

*The Duty of Churches respecting the Encouragement of
Spiritual Gifts.*

THE
CIRCULAR LETTER
FROM THE
BAPTIST MINISTERS and MESSENGERS,

Assembled at St. Albans, *May 31, and June 1, 2, 1796.*

Maintaining the important Doctrines of three equal Persons in the Godhead: eternal and personal Election; original Sin; particular Redemption; free Justification by the imputed Righteousness of Christ; efficacious Grace in Regeneration; the final Perseverance of real Believers; the Resurrection of the Dead; the future Judgment; the eternal Happiness of the Righteous; and everlasting Misery of the Impenitent; with the congregational Order of the Churches, inviolably;

To the several Churches they represent, or have received Letters from, meeting at *Loscoe, in Derbyshire; Burton-upon-Trent, in Staffordshire; Sutton Ashfield and Nottingham, in Nottinghamshire; Sheephead, Leicester, Sutton-in-the-Elms, Arnsby, and Foxton, in Leicestershire; Oakham, in Rutland; Braunston, Guilsborough, Clipstone, Gretton, Kettering, Walgrave, Moulton, Northampton, and Road, in Northamptonshire; Olney, in Buckinghamshire; and Thorn, in Bedfordshire; Saint Alban's, in Hertfordshire; Spalding, in Lincolnshire; and Sobam; in Cambridgeshire.*

Grace be to you, and Peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Brethren,

THROUGH the goodness of God we met together at the time and place appointed. The interview was pleasant and profitable; and the intelligence from the churches very encouraging. We have been used to address you on these annual occasions with a letter on some important subject. This year we have thought it expedient to call your attention to *The Duty of Churches respecting the Encouragement of Spiritual Gifts.*

The attention of the Churches has of late been happily turned to an increase of labour. Impressed with the command of Christ, *Go teach all nations—preach the gospel to every creature,* we have tried to enlarge the sphere of our activity, by attempting to make inroads upon the heathen world: and so far as relates to the interposition of Providence, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ hath hitherto prospered our way. The gospel of Jesus is now preached in Indostan; and the natives, both Heathens and Mahometans, discover a willingness to
A hear

hear it. We hope 'ere long to be able to say the same of some parts at least of Africa; and to address those who were not a people, as the children of the living God. Since this good work has been undertaken there has also been an increasing desire to propagate the gospel in our own country. Many villages and even large and populous towns are apparently without the knowledge of God. Those ministers who have made a point of carrying the word of God into such places, though they may have met with difficulties, yet have no reason to despair: on the contrary, they have found in general such a willingness to hear, that if they could have gone to ten places where they have gone to one, they would not have been in want of people to preach to. Under such an impression many of us have exclaimed, *The harvest is great, but the labourers are few!* You know the consequence: we must pray, and do something else as well as pray, that more labourers might be sent into the harvest.

The primitive churches were remarkable for the number of characters amongst them who were able to teach Christianity. They were nurseries for ministers. When the first attack was to be made upon the heathen world, and suitable characters were called for to undertake it, *the Church at Antioch* was ready to answer to the call. Richly provided with prophets and teachers, they furnished a *Saul* and a *Barnabas* for the work: and *when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them*, it seems without any sensible loss to themselves, *they sent them away* *.

It is true in those times the Holy Ghost furnished men with gifts of an extraordinary kind, such as cannot be expected in these: but gifts of teaching are ordinary, inasmuch as they are necessary for the fulfilment of our Lord's commission, the authority of which is binding *to the end of the world*.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews suggests, that *for the time that they ought to have been teachers they had need that one should teach them again which were the first principles of the oracles of God* †. From this passage, we may remark on the one hand, that no person is fit to teach others who has not himself a good understanding in the things of God; and on the other that Christians in general in those times were expected so to press after growth in grace, and a thorough knowledge of divine things, as that they might be able in some form or other, to communicate that gospel which they had heard and believed. As Christians were to mingle in civil society with other men, they would often be asked the reasons of the hope that was in them; and they were required to be always ready to give an answer to such inquiries with meekness and fear. If the body of professing Christians were properly qualified to discharge this duty, this would fit them for others; and the churches would be less in want of useful ministers than they are.

It is not sufficient however that individual members press after those things which may enable them to do good to others; the churches must become nurseries to their gifts: bold, ignorant and conceited characters may be found it is true, who need something very different

* Acts xiii. 1, 2, 3.

