterian government were established under the Commonwealth, neither Prelacy, nor Anabaptism, nor Congregationalism were acknowledged or endured as legitimate developments of the Christian faith and the Christian Church.

We are all agreed now that it is a happier state of things when men may think freely and breathe freely, though their thoughts are not the thoughts of those in authority, and their breath not quite formed of the same atmospheric elements. Let us only remember that many causes have led to this, that it did not all come from the struggling of the oppressed to escape from the power of the oppressor. It cannot be denied that Hooker and Jeremie Taylor pleaded for permission to think, and had it not conceded to them. It is acknowledged by the greatest admirers of John Wesley that the bishops with whom he came in contact, not only tolerated, and often encouraged him, but were more tolerant than he was, aye, more tolerant of Dissenters and of Dissenting practices.*

* See Smith's Life of Wesley.

What I ask you then to observe, Christian brethren, is this :— We are landed, through the faults of some, and the follies of some, and the piety of some, and the wisdom of some, in a state of things much unlike what ever went before, much unlike what our forefathers ever thought of, much unlike what probably any of them would have desired. Let us confess that there have been many aspirations after good, that there have been many elements of evil, not in one school, but probably in all. There are blessings which we all enjoy, let us be thankful for them ; we have an open Bible, the word of the everlasting Gospel free to all ; we can all think as we will, we can all speak as we think, there is none to make us afraid. Liberty is a blessed gift, yet it never can give happiness apart from law, it can never give security apart from union ; here are our blessings, here our perils. We have all apparently within our grasp, we lose it all because we have no power to grasp it ; liberty has given us the gifts, the license of disunion makes us clutch at them in vain. Never was such a glorious future before us, never were such heavy clouds threatening to darken and to deluge all. The pendulum has had its fullest swing. From the fourth century to the eighteenth men desired, as all good men must, to bring others into their own opinions, but they thought it lawful to do so by compelling outward conformity, if they could not persuade inward union. In the nineteenth century men have not only learned that coercive policy defeats its own ends, but have even convinced themselves that outward unity is of little worth ; that each man had better seek his object in his own way, and not so only, but that the revealed will of God favours this principle. Yet is it so that when any other end whatever is aimed at, divided counsels are esteemed the best for reaching it ? Union is strength, division is weakness, everywhere and in everything. He that reads a different record in Holy Writ, must surely have read it through an inverting medium. Unity, peace, one flock, one body, one spirit, meet us in every page ; “ a kingdom divided against itself cannot but

fall." How have we woke up in this age of light and learning, and found that union was a troubled dream of darkest midnight, and that our waking hours can only welcome separation, isolated efforts, tongues more stammering and confused than Babel's! It is not wonderful that the world welcomes this; men of this world like to look on religion as a matter of opinion; there is a trouble in seeking truth; it is easier to let each man choose what he throweth. It is easy to let all great questions glide quietly over us and so drift away from us, leaving others to dispute whilst we repose. But is this safe for the world? Is not this the very thing which in our own day is drowning the world? Is it not the division among Christian men which encourages worldly men to turn away from Christianity, and, if they ever turn towards it, sickens them with controversies, and persuades them that the very restlessness of the world is peace compared with the things of the Church? Is it not true, have not most devout pastors of souls, found it to be true, that even the anxious, the striving, the dying, despair, aye! to the very last, because that to which they looked for peace gives them only distraction? Oh, Christian brethren, let me plead with you for these poor souls. I have heard sounds and seen scenes which make my heart sick to think upon them, when men upon their death beds, to whose hearts I have striven to bring home the peace of Christ, have told me that they could not hear because they had heard so many voices, and all speaking such diverse thoughts.

