

THE GAFFNEY LEDGER.

A NEWSPAPER IN ALL THAT THE WORD IMPLIES, AND DEVOTED TO THE BEST INTEREST OF THE PEOPLE OF CHEROKEE COUNTY.

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AN ABLE AND INTERESTING ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY THE REV. MARK L. CARLISLE.

Full Text of the Address as Delivered Before the Conference at Buford Street Church Last Night.

The following is the address delivered last night by Rev. Mark L. Carlisle, D. D., before the Historical Society of the South Carolina Conference, at the Buford Street Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in this city:

A few years ago a Presbyterian minister came to me and asked for the authorities, from my library, upon which Methodists base the office and work of the presiding elder. He thought, as many think, that the presiding eldership is a separate order in the ministry between the bishops and elders, or presbyters. Such an opinion is based, of course, on imperfect knowledge of the theory and work of the itinerant system, and one familiar with Methodist law and usage does make so great a mistake. This Presbyterian divine was surprised, and I thought relieved, when told that the presiding eldership is only an office and not an order; that it is temporary and changeable as to its incumbency and personnel; that it carries no ministerial character; that it is based on no specific scriptural direction; and that its only justification is its expediency in the effective oversight of the work of the church.

There are, perhaps, some Methodists who have no very clear understanding of the foundation on which this office rests, and of its limitations and relation to the rest of the work. They accept it, as they accept many things in the church, by authority and as the custom of the fathers. Such an attitude is an important matter in an unfortunate and little worthy of thoughtful men, whether ministers or laymen. Unless there is a clear understanding of the correlation of work in our Methodist itinerant system, it is easy for many to be swept into presiding eldership, its origin, its co-facts and into judgments that will not stand the test of fair-mindedness. It has, therefore, seemed to me that perhaps as good use as I could make of this hour would be a study of the presiding eldership, its origin, its correlations, and its possibilities. These phases of the study are necessarily much interwoven with each other. In fact, the three are one; for the only reason for the existence of the presiding elder is his relation to the work, and that relation makes possible the results that should follow right administration of the office.

"Presiding elder is the name given in the Methodist Episcopal churches to an officer whose functions are those of a superintendent within limited jurisdiction. . . . The office is one of very great responsibility and far reaching influence." (McClintock & Strong.) The presiding eldership is not universal in Methodism. Of the great Methodist connections only the Methodist Episcopal churches use it. The Canadian Methodists and the Wesleyans of England accomplish the same results by other means. It has never been true, and it never will be true, that any one system or form of supervision is necessary to the churches. The Episcopal oversight is based on scriptural and logical foundations; yet no one of us will contend that the episcopacy is a sine qua non to the church. There are denominations great and active and spiritual Christian bodies, that reject the Episcopal form of government. We believe that there are good reasons for it; that it is the best and most effective system for us; but we do not believe that it is absolutely necessary to the life of the church. The constitution of the church hedges it about and makes it very hard to do away with it, but Methodism could, and does, live without bishops. Precisely the same is true of the presiding eldership.

A right understanding of these things demands a very broad and clear conception of the work of the Holy Spirit in the development and guidance of the church. "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." (Ephesians iv: 11-13.) "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same spirit; and there are diversities of administrations, but the same Lord; and there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. . . . And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." (I Cor. xii: 4-28.) A study of the whole chapter is profitable.

It is clear that a call to the ministry is by the Holy Ghost. No man of us would dare to assume that divine prerogative. It is equally certain that the regulation of the work of the ministry is to be determined under the Spirit's direction, in accordance with varying conditions and requirements. Hence there is great diversity in administering the affairs

of the churches, from the unity of Romanism under its pope, to the well-nigh absolute individualism of some Protestant churches. There is no law of divine right in office in the church. The only divine right is to justify by spirituality and energy the method and function of the office. Under the Spirit the most effective system is to be sought and used; but its use is justified only so long as it is efficient for the advancement of the kingdom of God. And so, if the episcopacy, or the itinerancy, or the presiding eldership, falls of the divine purpose, other methods may be found. But we must be careful to distinguish between the effectiveness of an office and the inefficiency of an officer. Methods may be right, but men may be wrong. The converse is also true.

