

Session I

The First Lambeth Conference and Medley's Charge of 1868

By the summer of 1868 John Medley, Bishop of Fredericton was in the twenty-third year of his episcopacy. Queen Victoria had been on the throne for thirty years, John A MacDonal was Prime Minister of the new Dominion of Canada and the famous Civil War general, U S Grant was President of the Republic to the south. 1868 was also the year after an experimental gathering of bishops in Communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury held September 1867 at Lambeth Palace in London. Medley of Fredericton had not attended.

Medley's eighth Charge to his clergy was delivered on the thirtieth of June 1868. Printed at Fredericton as was typical, the Charge was also printed that October in Oxford. The apparent cause of this additional English printing seems to have been Medley's desire to explain his absence from the Lambeth gathering and to make known in England his thoughts on the event.

The first Lambeth Conference of 1867 was an unprecedented affair. The seventy-six bishops who attended were fully aware of the historic nature of their gathering. In February 1867, Archbishop Longley had issued an invitation to the 151 bishops of the Anglican Communion. The term "synod," with its associated connotations was omitted in favour of the more generic "meeting" and "conference." Longley wrote, "I request your presence at a meeting of the bishops in visible communion with the United Church of England and Ireland ... to be holden at Lambeth, under my presidency on 24th September next and the three days following."¹ The immediate cause cited for the gathering was an address from the "Metropolitan and bishops of Canada" issued in 1865.² Such a gathering would seek God's blessing through worship followed by "brotherly consultations" on "practical questions" which would tend to the "advancement of the kingdom of our Lord ...and to the maintenance of greater union in our missionary work, and to increased (sic) intercommunion among ourselves."³ Medley had responded to Longley's invitation on April 2, 1867. He complained of the shortness of the notice stating that he had already scheduled a confirmation tour in part of his diocese for that September. He wrote, "as I could not perform these duties in the winter, I should be compelled to postpone them all."⁴ Medley asked leave to be excused from attending.

¹ Longley Letters, VI, p.6. cited in Stephenson, *Lambeth 1867*, 187.

² Ibid., 188.

³ Ibid..

⁴ Longley Letters, VI, p.115 cited in Stephenson, *Lambeth 1867*, 199.

In his Charge, Medley expanded on his concerns. "It appeared to me that in consideration of the vast distance from England of many of the colonial dioceses, and the grave importance of the step contemplated, a longer time should have been allowed to give the matters selected for deliberation full consideration."⁵ He further added that a longer delay before the meeting would have granted time for obtaining "the judgement of the colonial bishops generally, and of their clergy (and indeed of the laity also" on the matters to be discussed. The reason being that "if the decrees of that council were intended to carry with them the force of general consent" such a broad based consultation would have tended to aid in their acceptance. Medley further queried the wisdom of calling such a gathering of national and regional churches, some established, some not and some with an indeterminate relationship to the state "without distinctly stating the purpose for which we were called together and the subjects to be considered."⁶ Medley also demurred "that when only three days were allotted for deliberation ... I deemed it impossible that in so short a time a large body could come to satisfactory conclusion on points." As it turns out Medley was not alone in this criticism. Even Archbishop Longley's American friend Bishop H.J. Whitehouse of Illinois, while replying positively to the invitation, nonetheless added, "the only drawback was the limit of three days which your letter defined and which with our experience of such matters in the 'house of bishops' will strike us as unpractically short ... two to three weeks would appear to me a minimum."⁷

Medley, like many of those attending from overseas, including the American church's Presiding Bishop, John Henry Hopkins of Vermont, compared the gathering to the first church council at Jerusalem mentioned in Acts chapter 15. Medley lamented that, unlike Jerusalem, Lambeth "did not in any way touch or attempt to settle, as the first council of the church clearly did settle, disputed questions of ceremonial or of doctrine."⁸ Medley was referring to the Anglican Communion's international scandal known as the Colenso Affair. For Medley and many others, clear matters of doctrine were at issue. He wrote, "A bishop (John Colenso of Natal in South Africa) ... has openly impugned the genuineness and authenticity of certain books of

⁵ *A Charge to the Clergy of the Diocese of Fredericton delivered at his eighth Triennial Visitation, in the Church of St Paul Portland, St John, June 30, 1868 by John, Bishop of Fredericton* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1868), 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ Longley VI, Letters and Papers, Lambeth Conference 1867, Lambeth Palace Library, 173-174.

