

The Evangelical Magazine

On Plymouth Brethrenism

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Home Chronicle.

ON PLYMOUTH BRETHRENISM.

EASY as it is to find fault with the principles and modes of action of our fellow-Christians, and strong as the temptations sometimes are to be thus employed, there is so much that is apparently ungracious in publicly assuming the office of censor to our brethren, that we may be occasionally in danger of a criminal silence on questions of vital importance to the interests of our common Christianity, from a laudable anxiety not to offend the generation of God's people. This feeling has, doubtless, led many persons who were competent to expose and to warn the Christian public against the erroneous opinions and practices of a body of professors, known by the name of the Plymouth Brethren, to withhold the information they possess, lest, in attempting {235} to root up tares, they should injure plants of our Heavenly Father's planting. Admitting the full power of this consideration, in the present case, and earnestly desiring to avoid the least approach to misrepresentation, it yet appears to us that we are imperatively called upon, by existing circumstances, to render the readers of the Evangelical Magazine, acquainted with the real sentiments of this body of Christians.

The reasons for this conviction will incidentally appear on a careful perusal of this paper, and will constitute our justification, in the estimation of candid Christians, for the course we deem it right to pursue.

"The Brethren," as they call themselves, at times, and at other times, "the Saints," commenced their church existence in Ireland, at the time when the teachings and eccentric exhibitions of the late Rev. Edward Irving, began to attract attention through the kingdom, and soon after they formed a congregation in Plymouth, principally of persons who were the disciples of the Albury-school of prophetic interpretation, and who had seceded from the Church of England.

In the course of twelve years, they have spread themselves widely in this country, and have now very many congregations, collected not so much from the world, as from other Christian communities, whom they labour unceasingly to despoil of their members, believing, no doubt, that they are thus "doing God service." This circumstance prevents us from rejoicing in their successes, as we should do, were their converts mainly those who, by their instrumentality, had been translated from the kingdom of darkness "into the kingdom of God's dear Son."

In the early stages of their history, they were strongly marked by some peculiarities, which they have now wholly or in part abandoned, and in which they then gloried as distinguishing them from "the sects," and constituting them faithful witnesses to forgotten truths. The time was when they confidently {sic} expected a return of miraculous influence in the church, and carried with them oil, in visiting the sick, for the purpose of anointing them, with a view to their recovery, but their faith in this speedy return of power has died away. They then denounced, as carnal, the system of sabbath and daily school instruction, whereas now they are employing to some extent the means they once decried. Formerly they held it sinful to build places of worship, though it would be quite right to use any building previously erected for the worship of God, or for any other purpose; but recently they have erected chapels, at a very considerable outlay of money, and by announcing, through the medium of advertisements, the preachers and subjects of their evening lec-

tures, have sought to attract the public to these places. Their approximation in these and in other particulars to other Christian communities is not referred to for the purpose of reproaching them in this respect, but to show that they have little real ground for assuming to themselves the attribute of a superior wisdom, bordering on infallibility.

