

The League the Pastor's Opportunity

In Personal Fellowship

An address delivered at The Pastor's Conference of the International Epworth League Convention in Denver, by REV. J. W. BAIRD, B.A., Sarnia, Ont.

THE word "fellowship" conveys the idea of persons journeying together in a ship at sea, intimately associated in calm and in storm, in joy and in sorrow, through good and evil report. Our topic therefore might be stated thus:—"The League, the Pastor's Opportunity in giving direction to the lives, and moulding the characters and shaping the ideals of the young, as together in the same ship they cross the Sea of Time to the shores of that land from whose bourne no one returns to tell the story. And where is the pastor's place if not on board this League ship? His great work is to bless and save men and young people, who form so large a part of his constituency, and should receive a correspondingly large portion of his time and labors.

This League ship was built for the express purpose of saving men and developing a more intelligent and practical piety in our young people. And as the ancient tabernacle was constructed after the pattern shown by God to Moses while in the Mount, so we believe this League ship was built after a heavenly model and under a Divine inspiration. If she fails therefore to fulfil the purpose of her designation, the fault must rest largely, if not entirely, with her management, for she has within herself every equipment for and possibility of the highest service. Her chart is the Bible, her anchor, Hope, her figure-head, a Maltese cross bearing the motto, "Keep up, lift up." Her color ensign, white, shot with red, is beautifully emblematic of that purity of heart and life which comes through the cleansing of the blood.

Her working crew has an almost perfect organization, and they are full of life, buoyancy and daring, for the land of glorious achievement lies all before these youthful minds, and woe to the pastor who has not his soft, unseen guiding hand upon all the complicated machinery of this department of his church. But to get his hand where it ought to be demands on the part of the pastor a deep spirituality, a keen insight, a broad sympathy, a warmth of personal contact, for it cannot be denied, we think, that there are barriers between the pastor and the people, whom he is privileged to serve, which too frequently hinder that freedom of intercourse and closeness of contact that would be eminently profitable to both. And this is especially true of the pastor and his young people. The fault may rest partly with both. The young stand aloof and will not let their pastor see their best side; and the pastor, we fear, too often does not let the young people see his human side. There is no place, perhaps, where the young people show themselves more real, and are found so comfortably off their guard as in their League meetings, and where the pastor therefore has a better opportunity of knowing his young people.

And this suggests some of the pastor's duties to the League. Every opportunity brings corresponding obligations. One of these is regular attendance. The natural mutually strained relations between pastor and young people can only be overcome by intimate and constant companionship. This dropping into a League meeting occasionally only places our young people under greater restraints. We will go so far as to assert that if a pastor cannot do better than this he had better stay away altogether. Either constant attendance or entire absence ought to be the rule. And in every meeting attended, the pastor should take some active part, never, however, that of a critic or a dictator.

The young people like to feel that the reins of control are in their own hands, and if it is thought advisable to offer any criticisms at all, let them be given in private, rather than in public. There is no place where the pastor himself should seek to be more real and human than in the League meetings. For what is the church but humanity struggling to realize its own idea, and what is the League but the young life of the church, organized to do the work of the church. One of the pastor's first privileges and duties is to help his people to self-fulfillment, and this can only be accomplished by intimate personal fellowship, in the formation of which relation the League furnishes an opportunity nowhere else found, not even in the home.

A word to Leaguers. Whilst it is desirable that your

pastor should know you intimately, it is equally desirable that you should seek to know him, not only in your home and in the League, but in his home and even in his study. A few weeks since a young man, a member of my church and League, called at the parsonage. We went together into my study, and sitting down had a real heart-to-heart talk together. He told me of his early life, his conversion and subsequent temptations in his life upon the rail. This drew me out and I spoke freely of my experience, and I believe we were both strangely helped. From that moment that young man and myself were real friends, bound together by a closer bond of sympathy than ever before, and whilst I am a busy pastor, as all pastors are, still I would most gladly devote a few hours each week to such close heart-to-heart interviews with my young people. Young men, take your pastor into partnership with you, sometimes when you plan a raid into the woods or go out on an enterprising fishing trip. It will do you both good.

Again, it will strengthen the bonds of personal Christian fellowship for the members of the League to find that the pastor has faith in them as well as in their work. It was a feature in our Saviour's character that whenever there was an exhibition of faith and trust in Him, His whole nature went out to meet it, as in the case of the thief upon the cross. And to nothing do men, and the young especially, respond more truly and readily than to trust imposed in them. This constitutes what Munger calls "The Irresistible Appeal."

And what an opportunity the League affords the pastor for the exercise of Christian sympathy, which next to love is the strongest passion in the human soul. Our young people need sympathy, especially as in our day this noble quality of soul seems to be dying out between employers and employees. The same is largely true of domestic service. Servants, though their help is so essential to the daily comfort of many homes, being too often regarded as mere hired persons doing their appointed work for so much current coin of the realm. A want of sympathy also pervades much of the society of to-day. Where shall our young people therefore look for sympathy if not to the church, and I am sorry to-day it is not always found there.

Let the pastor's heart, therefore, be full of goodness and loving sympathy as he greets his young people in the League, and upon the street, and he will carry blessings of which he is himself as unconscious as the lamp of its shining. "He will move," as Beecher says, "on human lives as stars move on dark seas to bewildered mariners."

The League is also the pastor's opportunity in personal fellowship, in that it opens up a large field for expressions of praise, a desire that is born in human nature. It is true that charity is a very rare thing under the sun, but there is something else equally as scarce, and that is encouragement often praise. In the League meetings our young Christians often make their initial attempts at public utterances, and where the pastor can offer a word of approval, it is a crime of haste to withhold it. There is no stronger yearning in the human heart than that for appreciation. Ruskin says, "that the thirst for human applause, which is the last infirmity of the noble minds, is the first infirmity of weak ones." But it is the strongest impulse of average humanity, and some of the greatest efforts of the race have always been traceable to love of praise.

How shall I bear this sacred burden of life is the greatest of all questions for youth, and it is the pastor's privilege in this formative period of enthusiasm of ideal worship to hold up before them for emulation the one absolutely perfect human character, not in doing so much as in being—in living for others and for God. Nor will the benefits of such fellowship be all on one side. The pastor himself must share largely in the blessings of such delightful companionships, as Johnson says "I love the acquaintance of young people, because in the first place I do not feel myself growing old. In the next place, because youthful fellowships must last longest if they do last, and we know they do." As a place to go, a place to be, a place to form friendships, a place to grow better, a place to achieve good, a place to find partners in the helpful fellowship of Christian service, the League is the Pastor's great opportunity.