⁸ 1868 Charge, 28.

Holy Scripture; who denies (in his work on the Epistle to the Romans) both the eternal punishment of the wicked, and the security of the happiness of the righteous (thereby, as I conceive, impugning the truth of our Lord's words)." Medley further understood, it appears erroneously, that Colenso, "is said to have taught, that our Lord is not a proper object of worship." The immediate historical context of the scandal was as follows.

In 1853, English officials appointed J.W. Colenso bishop of the new see of Natal in South Africa. In 1861 his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* was published. Questioning the concept of eternal punishment as well as the basis of the Church's sacramental theology, the work aroused much indignation. Papers casting doubt on the authorship and accuracy of the Pentateuch followed. In 1865 his Metropolitan, Bishop Robert Gray of Capetown, deposed Colenso. Colenso disputed Gray's jurisdiction and appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London — the highest court in the British Empire. The Privy Council ruled in Colenso's favor based on the technicality that Colenso's appointment preceded that of Gray. An exasperated Gray nonetheless convened a tribunal of bishops and formally excommunicated Colenso in 1866. Colenso ignored the sentence and continued on as bishop of his diocese. Indeed he would continue on as bishop in possession of the cathedral and all its endowments until his death in 1883. The schism would continue into the twentieth century.

Medley acknowledged that legal matters were involved, but he insisted that "it can never be said of any Christian Church, that it is its duty to leave the consideration of all spiritual questions to the civil power."⁹ He also "recollected, that if anything can be safely said of the Anglican Church, is that it has never been contented with defensive teaching." Medley pointed to the persistent anti-Roman polemic of Anglicans since the Reformation. He pointed out that "whatever Roman Catholics may have added to the old faith, at all events they believe, in common with ourselves, in the fall of man, in our redemption by Christ, in the genuineness and authenticity of the canonical books, in the eternal punishment of the cursed and the secured happiness of the blessed." The question for Medley was "are we to allow one who denies that which is common to all Christians to be considered in full communion with us, whilst we repel those who are guilty of no such blasphemy?"¹⁰ Medley maintained that "the question of communion with Bishop Colenso may be properly separated from the mode of trial to which he has been subjected."

⁹ 1868 Charge, 29

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

Not having attended the Conference, and its proceedings having been sealed, Medley was unaware of the heated debate surrounding the issue of Colenso.¹¹ He was however aware that though the Conference made no official pronouncements “a declaration on the subject was signed by many bishops present.” He was in error when he asserted that it was not signed “by a majority of the body.”¹² What actually happened was that during the lunch break following the inconclusive debate, the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce crafted a brief resolution and circulated it amongst the assembled bishops. The resolution read, “We the undersigned bishops declare our acceptance of the sentence pronounced upon Dr Colenso by the metropolitan of South Africa and his suffragans, as being spiritually a valid sentence.”¹³ Fifty-six out of a possible seventy-three bishops signed the document — the three bishops directly involved in the case as Colenso’s judges could, of course, not sign. All the Canadian bishops signed as well as all nineteen American bishops present. Archbishop Longley had controlled the official meeting but the sentiment vis a vis the Colenso Affair was too much to contain. While the official proceedings of the first Lambeth Conference contain no condemnation, the historical record of the actual events says otherwise. Dr Colenso was condemned at the first Lambeth Conference by the vast majority of the bishops assembled.

Matters in New Brunswick

Medley characterized the times as one of “perilous crisis” for the Church in New Brunswick. In a province “so thinly peopled” and economically dependent on “speculation” with people scattered and isolated the atmosphere was “very unfavourable to religious thought and religious unity.” As he said, “Often without any literature, feeding solely on the husks of a passing newspaper ... what can we expect but those spasmodic bursts of religious feeling, which supply an electric life for a few weeks and then sicken, droop and die away into deadness again?” Contrasted to this generic frontier Protestantism, Medley pointed to the “sober and sustained majesty of many parts of our Liturgy” but added that it requires “an educated mind in order to thoroughly enjoy it.” He lamented that “the condensed force of the collects passes over the heads of uneducated persons.”¹⁴ The solution was an active clergy zealously working to “call Church-knowledge and life into action.”

