

CHURCH REFORM.

No. II.

CONVOCATION.

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THE second subject I propose to take up, in considering Church Reform, is Convocation. The subject is a very difficult one, because of the extreme opinions men hold about it. On the one hand, many regard Convocation as the noblest institution of the day, the panacea for the Church's diseases, the concentrated essence of the Church's wisdom. On the other hand, many think Convocation a mischief and a misfortune, and regard its proceedings with unmixed dislike or unmitigated contempt. Between these conflicting parties I cannot speak of Convocation without giving offence. Nevertheless I have not taken up my pen in order to please man, and I shall not shrink from speaking my mind.

Before entering on the special subject of this paper, I venture to make one small request to all Evangelical Churchmen. My request is simply this,—that they will not lightly turn away from the great subject of Church Reform, but will consider it gravely, and look it calmly in the face.

Some excellent friends tell me that all attempts at external Church Reform are movements beginning at the wrong end, and that no alterations or readjustments are of the slightest use unless we have a revival of downright Evangelical religion throughout the Church of England.

Some tell me that it is mere waste of time to talk of Church Reforms, and that it is too late to attempt them,—that the poor old house is too rotten and shaky to stand any repairs,—and that the very effort to “strengthen what remains” will bring the whole fabric to the ground.

None of these things move me. I have heard many such remarks in my time, and am getting too old to mind them. I cannot admit, because spiritual revival is the first and chief thing needed, that nothing else is needed in the Church of England. You might as well say that the garrison of a fortification should not try to mend the ramparts, because the stock of ammunition in the magazine was small.—I cannot admit, because reforms are difficult, and the case looks desperate, that nothing ought to be attempted. It is the boldest

policy which is often most successful. “L’audace, l’audace, toujours l’audace,” is often the true secret of doing anything great in this world.

Let the truth be plainly spoken, even though it may give offence. Most English Churchmen, and specially Evangelical Churchmen, are rather too fond of leaving everything alone outside their own parishes, and rather too content to sit under their own vines and fig trees nursing their own parochial work. It is almost impossible to arouse many of them to look at anything which affects the welfare of the whole Church, and the common interests of the whole body of the Anglican Communion. They are like passengers on board some huge Atlantic steamer, perpetually engaged in cleaning and decorating their own private cabins, while the ship has sprung a leak, and, without the active aid of every one on board, is in danger of going wholesale to the bottom.

It is high time for Evangelical Churchmen, at any rate, to change their plan of acting. Whatever men of other schools may think fit to do, we must shake off our past indifference, and awake to a sense of our responsibilities. We must remember that we are members of a great ecclesiastical corporation, and prove that we remember it by our actions. We must learn to be men of a public spirit, and to come forward and exhibit an interest in all that affects the welfare of the Church of England. We must show that we can consider the whole position of our Church as thoroughly and intelligently as any school of opinion within our pale, and that we are determined to speak out and let our voice be heard. We must no longer allow it to be said that Evangelical clergymen are fit for nothing but to preach in their own pulpits, visit their own parishioners, keep up their own schools, and speak on the platforms of their own pet Societies. We must show the world that we are Episcopalian ministers and not Independents, and that we know what we want for the whole body of the Church of England.

The time is short. The clouds are thickening around us. A night is coming when no man can work. Before the storm bursts on the English Establishment let us see if we cannot put it in better working order. I grant most freely that the attempt to “reform the Church” may lead to collisions, conflicts, divisions, and even disruption. Be it so. I for one had rather see her die fighting boldly, in a manly effort to purge away abuses, than see her sink slowly into the grave under the pressure of evils which she had not courage to face, and would not try to put away. My motto for the times is this, “He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one.”

I now proceed to say that, next to a reform of our whole Episcopal system, we want *a sweeping reform of Convocation*,

To Convocation in the abstract, of course, there can be no reasonable objection. Common sense dictates that a huge Episcopal Church like ours is

not properly organized without one. Such a Church ought to have an Assembly, meeting every year, composed of the Bishops of every diocese, and a certain number of Churchmen elected to represent each diocese. The objects and purposes of such an Assembly are self-evident. Conference, consultation, discussion, deliberation, interchange of opinions upon the many subjects which every year brings to the surface—the best mode of dealing with new dangers from without or within—the best mode of extending the influence of the Church at home or abroad,—all these are matters which might be most usefully considered by a rightly constituted Convocation. There ought apparently to be no insuperable difficulty in forming such an Assembly, and its formation might greatly help and strengthen the Church of England. But unhappily such an Assembly as this is not the subject I am at present considering in this paper. I am not dealing with Convocation in the abstract, but “Convocation as it is.” I want to examine “Convocation as it is,” to point out its defects, and to suggest “reforms.”

