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OUR
RURAL CHURCHES;

Their Perils, and the Remedy.

A LETTER
TO THE REV. THOMAS BINNEY,
OF LONDON.

BY WILLIAM FERGUSON,
BICESTER, OXON.

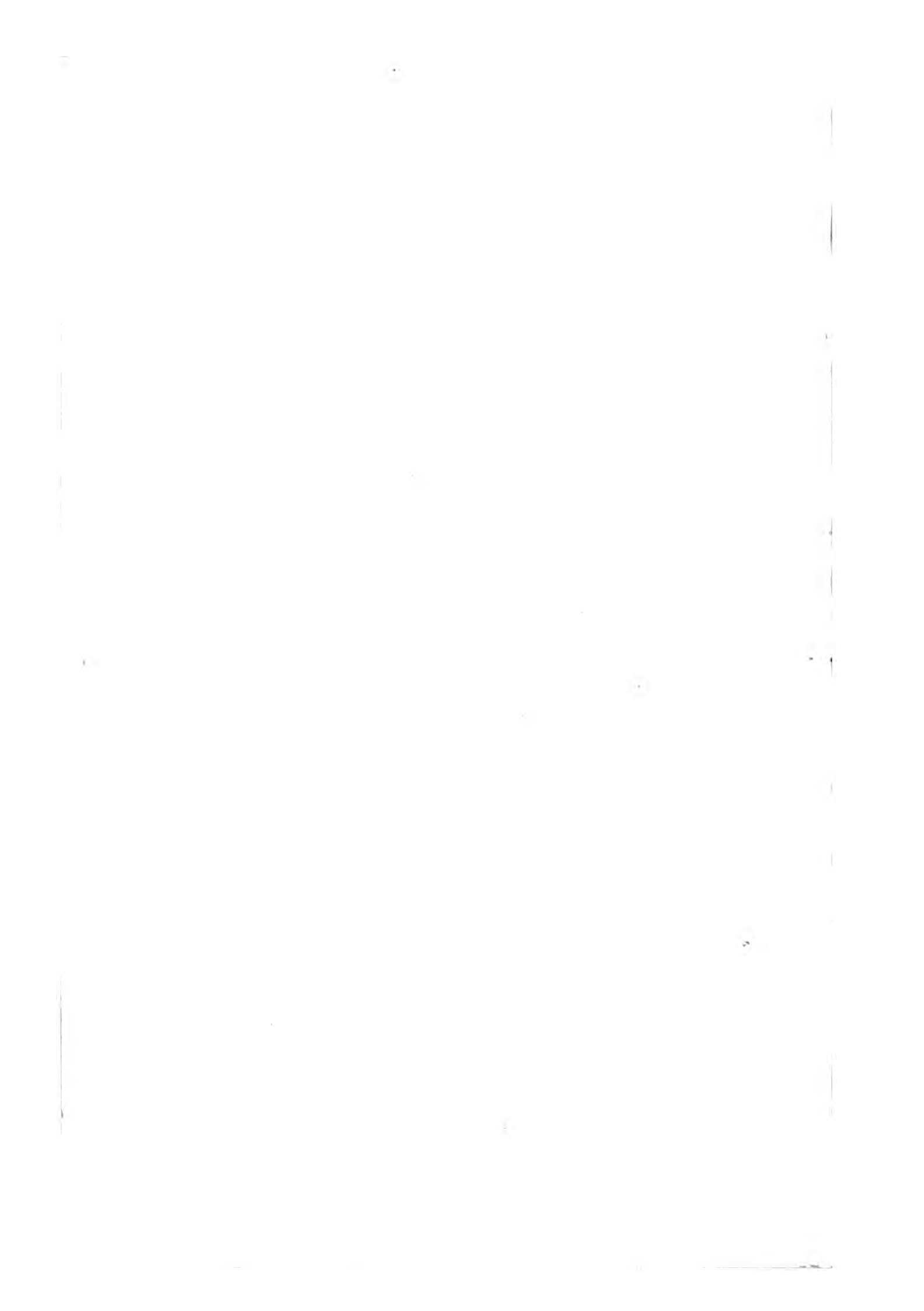


"— thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting."—PAUL.