† Heb. v. 12.

from encouragement; but men of modesty and worth will not push themselves forward: they must be sought out and brought forth, or you may expect them to pass their valuable lives in obscurity. *Every man that hath received a gift is commanded to minister the same, as a good steward of the manifold grace of God**; but no man is a competent judge of his own gifts: some through an excess of diffidence will under-estimate them, and others from a contrary temper of mind will draw an opposite conclusion. Hence it becomes the duty of churches, while they exercise a proper disregard to those who aspire after things to which they are incompetent, to watch the growth of talents in worthy characters, and encourage them.

It is not necessary that every one who may be encouraged occasionally to expound the scriptures, should consider himself, or be considered by others as sustaining the character of a minister.

If modest thinking Christians in all our churches were encouraged to communicate their thoughts on divine subjects at conference meetings, it would bring them into a habit of improvement, and tend to draw forth the exercise of gifts which in different degrees might contribute to public usefulness. Characters of this description might do much good by going into the neighbouring villages on a Lord's day evening where they might pray and converse, and read, and expound the scriptures with such inhabitants as choose to assemble with them. Such proceedings would much accord with the practice of the primitive churches, amongst whom were encouraged *helps, and gifts of exhortation*†.

Even in those churches whose members may possess nothing more than the ordinary gifts of praying extempore, and conversing on the things of God, we would earnestly recommend that a few of them go out on a Lord's day evening into an adjacent village, where they may find an opening, (or if they reside where the gospel is not preached, in their own places of abode) and hold a meeting, which might, at least, be conducted by reading, praying, and praising God. It afforded us great pleasure brethren, on reading your letters, to find that in more than one of our churches, this practice is actually carried into execution; and that the attention of the poor ignorant people was thereby stirred up. It is not confined to ministers, or to public preaching: Christians without distinction are exhorted to *hold forth the word of life*.

If a brother at a conference meeting discovers promising abilities; if what he delivers be not only on the side of truth and righteousness, but instructing to the minds, and interesting to the hearts of the hearers, let the elders of the church converse with him by himself, and request him to discourse upon some divine subject a few times before a select company in private.

Even the Apostle Paul submitted his preaching *privately* to them who were of reputation, lest by any means he should run, or had run in vain †.

If these exercises afforded satisfaction, he might be heard before

* 1 Pet. iv. 10.

† Rom. xii. 6, 7, 8. 1 Cor. xii. 28.

‡ Gal. ii. 2.

the whole church, who would thereby be enabled to recommend him to a sister church in case of a request of that nature being preferred.

And if a minister or two in the neighbourhood, whose judgments might be worthy of special regard, were invited to attend, we know of no evil that could follow*.

In this stage of the business it would be the duty of the church to examine strictly into the scripture qualifications for the ministry; and what it is that constitutes a call to that important work, that the recommendation which they may be called to give may not be indigested. And if there be good reason to believe a brother possessed of gifts which by improvement might be of general use, he should be encouraged on his part to improve them by every lawful mean within the compass of his power. The eloquent Apollos was *instructed in the way of the Lord more perfectly by those* who were better acquainted with it than himself †. A young man of true humility will be glad to receive instruction whether it come from a public or a private quarter; whether from men of larger experience and superior abilities, or from those who in some respects may be his inferiors.

The call of a Christian church, it has been said, is the call of God: but though this has been received as a maxim, we question if it be true. Persons may be encouraged to preach by a church who ought to have been employed in a different sphere of action. None will deny that such cases have existed. Our business is to judge whether a person *be* called of God to the work of the ministry: if he be, he has a right to our encouragement. And in judging of this important matter, we have only to determine WHETHER HE HAVE THOSE QUALIFICATIONS WHICH THE SCRIPTURES MAKE NECESSARY TO THE WORK. For *every man that hath received a gift is called of God to minister the same, as a good steward of the manifold grace of God* †. As this then is the turning point of the whole business, we shall employ the remaining part of this address brethren, in pointing out to you what those qualifications are, which constitute the call of God to the Christian ministry.

