

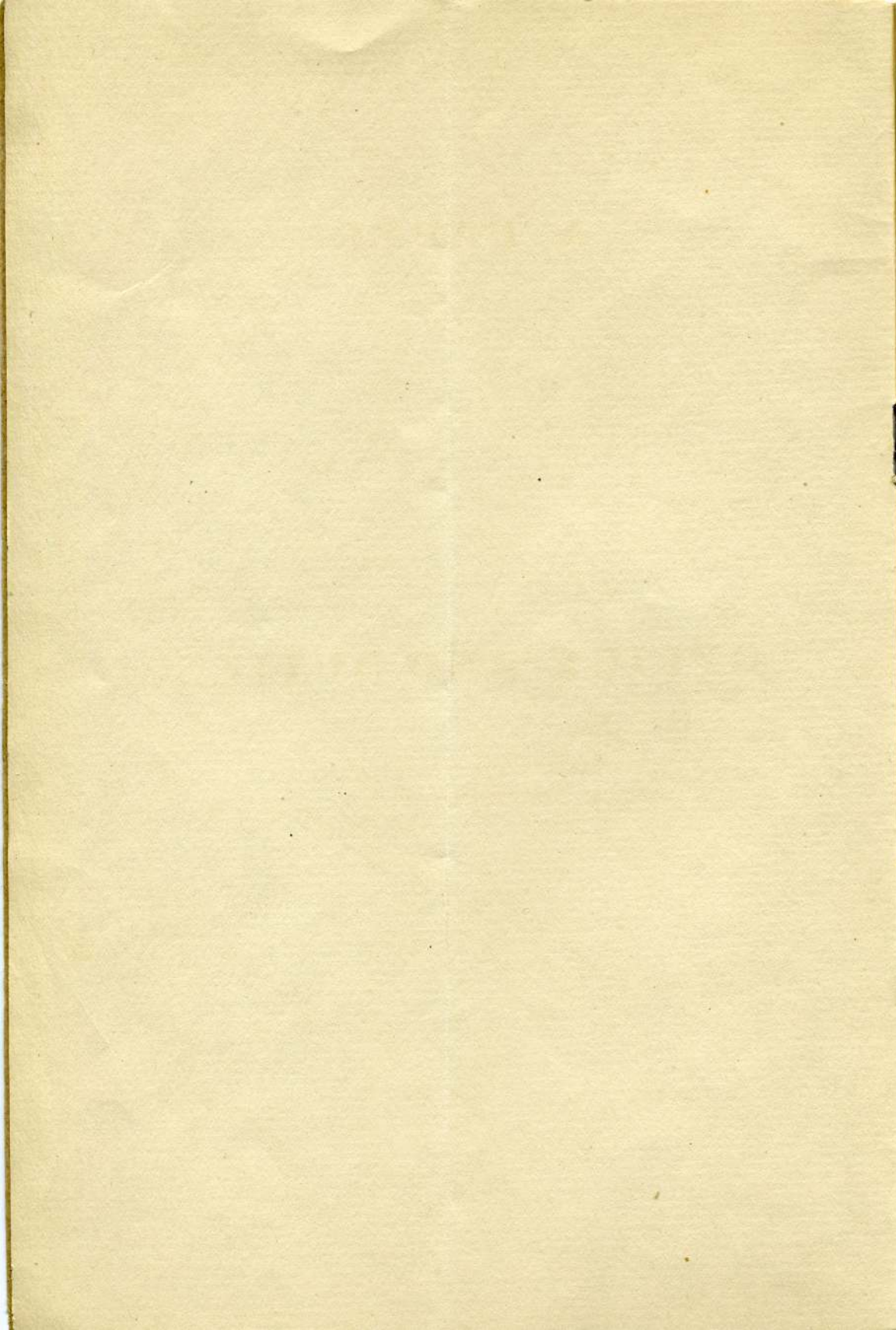
P 200

A PAPER ON THE OFFICE AND DUTIES

OF STEWARDS IN THE METH-
ODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH



BY SAM'L V. WOODS.



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ON THE

OFFICE AND DUTIES

**OF STEWARDS IN THE METHODIST
EPISPOCAL CHURCH**

By SAM'L V. WOODS.