"Nothing is difficult for those who are united."—LUTHER.

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A LETTER TO THE REV. THOMAS BINNEY.

REV. AND DEAR SIR—

I trust it will not be deemed a thing out of place, or impertinent in me, if, as a Congregational minister of twenty years' standing, I express to you in a few plain words, what I think of the state of things in relation to our own denomination in the rural districts of our country. Your high standing in the church of Christ, commanding influence, and great success in the ministry of reconciliation, are among the many reasons which induce me to place the result of my own observations on the state of our small churches before your mind's eye; and, I do it, in order that you, in conjunction with others, may be induced to take those steps, by means of which, a very considerable number of decaying congregations, which are no better than old and defaced way-marks, may be revived and made active, fruitful, and holy. Many of our feeble churches, as well as those of other denominations, live unto themselves, and not unto Him who died for them and rose again!

Cant phrases are, I fear, too often confounded by professors of religion, with the living faith and activity, which are the productive fruits of the heart-felt and soul-elevating Christianity of Jesus. You know, Sir, much better than I do, that men may be united in visible fellowship, and may be kept together for many years, by no better safeguard than a string of theological words, while the deep inward experience, and vitality of christianity, are strangers to the soul. Verbal religion is one thing, vital godliness is another and

distinct thing. The former may, and often does exist, where the latter is not felt fresh and living within the spirit. Where the symbol is substituted for the spirit of pure religion, a form of sound words may still be retained by the conservators of the Bible, while the words themselves may be a most telling-witness against them.

Many of our churches, Sir, have yet to learn the full extent of their own privileges—of the work of faith—of the labor of love. They, therefore, must be taught how much they owe to their Lord—to themselves—and to the perishing millions around them.

The extent to which many of our ministers and churches are ignorant of the real and deplorable state of things in their own neighbourhoods, is unpardonable. The people are at perfect “ease in Zion;” and those who minister to them act more like men who have been brought up and educated in some distant planet, than as men who have been trained for the work of the ministry in a world of trials, temptations, and untold difficulties. It was not so with Paul the aged—it was not so with young Timothy—why should it be so in our day? Why should the masses be left to perish in their sin and ignorance in the immediate vicinity of the churches of Christ? Why should tens of thousands in every county be left by the people of God to post their way unwarned to everlasting damnation? It is our duty as ministers, and it is the duty of our churches, to labor, “warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” Many small churches of our denomination have, I fear, put the form before the matter of Christianity, and thus have, to a great extent, lost sight of the essentials of the Christian life. The hollow form, and, with them, unalterably fixed line of duty, stand; but the monument of spiritual life, and holy activity of which the kingdom of God consists, is not visible—“The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint”—and yet, hundreds of the churches of

Christ in this our land of Bibles, of Sunday Schools, and of Tracts, are little better than colleges of wranglers, sustained for the purpose of diverting their own attention from the great Christian duties which devolvè upon them as the plenipotentiaries of heaven.

It is high time, Sir, that the Jupiter and Juno of certain religionists, which have been so long confined within the narrow precincts of religious observances, should be renounced for Christian integrity, resolute activity, and ample liberality in the cause of mercy, righteousness, and truth. But there are those who have eyes, but see not, ears have they, but they hear not, hearts have they, but they will not understand. They have resolved to slumber on in the centre of woe—in the midst of death—tens of thousands of the poor HAVE NOT THE GOSPEL PREACHED UNTO THEM. The producing millions are not one with the people of God ; and although they are not, in general, opposed to the Christianity of Jesus, they are in great numbers alienated from us, as well as from every other section of the church of Christ in this country. But still, we have the moral means within our reach of removing their prejudices, and of gaining their respect, confidence, and esteem ; but we lack the mental force, the bold spirit, and the intellectual agency by which these means might be made, under God, to tell upon the heads and hearts of the working population. It would be well for the great bulk of the churches, pastors, and deacons of our order to look with care, in faith, and with prayer, into the real state of society in this country, and then into the conduct of Christ, his Apostles, and the churches raised by them, in order that they might become impressed by the present state of things, and imbibe the spirit of the past, and thus awake, put on strength, and, in thought, word, and deed, hold forth the word of life.