In general, beware of being imposed upon by enthusiastical pretenders. A person may profess that he has been impressed with a *special desire* for the work of the ministry; and may reckon this to be the call of God; and even plead that his brethren ought on this ground to encourage him, lest they should be found fighting against God. From this consideration only, many worthy members of churches have been induced to give their countenance to ignorant conceited and overbearing characters; and by such measures the cause of Christ hath been greatly injured. A *special desire* we allow is an absolutely necessary qualification for the Christian ministry. It was granted by the Apostle that he who *desired* the office of a bishop, desired a good

* We do not mean however to enforce the advising with neighbouring ministers as in all cases necessary; nor indeed in any case, so as to infringe upon the independency of a church. But as asking a neighbour's advice in domestick concerns is no infringement on the independency of families; so neither is asking the advice of a neighbouring minister an invasion of the independency of churches.

† Acts xviii. 26.

† 1 Pet. iv. 10.

work: and where the motive is incorrupt; where it arises not from ostentation, indolence, or avarice, but from love to God and the souls of men, it is a good desire. Without this a person would be utterly unfit to encounter the trials of the work, and be induced on many occasions to relinquish it. Those *perplexities* which the best of Christ's servants experience, would in them become *despair*; and we should hear it proclaimed in the camp of the enemy, "A standard-bearer *fainteth!*"—It is also granted that this qualification can only be known to, or judged of by the person possessing it: for who but God and his own conscience can take cognizance of his secret motives? But then there are *other qualifications* which require to be united with this; and of which the party himself is not the proper judge, but those with whom he stands connected. Several of these are described by the Apostle in 1 Tim. iii. 1—7.

First, It is necessary that a minister be of a *blameless character*. This qualification exists in different degrees, even in the members of Christian churches. There are characters against whom no specific charge can be preferred, on which an admonition could be justly grounded, who nevertheless are not so amiable amongst their brethren, and have not so good a report from those that are without, as is necessary for so publick and important a station. A good name is necessary to our doing good in the world, and is on this account chiefly to be esteemed as better than precious ointment. Without it a man may labour all his life to no purpose.

In order to form a proper judgment of character, it is necessary that *time* should be allowed. Persons should be of some standing in religion, and even their particular connexion in a Christian church, should be of some duration before they are encouraged to preach the gospel: of so much, however, as to afford an opportunity of knowing their character. A bishop was not to be a *novice*, or *one newly come to the faith*: and if a deacon required to be *first proved*, the same reason must hold good with respect to a minister. On this account it behoves churches to look with some degree of jealousy on those characters who remove their communion with the hope of receiving that encouragement in one community which they could not obtain in another. Such removals may in some cases be necessary: but as hands were not to be laid *suddenly* on any man, neither should encouragement be given without a thorough acquaintance with the case and character of the party.

Secondly, It is necessary that he possess *an eminent degree of true religion*. To say that a minister should be a good man, is saying too little: It is required that he be *strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus*.* Ministers should be sought from among Christians of eminence; under God, much of a minister's success depends upon his *spirit*. The most shining talents without a favour of Christ in his conversation will be of but small account. A man's heart must be in religion, or he is un-

* In a letter from *Ram Boshoo*, the Hindoo Munthee to one of our brethren, received this Spring, he calls all our ministers "spiritual men." Be this a solemn admonition to us to answer to the Hindoo's idea of us; and to the churches to encourage none but such men in preaching the gospel.

fit to engage in this work. Reading, meditation, and prayer must be his element: how else will he give himself wholly to them? It was surely a most expressive petition which the Apostle put up in behalf of Timothy, *The Lord Jesus Christ be with thy SPIRIT!**

Thirdly, It is necessary that the grand principles he embibes should correspond with the Holy Scriptures. Every man who hath received a gift should minister the same; but *if any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God* †. There are two things which, in the encouragement of ministers, have been admitted in the place of evangelical truth; viz. *enthusiasm*, and *distinguished abilities*. A person under the influence of the former has supposed himself to be divinely inspired; and that every impression of a text of scripture upon his mind must be the true meaning of it, taught him by the Holy Spirit himself. Hence he neglects to consult the genuine meaning of scripture, and utters for God's word his own wild and indigested conceits. It is not so much a matter of surprize that such characters are found, as of regret that there are not wanting congregations to encourage them. Very different from this, but equally pernicious, is the substitution of talents in the place of principle. To look only on the former, and overlook the latter is an evil of magnitude in the present age. The more talents any man possesseth, whose leading views are at variance with the oracles of God, the greater mischief he is likely to accomplish; and all who any way encourage such preaching assist in planting a battery against the City of God, and partake of the guilt of destroying souls. The dark soul of a publick teacher has ever been the chosen habitation of the father of lies; because from thence he can propagate error with the least suspicion, and consequently to the greatest advantage. It was not therefore without reason that the Apostle to the Galatians writes in so pointed a manner: *But though we, or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached, let him be accursed!*

