

A Peripatetic

Unorthodox Coventry

Plymouth Brethren

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UNORTHODOX COVENTRY.

BY A PERIPATETIC.

VI. – PLYMOUTH BRETHREN: PREACHING THE WORD IN CHERRY STREET.

The close observer of religious developments in England notes with no little interest the fact that the Oxford Movement and the Plymouth Brethren arose in the same year, namely in 1827, both, it may be said, within the Church; but while the early Tractarians, or the greater part of them, remained wherein they had been nurtured, the Brethren, necessarily with the views they held, left the Church. Both movements are ascribed to the same cause – the superficiality of spiritual life at the time, in the Church and in Dissent. Many earnest men yearned for deeper spiritual experience, and with the object of gaining it, John Henry Newman joined the Tractarian Movement, and Francis Wm. Newman, the Brethren. The author of the “Apologia” found a home in the Church of Rome, and his brother soon parted company with the Plymouthists. A third religious movement took its rise four or five years later – that known as Irvingism – and it is worth noting in this connection, because the adherents of all three faiths attached, and still attach, importance to the great central act of Christian worship. Neither Ritualists (the development of Tractarianism), nor the Catholic Apostolic Church, nor Brethren deem the Sunday morning worship complete without the participation of the faithful in the Supper of the Lord. Further, all the bodies, though starting from different stand-points, professed to desire a closer adherence to apostolic forms. These are facts which show that the three movements should be considered together by any one who seeks to understand the improvement in the religious condition of England from 1830 down to (shall we say?) the present time.

The tenets of the Plymouthists are strictly Calvinistic: original sin and predestination, the efficacy of the Atonement, the merit of Christ’s obedience, the power of His intercession, the gracious operations of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification, are prominent points. Millenarian views are also generally entertained. They hold, further, that an official ministry, anything like a clergy, whether on Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Congregational theories, is a denial of the spiritual priesthood of all believers and striving against the Holy Ghost; but the great sheet anchor of the sect is the broad division it makes of mankind into the saints of God and the world, and a constant endeavour to separate the one from the other. The new edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica mentions five official divisions or sects of Plymouthists – (1) the followers of the Rev. B. Wills Newton; (2) the Neutrals, who incline to the Congregationalist idea that each assembly should judge for itself in matters of discipline, headed by Mr. Geo. Müller, of Bristol; (3) the Darbyite Exclusives; (4) the Exclusives who follow Mr. Kelly; and (5) the followers of Mr. Cluff, an Irish clergyman, who adopted the views of Mr. Pearsall Smith. More than 30 years have now elapsed since Mr. Newton was virtually excommunicated by the Darbyites; he held, or is alleged to have held, the peccability of Christ’s nature, and he deemed it essential to order that a “one-man ministry” should exist. *Hinc illæ lacrymæ!* as has been said before. Mr. Newton is now dead, and to the world at large the controversy which raged around him has long lost its interest; but to many of the Plymouthists it is still of importance, and divides them. It does more than divide, for the Darbyites refuse to acknowledge such Newtonites as exist, and even the Müllerites.