But will our small churches arouse themselves and act as faithful witnesses for God ? Our antagonists are resolved not

only to hold their own parishioners in their grasp, but also to recover their lost influence, and to induce as many as they can of our people to return to the bosom of the Established Church. I need not inform you, Sir, that while zealous and laborious Puseyites have proclaimed eternal war with the Evangelicals of their own church; both parties are agreed in their determination to crush the weaker branches of the Congregational denomination. I do not, however, blame them for their zeal in a cause which they are pledged before God to defend to the last. They have livings as well as flocks to oversee. What I most lament is, that so many of our own faith and order should act as if they had nothing to do with the great moral conflict which is now agitating the minds of men in this country. We have many village and small town churches which are ready to die; but very few of either the members, or pastors of these fruitless societies, are willing to quit themselves like men of God in the hour of trial. It cannot successfully be denied that, as a denomination, we are not making that progress in either town or country which would justify the language of triumph. I assure you, Sir, I am well acquainted with the real condition of a large number of our churches, which have a LIVING NAME but a DEAD EXISTENCE! Were I called upon to demonstrate the truth of this assertion, I could, at once, name scores of dissenting churches, and several county associations, in which there is neither the powerful activity of Christianity, nor yet any signs of real and telling co-operation visible. There may be—there is, some religion, some attachment to theological and ethical terms; but the soul-elevating religion of Jesus, the faith which works by love and purifies the heart, and the influences of the indwelling Spirit of the living God are not felt and cherished as they ought to be. Many of our churches do not receive more than from one to two persons each, into their fellowship, during twelve months together. And some churches there are of our order,

of from forty to one hundred and forty years' standing, or rather *sleeping*, which do not at this moment number more than from fifty to seventy members each! Where the church is dead, the Sunday School is but a thing in name: and as for either daily or evening schools, they are things talked of as much more likely to be established in connection with these old fashioned churches during the year two thousand eight hundred and forty-nine, than at the present time. The state of the untaught, degraded, and depraved tens of thousands, in almost every county in the United Kingdom, and the comparatively small sums which are annually raised by us, to sustain the cause of missions and of education at home and abroad, demonstrate with great distinctness, and irresistible force, that we have all slumbered and slept. While the population is increasing at an extraordinary rate, and the Lord's day, a profaned mercy, many of the dwellers in Zion remain at ease under the woe of heaven, the wrath of conscience. —They are content with things as they are—hence, their barrenness!—hence their peril!—hence their ruin! If left to themselves,—dying,—they must die! Though I confine my remarks to the state of our own denomination, in the rural districts of the south, midland, and north, I am fully aware that neither the Wesleyan Methodists, nor the Baptists, are making any better or greater progress in these dry lands than we are able to proclaim. What then must be done?—for we have neither the money, nor the heads, nor yet the hearts at our disposal, to convert and educate the whole of the population—and I fully agree with you, Sir, that “our *special mission* is *neither* to the very rich, nor to the very poor,” but to the “thinking, active, and influential classes,” who are in every age, the inhabitants of our towns and cities, and “moulders of the world.” We have far too many “LITTLE INTERESTS,” and the men who are from time to time trained to watch over them, are not, if we may draw an inference from the past, likely to increase the “*little one to a thousand.*”

Still, I would not give up an inch of our standing in any town, village, or hamlet—perish the thought—there is, however, but one step which we can take—but one plan which we can adopt in relation to our very small churches in the rural districts, and that is to convert them into branch societies.