Fourthly, It is necessary not only that he shun the path of error, but that he *know the truth*; or *have a good understanding of that which he is to communicate to others*. No man can feed others with knowledge and understanding who does not possess them himself. In the complaint of the Apostle to the Hebrews, that *when for the time they ought to have been teachers, they had need that one should teach them again which were the first principles of the Oracles of God*, it is supposed that a deep and intimate acquaintance with the sacred oracles was necessary to teaching. No wise prince would send an embassy by a person who could not understand it; nor can it be supposed that the only wise God would entrust a message to mankind, the proper delivery of which involved in it the glory of his own character, and the eternal salvation of those to whom it is addressed by a person who does not understand his will. Many good men have discovered an earnest desire to preach the gospel who have been manifestly destitute of this necessary qualification; and some, there is reason to believe have actually engaged in the work, whose defects as to an acquaintance with divine truth have been evi-

* 2 Tim. ii. 1.

† 1 Pet. iv. 11.

dent to their own confusion. Ahimaaz was eager to run, and so swift of foot as to out-run Cush; but, what a mortification must it have been when asked particulars, to have nothing better than this to answer, *Thy servant saw a tumult, but knew not what it was.*

We do not impeach the *motives* of such characters: these are best known to God and themselves; but be they ever so pure, this will afford no proof of their being proper objects of encouragement for the Ministry. It was in David's heart to have built an house for God; and God took it well at his hand; but he suffered him not to proceed. It is in the heart of every good man on one occasion or other to do much more for God, and his fellow-creatures than he is able to do; but it would be more becoming if every one were to labour to occupy that post to a good purpose to which his abilities are equal. It is a high encomium that is bestowed by the Lord Jesus on a good woman, *she hath done what she could.*

Fifthly, It is necessary that he have *a turn of mind for investigating truth, and a thirst after an ENCREASING knowledge of the Scriptures.* If a minister be not constantly acquiring knowledge, he cannot long communicate it to others. His stock will be soon exhausted. The inspired apostle Paul solemnly charges Timothy, and in so doing, equally charges all succeeding ministers of the Gospel to the end of time, to *give attendance*; to apply himself with all his might to *reading, to exhortation, to doctrine*; not to *neglect* the gift that was in him, but to *meditate* on these things, to *give himself wholly* to them, that his *PROFITING*, his growth, his improvements in every ministerial gift, and talent might *appear to all.** It is those who love wisdom that will seek her with diligence and patience; and such only will find her. In the desire God may be said to give the thing desired, inasmuch as it leads to the discovery of it. Without this, the leisure, the books, the company of his brethren, or whatever other means of improvement a minister may possess, all will be a prize in the hand of a fool, who hath no heart to get wisdom. Without this, he will not be able to be *still teaching the people knowledge*: the people will be before him; and how dangerous, as well as disgusting, must it be to see the leader of an army, in an enemy's country, a day's march in the rear! If not absolutely necessary, it is very desirable that a minister should possess some such thirst for the discovery of truth as a *Cook* or a *Columbus* had for the discovery of territory: a mind cast in such a mould might be expected to enrich his connexions with hidden treasures, to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge, and to find "whole provinces of Thought yet unexplored."

Sixthly, It is necessary that he have some good degree of *readiness in communicating his ideas.* A bishop must be *apt to teach.* It is not every good man, nor every discerning good man that is qualified to teach others. There is a certain aptitude in arranging and communicating our ideas which is of great importance to the christian ministry. It is true this gift admits of different degrees, and is capable of much improvement. It is also true, that confusion in language frequently

* 1 Tim. iv. 13—15.

proceeds from confusion in thought: the maxim of the poet will generally hold good:

“ Good teaching from good knowledge springs :

“ Words will make haste to follow things :”

But after all, there must be a kind of original stock; or some degree at least of natural aptitude in communicating ideas, on which improvements may be grafted.

Lastly, It is necessary that he possess *an active mind*. A certain spring of mind is of great importance to the proper discharge of the work of the ministry. An indolent character will appropriate that leisure which an exemption from secular employments may afford him to fauntering and visiting from house to house; a practice unfriendly to religion, and generally pregnant with scandal. An active character on the contrary, will ever find employment without being driven to such resources.