There were however obstacles and challenges to be met. “In former times, Medley posited, clergymen, whether ignorant or not, whether holy men or the reverse, were respected for their office.”¹⁵ This was no longer the case. “Many of the laity equal, or even exceed, the clergy

¹¹ R. N. Hebb, “The Canadians at Lambeth: An Examination of the Canadian Bishops at the Lambeth Conferences of 1867, 1878 and 1888,” *The Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society*, 49; no. 1, 5-37, 2007

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹³ Stephenson, *Lambeth 1867*, 271-272.

¹⁴ 1868 Charge, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

in sacred knowledge; many more are masters of subjects connected with Biblical knowledge.” The rise of what was known as “Biblical criticism” a mode of scholarship which treated sacred Writ like any other ancient text and dismissed reverence for it as the Word of God, had also begun to take hold upon the well read mind. Medley warned “to meet it with unmanly lamentations is worse than useless. It is actually sinful ... it is equally useless to meet it with simple denunciation of infidelity. All men who doubt are not infidels.” The new learning was to be met by a better educated clergy. Medley stressed that “the learning which sufficed for a clergyman fifty years since, will not suffice for him now.”¹⁶ His clergy were urged to obtain books from the plentiful and cheap supply and then to engage the intellectual challenges of the age.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

Another theme of Medley's Charge was that of the Establishment of the Church of England in the province. As a general position applied across the board he asserted that "Providence has been for three centuries plainly teaching us that the strength of our Church does not lie in its connection with the State."¹⁷ As for the usefulness of the establishment of the Church in England he characterized it as a "fiction."¹⁸ In New Brunswick, "to talk of an established Church in this province at this time is one of the idlest dreams that could enter into the mind of man." Granted, the word was in the Statute book but the reality was far different. Emigration and the admission of all denominations into the legislature had "reduced that statute to a dead letter." Of this Medley heartily approved. Why should not churchmen work and support their own church and clergy as all other denominations in the province always had? Not only so, but the heritage of establishment was proving to "have yielded more odium than profit."¹⁹ Medley found that it contributed "to foster the injurious suspicion that the clergy of our Church are paid by Government, and have a secret support of which nobody can give an account."²⁰

As bishop, Medley had come to the point of being critical even of SPG support. Not that the colony had received it but that they continued to be dependent upon it to an unacceptable degree. As he stated, "it is clear to me that whenever a church is rooted in the affections of its people it ought to sustain its own clergy, to build its own churches, to establish its own schools and to consider itself ... bound to support its spiritual wants." If poorer regions or missions exist and the "settlers are poor and unable to provide the whole salary of a clergyman, their richer brethren should assist in bearing the burden." What was happening however was "a shame and a scandal that this burden, after sixty years of assistance, should be laid on charitable people in England, and especially on servants and poor agricultural labourers."²¹ Medley would have preferred that the diocese had "volunteered to take some of this burden on ourselves." The

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁹ 1868 Charge, 20

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

²¹ Ibid.

reality was that the church in the province faced a further £300 reduction in SPG aid the coming year. Medley did not lament the fact but rather stated that, “even if that withdrawal should lead to a temporary abandonment of some missions, I think it would be better to be a real honest Church, of somewhat smaller dimensions, doing our own work, and paying our own way, than to have the mere shadow of an establishment, and to be clinging to a real pauperism, with the affectation of a respectability that does not belong to us.”²²

²² Ibid., 22.

At the end of his Charge, Medley turned his attention to the issue of synod, the first meeting of which was to happen a few days later on July 2, 1868. Addressing the accusation that a synod would grant the bishop too much power and that he would wield it in an arbitrary manner, Medley replied. "For twenty years I have borne accusations and insinuations in silence, and have rested my justification on the good sense and good feeling of the whole diocese." He added that "without respect of persons, that I have not sought to crush, by the strong arm of power, those whose opinions differ from my own; that I have conferred benefices and honours on those who gave no support to my own views of truth; and if I have done this when I was in a position of greater independence, I must be less likely to do mischief when met by the strong check of continual public discussion."²³ The majority of churchmen in the province did not fear Medley's exercise of episcopal authority and worked with their bishop in the creation of synodical Church government. At the first meeting of July 2, 1868 six parishes held aloof, but by July 1871 all parishes attended the first incorporated synod of the diocese of Fredericton.

²³ Ibid., 43.