The plan of forming district churches in villages within five miles of small towns in the agricultural provinces, is neither wise, nor economical. Poor churches are made still poorer, and rendered worse than useless by this very injudicious practice. To encourage a few poor persons who are neither fit to choose a minister, nor yet, able to support one, to form themselves into distinct churches, is perfectly absurd. But there are many such broken fragments of disorder, and skeleton churches to be met with in many parts of the United Kingdom. The sooner the Congregational Union pronounces against this withering practice, the better. Each Congregational church, whether in a large or small town, ought to be the centre of a number of Preaching Stations, Sunday Schools, Bible, Missionary, Dorcas, and Tract Societies,—Daily and Evening Schools—and the pastor of the parent-church, should act as a general superintendent. Village stations, by such a system as this, might always be kept in a healthy state, and the evangelizing church would receive constant additions to its numbers from the surrounding neighbourhood. The persons thus drawn together into mutual and holy fellowship, should be trained in evening classes by the pastor and his helpers, in order that they might be employed as town and village scripture readers, prayer and class leaders, tract distributors, exhorters, local preachers, and Sunday School teachers. This, Sir, is the plan which I have adopted in my own church, and I have not been disappointed. Where co-operation, a flow of holy feeling, and real activity are kept up in the church, the inward religious life becomes more intense, and the united body becomes

more and more active in its character, as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

The churches of Christ, when in a healthy state, by their magnetic attractions, draw others to their fellowship, as to one common centre. The church, Sir, was intended by her Lord and Saviour, to become a living organization to act upon the surrounding millions, that they might be restored to the favour of God and the blessings of his kingdom.

“It is not by any means in proportion to the number, or zeal, or eloquence of those who preach the doctrines of Christianity, that vital piety will make its way in the world; but it is precisely in proportion to the intensity with which the church universal exhibits the purity and elevation of Christianity as a spiritual life.” Our churches have yet to feel the full force of the facts involved in this quotation. But the time has fully arrived for them to act in the strength of union, rather than in their present isolated and too independent character. As Congregational churches, our isolation is the strength of our weakness, and the death of our faith. Our united opponents understand our weak points, and therefore they attack us with success. Nor can we be surprised that it should be so. Our own churches have contributed their full share of the blunders and prejudices by which our weakness and decay in many parts of the country have become notorious. The truths which we preach are from God—our church polity is scriptural—our commonwealth is from heaven, and not of men. The head of our church is the King of kings. But our extravagant isolation is our own, and we know it. We know too, that the unity of the Spirit has frequently been compelled to give place to angry wranglers. Young men of an unhealthy constitution, and totally ignorant of the world and of the characters of which it consists, are frequently allowed to leave their *own place behind the counter*, or in the *warehouse*, to feed, guide, instruct, and to rule the Church of God! Delicate

training, a boarding-school education, *some piety*, and a few years spent at any one of our colleges, are good things, but they do not constitute the only essential and paramount qualifications for the ministry of reconciliation. The logical qualification is good, but the spiritual qualification acting through the medium of the logical is better; but both should be accompanied in the preacher of righteousness, by a knowledge of men and things—of trials and difficulties—of temptations and disappointments—and by a healthy body and by a strong and active mind.

X The times in which we live, Sir, demand that we should open our chapel and pulpit doors, to men, who, though they may not have had a college education, are strong in faith and in the power of God. Men who know the scriptures of truth, and who could speak with power to the consciences of their hearers—men who have been well trained and tried in the world's school, as well as in the school of Christ—men who would identify themselves with the starved, ground-down, physically, morally and socially wounded sons and daughters of toil—men who would look upon the most formidable difficulties as impelling motives to urge them in the strength of faith and in the power of hope, to imitate Christ and his Apostles—Luther and Melancthon—Wesley and Whitfield—in their heaven-born zeal to save a ruined world from dominant sin and impending woe. We want such men as these, Sir—we need them—they are to be found in the workshop—in the field—and on the mountain side. But they are working men, and to a great extent, alienated from us—we must use means to gain their confidence and co-operation.

It is not yet too late for us to adopt some practical measures, which, if carried into systematic and determined effect, would lead to the best results among the working classes. I would not support either a single Home Missionary Station, or a separate church in any rural village, situate within five miles

of a small market town, and where the population, including the town and a circumference of five miles, is under seven thousand. If small places of this description can support a distinct and separate church, let them do so; but we have not the means of aiding every little place at which a few persons may take it into their heads to form themselves into an Independent church. Let Congregational churches but train and send forth lay agents to evangelize their respective neighbourhoods; and the small one will soon become a thousand. Let it not be said that such a plan as this could not be carried into effective operation. I have tried the "more excellent way" of doing this very thing in the State Church's strongest hold, and I have succeeded, though but the pastor of a poor, timid, and despised people.