He that desireth the office of a bishop desireth a great, as well as a good work. To be acquainted with the scriptures, so as to know the mind of God; with the workings of human depravity, so as in preaching to tell men all that is in their heart; with the operations of grace, so as to describe real Christianity, and distinguish it, from every counterfeit: To watch the temptations, perplexities, and difficulties of God's people, and administer words in due season: In short, to warn, rebuke, and admonish in such a way as to be pure from the blood of all men, is a work of no small importance; and for which the most active character feels his insufficiency.

The objects of ministerial care are often in danger, like the inhabitants of a besieged City, if supplies be not thrown in immediately, of surrendering to the foe. The heart, plied with temptation, is at the point of yielding. In many such cases, it will be the duty of a minister to strip temptation of its disguise; to represent sin in its native deformity; to point out its tremendous consequences; and to endeavour to allure the heart with the joys of salvation. Many of those who are thus tempted will fall into sin, and persist, and finally appear at the left hand of the Judge: but is the preacher to appear against them; or they against him? If a character be indolent, we cannot do him, or the churches a greater injury than by encouraging him to engage in the Christian ministry.

These brethren, are a few of the principal qualifications for the ministry; and, we have no doubt of your being of the same mind with us, that whoever possesseth them is called of God to that important work, and deserving of your encouragement. In different persons they may exist in very different degrees; and here lies the necessity of a candid and impartial judgment, whether the degree be such as to warrant a reasonable hope for future usefulness. There is not a single material in the building of God but what has its use, provided it be properly placed; it should be our concern so to place each individual stone that the whole may be *fitly framed together*.

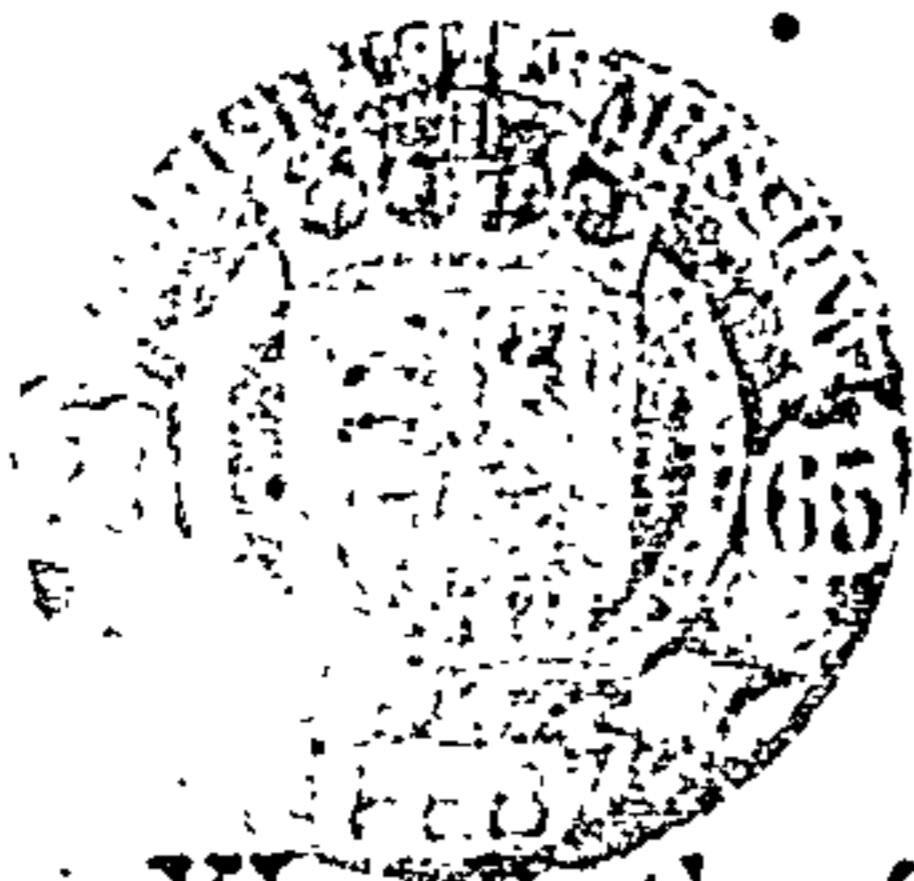
Brethren, be concerned for the welfare of posterity! Upon our conduct,

duſt, under God, depends much of their ſucceſs. If worthy characters are not fought out and encouraged, unworthy ones will preſs forward, and occupy their place. Miniſters of ſome deſcription our congregations may be expected to have. If ſpiritual and judicious men are not brought forward, many through inattention, the undue influence of worldly individuals, or a kind of charity that induces them to judge favourably of every man who ſuſtains the miniſterial character, will take up with ſuch as are carnal; and a carnal miniſtry has ever been found to be the bane of true religion.

