

Anonymous

The Wanderer at Church

The Foresters' Hall
[Ramsgate]

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THE WANDERER AT CHURCH.

No. 19. – The Foresters' Hall.

I am sorry to say that I can find no point of view from which to treat the Plymouth Brethren quite sympathetically. It may be severe, but it seems to me that it would not have been any great loss if they had never been invented. They were invented, by the way, as late as 1830, and the founder of the sect did not die till 1882 – yesterday, so to speak.

I will admit that they struck me as very sober Godfearing people, and any religious form of doctrine that converts evil-livers into sober Godfearing citizens deserves appreciation and sympathy.

But it struck me also that no Plymouth Brother or Sister – and as usual, of course, I saw more sisters than brothers – could possibly have been an evil-liver in the ordinary sense, if Plymouth Brethrenism was unknown. I feel quite sure that they would have been Strict Baptists or something even better.

Whether they succeed or not, the Salvation Army set themselves out to draw irreligious sinners into the fold. The Plymouth Brethren draw into their fold the fastidiously religious people who are not content with the exact doctrine or ritual of any existing chapel, although they cannot decide among themselves what the exact doctrine or ritual should be.

SCHISMS AND SECTS.

In my encyclopædia – and the astute reader will already have realized that for once I have departed from my usual practice and have been reading up my subject – it mentions that the English branch of the faith, founded considerably less than a century ago, has experienced several schisms and is already divided into six sects. My encyclopædia is two or three years old, so there may be more sects now. And it seems that the Ramsgate brethren follow out the traditions of their peculiar persuasion, for they require four separate places of worship in the town to satisfy their requirements, although one of them, I believe, would actually hold their four congregations. Nor can it be suggested that the four different buildings are required for the convenience of worshippers in different quarters of the town, since they are all within ten minutes' walk of each other, and two, Guildford Hall, and Foresters' Hall are within a stonethrow.

No, I am afraid the only explanation is that they have got the only correct form of Plymouth Brethrenism at the South-Eastern Hall, and the only correct form at King-Street, and the only correct form at Guildford Hall, and g'till {sic} another only correct form of the faith in the downstairs room of the Foresters' Hall, and that a Foresters' Hall brother who went down to the King-street meeting-house would be offended by impurities of doctrine or ritual.

If I am quite mistaken about this, if all four bodies are entirely one at heart, and only worship in different buildings for convenience, I am sorry, and am quite prepared to apologize, but it would still seem to me a pity for the little congregation of the Foresters' Hall to put up with the inconvenience of a public dancing-place through fear of crowding Guildford Hall.

On the Sunday when I made up my mind to visit the Plymouth Brethren I found the nearness of two of their meeting-houses an advantage.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

When at eleven o'clock I reached Guildford Hall and saw on the notice board that at 11 there was merely "Breaking of Bread" whilst the "Gospel Service" took place at 6.30, I did not know whether the Plymouth Brethren would care to see me. The "Breaking of Bread" suggested to my mind a semi-private meeting for the elect only, into which my intrusion would be unwelcome, and I walked round to the Foresters' Hall. When I found there that a service of some sort was being held although the notice board announced simply and solely a "Gospel Service" in the evening to which visitors were heartily welcomed, I was confirmed in my idea that the Plymouth Brethren did not want visitors in the morning, and regretfully went home to wait for the evening service.

It may have been cowardice on my part, and if so it was fittingly punished, so far as the Guildford Hall was concerned. For when I got there at 6.30 the place was closed and in darkness. I do not know what had happened to prevent them keeping the promise of the notice board, but there was no service.

The notice-board, by the way, is headed large: "The Lord Willing," so I cannot blame the P. B. if on this particular evening when I proposed to join in their evening service the Lord was not willing that it should be held.

HALL OF MANY ACTIVITIES.

But the nearness of Foresters' Hall was convenient, and round the corner I found the Lord was willing for the evening service to to {sic} take place as announced.

I should have preferred to describe the Guildford Hall, because it is a building set apart entirely for the worship of the sect. Foresters' Hall appears to be a building that I could hire myself if I invented a new religion and wanted to expound it, or if I wanted to start a dancing class (and I have not any inclination at present to do either). It is the church of the Plymouth Brethren – or of a sect of the P. B. – on Sunday only. For the rest of the week it is a place for dancing classes and the rehearsals of amateur theatrical and dramatic companies and other mundane activities, including the regular meetings of the Foresters and a Temperance Society. I had to prepare myself in entering to ignore such influences in the place as were unconnected with the religious body holding its services there; as for instance the piano carefully covered up in green baize with a placard above it announcing the rates at which it can be hired by the day or the hour, and the locker containing insignia of the I. O. G. T.

In the centre of the large room an island of chairs faced an extremely cheerful fire, and on the chairs sat about a dozen people very solemnly and silently. The number of worshippers rose in the end to twenty, after the service had begun. For even among this handful of extremely pious people to whom has been revealed the precise dull, sordid and ornamentless form in which the Almighty wishes to be worshipped, there is the usual percentage of those who cannot observe the first rule of ordinary politeness by getting to church in time. In every church I have noticed and wondered at it. They attend one service, or two, in the seven days: they have the whole week to think about it, and yet when the time comes they cannot get there until the service has begun and their arrival disturbs the rest of the congregation. It seems to me discourteous to them, if not to the Almighty.

THE UNPUNCTUAL WORSHIPPER.