Plymouthism took its rise in Coventry forty years since. Five persons, impressed with the truth of the movement which not very long before had earned considerable notice in Dublin and Plymouth principally, and which, curiously enough, has commended itself to large numbers of retired army officers, seceded from Cow-lane chapel. The high Calvinistic doctrine preached there at the time had probably prepared the way for Brethrenism, but the Five also stepped forth with the liberalising demand that the holding of a particular set of opinions ought to bar no Christian from drawing nigh to the Lord's Table. They also, of course, held strong views as to an established ministry. The late Mr. S. Dolby built the room – the places of public worship are invariably called rooms – in Cherry-street. This is still the meeting spot; but to distinguish the body from those gathering in Hales-street and elsewhere, it is needful to call them the Open Brethren, or Müllerites, for they take the view of the Bristol philanthropist as to the dispute which long ago rent the sect. The morning gathering of Brethren of all sorts is called a meeting for worship and breaking of bread; the evening service is announced as “preaching the word.” The latter meeting, which I attended at Cherry-street, and found some fifty people present, is in character similar to what may be witnessed in many a chapel and mission room, consisting as it does of singing, prayer, reading, and an address. The service was throughout conducted (the word is, I hope, inoffensive) by a local gentleman. In commencing his discourse, I noticed he said, “Let us look at a few scriptures” – certainly an unusual expression. The address was couched in simple language, and was clearly addressed to an audience who were assumed to need what Calvinists and others call conversion. The hymnal used was “Hymns for Worship,” and the singing was unaccompanied by instrumental music; indeed I have heard of people getting rid of such “vanities” in their own homes when they have joined the sect. The notices given out included prayer meetings on three of the four succeeding evenings and “a fellowship tea party” between two of the devotional engagements. The majority of the congregation brought their Bibles with them, *and used them*. Ordinarily, on Sundays, there is an early prayer meeting, worship, and preaching; prayer meetings on two week nights and on a third evening, “reading the scriptures, &c.” The public may care to have a Statement of the Cherry-street faith, as it is put forth by the congregation: – “The Christians assembling here, gather together in the name of the Lord Jesus, and simply as brethren in Christ, their bond of union being the possession of eternal life in the Son of God, the risen Christ; and their principle of communion, loving subjection to Him as the head of the Church. They desire to take the Lord Jesus Christ as their rule of life, and the entire Word of God as their rule of faith. They recognize the supreme Lordship of Christ over the Church which is His body, and they hold the presence, power, and guidance of the Holy Ghost in the Church as all-sufficient for ministry, worship, service, order, and discipline.”

What impresses me about the Statement is this, that it would be readily accepted by thousands of people who do not call themselves Brethren, and who are not constrained to forsake the paths wherein they now walk. As a definition of faith the Statement is inadequate. It says nothing about the rejection of a set ministry, nor of the rejection of infant baptism; though all congregations of Brethren reject one or the other, and some both.

An account of a Sunday morning with the Exclusive section at Hales-street room is reserved for another article.

UNORTHODOX COVENTRY.

BY A PERIPATETIC.

VIII. – PLYMOUTH BRETHREN: BREAKING BREAD IN HALES STREET.

The Darbyite, or Exclusive, section of Plymouthists, derive their name from a Mr. J. N. Darby, one of the earliest, as he was one of the best-known, Brethren. He was first of all a barrister, moving in the highest circles of society, then became an English clergyman and did a notable work among the people of county Wicklow. Subsequently, he left the Church, and preached in several tongues on the Continent. When Mr. Newton (who, it appears, is still living) published his views to the world about the year 1847, Mr. Darby vigorously opposed what he deemed a dangerous error, and he and his adherents, who became known as Darbyites, separated from the fellowship of those who maintained or even refused to condemn it. Cherry-street meeting did not become Exclusive; the people there said, with Mr. Müller, that a congregation ought not to be called upon to judge those Brethren who thought with Mr. Newton; and there was no Exclusive congregation in the city until about a dozen years ago. That had its origin not in any secession from the meeting already established, but through some persons coming fresh to Coventry, though a few of the present members used to belong to Cherry-street. A room was opened in Hales-street, still the centre of the activities of this body.

The meeting for worship and breaking of bread is held on Sundays at 10.30 a.m. On the morning of my visit there was a company of some seventy persons, six-sevenths of them being women, seated on benches left of the gangway. These were exclusively Plymouthists, for whom the morning gathering is, as will be seen, entirely intended. On the other side were a few adults and some children: these were people not in communion; and in some places the unconverted are separated from the saints by a cord being drawn across the room. At Cherry-street there is a small pulpit, but here not the vestige of a platform of any sort is to be seen. Its absence was, I suppose, to teach the absolute equality of Christians – a doctrine which a notable politician gave his adhesion to when he said, “In the Church and at the polling booth all men are equal.” At the far end of the room a table was spread with a white cloth, and bore a small loaf on an ordinary dinner plate, and a bottle partly filled with wine. The bread and the wine were, of course, necessary provision for the due administration of the Lord’s Supper, which Brethren, distinguished in that respect among Protestant Dissenters, participate in weekly. I do not know if there was any preconcerted arrangement as to carrying on the worship, but the men who sat nearest the table prayed and read chapters from the Bible apparently quite spontaneously, or “as they were moved.” Hymns were given out in the same way, the book used being “A Few Hymns and some Spiritual Songs, selected 1856, for the Little Flock.” All the Brethren here, too, were well provided with Bibles, and a stranger without a copy of the Scriptures was soon put in possession of one. In due time came the special object of the morning assembly, the “breaking of bread.” This was done in very homely style, contrasting immensely, of course, with the gorgeous ritual of the Roman Mass, and even with the English Church service of celebration. One of the leaders stepped up to the table, broke the loaf into several pieces, offered prayer, and then partook of some bread. The plate was passed from hand to hand, and each member helped himself or herself to a portion, literally “breaking” it off the loaf. The vessel then containing the wine (a glass jug) went

