

THE REMARKABLE CONFESSIONS OF A COUNTRY PARSON

Actual Experiences of a Preacher Show Not Only the Hardships of Service, But the Lack of Business Principles in Some Small Congregations.

Within the last year there has been much discussion of the hardships suffered by rural ministers, the low salaries paid them, and the severity of their struggle for existence. The following article tells the actual experiences of such a clergyman, and makes it evident that what has been published on the subject underestimates rather than overstates the intolerable conditions. What this minister has to tell is well worth the serious attention of the churches.

By John Southern.

IN the hills of Alabama in the days when those hills were covered with yellow pine there grew up at a saw-mill a boy who was called a minister in the Presbyterian Church. I was that boy. The public school in the community continued through three months of the year, usually in the Summer. These were my only educational advantages as a boy. While I was quite a small boy my father and mother joined the Church. Because of that influence and that of our good pastor I was led to join the Church when quite young. When I was 10 years of age I had decided on what my life work was to be. But by this time I had not much more than finished what are now known as the primary grades, for the school I attended knew no grades.

From that time on it was a struggle to become fitted to meet life as a minister. I taught little country schools during my vacations, and in school acted as janitor, or did chores in the homes and mended or anything I could find to do to help pay expenses. But eventually, by dint of hard work, I had finished high school and a portion of a college course.

By this time I had found a girl who was willing to share the life of a minister with me. A short time before marriage I had been ordained to the gospel ministry. There being no parsonage open to me, I taught school a number of terms.

But there was all the while the feeling that the schoolroom was not my place. After varied experiences teaching, from the little country schools up to the high schools, I received an invitation to visit a country parish in Mississippi with a view to becoming its pastor. So, leaving my wife and little child in Alabama, I made the journey to Mississippi.

This proved to be the beginning of my life as a minister and of my experiences in country churches. From my struggle to get an education I had learned to be systematic and practical in all my undertakings. The hardships of my life had been a splendid discipline.

The parish consisted of five congrega-

only for foreign missions, but for the support of pastors and all benevolences together and \$4.50 each for chewing gum. However, discouraging such figures are, I was here and in charge of this pastorate. I had to make arrangements to get to my appointments. I had neither horse nor buggy, and it was impossible to reach the points by railroad. In fact, some of them could be reached in Winter only by "horse-back."

To buy a horse and buggy would have cost me \$125, and that meant half of my first year's salary. But fortunately a good woman, one of the congregation, offered me a horse for its "keep." Since I could not use a buggy throughout the year, I concluded to do without it. I

ments I would call upon the Sheriff of the county to send a number of Deputies, who would be instructed to arrest anybody caught doing these things. But that proved to be unnecessary. The men who were watching were galled for the occasion, and no more disturbances took place during the remaining days of the meetings. I continued to preach there regularly as long as I was in the parish without the necessity of putting out watchers again.

This experience put me to thinking, however. I had heard a great deal about the gulleases and unsophisticated country youth and of the sharp, shrewd, and wicked city lads. It had often been said that the country is the place to raise boys, where they could not come into contact with the wickedness of the city; that boys should be kept pure from the contamination of city life at least until they are grown. Then when they go to the city they will remain good.

When in later years I came to investigate these questions out of ten years' experience in the country in the South, the Middle West, and the East, I found that about 90 per cent. of the boys in the country were impure and immoral and almost degenerate.

In this field there was no business method whatever which the churches used in meeting the pastor's salary nor of any other financial obligations. At some time of the year, usually in October, a subscription was taken in each congregation and the members and supporters given an opportunity to subscribe the amount they wished to give that year on the pastor's salary. This they could pay any time during the year it suited them.

But there was no official to whom it was to be paid nor any one to see that it was paid. When the pastor made his monthly rounds the members paid him what they had to pay that month. Each member did this independently of any one else. They were supposed in this way to pay what they had subscribed. Therefore I had to call into play my knowledge of house painting, which trade I had learned during the years of my preparation. By painting four days in the week and traveling two to reach my appointments and return I was able to eke out a kind of living.

I had been in the present pastorate but a few months when reports of how other preachers had been treated at one point in the pastorate began to reach my ears. These reports were to the effect that other ministers had been rotten-egged, pistols fired off around the house during "meeting," harness cut up, horses turned loose and taps taken off of the axles of vehicles so the wheels would come off after being started.

By and by we decided to hold a series of meetings. These meetings had been progressing a few days when one or two pistols were fired around the church at night. Having learned something of the community and knowing from these reports what had been done before by these same rowdies, I had already made my plans.

