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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VI.

THE COUNTRY CHURCH.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR G. FREDERICK WRIGHT, OBERLIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

THE rapid growth of cities is one of the most marked features of modern times, and is much commented on by writers of every description. The facts are indeed startling, and they lend themselves to the support of much gloomy speculation respecting the future, and, in church work, to many readjustments of plans. In the United States, for example, in 1790, only one-thirtieth of the population was in cities of 8,000 and upwards; whereas, in 1860, the urban population had so gained upon that of the country that it amounted to about one-sixth of the whole. At the present time it is probably about one-fourth. Again, since 1790 the total population of the United States has increased sixteen-fold, but the increase of the city population (counting every corporation containing 8,000 as a city) has been one-hundred-and-sixty-fold. Again, in 1850 there were only eighty-five cities having an average population of 35,000; whereas, in 1880, there were three hundred such cities.¹

It cannot be denied that these facts are startling. Especially do they seem so, if we surrender ourselves to the illusion of ratios, and are made to believe that the city population is eventually so to outstrip that of the country that but a remnant will be left to till the fields. But close examination will show that, even under present conditions, while this process may go on somewhat farther,

¹ See Article by Professor A. B. Hart in *Journal of Economics*, for January 1890.

there is a natural limit to it. Man cannot live without bread to eat and clothes to wear, a roof to shelter him, fuel to warm him, and iron with which to make effective the devices of his inventive faculty. And all these things must be obtained in increasing quantities and at increased expense from diminishing stores of nature. There must soon be a turn in the tide of affairs when the growth of the country population will keep pace with that of the city.

The recent rapid growth of cities has been facilitated by two temporary causes whose force will soon be spent. In the first place, labor-saving machinery actually tends to diminish the number of laborers needed to furnish the world with any given commodity. Its recent effect upon the growth of cities arises from its connection with improvements in transportation, whereby it has rapidly gathered those laborers into a comparatively few centres. Instead of a small number of cabinet-makers and weavers and shoemakers in every community, these and like classes of artisans are now gathered together in a few cities. But it is easy to see that this work of concentration has already come almost to its limit; so that the country has suffered nearly its full amount of shrinkage from the process, and the cities have well-nigh experienced their full amount of relative advancement from this cause. A few large cities are destined to become very much larger. But already the growth of the smaller cities is being checked by this process.

The improvement of agricultural implements has also, under present conditions, tended directly to the decrease of the country population. Each reaper and binder takes the place in the field of several men, and so to that extent tends to diminish the number of agricultural laborers. The railroads, also, as a part of the great system of labor-saving machinery, have, so far, co-operated in a peculiar manner to accomplish this same result. This effect has been felt chiefly through their influence in giving sudden

access to the virgin fields of the West and Northwest, where the farmer can appropriate in a short time, and turn to his own profit, the riches of the soil, which have been accumulating for centuries. It is not only in the forests and mines that man gets access to the accumulations of the past, but it is equally so in the uncultivated fields of the prairie, where the earth has been enriched by centuries of undisturbed vegetable decomposition, and the sod needs but to be turned over to make a fruitful field. The present generation, it may be truly said, is engaged not so much in cultivating the soil as in robbing it. The energies of the present generation are not turned, to any great extent, in the direction of scientific agriculture. In the newer portions of the country the effort is not to increase the production of the soil, and to make two blades of wheat grow where only one grew before; but the great contention with all classes at the present is to see which shall first obtain access to uncultivated fields and to the vast reserved stores of nature.

But the present conditions of agriculture are, evidently, anomalous, and must be temporary. The stored wealth of nature will soon be exhausted, and more labor than at present will be required to secure from the soil the productions which serve as the basis for the existing material prosperity. The careless methods of cultivation now in vogue will not long suffice to get even the present returns from the land, much less to get the increased returns which will be needed as the growth of population enlarges the demand. To some extent this increase of labor can be met by machinery, but to a still greater extent it can be performed only by an increase of manual laborers. Manures must be gathered and applied; diversity of industry upon the farm must be introduced; and so the flow of population will eventually be towards the country, rather than from it as now. Even the recently deserted hill farms of New England, will, in the course of a generation or two, be re-peopled with an agricultural population. The pop-

ulation of the country, taking the world over, must, it is plain, always be larger than that which is gathered into cities. Labor-saving machinery can never take the place, in tilling the soil, that it already has taken in the factory.