It was a grievous thing, indeed, when men tried to stretch the Christian conscience on a Procrustean bed; when Papists burned Protestants, and Protestants hanged Papists; when Churchmen imprisoned Puritans, and Puritans imprisoned Churchmen. The evil one has a different strategy in a new campaign. It is doubtful whether he will not succeed even more to his own contentment, when he has fully divided the Christian Church, and drawn up his own powers of lust and avarice and cruelty and unbelief in a compact phalanx against the host of God, watching and eager to cut off every straggler from the camp. And yet, brethren, we

are not so far divided in heart. Who is there amongst us that calls himself Christian that does not hold the great verities of the faith of Christ? Why must we live, why must we war apart, when we have the same King to fight for, when we are enlisted to serve Him, when we profess to love Him? There is not a sect, from the adherents of Rome, to the Independents and Baptists, who do not acknowledge God their Father, Christ their Saviour, His Spirit their Sanctifier, God's children as their brethren, and God's heaven as their home. Nay! shall I be far from truth, if I say that those who are ranked as the extremest opposites have often the most points of real agreement in the faith? I have sometimes thought that, if such were the will of God, the universal prevalence of any one Christian sect, whatever that it may be, with which I have the least possible sympathy, if only it held firmly the great truths of the Christian creed; its universal prevalence, I say, to the suppression of all that I myself held next dearest to the foundation faith, would be happier for the world and more hopeful for the future than that which we see round us now. It is without controversy such a thought as this which has given such unusual power of late to the claims of the See of Rome. It professes unity and it offers union. Its adherents number more than half of Christendom. Men who sigh for peace hear the Siren voice and feel its charms, and many a mind of more than common power has been attracted into the inclosure by the sound, and many more have been kept by the same charm from leaving it and breaking with it. Nay! If this were all, I do not see how Rome's argument could be answered. If there were not another side to the picture; unjust demands, undue subjection of conscience, unscriptural and unprimitive terms of communion, it seems to me that the claims of Rome would be unanswerable, her call one from which we could not turn away. But then we look on a long history, which tells of disruption of East and West, then of reformed and unreformed, caused by the strain which none could bear and which must have given way, which if again endured for a time, must again and again be broken.

But is there no possibility of catholic union without uncatholic compulsion ? Is it impossible that men should calmly look the great question in the face and say, "God helping us we will be true to Christ, true to the faith of Christ, true to the Church which He has loved, true to the world which He has redeemed. We will let neither tyranny oppress, nor unbridled license scatter ; we will seek purity and peace, faith in the eternal truth, yet love and unity with all our brethren ; we will find a home for those wandering lost ones who stray because there is no place on earth to gather them." Never, perhaps, has that kind of passive unbelief, which settles down into languid indifference, and which issues in material Secularism, so largely prevailed with us ; and it is due almost wholly to the habit of regarding religion as a matter of opinion, or of "persuasion," not as the one truth and the one Church of Christ. If this is not to prevail more and more, or to give no escape from it but in an infallible hierarchy, we must show it a more excellent way. That way most surely is not in persecution on the one hand, not in Latitudinarianism and endless division on the other, but in a Church which holds primitive truth and retains primitive organisation, but which allows wide scope for separate thought, and offers large comprehension both of practice and opinion. It must have the faith graven deep on its foundation stones, it must have walls which shelter but restrain, it must receive all, and give full play to all, though weak in the faith, if still not unfaithful to their Lord. Unity it must have ; variety it must not fear. Nay, if variety be forbidden, there will but be the unity of sleep, perhaps of death.

I think I have not departed from Apostolic teaching, from the teaching more especially of my text in what I now have said. Divisions are forbidden, comprehension is enjoined—"Mark them which cause divisions and avoid them." "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." Is our hearing so stunned, and our senses so dazed with contro-

versy that we cannot bear such words? And must the world wait and want, because we not only utter different voices, but because we even keep aloof in different camps, and fight against each other instead of fighting for the faith? Surely the extremest difference between Christian and Christian withers into nothingness, when we think of the difference between Christ and Belial, between God and Atheism. Cannot we turn our arms against the enemy, not against our friends, friends whose dress is somewhat strange to us, or whose tongues are attuned to a higher or a lower key? He would be hopeful indeed who should think to see in his own day all Christians even here in England once more united on the common ground of Holy Scripture and the Primitive creeds, working in the one inclosure of the ancient Apostolic Church, allowing to one another all true liberty of prophesy, all fair latitude of worship, all honest scope for work. Probably it cannot be yet, but it may hereafter. "Thou canst not follow Me now; but thou shalt follow Me afterwards." We need patience, and the patience of hope.