Now most of my readers, I suspect, know little, and care even less, about “Convocation as it is.” That there is a kind of petty clerical Parliament called by that name,—that in Canterbury it consists of an Upper and a Lower House,—that some of its members are elected afresh whenever a new House of Commons is elected,—that in most dioceses the bulk of the clergy take no part whatever in the election of its members,—that it slept from the days of Queen Anne till the days of Archbishop Sumner a most useful sleep*—that its recent revival was regarded by many wise men with deep dissatisfaction, as an enormous mistake,—that it is now assembled for a few days every year, and talks over certain ecclesiastical subjects,—that its debates are often eminently unwise, unpractical, and unsatisfactory,—that it has no power whatever to legislate on any subject without express license from the Crown,—that its decisions are null and void and useless without the consent of the Crown and Parliament,—that it looks to an outside spectator nothing better than an ecclesiastical Debating Society, in which certain well-known names are perpetually coming to the fore, and of which the proceedings are never read by one man in a thousand,—this is about all that most people know about Convocation! I doubt, in fact, whether most people know as much. This is the body about which I wish to make some suggestions. If it is allowed to meet and talk and debate in this nineteenth century, I submit that it requires a most sweeping reform.

* In saying what I do here, I should be sorry if any one thought I meant to make any reflection on Archbishop Sumner. Nothing could be further from my intention. I have always thought him one of the most undervalued and underrated Primates who has ever occupied Lambeth Palace. He had a fund of gifts, grace, and sound common sense of which the public had little idea. Few Archbishops have made fewer mistakes than he did! But certainly one of his greatest mistakes was the consenting to the revival of Convocation.

In handling this subject I shall not weary my readers by any historical account of Convocation. I shall not waste time on its origin, pedigree, or genealogy. I shall leave alone the story of what it was intended to do, what it did do, and what it did not do, at the Reformation, under the Stuarts, and after the Revolution of 1688. I shall say nothing about the quarrels between the Upper and Lower Houses of Canterbury Convocation, except that the Upper House was generally right, and the Lower House generally wrong. Its internal squabbles, and strifes, and contentions, and all the circumstances which led to its suppression for more than a century, are not worth raking up. We have as little to do with these matters now as with long-bows, matchlocks, and culverins in the days of breech-loaders and rifled cannon. We may safely leave them to antiquarians. Suffice it to say that a careful study of the annals of Convocation leaves the general impression that it is an institution which has often done much harm to the Church of England, and has seldom done any good. But we may safely leave its annals alone. "Let bygones be bygones." The practical subject at which alone I wish my readers to look is, "Convocation as it is" at the present day. It stands before us, galvanized into an unhappy vitality. If it is to be allowed to continue, it ought to be thoroughly reformed.

Now the defects of "Convocation as it is" are very serious, deep-rooted, and great. They are three in number. I will state them in order.

(1) In the first place, "Convocation as it is" *consists of two distinct bodies*,—one representing the southern province, and one the northern; one called the Convocation of Canterbury, and the other the Convocation of York. The action of these two Convocations is not harmonious. The decisions at which they arrive are not identical. The subjects which they discuss are not necessarily the same. Neither Canterbury nor York has a right to speak for the whole Church of England, though Canterbury often presumes to do so. The internal arrangements of the two are not the same. In York the Bishops and clergy sit together and form one House. In Canterbury they form two distinct Houses. The general result is, so long as there are these two Convocations, that the Church really possesses no general synod at all! Some men please themselves with the idea that we have recovered "Synodical action." It is a total mistake. We have no assembly that represents the whole Church of England. North may contradict south, and south may contradict north. This is a serious anomaly, and in some circumstances might do much harm.

(2) In the second place, "Convocation as it is" *is thoroughly defective in its composition*. It provides a most ridiculously unfair representation of the parochial clergy. Let us take, for example, the Lower House of Convocation in the province of Canterbury, and analyse its composition. It consists of 145 members. Of these 145 no less than 23 are deans, 56 are archdeacons, 24 are proctors for the cathedral chapters, and only 42 are proctors for the parochial

clergy. In a word, this Lower House contains 103 *ex-officio* members and representatives of capitular bodies, to 42 representatives of the parochial clergy!—Such a state of things is simply ludicrous, preposterous, and contrary to common sense. How such a body as this can ever meet and talk as if it represented the whole southern province of the Church of England, passes my understanding. It reminds one of those three famous artificers in Tooley Street, who, in the plenitude of self-satisfaction, put forth an address beginning, “We, the people of England!” I never read of its debates without thinking of the words of Cicero,—

“Miror, quòd haruspex haruspicem sine risu conspiciere possit.”

