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Week Evenings at Hull Churches and Chapels

The Plymouth Brethren

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First published in: *The Eastern Morning News, Lincolnshire Express and Hull Advertiser*, Vol. 33, No. 5345, Wednesday, 13 April 1881, p. 3.

Diplomatic reprint. The quotation in the first paragraph is taken from *Chambers's Encyclopædia. A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People*, vol. 7, London (Chambers) 1868, p. 613.

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Transcription and typesetting: Michael Schneider
Published on the internet at
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WEEK EVENINGS AT HULL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS.

XXI.

THE PLYMOUTH BRETHERN.

This undemonstrative phase of religious life came into existence about fifty years ago, and, considering its unproselytising disposition, has made considerable progress. Its native place is Plymouth – a rather warlike region for so peaceable a child. Plymouth Brethernism seems, however, to thrive in various climates, and must, therefore, have a tolerably robust constitution. It has extended itself considerably throughout the British dominions, and is no stranger in France, Italy, Switzerland, and the United States of America. Its origin was probably a reaction against High Churchism and the formalism of unevangelical doctrine. “Many of the first members of the new religious communities formed at Plymouth and elsewhere were retired Anglo-Indian officers, men of unquestionable zeal and piety, and these communities began to appear almost simultaneously in a number of places. Their origin is, however, very much to be ascribed {sic} to the labours and influence of Mr Darby, from whom the Plymouth Brethren on the continent of Europe are very generally known as *Darbyites*. Mr Darby was a barrister, moving in the highest circles of society; and under deeply religious influences became a clergyman of the Church of England, and lived for some time in a mud hovel in the County Wicklow, devoting himself to his work, but afterwards left the Church of England from conscientious scruples and became an evangelist unconnected with any church. In this character he laboured both in England and on the continent of Europe, preaching in English, French, and German.” He also gave his religious views to the world in pamphlets and in the *Christian Witness*, a quarterly periodical, which for several years was the chief organ of the Plymouth Brethren.

The theology of this religious community is what is called Evangelical, with an element of Calvinism {sic}, and also of Millenarianism. The Plymouth Brethren have not a formulated creed in unbiblical language. They profess to take the Bible and the Bible only as their rule of faith and practice. They seek the truth of God in the pages of the Bible. The sacred books are their gold mines of religious treasure, and they are convinced that they have found much spiritual gold therein. They are not like some people who are always talking about seeking truth, but never seem to have found any, or if they have found a little are afraid to be dogmatic about it, because all truth attainable by man is relative. The Brethren have some truth, and hope to find more in their spiritual diggings.

The Plymouth Brethren have not any church organisation, and do not believe in any. They disapprove of any association of Christians for any object, and therefore have not any Sunday Schools, missionary or other benevolent societies. They have not any special ministers or clergy. They insist on the right of every *male* member of the church to speak or preach in religious assemblies. In their meetings, after each hymn and prayer, there is generally a pause, that anyone moved by the Spirit may speak or pray. They take the Sacrament every Sunday, but any member of the church known to be guilty of gross sin is excluded from partaking of this rite till he has repented of his sin.

Even the Plymouth Brethren, who take the Bible as their sole rule of faith and practice, could not all agree to live together in Christian fellowship. A division took place among them in consequence of certain doctrines held by some of the Brethren respecting the human nature of Christ. Mr Darby opposed these views as dangerous errors, and he and his theological sympathisers separated from the reputed heretics, and compact, mighty Rome smiled again at the legion of Protestant sects. The people commonly known as Plymouth Brethren disown this designation, and wish to be known simply as “Chris-

tians.” The humorous young lady turned the prose of grammar into poetic romance, when, to the question of her teacher, “Is the word kiss a common or a proper noun?” she replied, “It is both common and proper.” It is both common and proper to employ some designation by which this class of religionists may be distinguished from other sections of Christians, though at other times courtesy may induce us to speak of them by the name they prefer – “Christians.”

The Plymouth Brethren, or “Christians,” of Hull, worship in an “upper room” in Vernon-street, Savile-street. It is a plain but clean, comfortable room, without the least appearance of church or chapel. There is not any reading-desk, pulpit, platform, or clergyman. I entered the room at 7.30 on Thursday evening, the 31st ult., and found several people assembled, young and old, and middle-aged. At the table, at one end of the room, sat a senior member of the church, with Bible and hymn-book beside him. There were several other arrivals of men and women, and young men and maidens, after I entered. After a long silence the man at the table announced a hymn, which was sung in a pleasant, devotional manner, the congregation sitting during the singing. Another long pause, followed by a prayer. Then a still longer silence, broken at length by the reading of 1st John, iii. chapter. Silence again, ended by a brother being moved to speak about some portion of the chapter which had been read. Several other brethren made remarks and asked questions as to the meaning of different parts of the chapter. In this way quite a variety of subjects were introduced – Christ and anti-Christ; the old man or the flesh; the new man or the spirit of man; when the Devil began his wicked work; the certainty of the wicked being cast into Hell; could a murderer have eternal life; beggars, and giving to him that asketh; the love of God in Christ, and the duty of Christians to lay down their lives for the Brethren. There was not the slightest manifestation of a controversial spirit in the treatment of these topics. The speakers did not rise from their seats. The expositions, remarks, and questions, were all conducted in a calm, conversational, fireside sort of manner. Occasionally there was a humorous remark and an amusing illustrative anecdote, which excited a smile or laugh in the Brethren and Sisters. The men were plain, realistic looking people, and the women had none of the vanities of fashionable attire; they were plainly but neatly dressed. The senior, fatherly sort of man, who sat at the table, and who did not appear to have the gift of tongues, closed the meeting with hymn and prayer. He kindly informed me that they “sought to know the will of God from His own word.”

On the whole the meetings of the “Christians” in Vernon{-}street are rather too slow and prosaic for this sensational age {-} an age of fever in religion as well as in almost everything else. The “Christians” are commendable for keeping themselves serene amid the ecclesiastical fastness and fever around them. They assemble in pretty fair number on Thursday evenings, and show by their regular attendance that they find real interest in the slow, common-place treatment of Divine things. They are in earnest, and love their cause. They know nothing of the uncertainty which comes of free, half-thinking, a state of mind which regards all right and wrong in morals as debateable questions, and goes for know-nothingism so far as God is concerned. Whatever may be the intellectual errors of the “Christians,” they have the inner vision of a Father’s hand to help and bless them, and they feel the thrill in their hearts of a love which is infinite. They have the spiritual vision which sees through the Providential problems which baffle the intellect. That vision saves men from increasing the number of the unhappy race whom Shelley describes in Peter Bell: –

To Peter’s view, all seems one hue;
He is no Whig, he is no Tory;
No Deist, and no Christian he –
But is so subtle, that to be
Nothing is all his glory.

J. M. D, {sic}