In considering the importance of the problem before us, we should keep in mind, therefore, that the country church must always be depended upon to bring the gospel before the larger part of the population of the earth. The problem of maintaining these churches, therefore, is more than half the problem of converting the world, and must, by its very magnitude, ever demand most serious attention. Most readers will be surprised at the facts brought out in a recent article by Rev. S. W. Dike,¹ that in the "fourteen Northern States east of the Mississippi River, where a little over one-half of the entire population of the United States was found in 1880, there were more people by about a million in the country townships of less than 2,000 inhabitants than there were in all the large cities and towns having 4,000 or upwards," and that the non-churchgoers in this portion of the country largely consist of those who live more than two miles from the nearest church, the proportion being fifty per cent greater outside of that line than within it. In the State of Vermont one-half of the population does not go to church at all. The great problem in church work, therefore, is to reach that vast outlying population. It is to be feared, that, in the prominence recently given to the subject of city evangelization, the importance of this other work is in danger of being overlooked. But the mission secretaries of all denominations who are compelled to face the facts, are now all sorely perplexed with the question, What shall we do with the country churches in the older settled portions, where so much of the population has abandoned the agricultural districts? and how much of our contributed funds shall be appropriated for the establishment of

¹ The Century for January 1890.

churches in the country neighborhoods of the newly settled regions? And, in view of the facts already mentioned, all may be interested in the question, What can be done to increase the efficiency of the declining country churches?

In answering these questions, it is necessary to keep clearly in mind all the elements of the problem. One of the most important considerations exists in the well-known fact, that the country supplies the city with its population, as well as with its means of sustenance. It is everywhere true that a large part of the prominent business men and of the leading men in the various professions in the cities were born and trained in the country, and this is pre-eminently true of the membership of the city churches. The beneficent light and heat of the city church, like that of the sun, according to one hypothesis, is, so to speak, maintained by a never ceasing shower of meteorites. The sons and daughters trained amid the economies and the heroic service of the country churches come together from every quarter in the city church, and their energy produces at that point a central body so radiant with light and heat that its beams penetrate, and impart their beneficent influence, to the most distant regions. Such are, in the main, all our large and most active metropolitan churches. They have gathered to them the best material from a great number of country churches, and it is extremely doubtful if a single one of them could maintain its efficiency for two generations if cut off from this supply of country-trained material. The city church is an essential factor in the evangelization of the world; but it is well to remember the rock out of which it has been hewn.

While the debt of the city church to the country church is great for the rank and file of its most active membership, it is pre-eminently great for its ministers. In the statistics that have been from time to time collected, it has been repeatedly noticed that the supply of ministers

is mostly from the smaller churches in the country. A score of country churches in Vermont, for example,—and the same is true in the hill towns of the other States of New England,—can easily be pointed out, which have each furnished, during the past century, from five to twenty ministers and missionaries, to say nothing of their wives, who have borne their full share of the heroic service; whereas, from the larger commercial and manufacturing centres, the ministerial supply has been very small indeed.

This state of things does not arise from accident. There are, in the nature of the case, in the country churches, conditions peculiarly favorable to the production and training of the highest type of Christian character, and for securing the most abundant and the best candidates for the Christian ministry. Where Christian influences exist in the country, they have much closer and more continuous access to susceptible minds than they have in the city. The pious mother in the country is not compelled to compete with so many distracting influences as in the city, and the same is true of the Sabbath-school teacher and of the pastor. Though the Sabbath-school may be small and the congregation but a handful, the narrowness of the field is in large part compensated for by the exclusiveness of possession, and the depth of the influences exerted is in inverse ratio to the surface covered. The work of a city pastor with a large congregation gathered from the country churches, as we have seen most of these congregations are, may be compared to that of a Western farmer who is rapidly reaping the harvest made abundant by the presence of reserved stores of nature. Whereas the work in the country church is fitly compared to that upon the market garden, where deeper cultivation and more direct personal attention secure the ripest rewards of labor.