I do not know why I should take the occasion of my visit to the Foresters' Hall to allude to this failing, unless it is that in a congregation of twenty, all apparently regular attendants, one might have expected to find the unpunctual worshipper for once lacking.

But to proceed with my own experiences. Nobody welcomed me in, and nobody directed me to a seat. It was quite unnecessary, of course, when there were so many seats to choose from, and it was so apparent that one might sit where one liked. I should think that if the Foresters' Hall congregation did elect one of their members to welcome in visitors, he would find time dragging heavily on his hands.

However, every chair was provided with a bible and a copy of "Good Tidings" hymns (red limp back, 3d.) and as soon as I had dropped modestly into my chair at the back, a nice little boy – the most active member of the congregation, and I am glad to say, the only child present – brought me a hassock. For although there were chairs for a hundred, the supply of hassocks was most carefully proportioned to the actual needs of the gathering, and they were dotted about sparingly. Hence the activities of the Plymouth child. When a newcomer selected a seat not provided with a hassock, the little boy pounced upon an unappropriated one and carried it to him. He was kept quite busy in the first few minutes after the service had begun.

A SAD LEADER.

And the service did not begin till five-and-twenty to seven. I had been sitting in very solemn silence for five minutes, when one of the gentlemen in the chairs, whose black hair I had been admiring because of a very nice wave in it, rose sadly, and walking to the table facing us, revealed himself as the officiating brother – a more elderly man than I had imagined from a back view.

I do not speak of him as the officiating minister because my friend, the encyclopædia, mentions the chief points against which the Plymouth Brethren have revolted are infant baptism, and an official ministry. And when at the close of the service I tried to extract a little information from one of the elect and asked him the name of the "minister," he stared at me blankly and then, when I explained, said: "Oh! you mean the brother who spoke."

The Brother-who-Spoke cleared his throat and offered up a short prayer. Then he cleared his throat and said that we would sing hymn 87, and, having cleared his throat, he read the hymn – it had five verses – all through, down to the last line of the fifth verse.

I have given my views about the ministerial reading of the hymn in a previous article. At St. Paul's Church, they do all that is required. They announce the number of the hymn on the wall and when the time for the hymn comes, the choir simply begin to sing it. At other churches the minister announces the number, whether it is notified on the wall or not. At others he reads through the first verse. But at Foresters' Hall, the Brother-who-Spoke read through it all.

EACH DOING HIS SHARE.

It seemed all the more waste of labour on his part because having read it all through he had to proceed to sing it all through. In default of a choir, or of so much as a harmonium, to assist in the lyrical part of the service, the B. W. S had to lead us in song, and after clearing his throat, he did it remarkably well. I could never have reached such a high note myself.

After the first line or so of solo, the congregation joined in, and we got through it very nicely. When I happen to hit on the right note I have a very nice singing voice, and there was one line in each of the verses that just suited my baritone. After the second verse, the congregation let me do the third line all by myself. And so, each doing his bit, we got through quite famously.

After the hymn, we had the reading, and there was a great fluttering of leaves. All the members of the congregation being provided with bibles they felt it incumbent upon them to follow the passage that was being read, and the fluttering leaves continued so long that the official reader paused.

"I do not know whether I gave it out correctly," he said, and announced once more where the passage was to be found.

A VIOLENT FLUTTERING.

Upon which the fluttering became violent for a moment and then ceased for him to continue.

For myself, I never follow the reading of the lesson in print. It seems to me to discount the reader's labour and suggest a certain distrust of his ability. This seemed to make the Plymouth child uneasy to see me the only member of the congregation without an open Bible before him, and after consideration I suppose he came to the conclusion that I was not following the reader with my Bible because I could not find the place. For he found the place for me and handed it to me nicely. After which, of course, I had to make some show of following the reader in the Book.

After the reading, the Brother-Who-Spoke looked at the clock and said sadly: "We may as well sing another hymn," and, having announced it, he read a hymn all the way through again and then proceeded to sing it with some assistance from the congregation.

But with all his efforts to get through the time – and when you read a hymn all the way through before you begin to sing it, it can only mean that you are making a desperate effort to fill up time – we got to the time of the address with considerably more than half-an-hour to fill if one was to make the whole business last an hour.

The B-W-S. managed to get through it, but it was a terrible effort. Once he had almost come to a dead stand, but he remembered that he had just been referring to a passage in St. John's Gospel, and he said: "We will turn back to the passage and read it," and as he read he found new threads to set him going again.

A WINDING DISCOURSE.

There was no structure in the address; there was no beginning, middle and end. It just went on winding round and round a few old truths, or rather a few old phrases, and at the end was just where it had begun.

It is the sort of sermon that may be good for one's soul, but it bores my intellect stiff.

I cannot pretend that I was unsympathetic. It would be a misuse of the word. In a Roman Catholic Church or a Jewish Synagogue, I say to myself: "There may be much more in this than I can understand."

But I understood the elderly gentleman with youthful-looking hair at Foresters' Hall perfectly. My mind was inside his, and every time he looked at the clock I said: "Can we make it last the hour?" My mind struggled with his to find any tag in what he was saying on which to tack a hymn or a platitude. When he cleared his throat, I said: "Well, that has filled up half-a-minute." I believe that I entered into his feelings entirely, and I found no justification at all for our mutual waste of time. I felt that we should both of us have been much better employed if we had gone to a decent place of worship, taken part in a decent service, and listened to an intelligent sermon.

The Wanderer.