In accordance with these plans, when the pistols were fired on that night I then and there stopped my sermon and said, without giving any names, that certain men with whom I already had an agreement would now be on the lookout and get the names of those guilty of any further acts of that kind; that they were to place themselves in position at different points around the church where they could watch the services and be watched, but also the horses and vehicles.

I then said that all names taken would be reported to the Grand Jury and the cases pushed against them. I also stated that if that did not meet the requirements I would call upon the Sheriff of the county to send a number of Deputies, who would be instructed to arrest anybody caught doing these things. But that proved to be unnecessary. The men who were watching were galled for the occasion, and no more disturbances took place during the remaining days of the meetings. I continued to preach there regularly as long as I was in the parish without the necessity of putting out watchers again.

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tions. At Lairdsville the manse was located. The manse was a little four-room frame house.

Such was the house. It was located on about an acre of ground which the minister was supposed to cultivate. The church at this point had seventy-five members. Fourteen miles south was Mount Hermon, with fifty members. Thirty miles south was New Harmony and thirty members. By this time I had found New Lebanon, boasting a membership of ninety-four. It was also necessary to travel fifteen miles west to Valley View, where there were thirty members.

On my initial visit I found it necessary to remain a month before I could find whether they wanted me or not. They had never been so organized that a question could be asked at once. Each one had to reach its own conclusion separately and independently. Therefore it was necessary to visit each of the five congregations and preach once for each one.

When the month was up this had been done, and I was informed at each place that I was acceptable. I wondered why the members were not called upon in any way to vote on calling a pastor. I felt that I was to call a pastor, and, anyway, I was not in a position as yet to instruct them. If I told them too many things I might not get the job. In each case the Elders came and told me that I was acceptable and how much salary they had been paying their preacher. This seemed to be all the action that was taken. This amount which they had named as salary and their manner of getting it had been their habit for the past fifty years.

The minister was supposed to preach at each of these points once a month. When I had summed up the amounts to be paid at each place as a salary I found I must live on \$250 per year. But as I was just starting into the work of a minister I had to have experience somewhere. Therefore I took the place and became the pastor on a promise of \$250 per year, and that promise nothing more than a verbal agreement without any assurance that it would be carried out.

Here were 250 people in the five congregations paying that amount to their pastor as a yearly stipend. This meant that each one was paying 50 cents per year for the support of the church. These farmers at this time had an income ranging from \$400 to \$1,000 each, yet they insisted that their pastor must live on an amount footing with themselves. They thought they could not possibly get along on less than \$400 per year.

It has been estimated that we Presbyterians spend four times as much for chewing gum as for foreign missions. On that basis the members of the Presbyterian Church gave last year (1908) \$1.12 each for foreign missions and \$4.50 each for chewing gum. Figuring on the same basis the members of these five congregations paid 90 cents per year, each, for

only for foreign missions, but for the support of pastors and all benevolences together and \$4.50 each for chewing gum.



"The beginning of my life as a minister and of my experiences in country churches."

cent. of them belonged to that class. In the Synod of New York, which embraces all of New England, where most of the churches are Congregational, seventy-two per cent. are country churches and seventy per cent. conform to my experience with country churches. This gives us an estimate from one of the weakest Synods, Mississippi, also one of the strongest, New York.

In the course of time another field just south of this one desired my services. At a meeting of the Presbytery I was approached and asked if I would come to that field.

There seemed to be more in it both from a standpoint of usefulness and of salary. I talked it over with the only Elder present from one of the churches of the pastorate. After the Presbytery adjourned I corresponded with the other churches forming the parish and also with the Elder I had met at the Presbytery.

The result of the correspondence was such that I concluded the Elder I had spoken in my faith for I was appointed. On this understanding I prepared to sever my connection with the Lairdsville work. When I came to resign I was told there was nothing to do but go. What did they care for a resignation? Consequently I notified all the parish and departed. In that section of country the Presbytery had very little to do with such matters.

In the other field of labor I was to live in the largest village of the pastorate. The train on which I and my family were to reach the village arrived after dark on a cold and rainy day in Autumn. We were met at the train by one of the officials of the church. Just that day had also been received of the expected arrival of the new minister.

The official expressed surprise at the suddenness of the arrival, but imagine our surprise when we learned that scarcely anybody knew of our coming! The surprise was still greater when I learned that the Elder with whom I had corresponded had not spoken by authority from the congregation at all. He had not even told the other Elders and officials of the church what he had done. Neither had he consulted the other congregations forming the pastorate.

These other churches, considering that the congregation of the village was stronger than they, were willing to abide by its decision. Therefore when they received my letters telling them of my conversation with the Elder at the Presbytery and asking for their decision, they wrote me that they were willing to abide by whatever that church had done, supposing that the village Elder had truly represented that church.

