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Circular Letter.

THE CLAIMS OF SMALL CHURCHES.

THE CIRCULAR LETTER FROM THE NOVA SCOTIA CENTRAL BAPTIST ASSOCIATION, CONVENED AT BRIDGEWATER IN ANNUAL SESSION, JUNE, 1873, TO THE CHURCHES OF WHICH IT IS COMPOSED.

Beloved Brethren,

We purpose in this letter, to ask your attention to a few thoughts on the inequality, which exists among our Churches in their religious privileges. Our aim is to call attention to the destitution of our small churches and to ask those that are "strong, to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please themselves." An inequality exists:

1. In the amount of preaching enjoyed. Too largely the gospel privileges of our churches are commensurate to their wealth; the rich being filled with good things, and the poor sent empty away.

Churches have been planted, chiefly by the labors of our fathers, and other missionaries who have succeeded them in almost every portion of our province. Many of these Churches are yet without the stated ministry of the gospel, and some but seldom hear a Baptist preacher. Whether it was wise in all cases to form those small communities into separate churches, is not our object now to discuss. Neither would it alter the features of the case. There are Christian disciples in those places who are one with us in their views of New Testament truth. Many of them have been led to embrace those views in the midst of persecution, and have passed through hard struggles with former prejudices before the "truth made them free." Led by the teachings of God's word, and following honest convictions of duty, they have identified themselves with our body, and if properly cared for each little interest is the nucleus of a strong Baptist Church to wield a powerful influence among the perishing around them.

The 166 churches connected with our Denomination in this Province, tell something of our strength, but not all. Mr. Costly in his Registration Report for 1871 says, "The Baptists, as a religious body are almost as generally diffused over the Province as the Roman Catholics. They are the most numerous body in four out of the eighteen Counties, and are all well represented in all the others, with the exception of Antigonish, Inverness, Pietou, Richmond and perhaps Cape Breton County." It is known to us, however, that there are Baptists in most, if not all of these excepted Counties, and in some of them Baptist Churches. Now it is evident that the whole of this ground needs to be occupied. But for 166 churches we have only about fifty-eight Pastors, and the Minutes of our three Associations last year, show seventy-nine churches without pastoral labor. True, most of these destitute are small, and not able to support a minister; yet they are an essential part of our body and their weakness is the grand reason why they have demands upon our Denomination for help. The question is, shall we help them, or will we allow them to dwindle and die? Will we neglect our duty and allow the other denominations to occupy the land which God in His providence has given to us? We cannot afford to do so in honesty to our principles, or in fidelity to our God. His word commands us to "comfort the feeble minded, and support the weak; to bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the laws of Christ." Such appellatives as "feeble, weak, burdened" will justly apply to many of our churches. The Minutes of our three Associations last year report twenty churches whose membership does not exceed twenty.

The most of these are planted in our poorer agricultural and fishing communities, and far removed from the hum of commercial thrif and the flow of commercial wealth, yet planted where souls are precious and among those whom Christ has said should "have the gospel preached to them." But unless generously assisted by their brethren many of our churches must remain in spiritual destitution, and have we not already neglected them to our dishonor. A glance at the small sums contributed to give the gospel to the poor should crimson the cheek of every Baptist with an honest blush; fill his soul with deep humiliation before God; lead him to a fresh consecration of his all to the Redeemer, and send him to his closet to weep over the waste places of Jerusalem, and earnestly to plead with the "Lord of the harvest till He send forth more laborers into His harvest.

In this matter of satisfying the poor in Zion with the bread of life, every Christian is "under law to Christ." There was no more and no other obligation resting on Paul, viewed simply as a Christian, than rests upon each member of every Baptist Church to carry the gospel into the regions beyond. But never will our churches fulfil the whole mission assigned us by our Head, until as a people we are all awake to duty. Let us continue to move with the slow march, which has marked our progress for the last ten years, and how long before all this land will be possessed; how long before the peans of victory will be sung by God's conquering host over a land redeemed; "the wilderness and the solitary place be made glad, and the desert rejoice and blossom as the rose."

2. Again, this inequality is seen not only in a disproportionate quantity of preaching, but also in the quality. Our wealthy churches secure the labors of our ablest men and best preachers, and our poorer churches must be content with such gifts as they can secure.

We do not blame any church for "coveting earnestly the best gifts." The blame is in monopolizing those gifts. Instead of releasing our Pastors a portion of each year to preach to the destitute; do we not generally require more of their services at home than is consistent with loving our neighbor as ourselves? We would not unsettle our Pastors, and establish a system of itineracy to be controlled by a Bishop or a Conference. Such a course would probably be as unwise as unscriptural. But each Pastor could perform some mission work every year without relinquishing the pastorate, and unless our destitute fields are more adequately supplied than it is possible for a few Missionaries to supply them, they must continue to languish.

And it may be questioned whether the Missionaries employed are in all cases suited to the fields they are called upon to occupy.

