

## THE CIRCUIT SYSTEM.

BY ROBERT WILKES.

IN the early days of Methodism there were no stations. Each society was part of a circuit, and every preacher was a circuit preacher. In England there has been a gradual innovation upon this primitive usage. Important societies have been set apart as stations, especially in towns and cities; still the circuit system has a strong footing, for in the 704 circuits comprising the British Conference there are 1716 ministers, showing an average of over  $2\frac{1}{2}$  to each circuit. In Canada the tendency of later years has been towards the division of circuits proper to such an extent that, except on purely rural work, it may be questioned whether there be any circuits left as formerly constituted.

I do not propose to treat of the causes leading to this result, nor to question the goodness of the intentions with which circuits have been reduced to stations. In the Toronto Conference, in 1879, there were 47 stations with but one appointment each, 21 with but two; and although some of the Missionary Circuits have 10 to 12 appointments, yet the average of appointments on all circuits was but  $3\frac{1}{3}$ .

The Church is chiefly concerned to know what the tendency of this innovation is; and if injurious to the present vitality and to the future aggressiveness of the Church, there should be an early remedy devised, cost what it may.

Beyond all other Protestant Churches, Methodism is Connexional. This is largely promoted by the Itinerant Ministry. The most successful evangelists, the ablest administrators, the most powerful preachers, are admitted by all to be the property of the whole denomination, and not of any individual church; the whole Church, therefore, rejoices in the possession of all its ministers, and in equal claims upon their services.

*Stations tend to lessen this Connexional feeling.*—For three years the

individual minister devotes his whole time to one congregation. Three times a week, with few exceptions, he preaches to the same congregation; he is spared from his pulpit with reluctance; and if it be known that a brother from a less prominent neighbouring station is to occupy the pulpit, that the pastor may serve the smaller church, the congregation is often sensibly diminished. The tendency is therefore in the direction of congregational selfishness rather than in that of circuit liberality and connexional brotherhood.

*Stations weaken suburban appointments.*—The erection of town and city churches into stations compels the weak suburban churches to become stations also. The result is, that such churches are unable to comfortably maintain a pastor. By the effort to do so, their relative expenses are unduly increased and the work of God hindered. Not infrequently the incumbent suffers privations, and almost always the struggling cause is weakened. Brethren belonging officially to such societies should enjoy the stimulus of associating with the brethren of the larger churches at their Quarterly Boards, where they can feel that they are not isolated, and where they can derive encouragement, financially and spiritually, to push on the work of God. In aiding the weaker societies in true circuit relationship, the larger churches not only become a blessing, but they are themselves doubly blessed.

*Stations unduly exalt preaching talent.*—In the Gospel ministry "there are diversities of gifts, but the same spirit;" yet the gift now in greatest demand is that of pulpit ability. Churches maintained congregationally are compelled to hold preaching ability at a premium; they can't keep up their congregations and pay their way without it. The result is that many brethren of eminent usefulness are practically excluded