A few years back we had but one sabbath school, one village station, and one local preacher; at present our numbers and societies are as follow:—

Number of Sunday, Day and Evening Schools	-	-	6
„ Children in these Schools	-	-	302
„ Tracts in regular circulation	-	-	1000
„ Preaching and other Stations	-	-	12
„ Persons regularly visited and instructed in the knowledge of the truth	-	-	4000
„ Miles walked during 1848, by our Scripture Readers, Local Preachers, and Sunday School Teachers	-	-	1650
„ Calls made at the Cottages of the Poor	-	-	11,840
„ Poor Persons relieved	-	-	581
„ Tracts and Books given away	-	-	1000
„ Sermons preached	-	-	500
„ Weekly Services, including Cottage Lectures, Sunday Schools, Prayer Meetings, &c., &c.	-	-	25
„ Libraries	-	-	3
„ Sunday School Teachers, Scripture Readers, Local Preachers, and Tract Distributors	-	-	40

Poor families, including some of our own people, Churchmen, and Methodists, are supplied with the loan of sheets and blankets during the winter half-year. We have also

Bible, Missionary, and Dorcas Societies; and we sold two thousand and forty Magazines, and seventy-three Bibles, during the year. I do not believe that there is a house either in, or within five miles of our town, in which there is not from one to three copies of the Scriptures to be found. We have also a Literary and Scientific Reading Class of Young Men.

Small and very poor churches at too great a distance to be supplied by lay-agency, should forthwith be converted into Home Missionary Stations, and supplied by agents appointed by the directors of our Home Missionary Society.

Our children and young people have not been attended to by us as they ought to have been. The Church of England has her confirmation to which her young are taught to look as the way to membership; the Methodists have their class-meetings to which their sons, daughters, and domestics, are conducted whenever they express a desire to flee from the wrath to come; the churches in Scotland as well as the Church of Scotland, have their system of catechising their young people to prepare them for church fellowship; the Baptists have their immersion to which their sons and daughters are directed to look, as a medium through which they must pass, before they can reach the fellowship of the church. On the value of these mediums of access to church fellowship, I do not express an opinion; but that they may be used as motives to draw the attention of the young to the visible church is what no one can deny. But what use do we make of infant baptism? I am fully convinced that few, if any, of our churches make use of it as a motive to induce their children to believe on Christ, obey his word, and unite at an early age in spiritual fellowship. For want of a denominational system, by means of which we might catechise the young of our congregations at the beginning of their way, we frequently lose them altogether. Why have not we our Congregational Catechisms,

framed out of living and abiding realities—out of all that is positive in Christianity, and adapted to meet the wants of the intuitional faculties of our children? These craving faculties ought to be fed from the store of living truth which the Spirit of God has placed within our reach. This is the way and method by which our offspring should be trained to reach the centre of truth and the concrete-reality of the “unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God.” But too many of our churches and congregations act as if they were taught of God to believe that their offspring must, by an *inevitable necessity*, first *depart from the path of virtue, and live in open rebellion against the Author of their being*. Judging from the conduct of many professors, I am sometimes inclined to think that ministers, churches and parents, believe that it is not so much their privilege to train up their children in the way they should go, as it is their duty to hand them over to the Sunday School teacher, to be *brought back by him, after they have lived for some years in sin*, to the fold of Christ. But, as the promise of mercy, grace, and salvation, is to us and to our children, it follows, that we should have *household churches, including parents, children and domestics*, all walking in the fear of God through the indwelling Spirit, and united in the holy and soul-elevating fellowship of saints.

Many of our county associations have out-lived themselves, and consequently, they are things in name rather than organizations of living and telling realities. They are always orthodox in words—but frequently heterodox in practice. It is high time that they were reorganized and put in a working condition. The Lancashire Congregational Union is a living fact—a noble and fruitful branch of the church of the living God, to which some other associations both north and south of it, might look for a pattern.