Because, therefore, of the importance of these country churches in themselves, as well as on account of their re-

lations to the changed conditions of the near future, they must be maintained. The denomination that neglects them and confines itself to city work cannot prosper. By that method of procedure it cuts off the sources of fresh supply by which church life is successfully maintained in the city. Most of all, it cuts itself off from a supply of ministerial candidates, and experiences the just rewards of neglecting the larger part of the work, which seems the harder, for the sake of reaping the deceptive harvests of city evangelization.

But the difficulties of maintaining the country churches, especially of supplying them with an educated ministry, are very great, and those denominations that have refused to adopt a system of itinerancy for their ministers, and that have endeavored to secure a classical education for all their ministerial candidates, are meeting with special difficulties in these fields at the present time. There is a dearth of ministers, and there is an increasing disinclination to spend either missionary funds or ministerial service upon the country parishes.

Prominent among the plans for bridging over the difficulty is that of the Evangelical Alliance, which is endeavoring to secure a unification of effort between the different denominations, which appear to divide, in such an unseemly manner, the forces of the smaller Christian communities. It would seem practicable to persuade the four or five denominations which often have struggling churches competing for support in a community apparently only large enough for one well-sustained church, to lay aside their peculiarities, and unite upon a platform of principles in which as Christians they agree. But practically it is found that this plan cannot, to any great extent, prevail. The reasons for the existence of the different denominations are as applicable to the small places as to the large. The Christian system is of such superlative importance that everything connected with it as a means of preserving its purity, and of urging its claims, becomes

of superlative importance. To ask the Baptist, who believes immersion to be the only form of baptism, and communion to be a privilege only of the church member, to surrender this point, is to underestimate the importance which he rightly attaches to his belief. It is like asking a patriot who loves his country to consent to the dismantling of fortresses which seem to be necessary for its defence. The defence of the fortress is, to his mind, the defence of the country. To ask the Congregationalist to exchange his church polity for that of the Presbyterian or the hierarchical order is like asking a father who loves his children to consent to the introduction of influences which seem likely to alienate them from the principles he has most at heart; while to ask the Presbyterian or the Episcopalian to surrender his form of church government would be like asking the Government itself to disband its standing army, and to substitute, for an orderly method of procedure, a disorderly method conceived to be far less effective. All these denominations represent ideas supposed by their adherents to be of great importance in the work of preserving and disseminating the gospel. To ask them to cherish these ideas only in the cities is preposterous. The church union toward which we look can only be the result of longer experience and more patient and protracted discussion. In our present plans it seems inevitable to accept the denominational divisions as established facts which cannot be lightly set aside. It is doubtful if the purity of Christianity can be maintained without the watchfulness of denominational rivalry. The problem, therefore, is, for each denomination to maintain its due proportion of country churches. If, for any reason inherent in itself, a denomination is unable to do this, there is, so far, an argument against its right to exist at all. We do not therefore hope for any great progress in

districts, and will, to a considerable extent, disappear as the country becomes more thickly settled, and the population begins again, under stress of approaching changes of conditions, to flow back from the cities to the country and from the factory to the farm.

It is easy to see that, in the present condition of things, those church organizations which maintain an itinerant system and are able to utilize an uneducated ministry, have a great advantage in the race. To such an extent is this now recognized that practically the Congregational and Presbyterian churches have adopted the essential elements of the system. The Congregational or Presbyterian home missionary secretary has almost as much influence in determining the relation of pastors to the home missionary churches as has the bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Congregational and Presbyterian ministers themselves are about as truly itinerants as are their brethren who suppose themselves to be loyal to the system of Wesley. The disadvantages under which the home missionary secretary labors arise from two sources: a lack of properly qualified ministers and a disinclination on the part of the churches to accept uneducated ministers. To supply the lack of ministers, a movement has already begun to provide a shorter course of theological education adapted to the wants of candidates whose school privileges have been limited, but who in the ordinary walks of life have shown special aptitude for ministerial duties; while many, also, have been admitted to the ranks of the ministry without even this amount of special training. To what extent this movement may supply the want, it is impossible at present to tell. But it is recognized on all hands as a calamity, that the great crowds of young men who graduate from the Christian colleges of the land—colleges which, for the most part, have been founded and endowed for the express purpose of raising up an educated ministry—should turn away from the sacred calling. But, so long as the most of them