A paper, read before the Buckhannon District Conference, at Buckhannon, W. Va., upon "The Office and Duties of the Steward in the Methodist Episcopal Church," on the 27th day of August, 1903, by Samuel V. Woods.

NOTE.

The Buchannon District Conference requested the publication of this paper, and the undersigned were appointed to co-operate with the author in such publication. We approve the author's work and spirit, and invite the attention of our church people to the teachings of this pamphlet.

FRANK S. TOWNSEND,
WM. W. BURTON.

The office of Steward in the M. E. Church was one of the first and most important offices created by the people in the primitive days, before the church was in fact organized as a corporate and compact body.

The duties of the Stewards being to provide a "support" for those who preached to the pioneers of Methodism in the days when preachers were laymen or lay preachers, and either walked or rode on horseback through the wilderness, to find and minister to the scattered settlers who had come to America, mainly from England, as dissenters from the Established Church of England, in order that they might worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience, where none dare to molest or make them afraid.

The lay preachers "called out" by John Wesley, were oftentimes, like those to whom they ministered, crude, uncouth, of meagre attainments, and many times men who themselves stood in need of "*timely reproof and wise counsel.*"

The people to whom they ministered were devoutly pious in their way, but were rough, hardy pioneers, who had

left their native land to avoid oppression and priestly domination from the Church and its officers, and they would not, as their descendants of this day will not, brook much of dictation in morals or doctrines.

And so it became and was made part of the duty of Stewards, "*to plainly tell preachers whatever was wrong in them,*" and to take an account of all money received and expended for the church, as well as to aid any needy of their brethren, in the faith, all of whom were poor, whenever any of them were found in want, by reason of sickness or distress.

In the year 1743, John and ^{Charles} James Wesley published the "Rules" for the "United Societies," through which they exercised their spiritual influence. The "*offerings*" of the people called *Methodists* were at first given weekly, and were for the poor, there being then no preachers but the two Wesleys, and no conferences.

After a few years the *Rules* were so modified as to provide that the weekly offerings were to go "toward the support of the Gospel."

The *society* was described as "a company of men having the form and seeking the power of Godliness, united, in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."

The only condition required for admission was "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins."

The customary contribution was a penny a week, or a shilling a quarter, and soon came to be called "*quarterage*." In the year 1743 these societies were divided by the "*Rules*" into "classes." For these classes "leaders" were appointed, and they became an order of sub-pastors, not ordained, like lay elders but filling up the interval between the "pastors that labor in the word and doctrine" and the members in general, and they furnished the main elements of a church council, which afterwards grew to be the "disciplinary" authority in every "society."

In every society there was, from the beginning—in 1738—a “Steward, to take and give account of moneys received and expended. After a few years there were two Stewards—one especially for the poor and the “poor’s money,” and the other for the society.

Now, the Discipline fixes the number of Stewards for each charge, and also provides that the Stewards *should be* persons of *solid piety*, who *both know and love Methodist doctrine and Discipline*. and who are of *good natural and acquired abilities, to transact the temporal business of the Church.*

§ 269 :

The duties of the Stewards are :

To take an exact account of all the money received for the support of the ministers in the charge, and to apply the same as the Discipline directs:

To make an accurate return of every expenditure of money, whether for the ministers or the poor members of the Church; to seek the needy and distressed in order to relieve and comfort them; to inform the ministers of any sick or disorderly persons; *to tell the ministers what they think wrong in them;*

To attend the quarterly meetings of the charge, and the leaders and the Stewards meeting; to give advice, if asked, in planning the circuits; to attend committees for the application of money to churches; to give counsel in matters of arbitration; to provide the elements for The Lord’s Supper; to write circular letters to the societies in the Church exhorting them to greater liberality, if need be; and also *to let them know, when occasion requires, the state of the temporal concerns of the charge.*

§ 271:

The duties of the District Stewards are: To attend the Annual District Steward’s Meeting, when called by the Presiding Elders, and to perform the duties prescribed in § 282 of the Discipline.

You see, therefore, brethren, that the entire temporal well-being of the M. E. Church has been committed to the laymen of the Church, and if the Church and its affairs are

not in the hands and under the control of the laymen thereof, and wisely governed, it is the fault of the laymen.

