

The General Baptist Magazine, June 1861

Nearly twenty years ago an article appeared in this periodical containing the following pertinent observation: *The leaves are fast failing around us, and each as it falls from the twig on which it was nourished into life and beauty ought to act as a powerful remembrance to teach us that we must shortly be numbered with the odds of the valley. How important that we should work while it is called day - for there is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave.* The hand which wrote that seasonable moral sentiment in the autumn of 1840 was young and tender, unpractised in composition, and only beginning to 'find' the work which it had to do for its beneficent Maker. The owner of that hand was the amiable brother who, after a brief term of service, has been called to rest from his labours, and whose works will follow him.

George Ward Pegg was born at Melbourne, Derbyshire. His ancestors were members of the Baptist Church in that place, — one of them, Mr. John Pegg, was an active deacon of the church, and for his Christian character and general ability was *had in reputation among all the people*. The subject of this memoir was brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. While yet a boy he left the parental roof to live with his uncle, Mr. R. Pegg in Derby. After a short time he was sent by this relative to a branch manufactory at Wirksworth, where the writer had recently commenced his ministry. There our intercourse was frequent and familiar; and the attempt was made by private conversation, as well as in public preaching, to direct his mind to spiritual things. Of all means of usefulness religious conversation is surely one of the most facile and the most fruitful. Among the young there are few that can withstand the persuasive power of a wisely manifested solitude for their salvation. At the time referred to, I did not know that my efforts on behalf of my interesting young companion were of much avail; but at his ordination, in relating his religious experience, he spoke of them as having exerted a good influence over him. This fact is mentioned here not to invite commendation, but to encourage any fellow labourer in the work of Christ to improve his opportunity of sowing seed, and of bringing forth fruit.

On returning to Derby, George Pegg formed acquaintances with some youths who were disinclined to religion, and by degrees he grew indifferent if not averse to it himself. Upon how many high hills, and under how many green trees he wandered, after saying he would not transgress, is unknown to any except to the All-seeing, before whom our iniquity is marked: (Jer ii.20). His life of apparent pleasure was a time of real pain. Sitting as he did Sabbath after Sabbath under the searching ministry of the Rev. J.G. Pike, he was often deeply sensible of his guilt and danger. This evil doing was attended with keen remorse and severe self condemnation, *being convicted by his own conscience*. In his eighteenth year his good impressions were renewed, and after giving evidence of his conversion he was baptized and received into the church, in Brook-street, Derby. Together with the new heart which had been given, and the right spirit which had been put within him, a desire for mental improvement was awakened: and having easy access to books he employed his leisure hours in reading and in literary pursuits. As one of the means of mental culture he began to write as well as to read. In the infancy and youth of nations metrical compositions are invariably the first forms of literature which are produced: and in the time of youth, which has been aptly termed the poetry of life, poetic effusions are the kind most commonly attempted. Our friend first tried his skill in the art of making words musical; and the 'Repository' contains several specimens of his rhythmical talent. Self-improvement was in his case sought not for his own sake alone, but as a qualification for doing good to others. The Sunday school engaged his attention as a sphere of Christian usefulness; and one of his earliest pieces in prose was 'on the Sunday School Teacher'.

In 1841, on my removal to London, we were again brought into close connexion with each other. It was arranged that he should reside in the metropolis for the promotion of his uncle's business, and that he should be my guest. In the course of a few weeks I found that he was inclined to other pursuits than those of commerce; and that he was willing to forego a position which promised to be lucrative for a calling more spiritual in its purpose, more severe in its requirements, and altogether different in its fruitions and rewards. Knowing him to possess good natural abilities, having heard his exercises in social prayer, and seen some of his written compositions, I encouraged him to try his powers in public speaking. He did so, first in the Praed-street Sunday school, and then at the week night prayer meeting. These addresses were followed by the delivery of a 'trial sermon' in the same place - and this led to his being recommended by the Church to the Committee of the College.

A little before that time, the revered Tutor, the Rev. T. Stevenson, had finished his course and the students were distributed among various ministers. Mr Pegg was placed with the Rev. John Stevenson, and continued with him in London until the settlement of the Institution at Leicester, under the care of the Rev. J. Wallis. During his college course nothing remarkable occurred to distinguish him as a student; but his genteel appearance, his good manners, the flowing style of his compositions, and his free and unaffected delivery, made him a general favourite as a preacher. Toward the conclusion of his college term he supplied the pulpit in Commercial-road, London, and so acceptable were his probationary services that he received a cordial invitation to settle there in the beginning of 1845. He accepted the call, and was ordained to the pastoral office in October of the same year. The ordination services were largely attended, were deeply impressive at the time, and are still remembered with profit by many who were present.