turn away because their heart is not in the work, there is no positive help for the situation. The most that can be done is to pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth more laborers into the harvest, and baptize anew with his Spirit the young men and the maidens, that they may have the spirit of prophecy.

A partial remedy for the deficiency of ministers would seem to be the adoption of a plan by which two or more contiguous churches should employ the same pastor ; but, in the communions above mentioned, this plan comes in conflict with the spirit of independence cultivated by the local churches and which it is essential to respect. It is found in practice difficult by any outside pressure of advice to get two churches to act in concert with reference to the same candidate, and so the union of fields is left in the main to be brought about by the successful management of the candidate himself, and thus the pastoral office, at best precarious in its tenure, is made doubly so by the necessity of pleasing two churches instead of one.

But herein is a field which appeals with peculiar power to the educated young men of the country. And there is not so much waste of organization as often appears to a superficial observer, even in the small villages where several competing churches exist. There is usually a large outlying region tributary to the village, and which is, with due patience, accessible to the influence of a self-denying and patient ministry. Often there are whole neighborhoods within four or five miles of these numerous churches where there is an almost total neglect of the means of grace. It surely would be a noble ambition for the most gifted young man to set himself seriously about the task of reaching these lost sheep upon the mountains, of overcoming their prejudices, and of revealing to them the wonderful love of their divine Master. In our opinion

and long-continued contact with the humble but independent class of people to be found in such fields. Instances might be related, almost without number, of the rich rewards and beneficent results of such self-denying labor.

Rev. Samuel W. Dike, whose labors in behalf of reforming the divorce laws of the country are now recognized the world over, and who himself obtained fitness for his present work by such a country pastorate as that of which we have spoken, has furnished in the article above referred to some most instructive suggestions as to the facilities at hand in our country parishes for the promotion of religious work. He rightly insists that the church is only one of the institutions of religion; that before and above the church is the family, and the family still exists in its completest form in the country district, where outside attractions have less force than in the city. In suggesting measures to solve this great problem of church work, he naturally reminds us of the great importance of the family in its relation to church work, and emphasizes the fact that this whole outlying population is gathered in typical American homes. In calling attention to the desirability and feasibility of utilizing this machinery of God's own making, we can do no better than to quote from Mr. Dike, merely adding that the plan he proposes is largely a return to and modification of the catechetical methods displaced by our undue reliance upon the Sunday-school as now organized. Says Mr. Dike:—

“Nothing else can be used with so great effect to meet the obstacles presented by distance and the other hindrances to public worship as the home. The home is always in contact with the vast numbers of the unchurched both in city and country. It is, so to speak, always on the ground. Distance, weather, dress, and the many social considerations that hinder church attendance, disappear before the home. Natural affection, parental duty, and domestic interest are pleading for its offices. It brings to

its tasks something of more worth than mere intellectual qualifications or professional enthusiasm. And these forces wait the development and direction which the church can give if it will apply its energies and resources to the work with anything like the way in which it has spent itself over the Sunday-school and similar institutions. In the judgment of the sociologist, that cannot be a helpful or permanent adjustment of the forces of the church which does not distribute them proportionately among the three great forms of social institutions represented by the family, the congregation, and the larger bodies formed out of the latter. The family is the primary social institution. It is the most universal in its inclusion of members and in its presence. It is the most constant in its influence. It comes into the closest contact with persons of all ages and sex, though it touches especially the young, and it is the great channel of woman's influence. To develop into all their complex relations the other social institutions and yet keep the life of the family sound and duly vigorous is the great task of modern society. As our modern civilization pushes out its wonderful growth on this side and on that, it continually finds itself compelled to look to its primary constituents and see that they are kept at their very best. It does this on peril of dissolution. The clearest lessons from the history of Aryan civilization, enforced too by the stress laid by early Christianity upon piety in the household, point in this direction.