It has been well, and often truly said, that the spiritual condition of any Church could be easily determined by the condition of the Church edifice, and the grounds and premises assigned to the minister as a parsonage.

Why is this saying so often true, and why is it so commonly verified? Because men, the world over, will judge of our spiritual condition by what they see of our temporal works, and not by what we profess.

And so it is, that when the Methodist Episcopal Church proposed to raise (20) millions of dollars as a Twentieth Century thank offering, and accomplished it, the world wondered, and attributed the work to the exalted spiritual condition of the Church; whereas, in fact, *it appears to be true*, that in the very year in which this work was proposed, and most of it accomplished, the spiritual condition of the Church did not surpass many other years in its history, and it had fewer acquisitions to its membership than in some previous years.

The great temporal affairs of the Methodist Episcopal Church are committed to the Stewards, who are always laymen, for the reason, that the chief glory of the church for many years was, and still is, that the Church is a pioneer Church, and a democracy, in which every member, however humble or obscure, may participate in the management of its affairs, and is in part responsible for its real condition.

The growth of this Church, and the extension of its doctrines in the Western Hemisphere are co-extensive with the growth of the idea, that the American Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, absolved from all allegiance to every foreign prince, potentate and power.

This idea grew, and finally became a reality and asserted itself, in open rebellion and successful war against Great Britain, resulting in our independence as a nation.

So also grew Methodism, and the scattered bodies of Methodists who lived in the American Colonies, under an organization which Wesley himself, for a long time, was afraid to call a "Church," had begun to solidify. Boardman

and Pilmoor in 1768 had volunteered to come from England as preachers to the Colonists, Boardman to New York and Pilmoor to Philadelphia.

In 1771, Richard Wright and Francis Asberry, that old "Thunderbolt of Pioneer Methodism," came also. Conferences, informal in character, were held as far back as 1744. At the *Conference* held in Philadelphia by Thomas Rankin, in in year 1773, there were only *ten itinerant preachers* and only 1160 members represented, of "*The Society of the People called Methodists.*"

Further sessions of the Conference became of course a necessity, and it also became important to know who should or might attend its sessions as members *lawfully entitled* to participate in its deliberations, especially if John Wesley meant to hold together in an ecclesiastical body those whom he had organized as believers and followers of himself.

So it happened that the legal *Conference* was at last composed of 100 preachers, all selected or called by Wesley, and by him designated,

"THE LEGAL ONE HUNDRED."

The time and talents of this body were mainly given at first, to the business of settling points of doctrine and discipline, and in the examination and accrediting of fellow-laborers.

This Conference existed, and convened only by permission of the one man who had created it, and upon whose will it, for the most part, depended for its continuance.

But its growth in power, independence and capability to meet every need was rapid, inevitable and independent.

The result was, that in 1784 Wesley could no longer delay the legal constitution of the Conference, and he was compelled, in order to provide for the perpetuation of his work, to take measures to vest in trustees for the use of "The People Called Methodists," the preaching places and trust property of the "Connection," as Wesley called them, most of which was held by himself, and to which he had most of the titles.

By this act of constituting the *Legal one hundred*, and vesting titles in the trustees, Wesley's work was

consolidated into a distinct religious organization, having legal corporate character and large property interests, and yet Wesley would not allow this great body to be called a "Church."

It was a "Society," "The United Society," "The Society of the people called Methodists." He was a high church-man, up to 1746, when he read a book by Lord Chancellor King, which convinced John Wesley that the doctrine of the uninterrupted succession of the Bishops was a fable, which no one yet had, and no one ever could prove.

One other thing he learned from that book was that the office of Bishop was originally one and the same thing as Presbyter, and the conclusion followed in his mind, that he himself was a Scriptural Episcopos [Acts 20:17 and 28], and had as much right to ordain ministers as his representatives and helpers to administer the sacraments, instead of himself, as any other primitive or missionary bishop ever had.