The office of presiding elder was created in the early history of Methodism in America, and it appears to have had its origin in the assistants whom Mr. Wesley employed as helps in the direction of his preachers. He had what we might call local or junior preachers on the circuits into which he divided his work, and always had an assistant in charge of the whole division, or district. These assistants were invested with much the same authority; over those under them that the great founder of Methodism himself exercised. Their authority was akin to the bishopric of later date. But when Mr. Wesley caused Coke and Asbury to be elected general superintendents, or bishops, in 1784, these assistants in office in America were made subject to them. At the Christmas Conference of 1784 twelve elders were elected and ordained, though not all were ordained at the seat of Conference. The question has arisen, whether these twelve men were simply traveling elders or assistants to the bishops. From the beginning there have been two opinions on the subject.

One party, consisting mainly of those who have advocated diocesan episcopacy and the election of presiding elders by the Conference, insists that these elders were all elected for the assistants' work. This is Dr. Emory's interpretation in his History of the Discipline. He says, "All elders were at first presiding elders, and insists that the distinction between elders and presiding elders was not made until 1792. Up to that date, he thinks, every elder, in the absence of the bishops, was equal in supervisory duty and office; and it is distinctly said that they were to 'take charge of all the deacons, traveling and local preachers, and exhorters.'" Nothing is said of authority being given over other elders. It was not until 1792 that a distinction was made and those elders who were not selected by the bishops for assistant and supervisory duties were definitely put under authority of the presiding elders. Dr. Emory's position is that, up to 1792, all elders were elected and appointed to the office and duties of presiding elder by the Conference, and each had equal authority in charge in the absence of the bishop.

Against this position, that the Conference and not the bishop is to appoint the presiding elders, those who approved the connectional episcopacy, or general superintendency, and the appointment of presiding elders by the bishop urge: 1st, that from 1784 to 1792 there were each year more elders than presiding elders; 2nd, that the appointment of presiding elders were to specific districts, and these appointments were always made by the bishop; and 3rd, that the Conference, by acquiescing in such appointment by the bishop of elders to preside over other elders, did in fact make that action valid.

The presiding duties which give name to the office of presiding elder did not, in the practice of the church, belong at first to the new order as soon as it was constituted. They belonged originally to the assistants and were gradually transferred to the elders. It was not until 1786 that they were actually made part of the duties of presiding elders and the office of assistant was abolished. It is probable that Dr. Emory and others were misled in their interpretation by the fact that it was possible for any elder to be a presiding elder. It is not likely, however, that in point of fact all elders exercised the same authority. The practice never was to make all ruling elders, though the bishop always, as a matter of course, appointed the presiding elders from the elders. The idea of the transfer of the duties of the assistants to the presiding elders, thus making them presiding elders, seems to have originated with Bishop Asbury. That apostolic man like Mr. Wesley, was always alert to the needs of the church, and used everything for the advancement of her best interests. It is evident that an organization of the bishops, assistants, and elders had in it possibilities of confusion. Mr. Asbury wanted simplicity and efficiency. He found, after the eldership was instituted, as he says in his Notes on the Discipline, "that this order was so necessary" that he would "make them rulers"—or presiding elders. Even his idea of such a presiding, or ruling, eldership was not contemporaneous with the institution of the order of elders, but came when, as he says, he "afterwards found that they would be useful in performing his duties of assistant superintendents. His idea was not put into practice until the Annual Conference of 1785. This was months after the order of elders had been instituted.