It will be readily admitted that the peculiarities of the Brethren might be left alone, with advantage, were it not for the fact, that, as a party, they have placed themselves in direct opposition to all other Christian churches, and avowedly aim not at their improvement, by example and fraternal counsel, but at their utter extermination. Violently denouncing the Church of England, they still more violently assail, as apostate, the different bodies of Dissenters, and delight to pour their most abundant vituperation on Congregational churches. Not content with working out their own plans, and pursuing their own path of Christian usefulness, they frequently step aside and print and circulate tracts addressed to Episcopalians, Baptists, Independents, Wesleyans, and Quakers, in which they urge the spiritually-minded in these communities to come out of man's system, which means, in plainer language, to leave the ministry they attend, and the churches with which they are united, to join themselves to the Brethren. From ignorance, or from other causes, they have greatly misrepresented the views, and exaggerated the imperfections of the Christian denominations they have thus assailed. Extremely sensitive themselves on all misapprehension of their sentiments, they are not very careful in the selection of terms, by which to describe the spiritual state of communities following not with them. The Church of England they term Babylon, and all Dissenters apostate. Their pastors are said to be elected "to extinguish the spiritual life of all the saints." The forgiveness of sins, through the blood of Christ, they affirm, "is a subject well nigh forgotten in these days, in the Congregational pulpits." "The Congregational system is a deliberate departure from the word of God." Dissenters and Churchmen "have sought, have joined the world. Both will be joined in it together; and the world is the sphere of judgment." The church has lost its missionary character, "and its only use, it is just ripe for judgment." A volume of no mean dimensions might be selected from the acknowledged publications of the Brethren, in which they thus condemn all the churches of the Saviour, but themselves; and of the uncharitableness and bitter sectarianism thus displayed, we have a right to complain; for, {236} "if any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him of himself think this again, that, as he is Christ's, even so are we Christ's." In strong contrast with the caricatures they give of other churches, they represent themselves as alone sound in the faith, as being perfectly scriptural, and as "having the Spirit." These pretensions we are justified in examining in self-defence.

Admitting, as we cheerfully do, that some of the plans and efforts of the Brethren to do good are unexceptionable, it is a mournful fact, that their endeavours are principally directed to an interference with the labours and successes of other bodies of Christians. They appear to have little of the holy ambition of the great Apostle of the Gentiles, who aimed to preach the gospel in regions beyond existing churches, "and not to boast in another man's line of things made ready to his hands;" but, on the contrary, they glory in building on another man's foundation, and in robbing other churches of their converts. It is well known, that their preachers will pass through a village or hamlet where the gospel is not preached, to visit one where other Christians have for years testified the glad tidings of salvation, and thus attempt to divide a congregation sufficiently small, and present to the world the unlovely sight of altar erected against altar, and give the impression that "Christ is divided." They employ means the most unscrupulous to entice the young and other unwary persons from sanctuaries in which they have been accustomed to worship, and from the ministry of pastors under whom they have been born again of the Spirit.

Cases are within our personal knowledge, in which they have, in numbers, and that daily, visited individuals of this order, shown them great kindness, and urged them to attend their ministry, alleging, that while the preaching of an individual minister was adapted to effect the conversion of sinners, it was not fitted to edify saints, though it was well known that these accusers had never even heard the pastor they thus depreciated. They compass sea and land to make such proselytes, and boast in the havoc they produce in secession from Christian churches, and the consequent sorrow and difficulties into which they plunge the pastors, bereaved of their children. A few years since, such success attended their unscrupulous use of money among the poor, and of other means with different classes, that they made no secret of their hope, that they would soon annihilate, in Plymouth, what they termed "the one man system," though, happily, the churches around still continue to flourish, under the gracious smile of the Master of Assemblies.