This view he entertained but held in abeyance for forty years, before he was constrained to announce it. In 1784 the American Colonists had won their independence, and it became necessary *to organize a separate Methodism for America*, where Methodist Societies had existed for so many years. So in 1784, *after forty years of hesitation*, Wesley gave formal ordination and letters of authority to Dr. Coke already a Presbyter of the Church of England, *to organize a separate Methodism for America*. He called Coke a "Superintendent for America." There Coke ordained Francis Asbury, that old hero in the army of the Lord, and these two men ordained the America preachers as presbyters. *From that year dates the Ecclesiastical commencement of the Independence of the American Methodist Episcopal Church.*

Founded by laymen, organized by laymen, officered by laymen, sustained by the devotion and piety of laymen and lay preachers, the church grew, and its influence widened, and the Methodist people and lay preachers were all colonial patriots, and during the Revolution of the colonies all the preachers sent out from England, being unpopular among the colonies, because opposing the Revolution, and devoted to England and the Church of England, but living in a country

where the people had determined once for all to have no more of English rule, and therefore no more of the Church of England, all abandoned the church and went back to England except only Francis Asbury, who adhered to the fortunes of the colonists: and thus, the Methodists were freed from the great weight which so easily beset them in the English preachers (including John Wesley himself) who were all attached to the Church of England, and still hoping to unite the Methodists to the Church of England, by some compromise, or to live in union and peace with it, were afraid of independence for the colonies, or for the American Church, and afraid to *name* the church, and also afraid to cut loose, and swing out into the glorious liberty wherewith we are free, and this the preachers never did, until the independence of the American colonies had been won and acknowledged, when the church was obliged to be independent, because independence was in the air which the people breathed, and in their thoughts, and they would not have a church, which was not free also. They knew the truth, and the truth had made them free indeed, (John 8:32).

So at last the Methodist people had their way in America, and in 1784 the church was minded to declare, and,

To stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. (Gal. 5:1). And, today the Episcopal Methodism of America represents the largest aggregate body of Protestant Communicants, and worshipers of the same ecclesiastical name, to be found in any one nation in the world.

There are in America more than one hundred annual conferences visited by twelve bishops at least.

The church has Universities, Colleges and Seminaries.

It has missions in India, China, Japan and missionaries in the distant islands of the sea, and workers in the remotest parts of the earth, among every kindred, people, tribe and tongue of the scattered races of men.

This church and its branches have a membership of communicants not certainly known, but not far from four million people.

It has Publishing Houses at home and abroad. It has newspapers, magazines and periodicals everywhere.

And the Methodist Episcopal Church is now, and for fifty years has been, more nearly national in its character, than any other church in the United States of America.

The government of the church also, and the divisions, thereof, correspond in many respects to the government of the country; for example:

The General Conference, or law-making body for the church at large, to the Congress of the United States; the Legislatures of the State, to the annual conferences; the Quarterly Conferences, to the municipal councils, which make laws for our towns and cities. The stewards, to the assessors and tax gatherers of the counties and municipalities: membership to citizenship. So that in whatever capacity a man serves the Methodist Episcopal Church, he is thereby, and to that extent, fitting himself to the duties and responsibilities of good citizenship in a republican form of government, for the establishment of which the fathers pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor.

The temporal and business affairs of this great institution, we call The Church, were largely committed, in the first instance to the stewards; each of whom, in his particular and humble place, performs part of the vast work of financing this worldwide organization.

The office of steward is often despised and avoided by members of the church who ought to, and best could fill it.

Their work is often criticised, and their motives sometimes impugned by those who would not so much as touch the work with one of their fingers: and very often the faithful work of the stewards, which keeps the church going, and its affairs in a safe and sound condition, is forgotten by that large part of the membership in every church, which regards the church as a mere club house and a place of resort, to be entertained and amused, without one thought or care, of how the house of worship is kept in order, and the services of a preacher secured, or how the building is heated, lighted or cleaned. It is all one to this large class of members. They

are the bane of every church; they are always on hand to be counted; they are seldom on hand to be assessed; they are always on hand to be seen; they are always ready to rush for the church at the first sound of a church-going bell; they seldom respond to the calls of the steward for aid. Most of them know nothing of the discipline or doctrine of the church. The greater part of them are densely ignorant of the Bible itself. And yet, these people are most likely, as a rule, to have the ear of the preacher. They have little or nothing for him, except to carry to his ears their flattery and the small talk of the neighborhood, and if they can succeed by their influence upon him, they are apt, unless he be a wise and discreet man, without his so intending it, to turn him by their flattery and adulation, away from the more sensible and conserative members of his church, who have neither motive nor interest to adulate him.

