

Criticus

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"Criticus" Amongst  
the Plymouth Brethren

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## THE CHURCHES AND CHAPELS OF NOTTINGHAM: THEIR MINISTERS AND CONGREGATIONS.

(By "CRITICUS.")

No. 36. – "*Criticus*" Amongst the Plymouth Brethren.

The Plymouth Brethren are not at all proud, and yet they do worship very frequently in upper rooms, where they are above everybody else. This peculiarity led me into a slight dilemma the first time I ever paid a visit to the "Brethren," though that is some time ago now. Having seen an announcement, in another town, that a special address would be delivered at the Plymouth Brethren Meeting-room, 82½, Division-street, I went, though I did not quite like the idea of a church or chapel meeting-room being at numbers eighty-two and a half – it sounds so *half-hearted*. When I got to the place one Sunday evening, I went up some stone steps, and having ascended as many steps as I thought sufficient, observing one or two doors, I opened one and entered the room. There were about a dozen persons present, most of them being seated at a long table at the upper end of the room. I went forward and seated myself comfortably at the table. My arrival seemed to make a considerable commotion, and the good people present began smiling upon me very graciously but still in a peculiar and mysterious manner. Now I do not like to smile much, particularly on a Sunday; but as the people were all smiling upon me I determined that I would not be outdone in civility, and so I smiled back upon them in return. This only made them smile all the more, but no one spoke a word or uttered a sound. Two or three, however, got up, and raising their fingers above their heads, pointed repeatedly and significantly at the ceiling. I looked up at the ceiling, but could see nothing the matter with it. It was all right, and there were no signs of it falling; so I said to myself, "*Fiat justitia ruat cælum.*" Still everyone was silent, and not a word was uttered. At this juncture I looked down upon the table, and saw a number of books, lettered "*Deaf and Dumb Institution.*" Being very quick of apprehension (like a policeman) I saw through it in a moment – I had got into the "Deaf and Dumb Institution" instead of into the Plymouth Brethren Meeting Room, and the people who were pointing up to the ceiling were saying in their own way – "Friend, go up higher." I went up another flight of steps, and found myself at last "the right man in the right place."

Now, I did not make a similar blunder when, last Sunday morning, I paid a critical visit to the Plymouth Brethren meeting in a room over the Co-operative Stores, Great Alfred-street. I could not very well stumble into the wrong place on Sunday, because it is not there at all that Mr. Councillor H. S. Cropper is to be found pursuing his work amongst the Nottingham deaf and dumb: and, consequently, upon passing Woodborough-road Baptist chapel, and ascending one flight of steps in the Co-operative Stores building next to that place of worship, I found myself at once amongst the Plymouth Brethren. The "upper room" is plain and unattractive. The walls are whitewashed, as also is the ceiling, and without any ornamentation of any kind, unless it be a clock over the entrance door. There are five windows, each containing four large panes, through which there is a fine view of slanting roofs and chimney pots, the two windows at the far end alone being covered with blinds. It being a beautiful morning, and the sun proportionately inquisitive and persistent, I was glad that these blinds at least were drawn down, as, the teaching of certain genial moralists notwithstanding, it is sometimes possible to have too much sunshine. The room is supplied with open benches, those at the upper end being grouped in the form of a square, in the centre of which is a table, which upon the occasion of my visit

was covered with a snowy white tablecloth, upon which rested a plate containing a small loaf, and a bright vessel containing wine. There were no reserved seats, or scarlet-backed pews, or other similar positions of honour – all the Brethren appear to stand (and sit) upon one common level. This is an arrangement I am not just now disposed to find fault with; it prevents pride, envy, or jealousy. Many will remember that on a certain occasion the Duke of Wellington once knelt in prayer within a quiet English church, when a villager entered, and not knowing the rank of the Duke, knelt by his side. The sexton was about to request the man to retire, when the Iron Duke interposed, remarking, “Let the good man stay where he is, please, *we are all equal here.*” It would be well if this choice sentiment was never forgotten – if in spiritual worship distinctions and barriers were removed, and all recognised as equal.