Well, it was a precarious as well as a very embarrassing position. Here we were already on the field and our household goods already shipped, and we were not wanted! What was to be done?

The matter was patched up, but having gotten into the pastorate under such conditions it was not to be expected that I would remain longer than a year.

My next work was a pastorate of three churches, Fairhaven, New Bethlehem, and Pleasant Valley. Again the negotiations for the change in the pastorate took place at Presbytery. This time also an Elder spoke for all three churches. But in this case he really represented the churches.

They had asked him to make the best arrangement possible with a minister. Or, if they meant the best arrangement from their point of view, I was told what I might expect as salary. From the three churches I was to receive \$400 a year and \$20 on moving expenses.

The people of this charge pretended to be more businesslike. Therefore they presented a call for my services through the Presbytery. One clause in that call was interesting. It read: "And that you may be free from worldly cares and avocations, we hereby promise and oblige ourselves to pay to you the sum of \$400 per annum.

Free from worldly cares and avocations on four hundred dollars a year! What a farce! It was all the more ridiculous

when it was known that Fairhaven boasted a membership of 185, New Bethlehem 50, and Pleasant Valley 50, a total membership of 285.

How much was that per member? Just \$1.35 each per year. I think it was Victor Hugo who wondered if some men wanted to buy five cents worth of heaven. These people wanted \$1.35 worth of heaven. Men of good common sense will forever hold themselves aloof from an organization which asks them to subscribe to such farces.

But I accepted the call, nevertheless, hoping for better things later. When I arrived on my new field of labor, I found no house in which to live. One had to be rented out of my \$400 salary and my family now consisted of three instead of two. I then and there determined that the parish would own a manse within a year. Much time of the first year was therefore spent in planning and prospecting for a property suitable for such a use. It seemed clear that the thing to do was to buy a house and lot rather than to build.

I finally found a house and lot which would serve fairly well for the purpose and for that place. It could be bought for \$450. They laughed at me when I proposed that they buy it for a manse. The financial authorities, if it could be said there were any, thought it ridiculous to try to do it without a cent in the treasury. But when I said I could easily raise the money they readily appointed me to manage the financial end of the matter. They thought that would not be, of course the money could not be obtained.

answer to that question. I have had experience with their business methods. In every case I had been preceded by men who were effeminate, unpractical, or visionary. True, many other questions are involved, but they will all resolve themselves into these two answers. Here they are: First, the churches have such loose business methods, and, second, there are too many pastors of these country churches who are, in short, "sissies."

Quite a number of such individuals join the Church for the very reason that they are that kind of men. The Church is an institution that of necessity must preach idealism to a great extent. Its particular mission is to point men forward to an ideal existence. Extreme idealism leads to effeminacy and unpractical theories.

The Church has in it many men and women, the women being largely in the majority, who are always looking upon things as they ought to be, and, at the same time, forget to consider things as they are. The Church is, then, the very institution in which weak, unpractical, and effeminate men can appear at their best. Therefore we find them there and in her ministry. Some one has said that the Church is made up of men, women, children, and preachers.

I resigned in the Summer intending to go to college and seminary in the Fall after spending a few weeks in my old home town in Alabama visiting my father. The next five years I was in college and seminary, and I had started in for this five years with money enough to support my little family and to keep myself in school one year. The rest had to

be earned as I went along. I was fortunate enough near the close of the first year to arrange to do supply work in a country church near the seminary. After graduating here I went to another seminary for a year, and also to do some more college work.

My next charge was still in the country, but something different from former experiences, for I was now the minister of a church in a village in Ohio. The membership was large. Business I had met, but there was still room for improvement.

This church also had suffered from visionary pastors. Large numbers had been gathered into the church by a former pastor under the theory that when people are converted their pocketbooks and conduct are always converted at the same time. Whether that be true in theory or not, yet as a practice it hurt the members.

I also found a theory strongly fixed in the minds of many that the support of the church should be drawn from its members only. This same former pastor was also responsible for this beautiful theory. The result of these theories was that the church was meagrely supported.

Very soon after my arrival the day for the annual congregational meeting came around. Such a day was an improvement over anything I had experienced. Consequently I was anxious to see what they did, and to find what I could learn. It was agreeable to hear reports, financial and otherwise, read on that occasion. But one item of business attracted my attention. An arrangement was made for raising the money to meet the current expenses for the ensuing year. That arrangement was that the annual subscription list was to be circulated among the members only. After the meeting was over I hastened to speak to one of the Trustees about it.

"What kind of subscription paper do you carry around?" was my first question to the Trustee.

"Here is a copy," said he, "you can see it for yourself."