The presiding elder is the legitimate result of the itinerant ministry coupled with episcopal superintendency. Those Methodist bodies that have no bishops have no presiding elders; but bishops, charged with a general administration over the whole

connection, must have assistants, who, in a limited territory, can exercise a more intimate supervision of the work. A little study of the itinerancy in the Methodist churches in America will, perhaps, lead to better understanding of the necessity for presiding elders. Stevens, in his History of Methodism, says, "Methodism with its 'lay ministry' and its 'itinerancy' could alone afford the ministrations of religion to this overflowing population; it was to lay the moral foundations of many of the great states of the west. It was to become at least the dominant popular faith of the country, with its standard planted in every city, town, and almost every village of the land. Moving in the van of emigration, it was to supply by the means of religion the frontiers, from the Canadians to the Gulf of Mexico, from Puget's Sound to the Gulf of California. It was to do this work by means peculiar to itself, by districting the land into circuits which could be steadily supplied with religious instruction by one or two traveling evangelists, who, preaching daily, could thus have charge of parishes comprising hundreds of miles and tens of thousands of souls. . . . Over all these circuits it was to maintain the watchful jurisdiction of traveling presiding elders, and over the whole system the superintendency of traveling bishops to whom the entire nation was to be a common diocese."

"Without any disparagement of other churches, we may easily see that they were not in a state to meet the pressing wants of the country. The Episcopal church . . . was not in a position to undertake to any great extent an aggressive service. The principles of the Independents, which subordinate the call of a minister to the voice of the church, placed a barrier in the way of their seeking the outlying populations, inasmuch as there were no churches to address this call; and though the Presbyterian system is not necessarily so stringent in these matters, . . . yet . . . there was little prospect of their doing much missionary work. Thus the work fell very much into the hands of the Methodist itinerancy. The men were admirably fitted for their task. Rich in religious enjoyment, full of faith and love, zealous and energetic, trained to labor and exertion, actuated by one single motive—that of glorifying God, they thought not of privation, but unhesitatingly followed the emigrants and 'squatters' in their peregrinations wherever they went. American society was thus imbued with Christian truth and principle as well as accustomed to religious ordinances." (London Quarterly Review, 1854.) It is easy to understand that such an effective missionary movement would have been impossible but for the direction and guidance of men of large vision who, as bishops and presiding elders, had general superintendency of the work. The ministry of Bishop Asbury shows how effective such general oversight was. He was bishop and presiding elder in one; and history has no nobler company than those that, like him and with him, rode day and night, across mountains and rivers and forests, to carry the message of the King and lay broad and deep the foundations of true religion in this great land.

It is a fact that Mr. Wesley started with no special theory of ministerial itinerancy. The expediency of the plan alone led to its adoption. It had the capital advantage of enabling one preacher to minister the truth in many places, and made even small abilities available on a large scale. "We have found," writes Mr. Wesley, "by long and constant experience, that a frequent exchange of teachers is best." The American itinerant was of a different sort from his English brother, and his work, like his territory, was greater. It was to be expected that methods would be developed in such an immense field that were not needed in the smaller one. It was out of the necessity for enlarged supervision that the general superintendency grew, and with it the presiding eldership; for it is evident that, unless the number of bishops was very largely increased, they could not, in such an immense territory, exercise efficient supervision. They must have some subordinate assistants, for not only is the bishop charged with making appointments and defining fields of work, but he is at the same time made responsible for the administration of all the affairs of the church. Only a limited, diocesan episcopacy could effectively supervise the work and administer the law without those to whom some part of authority and oversight might be delegated. Hence the development of the presiding elder is a perfectly natural and logical result of an itinerant ministry, operating in the wide territory of the nation, and having general superintendents, or bishops, who are answerable to the General Conference for their administration. It is not for a moment argued that no other system could be effectively used, but only that this system has been, and is, used to the advantage of the church and the glory of God. It is even conceivable that other methods might be better, but surely we should not lightly throw aside what has so evident a providential development. Every human system is to some extent faulty, but close study of this and all others, will show that the chief danger is not in mode, but in men, not in the office, but in the officer.

