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# Byeways of Religious Life in Aberdeen

Among the  
Plymouth Brethren

**bruederbewegung<sup>de</sup>**

First published in: *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, Vol. 161, No. 16541,  
Monday, 20 January 1908, p. 2.

Diplomatic reprint.

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Transcription and typesetting: Michael Schneider  
Published on the internet at  
<http://www.bruederbewegung.de/pdf/gammie.pdf>

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## AMONG THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN.

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BY "ECCLESIASTICUS."

It is a common saying, and a true one, that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives. It might be said with equal truth that one half of the religious community does not know how the other half worships. The walls of partition between the Churches may be thinner and less opaque than in former days, although there is doubtless still considerable misconception on the part of many regarding the mode of worship amongst those outside their own particular fold. While this applies to some extent even to those great Churches and denominations which are working alongside each other, it is specially true of the relation of those Churches towards the smaller sects. How much does the average member of any of the Churches in the city know of the other and smaller bodies of Christians, each of which also claims to be a church in itself? There are not a few such sects in our midst, but to the average church-goer it may safely be assumed that they are a name – and nothing more.

On a recent Sunday I betook myself to an assembly of those who are commonly called the Plymouth Brethren, but who insist, I understand, on being known simply as Brethren. There are Open Brethren and Close Brethren; the company with whom I worshipped belongs to the former category, and it is, I believe, the largest numerically in the city. Its meeting-place is, and has been for many years, in the hall No. 6 St Paul Street. Arriving there at the hour of the forenoon meeting, I found at the door, like Presbyterian elders at any kirk door, some of the leading men of the body, and men, moreover, whose names are familiar in the business life of the city; for the Brethren, be it understood, include within their ranks not a few of those who have come to their own in the ordinary affairs of the world. My identity was soon discovered, for almost before I knew what was happening, I heard some remark about "Ecclesiasticus." Yet although I was recognised, and the object of my visit was quickly surmised, I was most cordially welcomed, for, in addition to a verbal assurance to that effect, I received a warm handshake from each of the Brethren at the door in turn. In how many of our churches would a strange visitor receive as kindly a welcome.

Inside the hall I found much to claim my attention and interest. The meeting-place is a large, square apartment. Being up one flight of stairs, the Brethren can claim to meet, like the disciples of old, in an "upper room." The furnishings are of the barest description. Here there are no finely cushioned pews, no elaborate provision for physical comfort. Everything is plain, and even austere, in appearance. A narrow, raised platform, with a rostrum in the centre, runs along one side of the hall, and even these bear no embellishment of any kind. There is, indeed, nothing to indicate that the hall is a place of worship, but a plentiful supply of texts may be seen upon the walls. The aids to devotion which some worshippers find in stained glass windows and stately architecture and harmonious surroundings evidently do not appeal to the Plymouth Brethren.

The forenoon meeting every Sunday is devoted to what is termed the "breaking of bread," or what would be known in the phraseology of the Churches as the observance of the Communion. Strangers and children are accommodated in side seats near the door; the Brethren who are to partake of the ordinance occupy the body of the hall. There was a large gathering; from 150 to 200 people being seated within the inner circle. There were