[I am surprised that tellers can see without a smile.]

(3) In the last place, “Convocation as it is” *makes no provision for the representation of the lay members of the Church of England*. This is an immense and an intolerable defect, and one which alone is destructive of any good that Convocation might do. Whether we like it or not, the days are past for exclusively clerical Parliaments. Whether this be according to ancient precedent or not signifies nothing. To talk of precedents in 1870 is a childish waste of time. You might as well try to stop an express train with cobwebs, as stop the public will with *precedents*. We may depend on it the English clergy will never again be allowed to legislate for the whole Church, and to arrange matters, either of doctrine, or ceremonial, or practice, alone and by themselves. Of course Bishops and presbyters may meet together, and talk as much as they please. But they will never be allowed to legislate or dictate alone. The laity will never again submit to shut their eyes and open their mouths and swallow complacently anything that the clergy may think fit to give them. And the laity are quite right! They are “the Church” as much as the clergy. They have quite as much at stake in the Church’s welfare. They are often as well educated, as intelligent, as well-informed, as spiritually-minded, as able to discern “things that differ” in religion, as any clergyman. The words of the judicious Hooker are worth remembering : “Till it be proved that some special law of Christ hath for ever annexed unto the clergy alone the power to make ecclesiastical laws, we are to hold it a thing most consonant with equity and reason, that no ecclesiastical laws be made in a Christian commonwealth, without consent as well of the laity as of the clergy.” (*Hooker*, Book viii., chap. 6.) The simple fact that the lay people have at present neither voice nor place in the English Convocation, is enough to show that it is an institution totally unsuited to the age, and behind the times.*

* To all who wish to see this point more fully worked out, I strongly recommend an admirable speech delivered by Archdeacon Prest in the York Convocation, on February 23rd,

Such are the three great defects of “Convocation as it is.” Are they remediable? I believe certainly that they are.—Is it worthwhile to attempt their reform? This is a very grave question, and one which admits of much being said on both sides.

Some excellent Churchmen, whose opinion is generally most sound and wise, maintain strongly that a reform of Convocation would do more harm than good,—that it would only intensify many existing evils, and remove none,—that so long as the union of Church and State exists even in name, the House of Commons represents the lay Churchmen of England and Wales,—that the introduction of the laity into Convocation would only hasten on the separation of Church and State,—and that the safest plan is to let Convocation alone with its immense defects, to give it rope enough and let it annually hang itself before the eyes of the public, till it falls into contempt, and is suppressed as a nuisance.

There is much that deserves attention in these views, I fully admit; but they do not entirely convince me. We must look at things as they are, and accept the position in which we are placed. Convocation *is a great fact*, and there is not the slightest apparent likelihood of its being suppressed. Whether we like it or not, it will annually meet, and talk, and debate questions, and by its unwise proceedings will inflict annual damage on the Church of England. Is it wise to leave it alone. Ought we not to try to improve it?—The Church of England is in very critical circumstances, and may at any moment be threatened with disestablishment, and have to fight for its very existence. Is it prudent to await the storm without any attempt at forming a really representative Church body? Will not the very first assault find us all in hopeless confusion, and wholly dependent on a few isolated, hastily-formed, inexperienced, hot-headed voluntary committees?—These arguments weigh very strongly with me. I have not the slightest confidence in the intentions of either present or coming statesmen toward the Church of England. I defy any one to say what line of policy may be soon taken up by the political leaders of our day about the English Establishment. I suspect that serious mischief is already brewing. I see breakers ahead. If the existing Convocation could be silenced or suppressed, and the Church of England could be insured a fifty years’ lease of quiet life, I should be content to leave the subject of Convocation alone. But seeing what I see, and hearing what I hear around me, I dare not sit still. I am for bold action. I hold up both my hands for Convocation Reform.

Now, supposing that we attempt to reform Convocation, what ought to be done? How can we best adapt it to the times in which we live? How can we make it an institution which will command the confidence of English

Churchmen? The answers to these questions, I know, are many and various. I venture to offer the following independent suggestions as not undeserving of consideration:—

(1) I suggest, first of all, that the Convocations of Canterbury and York *ought to be fused into one, and form one compact body*. Their separate existence is an enormous anomaly, and entirely destroys the influence of any isolated action that either House may take. In the very nature of things a Church, like a State, ought to have only one Convocation, Convention, or General Assembly, and that one ought to represent the whole body. In these railway days there is no earthly reason why men from the north and men from the south should not meet in one place. Such a fusion alone, as a first reform, would be an immense gain. The southern province would benefit greatly by it. For soundness in the faith and common sense the northern Churchmen far surpass their brethren in the south. Not least, the fusion would destroy the possibility of an evil which already looms in the distance. That evil is the risk of a heavy collision some day between the north and the south!