It is the folly of more recent times to omit these solemnities as if they were antiquated rites and empty formalities, and to substitute in their room the enticements of the tea meeting, and the pleasantries of the platform. The fashion now is to 'let all things be done' - not 'unto edifying', but to entertainment. Personal tastes and local convenience are often more consulted than scriptural authority, ecclesiastical custom, and spiritual usefulness. *For my part, writes Job Orton, I must freely say that the little seriousness and zeal which the ministers in the present day show, and the little respect with which dissenters in general treat their ministers is, in my opinion, partly owing to the want of that great solemnity with which ordinations were performed by our fathers.*

The connection of Mr Pegg with the church in Commercial-road was maintained unbroken for upwards of fifteen years. With a few exceptions, the treatment he received from his people was kind and forbearing; and the effect of such treatment was to make him feel that he was in his proper sphere. Amidst repeated trials - often with imperfect health - and with fluctuating success he continued to exercise his ministry until the summer of 1860. The failure of his strength obliged him to be absent from his pulpit for several months; but when medical opinion was very decided as to the necessity of resigning his pastoral office he was unwilling to act upon it, believing that to leave his church, would, even if he were restored to health, be tantamount to a retirement from the ministry altogether. As however the prospect of resuming his labours became more and more doubtful he tendered his resignation in a brief note. Before this note could be read to the church his disease had completely overmastered his emaciated frame, and the saddened spirit which indited it had ascended to God. On the first Sabbath in February, he attended the services at Chesham where he had lately resided, and partook of the Lord's supper in the afternoon. Toward the end of the same week he became suddenly worse — on Saturday he seemed to be rapidly sinking, and on Sunday he expired. Such was the nature of his last sickness that he was not able to converse much. To Mr Preston, whose ministry he had for some time attended, and who visited him, on his death bed, he made the short but assuring statement; *I have no fear; the blood of Christ is sufficient for me!* He died in the house of his esteemed father-in-law, John Garrett, Esq., and has left a widow and a son to mourn their loss. In the cemetery of the secluded town where he ended his days, his remains were deposited on the 20th of February. The deacons of his church, and other attached friends from London, attended his interment, and the Rev Isaac Preston delivered a pathetic and an affecting oration. On the following Sunday evening, the writer preached the funeral sermon to his bereaved church and congregation in the Commercial-road Chapel; on which occasion, the numbers who were present and the feelings which pervaded the large assembly gave evidence the high respect in which our departed brother was held.

As a metropolitan minister, and one was accustomed to attend the meetings of the denomination, Mr. Pegg must have been extensively known the readers of the Magazine. They the opportunity therefore of forming their own judgment relative to character as a Christian, and qualities as a Christian minister. Without wishing to modify any opinion which others entertained respecting him, I cannot close this short biography without recording my belief that he was a good man — 'one who feared good God and eschewed evil.' Although comparatively young, he was sober-minded, and was much more free from levity of spirit than many of his coevals. As a believer he was 'sound in faith;' and in the doctrine he taught he showed 'uncorruptness'. His preaching was evangelical in its matter — serious in its tone — practical in its tendency — and useful in its effects. He had an average amount of mental ability, and a large share of common sense. The expensive alterations and the great improvements which were made in the chapel during the early and middle period of his ministerial course required, on his part, great energy and effort. He had taste to design those improvements — the will to resolve on making them — and the perseverance which was needed to conquer the obstacles which stood in the way of their being made. If any deficiency might be imputed to him in these matters, that deficiency lay in his not striving for the means of more speedily defraying the heavy costs which were incurred. Debts in churches should be as much deprecated as debts in families or commercial firms; and the house of God should be as free from incumbrances as other buildings. All ministers cannot do what Mr. Spurgeon has accomplished; but if all would adopt his principle they might be proportionately successful in their efforts to carry it out. To Mr. Pegg belonged the merit of having promoted the enlargement and re-fitting of a chapel which was both small and unattractive; but beyond the limits of his own church and congregation he made scarcely any appeals for help in order to meet the expense of the undertaking. 'Too delicate to dig; too bashful to beg' (Luke xvi.3).

It was probably from a disposition nearly allied to this unwillingness to be burdensome to others that he kept himself so much within the circle of his own people. A little more intercourse with Christian brethren - a little more interchange of ministerial services - and a little more public spirit would have enhanced his worth and increased his usefulness. He was certainly affable and companionable — 'a lover of hospitality — a lover of good men' (rather, good things' — *φιλαγαθον*) — but he was not so prominent in religious society as his circumstances and personal qualities would have enabled him to appear. His imperfect health may have been one inducing cause of his retiring habits, for his constitution was never strong, and the care which he took of it proved insufficient to preserve it from premature decay.

The attachment of Mr. Pegg to his church and to the denomination was warm and strong. The interest which he felt in our public institutions was evinced by liberal contributions to their funds: although it must be admitted that his contributions might have been larger if he had been sufficiently frugal in personal expenditure. His house was ever open for the accommodation of ministers and missionaries during their temporary stay in the metropolis. And considering what he did, and what he might have been able to do with the more ample means of usefulness which he had the prospect of possessing, his early removal must be regarded as a denominational loss. *And surely the mountain falling cometh to nought, and the rock is removed out of his place. The waters wear the stones; the floods sweep over the dust of the earth; and Thou destroyest the hope of man. Thou prevailest for ever against him and he passeth. Thou changest his countenance and sendest him away.*

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