

Devotional Service

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MAY 15.—"THE DISTRICT MEETING AND ANNUAL CONFERENCE."

(See "Our Church," Chaps. 18 and 19.)

It requires some study as well as considerable observation to become familiar with the ecclesiastical machinery of the Methodist Church. We saw a few months ago in our topic study, "How Our Church is Governed," that the Methodist system begins with the individual member; then comes the local church with its classes and leaders, its official and trustee boards; then comes the district with its chairman, then the Annual Conference, and lastly the controlling body of all, the General Conference. It might be well to refer to the topic study of February 14th in *The Era*. It will give much help in the understanding of the present topic.

THE DISTRICT MEETING.

The first day.—The district meeting consists of all the ministers and probationers for the ministry within the bounds of the district; and one lay delegate for each minister or probationer in the active work from each circuit or mission, elected by ballot by the Quarterly Official Board. Every minister goes through the year with the expectation that all his work will pass under review at this annual district meeting, which is held in the month of May. The meeting usually occupies two days. The first day's session is attended by the ministers and probationers only, and the time is taken up chiefly with inquiries into the doctrinal views and personal character of the ministers and probationers. Every member is brought to an annual account as to his character and fitness for the work of the ministry, when the following questions are asked by the chairman concerning each minister and probationer:

1. Is there any objection to his moral and religious character?
2. Is there any objection to his doctrinal views and teachings?
3. Has he duly observed and enforced our discipline?
4. Has he been punctual in attending all his appointments?
5. Has he competent abilities for our itinerant work?

If these questions are all answered satisfactorily, the report is sent on to Conference by the District Secretary, but if any objections are urged, a Committee of Examination is usually appointed. The work of the probationers is then carefully looked into, and their fitness for the ministry examined. It is intended that only those who show by their gifts and graces their suitability for the work of the ministry shall be either received on trial or continued on probation.

"Who are recommended as supernumerary ministers?" is a question always asked at the district meeting. It is a trying ordeal for the man who has labored in the ministry for thirty, or forty, or fifty years when the time comes for him to step out from the ranks of the active workers.

Another question asked at the ministerial session of the district meeting is, "Can any measures be adopted for increasing the efficiency of our ministerial labors and the promotion of the work of God?" Sometimes this leads to a practical discussion which results in plans and principles being suggested of great value.

The second day.—On the second day, the laymen meet with the ministers, and the business affairs of the church are attended to. The chairman of the district presides and a secretary is elected by ballot. The first item of business is the reception of the reports from the various

circuits in the form of schedules. Each pastor is expected to present full and exact statistics of his charges, embracing many items. These statistics are tabulated and with other things, sent on to the Annual Conference for review.

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE.

General Session.—The Annual Conference is an event of considerable interest to both ministers and laymen. For the preachers, who have been laboring in remote places, where they have scarcely seen a brother minister during the whole year, it is an occasion looked forward to with unusual pleasure. The Conference is opened with singing and prayer. God's blessing is invoked on all the proceedings and thanksgiving is rendered for past mercies. The first regular business is the election of president. There are no nominations and the election takes place by ballot. It is regarded a great honor, indeed, the honor of a life-time to be elected President of Conference. The next business is the election of secretary, which is also by ballot.

Ministerial Session.—As in the district meeting there is a ministerial session on the day previous to the opening of Conference, when the reports from the districts are received and considered. All cases of ministerial standing and character come up before this session. The ministerial session must report to the general session of Conference.

At the Annual Conference all the statistics from the districts are received and tabulated for publication in the minutes. The various standing committees and boards are appointed for the year and the connexional interests are all carefully reviewed first in committee and then by the Conference. The pastoral address, which emanates from the Annual Conference, is intended to bring before the various congregations any matters of special importance.

STATIONING COMMITTEE.

Perhaps the part of the Conference business that is generally regarded as of great interest and importance is the stationing of the minister. To appoint two or three hundred men to the same number of circuits so that there will be general satisfaction is no small task. Every people thoroughly understand the difficulties of the Stationing Committee in performing this work. Individual circuits and ministers are very likely to think only of their own local interests, but the committee is in duty bound to weigh all claims and consider all interests.

PUBLIC MEETINGS.

As far as possible the connexional officers visit the Annual Conferences and report concerning their departments, and each evening there is a public meeting or anniversary when missionary, educational, temperance, Sunday-school and Epworth League matters are discussed. The great occasion of the Conferences is the Friday night meeting, when the probationers have given and their probation are received into full connection. Several of them relate their religious experience, and call to the ministry, after which their reception is moved and seconded by two of the older ministers who usually deliver appropriate addresses. Then follows a charge from the president, in which reference is made to the responsibility which the young preachers are assuming. The last two days of the Conference are always crowded with business, as the reports of committees are then presented. The last item on the programme is the reading of the stations and the election of chairman of districts.

POINTS FOR THE PRESIDENT.

Two parts of our Methodist system are to be discussed in this topic, the district

meeting and the Annual Conference. Look up the January number of *The Era* where, on page 29, you will find an article on "How Our Church is Governed." The section, "Stories in the Buildings," might appropriately be read as an introduction to this topic. Then arrange with two members of the League in advance, one to prepare a brief talk or paper on "The District Meeting," and the other to prepare one on "The Annual Conference." After this has been done, form a school and ask questions, such as "Who are members of the Annual District Meeting? When is it held? What business is done there? How is its chairman appointed? What is the Stationing Committee? How is it composed? How are we sure that the doctrines of the church are properly preached?" etc. Consult text-book, "Our Church," from which much of the foregoing is taken.

MAY 22.—"HOW THE KINGDOM GROWS"

Mat. 13: 1-9, 24-33; Mark 4: 26-29.

The harvest field is before us. There is the wheat ripe and ready for the reaper. There are the tares always harmful, and now about to be gathered together and burned. The appearance of this harvest scene suggests the conditions which brought it about. There must have been a sower, and seed, and soil—two sowers, two kinds of seed, but one class of soil. Each kind of seed brought forth according to its kind. The two products grew together until the harvest. The good seed produced was preserved, the bad seed brought forth was destroyed.

A SCHOOL-ROOM.

The Great Teacher turns this harvest field into a school-room for the instruction of humanity. The field is the world; in other words, the soil is the heart of mankind. The one sower with the good seed is the Son of God. The other sower with the bad seed is the evil one. The good seed develops into "The children of the kingdom," the bad seed into "The children of the wicked one." The two preform their life's activities side by side till the close of life. Then the former receive eternal reward; the latter suffer eternal loss. Such is the parable in bold outline.

SELECT OR REJECT.

One moral at least the parable, from its very nature, fails to teach, and that is, the capability of self-action, or the power of resistance on the part of the field—the heart of humanity. The fatalism which teaches that the soil of the human heart must receive and generate whatever seed is sown and that it is unchangeable and absurd. Unlike the field, the human heart has power of selection and rejection. It chooses its own seed, it shapes its own destiny.

THE DIVINE POWER.

With that kind and tender love which should touch and win our hearts, Jesus leaving his Father's bosom descended into our world to procure and to preach salvation—with his own hand to sow, in the furrows that repentance had made, the seeds of eternal life. Christ so loved us that he came himself with the good news, he appeared and with his own hand he sowed the good seed. He who made this earth, stood on it a preacher of salvation. No wonder Paul glorified his office as a preacher of righteousness, considering who had filled it before him. It was the pleasure Jesus felt in the good news he proclaimed, which so glowed in his countenance and lent such power and pathos and tenderness to his persuasive oratory that his very enemies confessed, "Never man spake like that man."