We come now to a consideration of the relation which the presiding eldership has to the general order of the church. It is clear that here is no question of a separate order of the ministry. "The episcopacy of the Methodist Episcopal church is believed to be nearer to the apostolic model than any other. Its simple idea is that certain elders are chosen from the body of the presbytery to superintend the church, and are called bishops, or superintendents. Both these terms are used in the ritual. In virtue of their office the bishops naturally stand above their brethren. With regard to the ordinary functions of the ministry, they do not differ from others, but extraordinary functions, such as ordaining, presiding in assemblies, and the like, are laid on them by their brethren and exercised by them exclusively and of right—right not divine, but ecclesiastical and human, founded upon the will of the body of pastors. . . . Accordingly the bishops are elected by the General Conference for life. . . . They are amenable, not to the General Conference, which may even expel them for improper conduct. . . . It may be questioned whether any form of church government in the world has more of the elements of power and permanence than this, which expresses Wesley's own idea of a fully organized church." (London Quarterly Review, 1856.) To bishops thus constituted and authorized is committed the entire administration of the church. This, as we have seen, brought Bishop Asbury's idea of the presiding elders based on Mr. Wesley's former plan of assistants. By such arrangement the bishop is in touch, through the presiding elders, with every part of the field, and at the same time is relieved of the great mass of administrative detail that would be too burdensome for a limited number of bishops to attend to. Besides, the presiding elders, being appointed by the bishop, holds a close personal relation to him impossible otherwise. He, i. e., the presiding elder, has no original authority at all. It is all derived and delegated from the bishop, and the bishop may change his representative in the district at his pleasure. In addition to these things, it has been found impossible for the bishop to know men and charges sufficiently well to make all the appointments himself, and so, by the wisdom of the church, the presiding elders are made his advisers for the stationing of preachers. Here also the authority is vested in the bishop. No presiding elder can make appointments, even for his own district. The bishop must appoint. These things are all perfectly familiar, yet it is well to call them to mind again, because the relation of the presiding elder to the bishop and the conference has often been the subject of serious and even intemperate discussion.

The office and title of presiding elder appear for the first time in the Discipline in 1792. "Such an order of elders," says Lee, "had never been regularly established before. They had been appointed by the bishop for several years; but it was a doubt in the mind of the preachers whether such power belonged to him. The General Conference now determined that there should be presiding elders, and that they should be chosen, stationed and changed by the bishop." The celebrated case of O'Kelly which influenced the General Conference in this action. He had "tried to make himself independent of Asbury and the general connection," and to be left in his district, which he had been traveling since his ordination in 1784. McTear says, "It is supposed that disadvantages resulting from his case led to the present limitations of the office. The new law provided that the bishop should appoint the presiding elders, not allowing them a longer term than four years on any one district. It was likewise determined that the districts should be formed according to the judgment of the bishop. . . . Moreover, it was also said, 'The bishop shall appoint the time of holding the district conference.'" It is interesting to note how, in the very beginning, the power of the bishop is called in question, and how positively the General Conference declared the presiding elder, like other preachers, to be at the disposal of the bishop, and yet constituted him in an especial sense the bishop's deputy and representative.

"An annual conference, including several districts as now, had not then been developed. It was not until four years later that the territory of the church was mapped out into conferences in the present way. . . . The presiding elder was a sort of diocesan bishop, holding his four quarterly conferences for each circuit, and then if the general superintendent be absent, presiding at the 'Yearly Conference.'" It was a great step forward in the efficient and thorough organization of Methodism as an Episcopal church, when this officer's place and powers were defined. . . . As the general superintendent unifies the connection, taking the oversight of all the churches, . . . so the presiding elder unifies the district with its various circuits, stations, and missions. . . . Such officers are the supplement of the general itinerant superintendent; without them it would be impracticable on a continental scale. They complete the local supervision and make the general one possible. Being selected for experience and ability, they make a large amount of ministerial talent in young or untrained men available, who otherwise could not safely be entrusted with the pastoral care. By their help, advice and direction the feeble parts are strengthened and temporary vacancies supplied. They restrain the erring, encourage the despondent, plan for improvement and progress, maintain uniformity and continuity, and, being appointees of the bishop, work with him to connectional unity." (Mc-

Tear's History of Methodism, pp. 407-408.) But the question of the powers of the bishop in stationing the preachers, and of the relation of the presiding elder to the bishop and the conference, continued to arise for several years. In the General Conference, of 1800 it came up again. Bishop McTear says of this period: "The trend of opinion is indicated, not only in what is done, but in what fails to be done by legislative body." The records of the General Conference show that for a long period there was dissatisfaction among the ministers over these two intimately related matters; as in these items:—

"Brother Wells moved that the new bishop (Whatcoat), in stationing the preachers, be aided by a committee of not less than three nor more than four preachers chosen by the conference."

