

A CHURCHMAN'S DUTY  
ABOUT  
DIOCESAN CONFERENCES.

BEING HINTS AND THOUGHTS ABOUT THEM.

BY THE  
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*Stradbroke Vicarage,*  
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## DIOCESAN CONFERENCES.

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DIOCESAN Conferences are a subject which demands the serious attention of all faithful Churchmen in the present day. He that refuses to consider them, and "passes by on the other side," is no true friend to the Church of England.

Diocesan Conferences are a great fact. Whether they will ever do as much good as their promoters expect, may be very doubtful: but they are a fact. Whether we like them or not, they exist. Whether we choose to take any part in them or not, they live and move and have a being. They have been held already in the dioceses of Carlisle, Chester, Lichfield, Ely, Peterborough, Bath and Wells, Rochester, and Norwich. They are said to be proposed, and likely to take place in Lincoln, Exeter, Salisbury, and Chichester. To ignore them as mere fancies and speculations, is impossible; to turn our backs on them, and refuse to touch them, is childish and unwise.

After all, where is the man who could undertake to prove that there is anything unreasonable in a Diocesan Conference? Common sense itself seems to dictate that a periodical meeting of the bishop, clergy, and laity of a diocese, in order to consider matters of common interest to the Church, is right and wise. Presbyterians and Congregationalists have long had such Conferences, and found them useful. Why, then, are we to suppose that they are not likely to be useful when taken up by Episcopalians? The mere fact that they tend to diminish the autocratic authority of the bishops, to lessen the isolation of their present position, and to encourage the practice of bishops taking counsel with their clergy and laity, is no small recommendation of the institution.

To denounce Diocesan Conferences as wicked and wrong, as the manner of some is, to say the least, is unjust and unfair. Where is the sin of them? Of course they are not Evangelistic institutions. They are not preaching missions or revivals, nor anything else of a directly edifying character. But surely we are not to be told that Christians ought to neglect ecclesiastical machinery and

organization altogether! No one can read the Acts and Epistles of the New Testament, without seeing a good deal said about the outward framework, and good ordering of a Church. Meat and drink are not the only things necessary to make up a banquet. Wise men do not despise plates and knives and forks and tables and chairs. These things have their uses, though we do not eat them. To affect to despise ecclesiastical machinery because it is only *machinery* is wild work, and unworthy of any but a fanatic.

But what is the duty of English Churchmen in the matter of Diocesan Conferences? This is a point which requires serious consideration. Assuming that they are likely to spread all over the land, and to be held in every diocese, what is the position that Churchmen ought to take up about them?—What are the points that we ought to aim at in order to make them useful, and prevent their doing harm?—These are matters on which I shall venture to make a few suggestions. The usefulness of a Diocesan Conference depends very much on its constitution and working. It may easily become a very mischievous machine, and do great harm, or else sink into deserved contempt, and be ignored by three-quarters of the diocese. Let us try to get a few clear ideas upon the subject.

I. The constitution of a Diocesan Conference is the first point which requires consideration. That it is an assembly of the laity as well as the clergy of a diocese, is a point which I take for granted. Here, at any rate, there is no difference of opinion. But how ought such an assembly to be framed, and what are the elements of which it ought to be formed? These are very serious questions.

Speaking generally, there are only two ways in which a Diocesan Conference can be formed. It must either be a collective body or an elective body. Let me explain briefly what I mean by these terms.

An *elective* Diocesan Conference is formed by each rural deanery, or hundred, or district in a county electing two or three clergymen and two or three laymen, to act as its representatives. These clerical and lay representatives, together with the bishop and certain *ex-officio* clerical and lay members, compose the Diocesan Conference. This, I believe, is the constitution of the Conferences held in the dioceses of Lichfield, Carlisle, Rochester, Chester, and Peterborough.

A *collective* Diocesan Conference consists of all the clergy of every parish in the diocese, together with all the churchwardens, and one or two lay representatives from each parish, chosen by the *bonâ fide* Churchmen of the parish. These clergymen and laymen, together with the Bishop and certain *ex-officio* clerical and lay members, compose the Conference. This is the constitution of the Conference held in the large diocese of Norwich, in the autumn of 1870.

It will be evident at a glance to any reflecting person, that there is a wide

difference between these two kinds of Conferences. Which constitution is the best? Which is most likely to excite the interest, and receive the sympathy and co-operation of most English Churchmen? I shall offer a few remarks on this point. It is one on which my own mind is entirely made up.