“Here, then, is a place for some practical work in the development of the latent religious uses of the family. While we may not cease our talk with men about public worship and the duties they owe it, we may well learn to go to them in behalf of the family. But this must not be done as if the family were a homogenized mass with self-respect lost

charity long enough. It is time to help the home to self-respect by our own respect for it. There is in it a slumbering consciousness of itself which needs to be called into activity.

“Work in this direction will be slow at first. Long disuse of the powers of the family, or perhaps I should say the great neglect to train and use them fully, has had the effect of partial paralysis or of infantile weakness. It is easier to work upon larger collections of people than it is to take single households, just as we can make shoes cheaper in a factory than in the old-fashioned way.

“But the work can be done. I give an example, which is only one, and in the single direction of religious instruction. I refer to the home department of the Sunday-school. This is the name given to an extension of the Sunday-school beyond the limits of the collection of its members in congregations. It secures the enrollment of all it can of those persons who cannot attend with much frequency the central Sunday-school, as its members in the home department of the school. These are supplied with the necessary materials and helps, and are pledged to give at least a half-hour every Sunday to the study of the international lesson or some other Scripture at home, either alone or with some other members of the family. A record of attendance upon this duty and of other matters is made and sent regularly to the school, which in its turn gives similar information. This is the leading feature, to which others have been and may still be added. This device has been very successful, almost adding at least one-fifth to the membership of the school, and sometimes doubling its numbers. Several hundred schools probably have adopted it in country towns, where it is working remarkably well, and of late it has been most successfully tried in some cities.

“The principle of this is evident, and it is capable of enlargement and application in several directions. It reaches more people than the congregational method of

work can do by itself. What is more, it has planted in the popular mind the idea of the responsibility of the home to itself and the possibility of doing its own work in some measure. Now we may go on to other arrangements of the general sort. Household worship and perhaps liturgical aids to it, studies in the ethics and æsthetics of home life, the assignment of definite parts of religious instruction to the home along with those pursued in the church school, may be named as within the range of the American family of ordinary intelligence. A course in Bible study and also the salient points of church history, the confessions, collects, hymns, music, and missionary work of the church might become parts of systematic study at home in the more intelligent families, if not in most."

From all these considerations it is evident that in solving the problem of the country church, as in that of the conversion of the world, what we need is not more measures but more men. How shall we secure a great increase of laborers prepared to enter into these fields and cope with their difficulties? Ultimately, of course, the answer to this question resolves itself into the more fundamental one, How shall we secure the conversion, consecration, and Christian training of the children and youth of our land? But subsidiary questions relate to various other matters of importance. Among these is that of forming a public sentiment that shall properly honor those who enter upon this self-denying and most important work. At the present time we are impressed with the fact that honor is distributed upon the ministry not in proportion to its real spiritual work, but in proportion

the necessity of which we are now speaking. It is not right that these institutions should be brought down to the low level of mere secular seats of learning. College presidents and college professors are called upon, in view of the present tendencies, to humble themselves before God, and to ask, why it is that a larger number of their pupils are not controlled by the higher ambitions impelling to grapple with the hard problems and the hard realities of home missionary work. The wine-drinking and worldly alumni of these institutions should not be allowed to control by outside pressure, as to a considerable extent they are now aiming to do, the election of college officers and professors. Nor should this class be allowed, as is now largely the case, to be, in the various alumni societies, the chief representatives of their *Alma Mater*.

But no one class of men can bear the whole responsibility for the present decadence of interest in the work of ministering to the wants of the country churches in the land. There has been a general decay of public sentiment upon the point, arising largely from a failure to appreciate its importance and its hopefulness. We have but duly to reflect upon the problems to have the fire kindle in our bones. Any man in his calm senses would say that the winning of a hundred souls to Christ was a more satisfactory accomplishment and a higher type of success than the accumulation of a hundred thousand dollars worth of precarious securities, and yet but a small proportion even of men of marked ability who endeavor to attain the latter end are successful. On the other hand, scarcely any young man of even moderate ability can fail, after proper preparation, to find a neglected country field of Christian labor, where by patient effort in the lines marked out by heavenly appointed means he can win more than a hundred souls back to paths of righteousness and lead them to seats of everlasting glory. And among these hundred stars of his crown it is more than likely there will be some of special brilliancy who shall be a guiding light to thousands more.