At present, perhaps, we must be content to work each in his own sphere, for God, for Christ, for Christian souls, for heathen and for outcast souls, for time and for eternity. Casting our bread upon the waters in a loving and a patient spirit, we may find it after many days. But, oh, let us,—us at least to whom God in His Providence and His Grace has preserved the faith of our fathers and the Church of our fathers, unbroken through the trial and the tempest—let us feel deeply and more deeply every day the precious trust, the heavy debt, which such a gift has brought on us. We must guard it for our children, we must open it wide for our brethren. If our unfaithfulness robs our children and drives away our brethren, their loss will be our loss, and their ruin will be our responsibility. Never was there more need to keep that which is committed to us (I Tim. vi, 20.) "That good thing which is committed to us" (II Tim. i. 14) "To keep

the commandment without spot, unblamable, unto the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Tim., vi. 14.) Never, again, was there more need "Not to let our good be evil spoken of" (Rom. xiv., 16) not for meat or minor difference "to destroy the work of God" (xiv., 20) but "to follow after those things which make for peace, and things whereby we may edify one another." (v. 19) edify, build up and strengthen, not rend and destroy and tear down one another.

The principles of the Society which I commend to you, "The Home Reunion Society," are the principles to which I have imperfectly tried to give utterance. It seeks for union at home, where most disunion reigns, on a ground of fundamental truth, in an inclosure of Apostolic antiquity, in a principle of large charity and liberal concession on all sides. When He overcame the sharpness of death Christ opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers. Let us not shut the kingdom, but open wide its doors to all who will enter into it, believing in its King, and willing to live lovingly with its subjects. It is thus I believe in my inmost soul, that it is only thus, that the power of evil swelling round us can be kept at bay, that the world can learn to believe that the Father hath sent His Son, and that believing it can be saved.

We cannot give up our faith, there would be nothing for us to fight for then. So we cling to the ancient creeds, in which all foundation faith is summed up. We must have an organisation, or it is impossible to live and work together. None can be simpler, none other for all men is possible, except that organisation, which we have inherited through the long lapse of ages from the first century of the Faith. On these we take our stand, and then we throw our arms and our hearts open to all.

There are who say, why seek this outward union? Can you not own a common cause, and be satisfied to seek it in different ways and in different communities? Will not alliance work as well as unity? We answer, no! No! because it is not Scrip-

tural, it is not practical, it is not true. Scripture knows nothing of allied bodies, we are to be all one body in Christ. Practice proves that divided bodies have different interests. Different aims tend to divide, subdivide, weaken, never to strengthen one another. Truth tells us plain enough that if we would do common work we must do it in common action and in unity, but not in strife.

Brethren, the work before us is infinite—but for belief in an infinite God, the thought of it would be simply despair. There are many warm hearts and many open hands, but they beat and they work in vain, because they beat not in unison and work not with a common will. There is a great united mass of evil, unbelief, intemperance, selfishness, worldliness, greediness of wealth, indifference to truth, swelling up and stifling all life and hope; not a hand, not a tongue, not a heart can be spared, we want them all in whatever ranks they may be serving now. But oh, how would everyone strive more surely, aye, with a sevenfold, nay with a seventy fold weight and power, if all struck together, and if the ring upon the anvil was that of all Christianity, striking for God, for Christ and for truth. I will say no more words of my own; let the words of this day's appointed Scripture speak for me and for my cause:—

“Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like-minded one toward another according to Christ Jesus, that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received into the glory of God.” Rom. xv., 5, 6, 7.
From the Epistle of the Day.