I say then that an *elective* Conference appears to be open to several very grave objections. I will not waste time by saying that it is a novelty, and quite unlike the ancient Diocesan Synod, which always included the whole of the clergy, and sometimes as many as seven laymen from each parish. (See Hook's Church Dictionary: article Synods.) The objections I have to state are purely practical.

(a) An *elective* Conference is most unlikely to attach to itself the general feeling of the diocese. At least three-fourths of the parishes will have no place or voice in its proceedings. A collective Conference secures to each parish a connecting link of interest. When a parish knows that its own parson, and its own churchwardens, and its own lay representatives are present at the Conference, it will care for the Conference proceedings.

(b) An *elective* Conference is almost certain to increase party-spirit and division in a diocese. The election of two or three representative clergy in each rural deanery, is sure to divide the already divided parsons into two or three distinct parties. A more ingenious device for setting a whole diocese by the ears and promoting ill-feeling, I cannot conceive. The best clergy will often be rejected. The minority will always feel that its own opinions are not represented in the Conference, and will regard its proceedings with indifference. A collective Conference excludes no clergyman, and enables every phase of opinion to have a place and a voice in the assembly.

(c) An *elective* Conference in the southern part of England, will probably shut out almost every Evangelical clergyman. The Evangelical clergy are certainly not one in four of the whole clerical body south of the Trent, and of course would not be elected. Their exclusion would naturally not be satisfactory to themselves and their congregations, and we may hope, would not be satisfactory to the bishops. At any rate the bishops would find that the Evangelical body would care very little for the proceedings of an assembly in which the advocates of their views were shut out and never heard. In a collective Conference the exclusion of any school of opinion is simply impossible.

(d) An *elective* Conference is likely to be exceedingly wanting in the popular element among its lay members. Most rural deaneries, if called upon to elect two or three lay representatives to a Diocesan Conference would naturally choose the nobility, magistrates, and landed gentry residing or owning property in the deanery. The result of this would be most disastrous. The middle classes, the farmers, the shopkeepers, and respectable tradesmen would be almost entirely excluded. The Conference, in most dioceses, so far as the laity are concerned, would become a purely aristocratic body, and the very class

which is the back-bone of Dissent and Scotch Presbyterianism would be most foolishly shut out and left in the cold. A collective Conference, on the contrary, is entirely free from this fatal objection. The churchwardens, as a body, are precisely the persons whom a wise Church ought to try to gather together and bring forward.

The only objection that I can see to a *collective* Conference is its enormous size and unwieldiness. But even this objection does not appear to me insuperable.

In the diocese of Norwich, the difficulty was got over by splitting up the Conference into five sections, and holding it at five different centres on five successive days, each section discussing the same subjects, and the bishop presiding at each centre. Why the same plan should not have been adopted in other dioceses I am unable to see. Of course the plan entails some trouble and expense. But the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. At any rate, after the successful experiment of Norwich, no bishop has a right to say the plan is impracticable. The plan has been tried in the largest diocese in England, and has succeeded.

The plain truth is that English dioceses are far too large. They are utterly unlike any diocese in scriptural and apostolic times, and ought to be broken up and rearranged. At present they are far too large for any bishop, of the common order of men, to work them with comfort to himself or full benefit to the Church. They ought to be each divided into two or three, and then this difficulty about Diocesan Conferences would right itself. If the bishops will not take this matter up, the fault lies at their own door. But one thing is very certain in my judgment. No Diocesan Conference will ever do much good, unless its constitution is thoroughly liberal, democratic, and broad. So long as Diocesan Conferences are elective and consist of five or six men from each rural deanery, they will never prosper.

After all I cannot help thinking that the precise constitution of a Diocesan Conference is a question on which the opinion of the diocese itself ought to be consulted. The Churchmen of a modern English Diocese are not ignorant heathen, or little babies who cannot think for themselves. It seems hardly fair and respectful in the nineteenth century to impose on a diocese an ecclesiastical organization about which the parishes have had no opportunity of expressing their judgment. No doubt it saves a great deal of trouble for a bishop to inform his diocese that he proposes to hold a Diocesan Conference, and to request each deanery to elect half a dozen clergymen and laymen to be its representatives at the said Conference! But I venture a grave doubt whether such a course of proceeding is likely to create much interest in the minds of middle-class Churchmen, and whether it would not be far wiser and more useful to the Church to begin by inviting the opinion of the clergy and laity of each parish, singly and separately, before framing a constitution.