We would say nothing to the dishonor of our Missionaries. They are doubtless men of God, honorably discharging their duty, and in the end will receive the approbation, "Well done." Yet many of them are young, and have not had the advantages of experience, and of growth. Probably too, applications may sometimes be made to the Board for the appointment of a mission, not as much from a love for mission work, as from the fact of the applicants being for the time out of employ. Now, would it not be better for our denomination as a whole, to somewhat equalize our labor, and as churches, invite our Pastors to alternate with our Missionaries. The Pastors occasionally occupying the mission field, and the Missionary for the time acting as a supply for the Pastor.

Such a course would be beneficial to the Pastor, for being brought into connection with destitution he would be likely to imbibe more of the spirit of Missions. Our young men would be improved. The influential position would draw them out, and strengthen them for their life-work. The Missionary zeal of our larger churches would be stimulated; and our smaller ones would not only be cheered by the warm hearted appeals of our young men, but would by our strong men be fed with instruction, and established in the faith.

It may be urged, however, that the better literary advantages, as a general rule by the more wealthy communities, compared with our newer rural sections, and the importance of the position which they hold in our denominational interests; demand the constant attention of our ablest men. Had we an adequate supply of men to meet the wants of all our churches, we would not advise that any pulpit should be vacant for a single Sabbath. As the matter stands we deem it better that every church should occasionally lack, than that others should be left uncared for. So far as our denominational interests are involved, we would by no means have our large churches wholly neglected; neither so far as the destinies of eternity, and the interests of souls are concerned should we overlook our small churches and allow them to dwindle and die. Besides, our destitute churches are some of them in important county towns and villages, and in the midst of good educational advantages. They need strong men; and yet how few of the graduates of our College are to-day engaged in our Home Mission work.

3. Another example of this inequality may be seen in the places provided for public worship. Some of our churches have no place of worship, except the low crowded school-room; or the private dwelling. Others actually expend more in an expensive style, or mere adornments, than would suffice to build a comfortable place of worship for some needy church. We have no less authority than Dr. Wayland for the following, "We have no belief in holy places or places where God may be acceptably worshiped. We do not profess to build a shrine, which, standing in a holy place, shall address the eye and overcome us by its magnificence. We assemble to offer spiritual sacrifice. We meet to hear the word of God explained, and brought home to our consciences and hearts, and to bring under the sound of the Gospel as many as possible. Hence, we need a neat, convenient audience-room, well ventilated, well warmed, and also perfectly adapted to the wants of both speaker and hearers. We want this to be provided at a small expense as possible, for two reasons: first, we wish to bring the gospel within the reach of the poor; and secondly, we need a great many such houses, because, if faithful to Christ, we expect an abundant increase. I regret however that in the building of meeting houses we have acted at variance with all these principles.

We have our Gothic temples instead of our Baptist Meeting-houses. Who would think of erecting a Gothic building for any purpose (except a church) where the object was to enable a large number of persons to hear a speaker. Now in all this we underrate ourselves, and do injustice to our principles. Could we unite upon some plain, neat, convenient, and economical model for a meeting-house, we might build two, where we now build one; and attract to the worship of God thousands who are now excluded from a place in the sanctuary. Can any reasons be assigned why we should sacrifice these advantages, for the sake of imitating the gorgeous structures of the Roman Catholic Churches." (Principles and Practices, chap. 26.) The sound sense of this quotation will justify its length. How many of our churches in their zeal for the elegant have crippled their contributions to the benevolent. And it may be doubted whether the expenditure of the money which is yearly lavished upon the gaudy would not be more acceptable in the sight of Jesus if given to provide places of worship for the poor. Had we as a denomination acted on the plan above suggested by Dr. Wayland, it is probable that every one of our churches in this Province might to-day have a comfortable place of worship, sufficiently large to meet all its wants.

In review of the whole does not an inequality exist among us too great to be among brethren. For while some churches are surfeited, others are starved; while some have more privileges than they appreciate, others have few to appreciate; and yet we hear the Spirit saying to a church, collectively considered, "I mean not that other men be eased and ye burdened. But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want; that there may be equality." Brethren when shall our practice be a living comment on that Apostolic rule? Not till a spiritual patriotism for the kingdom of Christ glows in every bosom, and the tone of our zeal is primitive and fervent.

How then, we ask, is more equality to be secured?

1. We need more prayer. We need it that the laborers may be multiplied. For a supply equal to all demands of the field, we should continue to pray the Lord of the harvest till every locality is blessed with a living ministry, and all our whitened fields are gathered into the granary of God. And we should pray too for those who are now laboring, that each may possess the missionary zeal of the Master, and that disentangled from every yoke of worldly bondage they may give themselves entirely to the things of God. Prayer also is needed for ourselves as churches, until an earnest longing for God's glory becomes the all-absorbing passion of the soul, and the call "come over and help us" meet a ready response from every Christian.

But we do not pray unless the object for which we plead is sufficiently desired to lead us to sacrifice our own privileges and wealth as means to its accomplishment. Hence we need:

2. The spirit of entire consecration. We profess to belong to God. "We are not our own but bought with a price." "We are the Lord's"—and we sometimes sing,

"All that I am, and all I have, shall be forever thine."