men and women of all ages – some grave and reverend seniors, others in the mid-time of life, and (which is a notable feature) a considerable sprinkling of eager and ardent youth. The platform is used, I understand, when the meeting is for Scripture exposition, or for the preaching of the Gospel, but at the forenoon meeting it is entirely unoccupied. Everyone sat on the same level, the leaders or “overseers” merely finding places on some of the front benches. I was astonished to find a hymn-book in use, as I had imagined that the Brethren, with their rigid adherence to what is purely Scriptural, would have tabooed anything in the form of “human hymns.” Of course, there was no instrumental music of any kind, and there was no choir, yet it was surprising to find that not a single Psalm was used in the praise. I am speaking, of course, of the service as I saw it on the occasion of my visit. Psalms may be used at other times, but on the Sunday, to which I refer, they were conspicuous by their absence, and a stranger could not do otherwise than mark the omission. In this respect the Brethren are either a stage behind or a stage in advance – according to the point of view – of other conservative bodies, such as the “Auld Lights” or the “Wee Frees.” Perhaps it has been thought that the difficulty has been overcome – or shall I say that a compromise has been made – by the selection of specially acceptable hymns. The collection in use is entitled “The Believers’ Hymn-Book,” and it is said to contain “Scriptural hymns for use at all assemblies of the Lord’s people.” On glancing over its pages, I found quite a number of hymns familiar by long and constant use to the religious public of all creeds, so that in actual practice the Brethren are sing- {sic} almost the same spiritual songs as their Christian brethren outside their own borders. I must not omit to remark that they do sing. Although, as I have said, there was no instrumental music and no choir, there was very hearty singing on the part of the whole company, and the volume of sound would have surprised a musical critic, although its harmony might not have appealed to his cultured ear.

Evidently there was no pre-arranged order of service. After the opening hymn, one of the Brethren engaged in prayer. Then another member of the company in another part of the hall announced another hymn, which was followed by prayers from other three individuals. This continued for a considerable time. Sometimes there was a pause for a while, until one began to think of a Quaker meeting; then the prayers and hymns would follow one after another in quick succession. Everyone seemed to act according to his own sweet will, announcing a hymn or engaging in prayer according as he felt the impulse within him. After nearly an hour of this varied form of service, one of the senior Brethren read and expounded several Scripture passages bearing on the institution of the Lord’s Supper, and, after a prayer of thanksgiving, he then proceeded to “dispense the elements.” The Brethren believe in the literal breaking of bread. Taking the bread which was provided for the ordinance, he broke it in four pieces, placed these, not on silver salvers, but on ordinary bread plates, and handed them to the company, each member of which also literally took part in the “breaking of bread” by breaking the small portion for himself from the large piece, which was passed round from seat to seat. Then followed another prayer of thanksgiving from another member of the company, and the wine was served in silver cups after the manner of any Presbyterian Church.

An offering was taken from those who had communicated – the boxes were not passed to the strangers in the side seats – and, after the singing of a hymn, one of the Brethren read and commented on some passages of Scripture; his remarks really amounting to what would be termed a post-Communion address. Thereafter, another member of the company intimated the death of one belonging to them for many years and made a sympathetic reference to the event. He followed this up by giving a number of intimations regarding the various meetings both for the Sunday and throughout the week, concluding

with the announcement that at this stage “the strangers in the side seats might kindly leave while the Brethren remained for a little in conference.”

Of the subsequent meetings during the Sunday, I may say that in the afternoon there is held a “Believers’ Meeting” for teaching and expounding the Scriptures, when the hall is frequently filled in every part with a company of 400 to 500 persons; from 4 to 5 o’clock there is a Sunday School with several hundreds of scholars; while the evening is devoted to aggressive work by the preaching of the Gospel. Nearly every night of the week there are meetings of a similar nature, and the self-sacrificing devotion and zeal with which the work is carried on can only be regarded as worthy of all praise.

One or two general impressions may be briefly noted. To those accustomed to church services even of the least ornate style the meetings of the Brethren would seem strangely lacking in order and decorum, not, of course, in the sense that they are in any respect disorderly, but simply that they do not follow any regular programme. Whether this may lead to greater spontaneity in the worship and to a more general willingness on the part of the rank and file to take their share in the services would be a controversial matter into the merits of which I do not enter. Any visitor would be struck, however, with the manner in which men who have never been through the theological halls can expound and interpret Scripture. This may be admitted without accepting fully their interpretations. Evidently there is produced a race of earnest and intelligent Bible students, and this may be said to apply not to the leaders only, but also to the average members of this distinctive and vigorous religious community in our midst.