(2) I suggest, in the second place, that there ought to be *no place in the Reformed Convocation for any ex-officio members*. Deans at present are all nominees of the Crown, and so also not unfrequently are Canons. Archdeacons are nominees of the Bishops. I am entirely opposed to their having any seat in any representative convention of English Churchmen by mere virtue of their office. Let there be no man in such an assembly who does not represent the deliberate choice of a certain number of electors. If the clergy of any diocese choose to select any dean or canon or archdeacon to represent them, all well and good. But to pack a so-called representative assembly of Churchmen with scores of nominees of Prime Ministers and Bishops, is to my mind most objectionable. If they are right and fit men they will generally find their way into Convocation. The decision of the disestablished Church of Ireland on this point has been, in my judgment, most wise.

(3) I suggest, in the third place, that the existing modes of electing Proctors for the parochial clergy should be clean swept away, and that *each diocese (when properly reduced) should return three clerical representatives*. I would give every officiating clergyman in the diocese, whether incumbent or curate, three votes,—that is, one vote for each of three names. I would also allow the principle of representing minorities in order to secure the representation of all shades of opinion, and would, therefore, permit any clergyman to cumulate all his three votes on one name. Not least, I would let any one vote by paper, if he pleases, and thus take away all excuse from the very lazy or the very poor for not voting at all.

(4) I suggest, in the fourth place, that there ought to be *an equal member*

of lay Churchmen as well as clergymen in the Reformed Convocation.* I would call on the lay Churchmen of each diocese to elect three suitable laymen to represent them, either peers or commoners, permitting the cumulative vote and the vote by papers, as in the case of the election of clergymen. As to the qualification of electors, I would allow every man to have a vote who would declare publicly that he is a Churchman, and that he attends habitually some Church of England place of worship. More qualification than this I cordially dislike. The sacramental test is very objectionable. Less qualification than this I would never permit. To talk of a man being a Churchman who openly opposes the Church, and regularly attends a Dissenting chapel, is an insult to common sense. It was all very fine to talk of every Englishman being in the eyes of the law “a Churchman” a century and a half ago. It is too late to talk such nonsense in 1870. Let me add that on no account would I give votes to Church women! I do not agree with Mr. Stuart Mill. Women have joys and sorrows enough at home, without being dragged into the excitement of elections.

(5) I suggest, in the last place, that in any Reformed Convocation, *Bishops, clergy, and laity should all sit together in one house*, and discuss all subjects face to face. The endless squabbles between the Upper and Lower House of Canterbury would then be put an end to for ever. The gulf between bishops and clergy would be effectually bridged over, and the relation between them placed on a more Scriptural footing than it is now. This is the plan at York already.—The Bishops would then have an opportunity of knowing what public opinion is, and of discovering that they are not infallible, by being rubbed up against the minds of the laity. The laity would have an opportunity of enlightening the eyes of the Bishops, and of telling them what is really going on in the Church and the world. This alone would be of immense advantage to all parties.† Whether the three orders of bishops,

* I say an “equal number” of laymen at least. I have no great objection to having a greater number of laymen than clergymen in Convocation. I only feel that very large bodies of men are found useless for discussion, and are too apt to devolve everything on committees. An English Convocation, if every county was a diocese, and every diocese returned three clerical and three lay proctors, would be an inconveniently large body.

† I regret to see that our Irish brethren of the Disestablished Church, in forming their “Church body,” are unable to agree on this subject. I do not for a moment contend that it is *essential* that Bishops, clergy, and laity should all sit together in one house; but I do contend that it is eminently *expedient*. Nothing, I am certain, has injured our Church so much, for three centuries, as the distance between the Bishops and laity. Nothing so thoroughly accounts for the singularly unwise line of action which our Bishops have frequently adopted as their want of personal conference with the laity. Nothing, I am persuaded, would be so useful for Irish and English Bishops, as to meet leading laymen more frequently, and to ascertain by personal intercourse, what the laity think and feel. “Precedents” no doubt may be against it. It is too late in this age of the world to talk about “precedents.” Common sense is dead against precedents in this case. So long as the Bishops adhere to their resolution of keeping to themselves, the public will always suspect them of a Popish tendency, however little they may mean it. The laity will never admit that there is one bit more special wisdom

clergy, and laity should always vote together as one body, or at any time be separated, is another question. I can conceive it possible that on some occasions, if one-third of the whole body demanded it, it might be desirable to vote by orders. But this, after all, is a matter of detail. The main point I contend for is that Bishops, presbyters, and laymen, should all sit in one house together. It would help to destroy and sweep away the superstitious line of entire separation between clergy and laity, which has hitherto been the rule.