I have yet to learn that the *elective* constitution adopted in the dioceses of Rochester, Peterborough, and Carlisle, was examined and approved by the parishes of those dioceses, before it was launched. But I do know that in the huge diocese of Norwich, in which I live, the parishes were consulted, and that the general feeling, from the very first, was strongly in favour of the *collective* system. The Norwich Conference itself was attended by 2,246 persons in all, at five different centres, Norwich, Ipswich, Halesworth, Fakenham, and Lynn. It was attended altogether by no less than 739 clergymen, 763 churchwardens, and 563 elected lay representatives, beside “ex officio” members. The interest exhibited by the laity, most of them middle-class men, was marked and unmistakable. And it is a striking fact that the proceedings at each of the five centres concluded with an almost unanimous vote that no Diocesan Conference ought to be held except a collective one, including all the clergy, with churchwardens and lay representatives from every parish.

My own conclusion about the whole matter is very decided. If you want a Diocesan Conference to be useful, and to interest the whole body of Churchmen in the diocese, you must adopt the *collective* system, and give every parish a place and voice in the proceedings, whatever trouble or inconvenience it may cost. The *elective* system is utterly wanting in the broad, liberal, popular, and democratic element which the spirit of the times imperatively demands. It is behind the age. It has an unhappy tendency to become narrow, exclusive, aristocratic, and oligarchical. As such it will never arrest the attention or command the affection of the farmers, tradesmen, and intelligent artisans. The Norwich constitution does this, and in my judgment is the only one that will succeed. The elective system may live, but it will never flourish.

II. The second point in Diocesan Conferences which demands the attention of Churchmen is the extent of their action and operations. This is a point of grave importance. If we love the Church of England, and wish to preserve our dioceses from strife and confusion, we must labour to confine Diocesan Conferences to their proper work.

Legal power, we must remember, Diocesan Conferences have not. They cannot alter a word in the Articles, Prayer-book, Rubrics, or Canons of the Church of England. They cannot compel a single incumbent in the diocese to do anything he does not like, so long as he observes the law of the Church and the State. They cannot oblige him to wear a surplice in the pulpit, or walk in a procession, or adopt a particular hymn-book, or support a particular Society, if he has no will to do it. They may pass as many resolutions as they please, declaring that such and such things *ought* to be done in the diocese, but they have not the slightest power to *enforce* them. Let this not be forgotten.

Of moral power, however, Diocesan Conferences will always possess a good deal. Common sense points out that if they only recommend things as

“desirable,” “beneficial,” and “expedient,” such recommendations are sure to have weight. The mere fact that an assembly composed of the bishop, dean, archdeacons, and a number of leading clergymen and laymen “recommends,” would bind the consciences of many, and become a heavy burden to some. This is precisely the reason why I have said, and repeat it most emphatically, that Diocesan Conferences ought to be strictly confined to their proper work.

The proper work of a Diocesan Conference is consultation, deliberation, expression of opinion, discussion, comparison of views,—and not action. In this respect its proceedings, in my judgment, ought to resemble closely those of the annual Church Congresses, and at these meetings even resolutions are strictly prohibited. The moment a Diocesan Conference attempts to do anything it is almost sure to do mischief. It will array class against class, parish against parish, clergymen against clergymen, deanery against deanery, diocese against diocese, from one end of the land to the other. There is nothing that a free Englishman dislikes so much as the very appearance of dictation from those who have no authority to dictate. The more trifling the “recommendations” the more likely he is to assert his independence, entrench himself behind his legal rights, and refuse compliance. Give him ideas to think over, if you like, but leave him to work out the ideas for himself.

Action, and action of very useful nature to the Church of England, may possibly be the ultimate result of well-constituted Diocesan Conferences. Men of different schools periodically brought together, and seeing each other face to face, may gradually learn to understand one another, and discover common grounds of operation. High Churchmen may possibly discover that Evangelical Churchmen are not Dissenters, that they love the Church of England as much as any, and that they are not wild, violent, rude, “unlearned, and ignorant men.” Evangelical Churchmen may gradually find out that all High Churchmen are not Papists, and that a man may belong to the school of Andrews and Beveridge, and yet preach justification by faith. After the Conference is over some common line of action in some useful direction may be discovered. But to expect that a Diocesan Conference can ever initiate action or help a Bishop to govern a diocese by a series of committees, one taking up education, another missions, a third Church building, and so forth, is to expect that which will never be found. The attempt would only end in divisions, quarrels, collisions, and confusion.