A lengthened acquaintance with the Plymouth Brethren has served to convince us, that as a whole they are not superior in the exercise of Christian graces to other Christian communions, but are, on the contrary, essentially deficient in many of the virtues of which they boast. There is a lamentable inconsistency between many of their professions and practices. Abounding in expressions of kindness and brotherly-love, they are most unbrotherly in the spirit they display towards believers of other societies, whom they have no hope of bringing within their narrow circle of fellowship, and they know well how to persecute any who deem it right to retire from their communion. Decrying sectarianism, they are eminently sectarian in their conduct, as they refuse to mingle in religious worship in any sanctuary but their own, or to co-operate with other Christians in advancing the kingdom of the Saviour, and thus, while professing to desire the visible unity of the church, they set up the most serious barriers to its accomplishment. Denouncing pulpits as Babylonish, though they are no where thus described in the Bible, but on the contrary, (Neh. viii. 4, 5,) they cannot enter ours, nor will they even consent to preach from the table pew of any of our chapels on the common salvation. Inviting Christians of other denominations to break bread with them, they decline every invitation to reciprocate the fellowship, and one of them recently affirmed, that he would rather be seen in a theatre than breaking bread in a chapel, where the gospel is preached in the town in which he resides. Professing to meet on an unsectarian basis, they so effectually narrow and pervert the principle, by their exclusiveness and censoriousness, as to present the aspect of the most bigoted communion to be met with among Protestants. It is the testimony of one who was induced for a time to join them, and was afterwards driven out by their intolerance, that "their minds are so constantly exercised in detecting, and their tongues in denouncing what they consider bad in other Christian bodies, that it has not unfrequently induced a censorious and uncharitable spirit, and, in some degree, an alienation of heart from those Christians who do not assimilate to themselves." And this witness is true. Embodying, as the Brethren do, in themselves, the dissidence of dissent, and, confessedly, "dissenting from all dissenters," they yet disclaim the name, and use it as a term of reproach, as synonymous "with the irreligion and ungodliness of popular feeling." To use any apparel or furniture, but of the plainest kind, is sinful, and yet some of their members have learnt to conform, in these respects, to the usages of civilised society. To lay up money is decidedly wrong, and yet they have their banking {237} accounts, and are accumulating wealth. They say it is unlawful to borrow, and yet they do not hesitate to lend to poor Christians of other communities, whose understood obligation in return is, to attend their chapel. "To agree to differ" on religious opinions, they condemn as carnal policy, and, as a compromise with evil, inasmuch as all differences of judgment flow from sin, and yet on the subject of infant baptism they do agree to differ, and are sufficiently

severe on churches that do not; and in their private membership, they allow differences of opinion on the personal reign of Christ, while they are not free to go out and preach with a brother who does not proclaim that doctrine. Other palpable inconsistencies between their professions and practices could readily be noticed, but these are sufficient to prove that they have little right to the superiority they claim, as being the only persons entitled to be called “saints” and “faithful brethren.”

Many of their views of religious doctrine and of Christian duty, appear to us to be thoroughly unscriptural. To “show piety at home” seems a small part of their religion, and parental and domestic duties are mournfully neglected among them. To family worship, they pay no regard, on the principle that God is always to be worshipped; the divine blessing is not asked on their food, as this would be to seek what they already have; and they denounce the practice of pious parents who teach their children infantile forms of prayer and praise, on the plea that it is taking the work out of God’s hand. Their young women attend but little to the apostle’s direction, to be “keepers at home,” and may be found daily going from house to house, disturbing individual minds, and infringing the peace of Christian families, by their misrepresentations and importunities. The most slender title to Christian character, will admit a person to their fellowship. Individuals on whom the discipline of other churches is about to pass, they readily receive; and persons who have been severed from other bodies of Christians, for immoralities, they admit without making a single inquiry as to their character, of the parties with whom they were formerly connected. They retain persons in their communion, who travel on the Lord’s day on ordinary business or for pleasure, and who have almost forsaken the assembling of themselves with the church. This neglect, they declare, is no evidence of the absence of Christian principle, as it is not now to be said, “Go up at the hour of prayer;” but, “Pray without ceasing.” The authority of the Christian Sabbath, they set at nought, affirming, that “Sabbath-breaking is never condemned as a sin among the saints,” and one of them has expressed his wish that all the shops in Plymouth could be opened on a Sunday, for the purpose of pouring contempt on the practices of those who invest it with a sacred character. While marvellously attached to the exposition of the ceremonial law, and delighting to spiritualize its most minute particulars, they reject the moral law as a rule, and charge them who enforce its claims, with being legal. They say, “The Antinomian is right in principle. The law was fulfilled, and set aside by the work of Christ.” They deny that the help afforded by the Spirit of God, in preaching and prayer, is moral aid, and contend, that whilst the greater part of the miraculous gifts enumerated in the twelfth and fourteenth chapters of the second Epistle to the Corinthians, are now absent from the church, the word of wisdom “and a little bit of the gifts of prophecy and teaching” are still possessed, and that, consequently, the directions given by the apostle for the exercise of the gifts which then existed, are not only all applicable to the present time, but are alone sufficient to meet its exigencies, and that it is therefore sinful to educate pious young men for the work of the ministry, or to have a well-defined ecclesiastical polity.

