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The duty of Methodist ministers to probationers

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The Duty of Methodist Ministers to Probationers.

This great problem presents itself to the organizers of a church: How can the ideal, invisible church, be perfectly realized in the visible?

Our fathers were alive to this question, and in their wisdom patterned after God, whose heavenly church is porticoed by a probation. They saw the need of trial, for the church's sake, and for the good of the applicant at her doors. They also saw the need of training, that the church might be supplied with intelligent and disciplined workers, well used to the machinery with which they were to operate.

We have seen abundant reason to praise their wisdom, for by it the church has taught ^{her} ~~the~~ members to love her ways before binding them in solemn

covenant, thus gaining devoted adherents, and saving herself from many painful acts of excision.

But this plan, like all humanly-devised and humanly-operated arrangements, has suffered in its workings, from mismanagement and neglect. As a consequence, the Methodist minister finds two evils looking him in the face and challenging him to earnest effort for their suppression. One is: The reaction which follows the revival; the other: A loose and complaining adherence to the church.

It is too true that most of our sweeping revivals of religion are followed by discouraging reactions. Of the many who seem to be converted, often half are found unworthy of recommendation at the end of six months. To the preacher's sorrow and chagrin, the glorious harvest he thought he had reaped,

and hoped to garner, proves to be half chaff and cheat. It is sad to have such an ideal so marred, and he reads with shame the meager list that sums the faithful, deploring meanwhile the success of those malign powers whose combined craft has robbed and defeated him.

This fact is so notorious as to provoke sharp criticism, not only from sceptics - scoffers at our methods, but from devoted and godly people, who have learned to look upon revivals with a sort of dread, and whose prayer is for that constant power in the church that will bring men to Christ every Sabbath in the year. The taunt of a schoolboy, years ago, stung because it was true: "You Methodists! You sing, and pray, and get happy, and then backslide!"

The question we must meet, then, is: How can we prevent this spiritual reaction? In answer I must ask: Is it enough,

simply to place probationers under the care of class-leaders? If all class-leaders were up to Wesley's ideal, and the size of the class corresponding, we could almost answer yes. And it is to be hoped that there are many such leaders - men who carry a burden on their soul, men of sound sense, of sound piety, and with love enough in their hearts to send them inquiring after the daily life - after the heart-struggles of those they must meet and instruct. The spiritual life of young converts is well cared for - safely directed, nourished, and molded, by such men. How much the church owes to these sub-pastors we cannot know, until their crowns of peculiar glory tell us something of what they have done.

But such are comparatively few. The bond between many leaders and their class is very weak. They know very little of the real life - the soul-life, of those they lead. The little speech they

hear from sabbath to sabbath is almost the only source of their knowledge at this point. but though that may be honest, and intended to unfold the inner life, it is necessarily incomplete, one-sided, often formal, often unconsciously insincere, and so but a vague and unreliable indicator of the kind and degree of spiritual help required. Be the leader ever so wise, pious, appropriate, he can only give chance directions, the most general and vague advice. But if he is an incompetent leader, windy, wordy, without sense and appropriateness, his platitudes sound like a worn-out song, and do no one any good. From a meeting with such a leader, the anxious, hungry soul goes away still bearing the heart-ache - unfed, unled, uncheered, doubtful whether the class-meeting is a means of grace. What a pity to leave young probationers, converted or unconverted, in the dangerous and delicate days of their christian life, to

the tender mercies of such a man!

It seems clear therefore, that this is not sufficient. True, the minister must be a leader of leaders. It is his business, not only to see that they are faithful in their office, but that they use the best methods. Still, more than any others, probationers need the personal care and aid of their pastor.

See how it is with a converted probationer. Stirred by his pastor's appeals, led to the foot of the cross by his affectionate warning, guided in the act of saving faith by words he whispered in the dark hour, welcomed into the new life by his beaming smile and hearty grasp of the hand, he feels that next to Christ, he loves that faithful man. Indeed, the place he fills, no other in earth or heaven can occupy - not even father, mother, or wife. His pastor is an angel to him, sent to speak celestial words that flowed into his distraction like music, and calmed his spirit into peace.

His pastor is his spiritual father; and will be

not now in the infancy of his spiritual life. need the case of that father? The judgment of that man will be relied upon in preference to any other. All perplexing questions of doctrine and duty will be brought to him with expectation of an affectionate and thorough solution.

The young convert longs to speak his joy and gratitude in deeds. He finds the missionary spirit suddenly born within him. In the dawn, and full brightness of his new day, he sees the darkness from which he has escaped, redoubled, and remembering that others, and many he loves, are still lost in that darkness, he mingles with his first exclamations of joy, the most earnest appeals to the unsaved. It is the pastor's work to fan that holy flame of love. Or, if the new-born is timid, he must inspire courage, and lead him into earnest and active work for Christ. Thus he will find he can often make the eloquence of a first love wonderfully persuasive.

The pastor ought to do this for the convert's sake. His first baptism of divine

love will not keep him safe for the future.

It is only the germ, to be developed into a beautiful and symmetrical life of love.