The italics (by the conference) are mine and indicate the real animus of the movement. The party advocating this desired not so much to aid the bishop as to keep the appointment subject to the wishes of the conference; for that would have been the result of such action. It is refreshing to see the clear and positive way in which these sturdy pioneers stood for the free and untrammelled prerogative of the bishop in stationing the preachers. The record tersely says, "voted out next day."

"Brother Ormond moved that the conference be authorized to nominate and elect their own presiding elders. This was voted out"—and wisely. Such a rule would have rendered the whole itinerant machinery absolutely useless, and would have resulted in the overthrow of the general superintendency of the bishops and the establishment of virtual diocesan episcopacy. Men like O'Kelly and Beverly Allen, popular, magnetic, plausible, would have secured the suffrages of the conference and established themselves in place and power to the detriment of the real interest of Methodism.

Again in 1808 the whole question was under discussion. The constitution—for so many call it—was being debated. The perennial subject of the presiding eldership came up, but with it, and overshadowing it, was the question of the episcopacy. Joshua Soule was the author of the phraseology of the Third Restrictive Rule as it stands in the Discipline:—"They shall not change or alter any part or rule of our government so as to do away with episcopacy or destroy the plan of our itinerant general superintendency." Ezekial Cooper, proposed this form:—"The General Conference shall not do away with episcopacy nor reduce our ministry to a presbyterian parity." Soule's language prevailed. Cooper and others labored hard also to have seven bishops, one for each district. They were favorable also to an elective presiding eldership and introduced a resolution that "Each Annual Conference respectively, without debate, shall annually choose by ballot its own presiding elders." The resolution was lost by a vote of 73 to 52.

Again in 1812, "After a serious struggle of two days in General Conference to change the mode of appointing presiding elders, it remains as it was." (Asbury's Journal.) In 1816 the question came up again; but now the idea was that the candidates for presiding elder were to be nominated by the bishop and elected by the conference. The conservative majority had increased, and the motion was lost.

At the General Conference of 1820 there was need for a new bishop, and Joshua Soule was elected on the first ballot. Six days later the presiding elder question was up again. The radical element had gained strength, and the conference agreed, as a peace measure, that when a presiding elder became vacant the bishop should nominate three men for the office; the annual conference, by ballot, was to elect one of these three; and the presiding elders thus chosen should be the advisory counsel of the bishop in stationing the preachers.

Bishop Soule took no part in the discussion, although in 1808 he had been largely the means of fixing the presiding eldership in the organic law of the church. He looked upon that action as a constitutional enactment, and this decision now to elect presiding elders was, to his thinking, a breach of the constitution. No man ever better understood the meaning of constitutional safeguards than Soule. "He understood the protection and order of law; he had too clear a mind to fail to see the possible disaster when law is disregarded. . . . To accept the episcopacy and enforce an unconstitutional enactment was for him to do wrong, and he would not knowingly and willingly do it." (Collins Denny.) So it came about that Soule resigned the episcopacy. It is not necessary to go into the details of the conference action. Soule was asked to withdraw his resignation and be ordained. He declined. The bishops then asked for another election, but finally consented to let the election be deferred for four years.

The point of interest in our study is in the fact that one of the greatest men of Methodism, the man who for conviction's sake threw in his lot with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, when the division came in 1844; the man whose last message to his colleagues was, "Push forward the great work," and who died "admired, respected, venerated, loved by the Methodists of the South, and passing years do not dwarf him."—this man clearly saw the impracticability and unconstitutionality of the election of presiding elders and declined to be ordained a bishop if he

were directed to enforce such a law. His position seems to be the correct one. The whole matter rests on the Third Restrictive Rule and the general superintendency of the bishops.