The favourite idea of many that a Diocesan Conference can ever become a Bishop’s Council, is simply absurd. It would be a body far too large, however constituted, to serve any such purpose. Those who propound it can never have taken a practical view of the subject. For example, in a diocese like Norwich the mere election of three clergymen and three laymen in each rural deanery would make up a Conference of at least 250 members, beside officials! He who supposes that a body of 300 persons can ever form a Council, or do much

business beside talking, must surely have taken leave of his common sense.

A Bishop's Council, consisting of 20 or 30 well-chosen Churchmen, would doubtless be a very useful body, and an immense help to a bishop. The election of such a Council might very properly be left to a collective Diocesan Conference. It would make an excellent body of electors. For such a purpose, and for the election of clerical and lay proctors for a Reformed House of Convocation, a Diocesan Conference might really prove very useful. But all other action beside this ought, in my opinion, to be strictly forbidden. The attempt to do anything, unless I am greatly mistaken, will only end in disastrous failure.

III. The duty of Churchmen about Diocesan Conferences is the last point about which I desire to offer a few remarks. I shall say but little upon it, and my opinion must be taken for what it is worth.

My first remark is that no Churchman ought to absent himself from a Diocesan Conference, so long as its business is conducted fairly and impartially. Of course in an elective Conference he cannot be present unless he is an elected member. But if he is elected, let him attend by all means. To refuse attendance because we do not like the constitution of a Conference, is to act the part of a sulky child, and to miss golden opportunities of doing good.

My second remark is that all who attend Diocesan Conferences should strive to do their duty, and to give a right tone to the proceedings. Let them not waste precious time in flattering Peers and Prelates, making complimentary speeches, and talking common-place platitudes. Such speaking and talking are unworthy of a solemn Church assembly, and may be left to political dinners and agricultural meetings. Let the Churchman who goes to a Diocesan Conference go for business, and speak to the point, if he speaks at all. Let him express his own views courteously, keep his temper, and respect those who disagree with him. But let him stand up boldly for truth, protest courageously against error, and testify against everything that is wrong. In the largest assemblies it is wonderful to see what may be done by two or three bold, faithful, watchful, outspoken men. Truth never need fear collision.

My third and last remark is that we should all watch against the tendency to a narrow-minded, isolated line of action which so unhappily prevails in many quarters in the Church of England. To abstain from all public meetings in which we cannot have our own way, to retire from any assembly of Churchmen where we are likely to meet with any contradiction, to be incessantly finding fault with things around us, but never trying to amend them, all this may seem right to some minds. It admits of grave inquiry whether it is not selfishness, laziness, and cowardice, disguised under other names.

To come forward boldly on every opportunity,—to speak out boldly and courteously for Christ's truth, fearing the face of no man,—to contend earnestly for the faith and the real doctrine of the Church of England, even if we



stand alone,—this, I believe firmly, is the bounden duty of every true Protestant Churchman in the present day. It may cost us much self-denial and exertion,—it may be a heavy cross to flesh and blood,—it may entail on us many painful collisions and vexation of spirit,—but it is the line of duty. If a man dislikes the Church of England, let him retire from it and join some other body of Christians. But if he remains in our communion, let him do all he can to strengthen and improve it.

To shut ourselves up in a corner,—to avoid the company of every one who disagrees with us,—to allow the affairs of the Church to be managed by unsound men, and the helm to be left in untrustworthy hands,—all this may seem to some very spiritual and very right. I cannot agree with them. If we want Diocesan Conferences to be really useful to the Church of England, we must come forward and labour incessantly to make them what they ought to be.

I leave the whole subject here, and commend the points I have touched to the attention of all Churchmen into whose hands this paper may fall. I lay no claim to infallibility. I only want to set men thinking. I can only say that the conclusions at which I have arrived, are the result of careful observation and reflection.

My advice to all Churchmen who have to do with Diocesan Conferences is to contend earnestly for a constitution which gives to each parish a place and a voice. I believe in my conscience that this system is the one most suited to the times, and most calculated to be useful to the Church of England.