The great need of our country churches is of pastors who shall enter heartily into the work before them, and who shall properly appreciate their privileges and magnify their calling. To one who fully understands the opportunities of even a small country parish, the general hankering of the college graduate for business, and of the theological graduate for a city parish, is unaccountable; for, as is well known, nine-tenths of the business men fail of success, and, as we have seen, the country parish affords a much clearer field for influence than the city parish. The seductions of the city and the very bustle of its activities militate against the permanent influence of the preacher. The audience goes out from the sound of the metropolitan preacher's voice to listen to a very Babel of voices of every description and upon every class of subjects, and to have their eyes dazzled with the display of those who have become suddenly rich. Calm reflection is almost impossible, even for the youngest. But how different in the country, where the educated minister can by his mental attainments easily lead the thought of the whole community, and, with the young, follow up the impressions of one week with those of the next, and thus secure the cumulative force of continuous effort! The opportunity for study, also, which is open to the pastor of the country church, as compared with that of the city pastor, is of the very greatest importance both to his present and to his future work. Unlike the lawyer or the physician, the pastor is at the very beginning of his calling thrust into the complete performance of his arduous duties. He must prepare as many sermons from week to week at the beginning of his labors as during any later portion. The demands of the Sabbath-school, of pastoral visitation, and of the weekly lecture or prayer-meeting are the same at the beginning as at the end of the pastoral office. Whereas, with the lawyer and physician, the first few years of practice are likely to give time for reflection and study: clients hesitate about committing their case

to a novice, and patients seek experience in their physician. Happy is the pastor whom Providence permits to begin the arduous work of his calling in some country parish, where he can command the situation rather than have the situation command him, and where in comparative quiet he may go over again, amid the practical affairs of life, the great themes of the gospel which he is to preach!

Much more might be said of the opportunity afforded in the country parish for the more protracted and profounder methods of study which are ever in demand in solving the deepest problems of human thought. It is a well-known fact that the deepest and most influential theological thought of New England has been done by country pastors. Such were Charles Backus, Lyman Beecher, Joseph Bellamy, Asa Burton, Jonathan Edwards, Justin Edwards, Nathaniel Emmons, Thomas Hooker, Samuel Hopkins, John Norton, John Smalley, Solomon Stoddard, Nathan Strong, Bennett Tyler, Eleazar Wheelock, Stephen West, John Wheelright, and John Wise. There is a mistaken notion, becoming increasingly prevalent, that successful study can be prosecuted only in the vicinity of large libraries. This depends upon what kind of study one has in view. For the prosecution of philosophical and theological studies, a comparatively small range of books if well-selected will furnish all the essential material. With one's Greek and Hebrew Bibles, with the lexicons and grammars and Bible dictionary, a few well-selected commentaries and systems of theology, and a not large collection of other books of reference, within the means of almost any country pastor, he is provided with nearly all he needs. He cannot by any means exhaust the possibilities of successful study with such helps, in the first ten years of his ministry. Besides, in the present progress of our civilization, libraries and literary centres are springing up in every part of the land, and so are accessible to him if he is wise enough to reverse

the custom of the city pastor and get variety by spending his vacation in the city, while the city pastor is in the country. Books, too, are now attainable from some of the libraries by mail, and thus the position of laborers in these diverse fields is being equalized.

But, after all, these are not the great considerations. They are only secondary. The appeal of the country population is to the Christian heart of the college graduate. The ideal of our civilization can be realized only when there is a highly educated preacher of the gospel, independent in thought, within reach of and in contact with every outlying neighborhood in the land. The appeal is that of the lost sheep on the mountain side, and whoever shall hear and heed that appeal cannot fail to return richly laden with its rewards.