This action of Soule and Bishop McKendree's plain declaration and protest against the action of the General Conference caused the suspension of the resolution for four years. In 1824 the matter was disposed of by an adverse vote. It had been presented to the annual conference in the meantime. The resolution reads as follows:—

"Whereas a majority of the Annual Conferences have adjudged the resolutions making presiding elders elective, and which were passed and then suspended at the last General Conference, unconstitutional; therefore,

"Resolved, That the said resolutions are not of authority, and shall not be carried into effect."

Since that time there has been no sustained or serious movement to change the relation of the presiding elder to the bishop and the conference. Through the trying times of 1844 and following years the custom and law have remained unchanged. The bishop appoints the presiding elders; they represent him in the administration of the law; they are answerable to him; they are his advisers in the making of appointments. Occasionally there have been here and there cases of dissatisfaction,—usually growing out of personal relations and conditions,—but there has been no demand for a change in the organic law.

One other phase of the subject demands our attention. It is the relation of presiding elder to the preachers and laymen. This would seem simple enough if one keeps other relationships in mind; but it is just in this region that most of the difficulties arise. The appointment of a man to the presiding eldership does not in any way change his ministerial character or functions. He is still only an elder. But there are laid on him certain administrative duties which bring him into a very vital and intimate relation to all the official brethren. As the delegate of the bishop, he has to see that the whole law of the church is carried out and all the affairs of the church adequately administered in the district assigned him. This carries with it of necessity a very close supervision of the preachers and official laymen of the district, and the presiding elder has a practically unlimited right of inquiry as to certain things. There is no officer in the church who may be so useful in the development of affairs and men. He alone can give that unity of impulse to the district that is needed for great results. Through him the bishops can carry out great plans for the advance of the spiritual and material interests of the whole church.

The other chief work of the presiding elder is in advising the bishop about the appointments. There was a time when preachers and charges were few, and Mr. Wesley, or Bishop Asbury, knew the fields and workmen so individually and intimately that they could make appointments without the help of any one. But, obviously, as numbers increased there would be increasing difficulty in doing this; and, unless the number of bishops was increased in like ratio, some provision must be made for necessary assistance and information. Many plans have been proposed, and, as we have seen, there was a long and stubborn fight over the matter. Yet, as a matter of fact, the cabinet is a secondary result of the presiding eldership and not its primary reason.

It might even be asserted that the stationing power of the bishop is not by any means the chief reason for his existence. But since the bishop and the power vested in him to make appointments, and the necessary assistance in that work would naturally and logically be found in those who are appointed to assist him as presiding elders. Any other arrangement would be cumbersome and confusing. We have, therefore, as a result of the growth of our itinerant episcopal system this condition of affairs:—A bishop who is charged with the administration of the law; under him necessary subordinates for such administration in the presiding elders; these men subject to the bishop's appointment and for them he is responsible. But the bishop is further charged with the making of the annual appointments to the charges; the number of charges and preachers is too great for him to know all personally; he must, therefore, have assistance and information from some source; the presiding elder of each district is in a position to know about appointments, and the necessary men and charges, for he comes into close contact with both and equally with all in the district; the bishop would therefore naturally require of him any information needed for the proper adjustment of matters in that district. The next step is natural and wise; that the presiding elders of each conference be made a cabinet to help the bishop, each having the same access to the episcopal ear, and all things being done openly. When to this is added the fact of a constantly changing episcopal presidency and the bringing to bear on the force and effectiveness of the members of the cabinet of the best judgment of the different bishops, it is easily seen that the chances of mistake are much reduced.

Bishop James Atkins (then Sunday school editor) once said, "I regard the presiding eldership as the greatest opportunity in the Southern Methodist Church." One can easily see his meaning. The real advance work of the church is dependent there.

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