The morning service usually commences at half-past ten o’clock, but it was a little later on Sunday last when the proceedings actually commenced. At that time there would probably be from 20 to 30 people present, but in a few minutes more the number was considerably increased, until at twenty minutes to eleven there would be as many as 120. The majority of the worshippers, upon entry, knelt down before taking their seats, and a number carried Bibles in their hands, though they were not used at all during the service, no Scripture lesson being read or address given. The class of people present seemed mostly to belong to the better order of society, and appeared highly respectable. Their proceedings were quiet and reverent. A hymn, No. 110, was first sung, all remaining seated, including even the brother who gave out the number. Seeing “Criticus” in a back seat unprovided with a book, one of the brethren near the table courteously came and handed him one. Opening it, I found it entitled, “A few Hymns and some Spiritual Songs, selected 1856, for the Little Flock.” The various compositions are evangelical in tone, and free from any very striking peculiarities. There are a number of Wesley’s hymns, most of which have been slightly altered, though I cannot say, improved; nor, indeed, would Wesley himself, were he living. But the attempted “improvements” are not made to alter or mutilate the doctrinal sentiments, as far as could be gathered from a cursory examination of the volume. The singing of the hymn was just such as one would hear in a village Wesleyan chapel, the tune, moreover, being of the old-fashioned sort common amongst the earlier Methodists. The words were sung with much pathos, rather slowly, and with a subdued cadence – several of the congregation sitting with closed eyes, as if in rapt and solemn worship. Five minutes’ perfect silence followed; then a number of the men nearest to the table stood up, some knelt down, and the rest of the people lowered their heads, while a brother offered up a plain and thoroughly Scriptural prayer, as he stood erect with arms folded. Then another period of silence succeeded. A different brother then quietly gave out the 275th hymn, and after he had read the verses, the people sang them, all seated as before. In this hymn I thought I detected a spice of Calvinism, one verse reading –

As Thine, Thou didst *foreknow* us,  
From all eternity;  
Thy chosen, loved ones ever  
Keep present to Thine eye.

The succeeding verses, however, referred to “the Lamb once slain for men,” and “Thy Spirit,” which “formed our souls anew.” There was nothing in the sentiments the orthodox (whatever that may mean) could take exception to. This hymn having been gone through, several placed their heads in their hands, and resumed communion with their own thoughts, but after a few moments’ silence, several again rose to their feet, and the person next to the one who had first prayed, then offered up a fervent but reverent

prayer. There was no excitement, and no undue raising of the voice, but a somewhat pathetic and subduing petition. It was such a one as may any Sabbath be heard in our ordinary Nottingham churches and chapels. Another brother then announced hymn 287, the first verse of which he read. There appeared no brother in particular whose stated duty it was to give out the hymns and conduct the devotions, any one who liked apparently being at liberty to select a hymn as he felt moved so to do. The first verse read thus: –

As ground, when parched with summer's heat,  
Gladly drinks in the welcome shower,  
So would we, listening at his feet,  
Receive His words, and feel His power;  
Have nothing in our hearts remain,  
Like the great truth, "The Lamb was slain."

This hymn, like the rest, was well and feelingly sung, and then came silent meditation once more, even the females sitting with closed eyes; the stillness at length being broken by a brother, rather intellectual-looking and well-dressed, approaching close to the table and offering up another prayer. That done, he took up the small loaf and broke it with his hands into three pieces, handing the plate to the brother who sat the nearest to him; who, after taking a small piece of the inner, soft part of the loaf, handed the plate to the next, and so on, each passing the bread in turn to his or her neighbour. This was only done amongst those sitting on the benches around the table, the occupants of the back benches, consisting chiefly of young persons, with three or four upgrown people, probably strangers, like "Criticus," having no opportunity of "breaking the bread" { } One of their hymns speaks about

... Their table richly spread,  
Where strangers cannot find a place,  
Where saints alone are fed.

These lines express a perfect truth at Great Alfred-street Meeting Room, where an invisible wall of partition separates saints from sinners. After partaking of the bread, the brethren and sisters closed their eyes, or covered their faces, and another brief interval of stillness followed. The last brother again prayed, after which he uncovered the sacramental cup, and handed it to the one next to him, who, after drinking, passed it to the next, the vessel being handed from one to the other as the bread had been. This part of the ceremony did not occupy much time, the good brother who had just prayed drinking the last of all, after which he replaced the cup on the table. The 37th hymn was then sung, it being one having reference to the priesthood of Christ: the tune was peculiarly sweet, and the "little flock" evidently entered fully into the spirit alike of the sentiments and the music. Another prayer followed, and then all was over, as I thought. I rose to go; but not wishing to give the brethren the idea that I was in haste to leave them – or that any carnal recollection of dinner put speed into my feet – I took down my hat and lifted up my umbrella with due dignity and deliberation, resolved to go out amongst the last. I found, however, that to carry out my virtuous resolution would require some patience. Not a single (or married) brother or sister made for the door. Was there to be more? The clock already showed 12.5 p. m., and, not being of a greedy disposition, I felt quite satisfied with what I had got. But I waited on a little, and asked an amiable-looking neighbour – in a nice new bonnet – what they were waiting for now? The answer was, that they always saluted one another in a friendly way, after worship. I blushed. I felt myself blushing. I declare I could not help it, a passage of Scripture came so forcibly to my recollection about one special form of "saluting the brethren." "Ah!" I thought, "when the brethren are so thoroughly Scriptural, perhaps they insist upon this fine old Scriptural rule." I resolved to stay, won-