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leading members of any country church for the reason of this failure, and the answer will be: "So many of our best members have died or moved away." This answer will be true for the great majority of decadent country churches.

Taking the United States as a whole there are not many farms abandoned absolutely. Too few to consider here. But where the best members die or move away others have occupied the farms they left, but they have nothing to do with the church. Why?

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Here is what I read at the top of the paper: "The undersigned subscribers hereby agree to give the amount opposite their names for the current expenses of the _____ Presbyterian church for the year 1908."

"Is this the usual method of raising your money?" I asked.

"We have always done it that way," replied the Trustee.

Then I asked: "When are these subscriptions payable?"

"Any time during the year at the convenience of the subscriber."

"For how long a minister's salary weekly, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Supposing, then, that in the early Spring when money is scarce nobody finds it convenient to pay for two months, how would you pay the minister?"

"The Trustees are authorized to borrow the money."

"And pay interest on it?"

"Yes."

"Then the church will be borrowing money and paying interest on it for the personal benefit of its members, will it not?"

"Well, that is one way of looking at it."

"Who is responsible for the collection of these amounts?"

"Nobody. They pay it when they get ready."

"But suppose some do not get ready?"

"We wouldn't get it, that's all."

"How much do you get on this list?"

"I don't know."

"Then how do you know you will get enough to pay the minister's salary?"

"We don't know for sure."

"But you have already made a contract with the minister, have you not?"

"Yes."

This conversation furnished me much light. I no longer wondered why some of the best and most level-headed men of the village had nothing to do with the church.

But I gained still more light a little later. When I came I was surprised to find that there was great unwillingness to install the minister as pastor. It seemed to be general throughout the church.

The idea was to employ the minister for a few months at a time, entering into a written contract. As long as the minister suited they continued to make these contracts every few months. Of course, there was never any permanency in anybody's mind regarding the minister's work, and the whole arrangement was looked upon as temporary.

I entered the same relations, knowing it was not a good plan, but thinking that a little later the thing could be changed. But I never felt as though I had any authority in the congregation. And I afterward had sufficient reason for believing that was just the reason for such a state of things. They did not want anybody in authority.

I found two factions in the congregation, and each was afraid the other would get into authority. Neither faction was willing to go into the election of a pastor fearing the other one would have more influence or more power in such an election.

They always looked upon each other with suspicion, and the minister was constantly on the watch to try to avoid the appearance of being too friendly with either crowd. I soon saw that the church people stood aloof from each other and, as a result, the neighborhood stood aloof from the church.

But in a few months the church began to do its work much more systematically. Several business methods were introduced. The organizations of the church were put

on a good basis. The pastor's salary was paid promptly, and everything done with dispatch.

I now concluded that my work here was done, and since I had received a unanimous call to a country church in one of the New England States I resigned. When I visited this church in New England as a "candidate," I found what seemed to be great interest in all departments.

The Christian Endeavor meetings were well attended, and the church was interesting. Everybody seemed intensely interested in the church. They were all anxious to secure a pastor, as there had been none for a year or more.

I had not been here many months before I found as these methods as I met in all my experience. There were indications that many of these methods were the result of the work of men as pastors who could never put practical ideas into force because they had no such ideas.

This church in which I was now laboring once had quite a little sum, the income from a mill which was used for its support. But I soon learned that quite a sum of the principal had been entirely lost to the church. Just how no one seemed to know. No one seemed to be responsible for it, as no bond was required of anybody who received the fund.

I thought this the most remarkable place I had ever known—a place where everybody would do as they pleased, nobody be responsible for what he did. Anybody who was interested in the church for the benefit of the church and in some cases expend the money for the church just as he wished.

Nobody particularly was responsible for these entertainments. Just one or two, or a half dozen mutually agreed to get it up and say it was under the auspices of the Christian Endeavor Society, when in most cases the question had never been before the society. The ladies among these entertainments might as well have been the church's benefit, but they never had the least sign of an organization of any kind. The authorities of the church never knew these things were going to take place until they were advertised.

A number of times during the present pastorate persons in private conversations with their friends actively money from people formerly belonging to the church and there were interested in it. But instead of turning that money over to the Treasurer, the person receiving it expended it as he pleased. The church needed, without the expenditure being passed upon by any authority, the money is it to be used for the church's benefit, and every time one dies it is a loss to the church, yet their farms are being bought up by the State, and the people who do not come into the church. Could they be expected to put their money and link their lives with an institution doing business this way I describe hundreds of them. In the country church just described the church is interested in it. But in fact, there is every reason to believe that they can look after their eternal interests better themselves and not cost them anything. It is a question whether such churches should not die.

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