Let us see to it that the sentiment does not end with the song, for it is not to be feared that benevolence with too many is a matter of convenience rather than of conscience. If anything can be given, and the want of it not perceived, it may possibly be given to God. Such offerings are unworthy of the name of sacrifice. We are to give till we do feel. When this is the case, and all is honestly consecrated, there will be no lack in God's treasury, and then our weak churches in their applications for aid will not be told, "depart in peace, be warmed and filled."

3. We need to love our neighbours as ourselves. This alone would give to our churches privileges more equal. Cherishing such a principle, what Christian, or church could Sabbath after Sabbath sit, and be feasted in the sanctuary without remembering their brethren who are fainting for the bread of life." With this in our hearts we could not behold our neighbour and brother in want, and with the priest or the Levite "pass by on the other side." Every member of the brotherhood has claims on the sympathies of his brethren, and there should be an abiding confidence in the heart of each, of receiving aid in times of need. That confidence should not be shaken—neither should the individuality of our churches cause us to forget the brotherhood. No distance of location or variation of condition can weaken our obligation to "distribute to the necessity of saints." We may love our own church, or that separate organization to which we belong, because we have common interests involved. We might give largely to provide for it elegant places of worship, and a stated ministry because it would be for our own comfort, and tend to our own advantage: and yet possess an isolated, selfish spirit which would shut up, within the limits of our own congregation, all our concern for the cause of God and our denominational growth. But the question having lost none of its force would still come down to us upon the stream of time: "Where is thy brother?" Here too we may learn an important lesson from our Wesleyan friends—when they gain a footing in a locality they keep it. This is probably attributable to their having what we

4. Need—a more efficient system of Home Mission work. Hitherto our interests and our zeal have been sectional, and our efforts desultory. And in proportion as we have localized our strength and means, in just that ratio have our conceptions become narrow, and our work limited. The conclusion is that our care one for another and especially for the weak is not proportional to our means and should test our profession by the Divine inquiry, "Whoso hath this world's good and seeth his brother have need and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him how dwelleth the love of God in him?"

THE HOUSE OF PRAYER AND THE HOUSE OF HEALING.

Hospital Sunday in the City of London has yielded nearly five-and-twenty thousand pounds. It is a grand demonstration of the keen interest which true religion takes in the ailments and cures of men. There may have been a touch of competition, and of a fair show in the flesh; but, taken all in all, it is a noble example of how practical and charitable are the feelings of men who worship and bow down, and kneel before the Lord their Maker. The hospitals are the sources of two perversions. They may be counted as only medical schools, offering many and likely "subjects." Or they may be felt to be the exhibition of man at his lowest state, presenting him under the degrading appearance of disease, and as if constituted only of cellular tissues, phosphates, and a few grains of iron. Scientific skill with flesh and blood seems to cover such a conception of a hospital. Yet Champagne dinners once a year, and immense rentals under the larger corporations, only serve to hide the deep fountain of charity which founded and sustains their noble institutions. A few Saturday contributions, the angry gift at the Albert Hall, and one or two cups of pence from Sunday excursionists, will cover all the gifts that were made outside a place of prayer. Hospital practice and Sabbath worship have been brought into close contact, and the question is apt and fair, whether a devout spirit has not so much to do with the maintenance of these charities, as to affect the success of the operations within them. The faith of the Christian will not hesitate in replying that the gift, accompanied with prayer, will do more to heal than the gift without it. And this is the last bone of contention between the Gospel and science.

Dr. Hesy has lately delivered a course of Boyle lectures, in which he has dealt directly with this subject, with the same frank sagacity he has applied to the moral difficulties of the Bible. And though the popular interest in it has somewhat declined since the autumn, the topic is so vital and serious in its bearings as to repay constant and prolonged treatment.

The objections urged against the efficacy of prayer may be summed up on one side in this form. An answer to prayer would involve an interruption of the order of the universe; and, if that could be, man is too insignificant a part of the whole that it should be done for his sake. Thus a hard and fast adhesion to law and a low thought for man are the habits of this unbelief.

The forces of nature must have full, free play. But what are they? Do they only play in disease and drugs? Do they not play in the enthusiasm of the physician and the tender love of human hearts? The right of petition is as much a power in the state as the right of taxation. The burdens of existence appear on every hand lightened and checked, if not removed, by the sympathies and appeals of the heart. It is neither unhistorical nor unscientific, nor unphilosophical to think of prayer as one of those forces which, interacting with other forces, determine the progress of events.

And this minimizing of man's position in the universe which seems so humble and novel, is neither new nor meek. An old poet touched on the inquiry when he looked on the heavens, "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" and answered it as, modern science notwithstanding, we do now—"Thou hast crowned him with glory and honour." Pascal says, "When I look on the mountain I feel how small I am, but when I look on this thought of mine about it, I feel I am more than all mountains." The conquests of science are the answer to the imputed degradation of man.