Such are the suggestions which I venture to throw out for the reform of Convocation. Right or wrong, wise or foolish, they are the result of long and patient consideration. Let men laugh at them, if they please, as crude and visionary speculations. I only declare my solemn conviction that if Convocation is to be allowed to go on meeting, as it does now, some such reforms as I have indicated ought to be made. Without some such reforms I am certain that Convocation will never secure much confidence or respect from the bulk of English Churchmen. Convocation as it is, I unhesitatingly assert, is a mere mockery and delusion, and had far better cease to exist. If the leading orators in the Upper and Lower House of Canterbury Convocation had any idea of the way in which most thinking people regard their proceedings at present, they would be rather surprised.

Would such a Reformed Convocation do any good? This is a knotty question, and one which will receive various answers.

In giving my own opinion, I should be sorry to be misunderstood. I have no great opinion of the value of any Synod or Convocation, however constituted. I never forget that, like General Councils, as the twenty-first Article says, they are “assemblies of men whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God; and they may err, and sometimes have erred in things pertaining to God.” I have seen enough of the Scotch Presbyterian assemblies to learn that in any Convocation “talking” men are unduly exalted, and silent, solid, sensible men are unduly depressed. But notwithstanding all this, I dare not say that no Convocation ought to be held at all. In fact, there are grave reasons why I think that a properly constituted Convocation might do much good.

(1) If any one asks me to specify in detail what a Reformed Convocation could do, I reply that so long as the Establishment lasts, and the Church of England is connected with the State, there is of course very little that Con-

and infallibility in *Bishops alone*, than there is in the *Pope alone*. If the Irish Bishops decide on sitting alone, I venture the prediction that the decision will be a source of weakness to the Irish Church as long as the world stands. If anything is to save Episcopacy, it must be a judicious use of constant conference between the Bishops and the laity. If any reader is not convinced, I ask him to compare the speeches of Bishops sitting alone in Convocation and the same Bishops addressing a lay audience out of Convocation, and mark the difference.

vocation could do, unless the Crown gave it licence. What mischievous degree of licence Mr. Gladstone may give it some day, no man can possibly tell. But, in any case, it would do far less harm than the present so-called Convocation does. Conferences and discussions are things from which God's truth has nothing to fear, so long as its advocates can get a fair hearing. The mere admission of the laity would alone be a salutary revolution. I have more confidence in the good sense of lay Churchmen than of clergymen. The influence of the lay element would effect a great change in the debates. If the speeches made, in the discussions of the reformed body, were not soon vastly improved in tone, I should be greatly surprised. Some bishops and archdeacons and deans, I suspect, would never talk as they sometimes do now, if they knew that they were talking under the eyes and ears of two or three hundred picked laymen from every part of England.

(2) If the Established Church of England were to be assaulted, as I have little doubt she soon will be, it is undeniable that a Reformed Convocation would be an immense help in offering resistance to the attack. Through its agency an expression of public Church opinion might be obtained in a week's time. Through its aid an organized front might at once be presented to the foe. If the Irish Church had been properly organized when Mr. Gladstone first attacked her, the result of the recent conflict might have been very different. Few Sebastopols possess a Todleben who can extemporize impregnable defences in a few days. *Si vis pacem para bellum. [If you want peace, prepare for war.]*

(3) Finally, if the English Establishment is overthrown, and the Church of England is suddenly called upon to form a "Church Body," and adapt herself to her new circumstances, some reform of Convocation like that I have tried to sketch out would become an absolute necessity. Like every Colonial Church, and like our brethren in Ireland, we should be obliged to organize ourselves, whether we liked it or not. What the result of such an organization might be it is hard to say. God forbid that we should ever come to such a state of things! But it is well to look forward. Forewarned, forearmed.

Whether the disestablished Church of England, in such a case, would hold together or not—whether the High Church body would be insane enough to try to reverse the Gorham decision, or wise enough to offer a moderate definition of what they mean by baptismal regeneration—whether, in short, we should end with having two Episcopal Protestant Churches in England or one,—all these things are in the womb of the future. "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof." In the meantime, to prevent many present evils and to secure more present strength—to bring in the all-important help of the laity—and to be prepared for every possible emergency, I strongly advocate a sweeping reform of Convocation.

In my next paper I hope to take up the question of reform in our Cathedral

bodies.

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