The stewards have to deal with *the individuals in the church*, they know their zeal and their good works, they also know how stingy, mean and contemptible some members are, they see the large difference between the professors and the performers in material things. They know how members may shout, and pray, and promise great things, and they see how miserably they perform their promises in the real substantial material affairs of the church.

They encounter, for example, a man who is independent in fortune, who contributes, it may be, for all the expenses and charges of the church to which he belongs, for himself, his wife and ten children, \$10.00 per year, and they see that same man, after his sons and daughters have grown up to maturity in the church under its teachings, after they are married, have families of their own, and in turn are independent in fortune, still paying no more than \$10.00 per year for all the charges of the church, and after counting his small contribution as in full for the church dues of these children themselves and their families, none of whom have ever been taught to give systematically to the church, as the Lord has prospered them. So that the church, instead of ten new generous, young families, to make it strong and vigorous, has

only the one man it had ten years before, who, most likely, reminds the steward of the early days in which the members of the society each contributed a cent a month, or a shilling a quarter. Such a man has never learned the grace of giving, and therefore could never teach the same to his children. He has never added one cubit to the stature of Methodism, nor one hair to the growth of his own head. He is the same muling infant he was, when he joined the church. Such a man has always been, and so long as he lives, will continue to be, a source of weakness and a reproach in the church itself.

For such condition of things, the stewards are largely responsible, for it is plainly their duty *to let the brethren know the state of the temporal affairs of the charge*. Let not the Stewards tell members of the church, that they are *begging* for the preacher, or for the Church.

They are never *beggars*. They are only the trustees, appointed by the church, to receive from members of the church, their *voluntary* contributions for the support of their Ministers and of their Church.

Every member of the church ought to feel that it is his plain imperative duty to God and to the church, *to purpose in his heart*, what he will give to the church, *not grudgingly* or of *necessity*, but *cheerfully*, and *having so purposed*, he should regard the amount, as sacredly set apart and consecrated to God, and when the time comes, turned over to the steward, with a prayer that it may accomplish the thing whereunto it is sent.

Let all Methodist stewards, everywhere, teach their children, from earliest infancy, the *grace and duty of systematic giving*, to the church, no matter how small the amount.

Let a steward be one that ruleth well his own household, having his children in subjection with all gravity. (For if a man knows not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God—Timothy 3:4-5.)

The habit of giving cheerfully, grows until it becomes and is a *beautiful grace*, and so also the habit of withholding grows, until it becomes a *vice*. as hateful as any other sin,

and one which outlasts the strength and grace of youth, and is most hateful and tenacious in old age.

There is a withholding which scattereth abroad, and there is a scattering which gathereth together.

What a man gives away of his fortune to the needy in this world, will be all he will have saved in the world to come.

Let us, therefore, gladly bring our tithes into the store house of the Lord, and prove, him and see whether he will not open the windows of heaven and pour us out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it. (Malachi 3:10).

Let the Steward, who lifts the daily collection from the public congregation, know, that he is an exemplar of what he asks of others, and therefore, be always ready to put his own contribution *into the collection before he presents the collection basket to any other person*, let him *never* make his collection *after all the others*, and then in an ostentatious manner.

Let those who give, give with simplicity. Let all our people remember that whenever Methodists meet they will pray, and take a collection, and therefore acquire the habit of going to all church services, with their contributions *ready in a convenient place*, where, without demonstration or show, they may be handed over to the collector, as he passes, and let no Methodist ever "*fish out*" his contribution from a deep pocket or purse, or from a handful of coin to be noisily thrown into a basket, as if he had been taken by surprise, and intended to make as big a show as possible, with the smallest coin in his pocket.

Let the steward, as far as in him lies, live peaceably with all men.

Not self-willed; not soon angry, but sober, just, temperate, a lover of good men, holding fast the faithful word, as he hath been taught that he may be able, by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayer (Titus 1:7-9).

And let the Steward wherever his humble lot be cast, always remember that he serves the great Methodist Episcopal Church, the house of God, the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:15).

August 27th, 1903.

SAM'L V. WOODS.