round in the same manner, as the people sat in their seats. Neither one element or the other was offered to that portion of the congregation which was in the outer court of the sanctuary. Another hymn was sung, with everybody sitting, and the service may be said to have closed. It is at this time the names of intending and accepted brethren are read, and the announcement this morning was that "our dear Brother — desires fellowship at the Lord's Table with us." Further, help of "the dear saints" present was asked for some sick persons belonging to the body. Then all the meeting uprose, and several minutes were given over to general conversation before the members quitted the room.

On the week-day evening I went to the room to hear Mr. W. Kelly discourse on "The Church of God as it became in man's hands, with our responsibility according to Scripture." Mr. Kelly is a well-known leader among the Exclusives; hence he spoke with authority as to the views of the section. The address was long and argumentative, but did not seem to me sufficiently clear to be "understood of the people," unless it were assumed that all the congregation were steeped in biblical lore and in the doctrines of Plymouthism. Briefly, Mr. Kelly's position appeared to be this — the Brethren of Hales-street meet as the Church of God in this city; they add nothing to the statements of the Bible, and simply follow the apostolic precepts: but the English Church, Presbyterians, Baptists, &c., have all formed mere "denominations," and made conditions of membership other than those of primitive Christianity. Herein was the break-up of the Church of God. Then he denounced the promiscuous gathering of saints with the world for worship, preachers preaching for fees (each according to his value), and collections from unchristian people for religious work. The other point of interest was when he said he was sorry that they themselves (meaning Brethren) had not escaped the break-up, "but woe to those whose fault it is that hinder and do not do all that can be done to repair any mistake of that kind; and if there be anything in which we are (*sic*), the Lord reveal it." Some responses of "Hear, hear" followed, and it would be very interesting to hear the Open Brethren in reply. Mr. Kelly, knowing at least one weakness of Plymouthism, concluded by giving some advice to his fellow-members as to dealing with a person of evil life in "the assembly." A Christian had no right to withdraw until the assembly had declined to judge, and, having judged, to exclude. This is the offence of the Müllerites: they refuse to judge the heresies of Mr. Newton; *ergo*, the Exclusives cannot meet them around the one Table of the common Lord.

In the article on the Open Brethren five official divisions of the sects of Plymouthists were named, "but the fundamental principle of the Exclusives, 'separation from evil God's principle of unity,' has led to many unimportant excommunications and separations"; and for a few months in the year 1881 there met a third section in Coventry. They had a room in King-street, were in fellowship with Brethren at Kenilworth, Leamington, and elsewhere, and received help from a Mr. Crowley, who just before had lived at Leamington. Mr. Crowley, I believe, accepted the baptism of infants, but I do not know how far his peculiar tenets have been received by Brethren. To get information of this sort, and indeed as to many other matters affecting the sect as a whole, is very difficult, owing to the independent position each meeting holds, and the non-existence of any central authority acknowledged by all. Mr. Crowley, I remember, used to make large free distributions of literature through the post.