dering if strangers would be permitted to participate in this part of the service. I was, however, deeply disappointed to find that "saluting the brethren" simply meant the most common-place proceeding, in short, shaking hands. I heard the brethren making inquiries about absent members of families; and occasionally I could detect a gentle reproof in the inquiry. "Brother" and "Friend," sometimes emphasised into "Christian brother," and "Christian friend," were the forms of expression used in addressing one another. Occasionally, as in the case of other Christians, the arch-enemy of mankind permitted thoughts of trade to intrude into the meeting-room. As I passed one brother I heard him say that "business had been bad lately," and that "So-and-so would not pay much." "Ah!" I thought, with a sigh, "alas for our poor humanity! Churchmen, Dissenters, and Plymouth Brethren – Jews and Gentiles – they are all alike in one thing. Sunday cannot be kept for Sunday thoughts;" and so thinking, "Criticus" became conscious that musing on other people's infirmities was not in itself the highest of Sunday employments.

I understand that at the evening service there are exhortation and speaking. It is several years since I attended one of the Sunday evening services amongst the Plymouth Brethren; but I remember that a Mr. Goodall, a gentleman from London, preached on that occasion from John, xiii, 10, and that in some parts of his sermon he was very exact. He repeatedly appealed to "Dean Alford's new reading," of which he approved, especially in one place connected with his text, where he said "Supper being ended" should read "Supper being begun," Mr. Goodall adding, "which is a very different thing, you know, from supper being ended." The brethren saw the joke, and smiled. I also recollect that Mr. Goodall took occasion to enforce the chief point in the brethren's creed. "I do not like paid agents for the Father; we can do it all in ten or fifteen minutes, and no longer, for there is no necessity to have it." If Mr. Goodall meant that what they could do "in ten or fifteen minutes" was the sermon, he allowed himself considerably more time, for I have not forgotten that his "remarks" occupied one hour less five minutes.

In their manner of worship the Plymouth Brethren resemble the Society of Friends more than any other body I have seen. The people are not very numerous, but they appear to be generally of fair social position and standing. There was no excess or extravagance; everything was orderly and decorous. A few inclined to quiet enthusiasm, occasionally gave vent to ejaculations such as, "Do, Lord," "Oh, let it be so, Lord;" but these were exceptions. I was particularly struck with the friendly interest they took in one another. Had they all been separated for years, and brought together again by a miracle, they could not have been more kindly or demonstrative in their hand-shaking and inquiring. One young female was brought to the street door in a wicker carriage, and then carried upstairs into the meeting house, so I should fancy that their members are generally rigidly punctual and scrupulous in their attendance at the ordinary services.

Although the body are known as "Plymouth Brethren," they themselves regard the term as a misnomer. They assume no name but that of "Christian," or "Brethren," have no written creed, renounce all personal claim to their property, and are strongly opposed to a separate order of ministers, maintaining that, as the gifts of the spirit (1 Cor., 12th chap.) are still enjoyed by the Church, the ministry ought to be open to all the members. No Plymouth Brother can be a magistrate, and the body also repudiate the exercise of any political right or privilege, so that Mr. Saul Isaac, Mr. W. E. Denison, the Hon. A. Herbert, and other aspirants for Nottingham honours need not pay court to Alfred-street Central Meeting-room. The Brethren do not co-operate with other Christian societies for the attainment of a common object. The management of their affairs, both as respects the admission of members and the distribution of funds, is lodged in the hands of a select inner circle, who do not appear to be responsible to their Brethren{.} They observe the Apos-

toloc practice of showing forth the Lord's death – or, as they call it, “breaking bread” – every Sabbath day. The Brethren may be said to have sprung into existence in 1829. In that year a number of men became dissatisfied with the existing state of things in the Church; all the ecclesiastical organisations were, as they thought, barriers in the way of that unity prayed for by Christ that He and his followers “might be one.” At that time a Mr. A. N. Groves, of Exeter, was at the Dublin University preparing for “orders” in the Establishment, and he and a few others met continually for prayer and reading the Word. One day, Mr. Bellet, a barrister at the Irish bar, said to a lady, “Groves has just been telling me that it appeared to him from Scripture that believers meeting together as disciples of Christ were free to break bread together, as their Lord had admonished them, and that in as far as the Apostles could be a guide, every Lord's day should be set apart for this remembrance of the Lord's death and obeying his parting command.” This suggestion of Mr. Groves was immediately carried out by himself and his friends in Dublin. This was the beginning of what have been called Separatists, or “Plymouth Brethren” – the term “Plymouth” being no doubt applied because Plymouth was one of their earliest and strongest places. In some towns the ranks of the Brethren have been recruited by clergymen and ministers who have renounced their livings and churches, though I cannot find an instance of this in Nottingham. The nearest instance of the kind is at Worksop, where the Rev. Mr. Ugill, an Independent minister, “came out,” and brought his congregation with him. They did not, however, go right over to the Brethren, but were known in local history as the “Ugillites.”