If the germ lies uncherished, it may soon lose its vitality. Peculiar temptations soon try the new-born. Satan has dark doubts to insinuate as soon as the heavenly threshold is passed, and he has driven many a newly-adopted child out of his Father's House. Now, if that first love can be set to work, and the new convert enabled to utilize his new joy, he finds at once another and a more solid assurance than his own feelings give him. Then, he will have less time to entertain the whisperer, who would tempt him to dally with danger - to become absorbed with the contemplation of his subjective states - to measure his spiritual life by the thermometer of feeling, and thus lead him, after his first transports are over, into doubt and despair. His mind will not be morbidly watching for feelings, but so interested in watching for souls, that subjective states will be in a measure forgotten - forgotten in the royal joy of saving men from (death.

With what trembling eagerness should a pastor rejoice before the portals of a soul, open to him as to no other. To enter the inner sanctuary of a life! To be taken into the confidence-chamber of a soul, where it whispers of faults, and wants, and feelings, and struggles, too sacred for the vulgar ear of the world! Then is the time for a pastor - a spiritual father, to clothe himself with purity and fidelity, and out of the treasures of his soul to bring forth help and counsel for the one who so confides in him!

But there is another class of probationers - the seekers. It is a sad fact that many of these go unaided after the special meetings have closed. After the solemn address of the minister on the last day of the protracted meeting, in which the sympathy, prayers, and counsels of himself and the church are pledged, these inquirers are gradually neglected - left to struggle with conviction and doubt, alone. Many such have wandered back into a more heartless indifference or colder

recklessness than before, frozen by a careless church and careless pastor! The fact is, these need the most delicate, the most genuine, the most assiduous attention. They should never be left alone, not for a day, if possible, until they find Christ. The leader cannot care for them, it may be, the pastor must.

We would say therefore, give probationers to the best leaders possible. For females, either appoint some lady, possessed of fine intuitions, and of a nature that calls out love, as leader, or give her, and others like her, special care over them. Drop a word to faithful men, here and there, wherever you see the confidence of a probationer placed, hinting at something that would help the latter. But after all this is done, the pastor's care and personal effort must be unwearying, and his faithfulness at this point should commend itself to these young sheep, to the church of Christ, and to God.

But mere spiritual guidance is not

all. It cures the first evil, and does much to cure the second, but not always enough. We need in these days, not simply a warm, zealous church, but a church whose members are intelligently devoted to herself and to Christ.

It is often flippantly remarked: "I love one church just as well as another;" and our mental comment is: "Yea, doubtless; but no church need feel flattered by your favor." It is a false notion of liberality that gives birth to such a remark. Instead of a noble charity, which despises bigotry with all its displays of sectarian narrowness, it is a loose liberalism - a sort of spiritual free-love, often born out of ignorance - perhaps oftener of a lack of true devotion to Christ. If that is the direction of our progress, pray God may he hang chogs on our wheels! For earnest and intelligent devotion to a particular church is no more a foe to true

charity than passionate love of one's mother makes the heart cold and unphilanthropic. On the contrary, it fosters true charity, as filial love fosters true philanthropy. Now, one grand secret of disregarded church ties, is ignorance. Many members of the Methodist Episcopal Church know almost nothing of her history, doctrines, or polity. I am persuaded that, could they hear the strange and eventful story of her birth in the midst of persecution; of her triumph through the might of heroes who gave their life for her; of her march through our forests, over our grand mountains and broad rivers, panting for the souls of men; of the eloquent tongues that have carried her joyful message; of the peculiar doctrines which gave her being, and strengthened her in the conflict God brought her forth to wage; - if they could stand on her mount of vision and scan her outlook on the future, and view the

gathering of her squadrons for the conquest of the world, they would yield her a more cheerful and grateful service. Standing before this majestic presence all athrob with divine heart-beats - with the breast-beavings of God's love for men, they would be shamed out of their littleness of soul, and their peevish complaints of the little sacrifices she asks.

I have thought that especially in our stations, and small circuits at least, a short course of lectures could be made to contribute largely to this end. With the enthusiasm a Methodist minister ought to have on such themes, and the thorough study he should give them, lectures prepared specially for probationers could be made very interesting and beneficial. There is a world of thrilling history and biography to draw from. And certainly our doctrines can be filled with life and power. They are life-giving and powerful in them-

selves, besides having a thrilling history in the experience of our founders, and of thousands of believers. So also could the usages and polity of our church be fully and clearly explained, especially if woven in, in graphic style, with history and incident.

Such lectures might be given on successive Sabbath evenings, having been announced before for the especial benefit of the probationers, yet commended to the church as a whole. The probationers might be gathered as a class in the front pews, and thus given such a prominent part, as the objects of the teaching, as to insure, not only their interest, but the interest of the church for their sake.

If these lectures were made what they should be, I am certain that not only would the probationers be instructed, delighted, and wedded to the church, but many of the older members would learn something new, and silently breathe deeper vows of devotion to their cherishing mother.

Thus I think the adherents of the church would be filled with a fulness of spiritual life from the very start. A new era of steady devotion, of all-the-year piety, would set in, keeping the church awake and active constantly; - an era in which the stated, protracted meeting would be done away, with its accompaniments of exhausting efforts, spasmodic enthusiasm, and dreaded reaction. In this era, the grace and love of God would walk hand in hand with the wisdom and fidelity of pastor and people, the one being cherished and constantly employed by the other, until every society should seem to the world a part of a living organism, working in perpetual harmony with the great body - the Church of Christ, contributing ever to one grand revival, whose steadily increasing might should leave no place for cessation or reaction, until the world shall stand redeemed before the throne of a triumphant Christ.