Brethren complain that they are greatly misunderstood and falsely judged. They should take more frequent opportunities of letting the world know what they are and what is their position. The question is asked by people outside, wherein do the two local sections materially differ? In doctrine they are one, in order and government are the same. Yet the Hales-street Exclusives excommunicate the Cherry-street people, for they

have defiled themselves by implied association with Mr. Newton, and would not admit them to fellowship except in the same way as they admit persons coming from elsewhere. They have no dealings with Open Plymouthists, they apply with more intensity than any other of the two hundred and fifty “denominations” in England to-day the old Puritan doctrine which led to half the schisms, that the visible Church of Christ consists only of faithful men and women, and that every means must be taken to keep from the sheepfold those who do not properly belong to it. I endeavoured to gather from a member something as to how the separation of Plymouthists from the evil was made more complete on their part than on the part of other religious bodies. The reply was that the former took less active part in worldly affairs. For instance, Brethren feel at liberty as citizens of this world to vote at elections of national and local members, but not to actively mix up in the strife of general political work. I put the question whether they might not, by shrinking from association with the crowd outside, lose opportunities for the exercise of an influence making for righteousness. He replied that that might be the case, but then he fell back on the inner light given to the elect which would, in God’s good time, bring the kingdoms into The Way. The earliest adherents of Plymouthism were found in the English Church; in Coventry they were not, and such ’verts as now sustain the local meetings come almost entirely from Dissent. I fancy a Sunday morning with the Brethren is among the strangest of experiences in Unorthodox Coventry, but the curious visitor will do well to keep his mind fixed on two things – the contention that “this is primitive Christianity, this is the Christianity of the Catacombs”; and that a fundamental principle is separation from even the appearance of evil.

UNORTHODOX COVENTRY: PLYMOUTH BRETHERN.

Sir, – Since the publication of Article No. 8, entitled “Plymouth Brethren,” many enquiries have been made respecting certain statements contained in that article, imputing uncleanness to the Cherry-street congregation. It is stated “The question is asked by people outside, wherein do the two local sections (viz., Cherry-street and Hales-street) materially differ. In doctrine they are one, in order and government are the same. Yet the Hales-street Exclusives excommunicate the Cherry-street people, for they have defiled themselves by implied association with Mr. Newton.” Kindly allow me an opportunity to contradict the latter part of such statement as utterly void of truth, so far as the Cherry-street gathering is concerned. As to the unscriptural doctrine imputed to Mr. Newton by his Exclusive judges, the Cherry-street people do not deny; but to say that the Cherry-street people have either accepted Mr. Newton’s views, or associated with him, is wrong. The care manifested by the Cherry-street people for purity of doctrine in their midst, has kept them free from the defiling error said to characterise Mr. Newton’s teaching. From the commencement of the Cherry-street gathering they have no knowledge of receiving into their fellowship either Mr. Newton or any one else holding similar doctrines to those imputed to Mr. Newton by the Exclusives; therefore, the defilement alluded to could not possibly be contracted by the Cherry-street people in the way stated. Is it not because the Cherry-street people firmly refuse to wear the Darbyite yoke and take part with the Exclusives in the bitter and disgraceful strife in which they have been engaged for the past forty years, “dividing, judging, scattering, and excommunicating” their fellow believers on every hand, that renders the Cherry-street people so unclean in the judgment of their Exclusive Brethren? Both history and experience in matters of discipline have taught those taking the oversight in the gathering at Cherry-street that their duty is to watch constantly against doubtful doctrines, and evil men too, who do not spare the flock, and if possible keep them both outside their fellowship. The Cherry-street people have so much in common with their fellow Christians generally that they refrain from any interference on their part with other assemblies. At the same time, they are equally willing to help their fellow-believers in any trial, difficulty, or sorrow that may overtake them, but they do not think it either wise or profitable to condemn every fellow Christian who does not willingly accept their views of truth.

The Saviour washed His disciples’ feet, but is it not a painful sight to witness men professing to know so much of His truth, yet so destitute of His grace? It seems to afford the Exclusives pleasure, rather than sorrow. If at any time they happen to find out any defiled feet, instead of washing them, they expose them by holding them up to the world’s gaze and calling attention to them. Such conduct is said to be a denial of the true spirit of the Master and quite destitute of Christian love one to another.

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