Permit us to add, the work is heavy on our hands. A few years ago, you know, we had a good number of able and reſpectable miniſters in our connexions. But ſome of them have finiſhed their courſe; and others have been removed for the general good of Chriſt's kingdom to *distant ſituations*. Theſe removals too, inſtead of leſſening, or concentrating our labours, have abundantly extended them. *The work is great, and large; and we are ſeparated upon the wall one far from another!* Dear brethren, ſtrengthen our hands! Unite with us in ſupplicating the Lord of the harveſt for more labourers! Unite with us in diffuſing goſpel truth amongſt your connexions, in exerciſing a faithful diſcipline, and in carrying into execution every punctilio of the mind of Chriſt. And if there be "*ſpiritual men*" amongſt you who in your account are able, and who feel in their own ſouls an ardent and pure deſire, encourage them to come forward, and join the miniſterial ſtandard. Brethren, The grace of our Lord Jeſus Chriſt be with your ſpirits! Amen.

Signed in Behalf of the Association, by

JOHN GILL, MODERATOR.



MINUTES.

Tuesday Evening VI. Brother *Gill*, minister of the place, begun in prayer—was chosen moderator;—letters from the churches were read, their contents minuted, and the meeting closed with prayer by brother *Cave*.

Wednesday Morning VI. Prayers were offered up by brethren—*Heighten, Payne, Simmons, Read, Evans, and Watts*.

$\frac{1}{2}$ past X. Brother *Crapps* began public worship in prayer; brother *Sutcliffe* delivered the exordium;—The first sermon by brother *Blundel* from Eph. i. 9, 10. *Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, &c.*—The second sermon by brother *Fuller* from Heb. v. 12, 13, 14. *For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God, &c.*—Brother *Morris* concluded the opportunity in prayer.

In the afternoon the ministers and messengers retired;—the circular letter, produced by brother *Blundel*, was then inspected, approved and ordered to be printed.

Evening VI. Brother *Thomas* of Devonshire-square, prayed; brother *Sutcliffe* preached from Phil. i. 21. *For to me to live is Christ*; and concluded in prayer. After public worship, brother *Fuller* was unanimously requested to print his sermon on *the importance of a deep and intimate knowledge of divine truth*, and brother *Sutcliffe* to prepare the next year's circular letter—*On the divinity of the Christian religion*.

Thursday morning VI. Brother *Blundel* prayed; the ministers communicated their religious experience; adjusted the business of the Association Fund, and the meeting closed in prayer by the moderator.

State of the Churches.

Added	{	Upon a profession of faith	-	-	-	139
		By letters of recommendation	-	-	-	5
		Restored after exclusion	-	-	-	3
						147 added
Diminished	{	By death	-	-	20	} 50 diminished.
		Dismission to other churches	-	-	5	
		Exclusion	-	-	25	
						97 clear increase.

Number of communicants in all the churches 1722

The next Association to be held at LEICESTER, on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, in the *first week* after Whitsun-week. Brethren *Hopper* and *Gill* to preach.

Put up at the BLUE BELL, Humberstone Gate.

The friends of the Baptist Mission are informed, that several letters have lately arrived from Bengal, together with Mr. Carey's *Journal*; and that No. III. of *Periodical Accounts* will be printed as soon as the materials can be properly selected and arranged. Our brethren having prepared some of the sacred writings ready for the press, request our assistance to enable them to print them. They have also a *new mission* in contemplation to *Boutan*, on the borders of *Thibet*, provided we could send them two suitable persons to undertake it. The society will gladly attend to each of these objects as soon as suitable characters offer, and adequate means are afforded them.

N. B. We have just received intelligence that our Brethren *Grigg* and *Rodway* are safely arrived at *Sierra Leone*, and have entered on their work.