I am surprised that we continue without some authoritative guide to churches and ministers, who are necessitated to wander

in search of each other. We ought to have a number of committees appointed by a meeting of the Congregational Union. These committees might consist of an equal number of ministers and lay gentlemen of standing in our denomination. They might be selected from existing associations, and the better portion of our churches; and appointed in a given number of districts throughout the kingdom, including London and Manchester. A register might be kept in London, and another in Manchester, for the purpose of keeping a list of all churches in want of a pastor, and of all recognised ministers who might from time to time, be without a charge. By such a plan as this, we might have sound counsel and advice, old divisions might be healed, and new ones prevented. Ministers would be directed to suitable churches, and churches would be saved much trouble and anxiety. In cases where any dispute or misunderstanding might arise between pastor and people, which could not be settled by themselves, the subject matter of dispute could be laid before the nearest committee, to be settled by them as arbitrators; but in case the business could not be settled by them to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, an appeal might be made to the Annual or Autumnal Meeting of the Congregational Union, and the case might thus be settled by a committee appointed by the assembly. As I shall be misunderstood, wilfully by some, and ignorantly by others, I beg to state here, that I am not an advocate for any ecclesiastical or tyrannical court, having for its aim and end, the destruction of the scriptural Independency of our churches. I am, from conviction and choice, a Congregational Independent. But still, it is my opinion that we might, consistently enough with our notions of civil and religious liberty, appoint a number of committees, *not county associations*, but arbitrators, selected from the most thoughtful, experienced, and respectable of our Ministers and laymen, for the purpose, not of interfering with our liberties, but of giving advice,

counsel, and information on all matters which might be brought before them by ministers and churches. That our denomination suffers from our not having some such committees, to which an appeal might be made in the hour of conflict and of trial, is both known and deplored by all who make the respectability and prosperity of our churches their prayerful study.

It is high time that an end were put to a most unrighteous and disgusting practice followed by certain parties who have a place in our churches,—I do not, at present, say that they have, or have not, a place in our pulpits,—I mean, Sir, the practice of writing letters in confidence, and of whispering slanderous insinuations in the ears of the unsuspecting, to tarnish and obscure the virtues of men, whose Christ-like conduct the vituperators can neither admire nor imitate. If these remarks should be considered somewhat severe, I cannot help it—letters in my possession—the widow's tears—the child's sigh—the divided and decayed state of many of our churches, are my authority—my witnesses. Would that some systematic plan were adopted by our ministers and people by means of which, a greater measure of harmony, zeal, and prosperity might be promoted throughout our denomination, and the services of private slanderers and religious wanderers dispensed with. But, unless you, Sir, and other ministers and gentlemen of standing, take the matter up, we shall be doomed to go on as we are. We have a powerful press—we need a powerful pulpit. Our press is powerful just because it is systematic and propelled by steam. But too many of our *pulpits* are the *mere receptacles of small blocks of ice*. There are large towns as well as whole counties in England, in which Congregational dissent is inoperative, unfelt, and almost ready to die.

Sir, I long to see all the powerful elements which we have within our reach, though in an isolated state, brought together—element to his element—all united in one spiritual and

holy bond of fellowship, and having fixed and definite principles of a purely practical description. What we want is, a *closer union, a denominational system, embraced by the whole of our churches, understood by the whole of our ministers, and adopted by all* as an index to our unity, and as a proof of the rich fruits of righteousness and holiness which non-conformity can produce, without the sword of the magistrate to defend it, or the pay of the state to support it. The great things we should endeavour to bring about are, *concentration and co-operation*; a more simple, practical, and powerful style of preaching the Gospel; sympathy with the working classes in their honest and righteous endeavours to obtain their political freedom; kindness to the poor, and attention to the education of the rising race. Let us act in the spirit of Him "who went about doing good." Let us be influenced by one living idea, that of striving to save all who hear us. It is our duty and privilege to advance to one common centre—the Cross of Christ—bearing in mind that the way to the Crown is by that Cross.

That you may long be spared to your family, to the Church of Christ, and to your own church and congregation, and endowed with the Spirit of Power and Grace as a Minister of Christ; and that you may be enabled to rejoice in the enjoyment of good health and domestic happiness, is the sincere and earnest prayer of,

Rev. and Dear Sir,

Your's affectionately and earnestly,

WILLIAM FERGUSON.

CARLISLE,

April 24, 1849.