While there is reason to believe that some of their confident anticipations of the coming of the Saviour, have, to some extent, been modified with the lapse of time, they still hold that the gospel is not designed to evangelize the nations. Time was when a preacher of theirs announced to his staring village auditors the day and hour when he should next preach to them, but qualified it by adding, “if the Lord does not come before that time, but my full impression is, that he will.” This fanaticism could not long survive, and the nightly expectation with which the Brethren professed to retire, of the second advent transpiring before morning, has died away; but their hostility to missionary undertakings is unabated. They use terms of sarcasm and ridicule, blended with pity, to describe the

whole missionary enterprise, and doubt, or affect to doubt, the truth of the statements put forth as to conversions among the heathen, insinuating that they are merely civilized, and will only, as its consequence, be involved in greater condemnation. The gospel, they say, is a failure, and the results of missionary labours displeasing to God. In the improvement of society, the Brethren profess to take no interest, affirming, that Christians are not to claim the rights of citizens, or to hold any office under Government, or to extend religious liberty at home, emancipate the negro, or subscribe to an hospital or infirmary; as all these things belong to the world, which is under the control of the devil. The mischief of {238} these sentiments is at present limited, but could they find a general reception with Christian people, they would produce the most disastrous results, and on this ground they should be exposed and resisted.

We have lived long enough in the focus of Brethrenism, to know that its light is not so pure, nor its devotion so intense, nor its charity so fervent, as those at a distance from it may imagine. That which is truly good among the Brethren they have in common with other Christians; and that in which they boast as their distinguishing glory, is either objectionable in itself, or not peculiar to them. The duty of separation from the world is held as firmly, and practised as scripturally, by some other Christians as by them. Spirituality of mind is to be found beyond the circle of their influence, and where less ostentatious display is made of its possession; and they have failed to prove that there is any thing in the constitution of Congregational churches to prevent the attainment of entire consecration to the Saviour. They would find it difficult to show that the majority of the communities they attack, require any thing as a qualification for church membership, which is not requisite for fellowship with God. As much of real brotherly love is found among other sects as in their midst; and many amiable persons, who have passed into their communion, in the hope that it was simply the home and atmosphere of love, have heard more scandal, and seen more contention in their midst, in a brief season, than they found in a long extended period in the churches they left. The open ministry, boasted of by the Brethren, is less practised by them than by the Wesleyans and some other bodies; for, while denouncing all human arrangements in reference to the ministry, as fettering the Spirit, they meet and appoint each other to office and work, and it is fully known, by the initiated, who is to preach at a given time and place; and any brother who, supposing himself gifted, should interfere with this arrangement, would be made to feel that he had mistaken his calling, and that "the spirit of the prophets must be subject to the prophets." The fact is, that the vaunted purity, liberality, and love of Brethrenism, is, when weighed in the balances of scriptural, impartial observation, found wanting. It is one thing when viewed at a distance, and a very different one when closely inspected; condescending and gentle when it is attracting some one to its enclosure, it becomes indifferent and tyrannical when it has effected its object, and unrelentingly hateful when it has failed of its end. Many persons have lived to repent bitterly the hour when they hastily withdrew from the fellowship of a sectional church to identify themselves with the Brethren, and some have been so perplexed and injured by the change, as to draw back from a Christian profession, in deep disgust at the tricks they have seen performed under the profession of superior sanctity. To warn the young and inexperienced against the insidious attacks which may be made on their principles, and to save them from the sorrow and disgrace of abandoning them, and to place the pastors and members of churches in a right position towards the Brethren, in their aggressive movements, are the objects of this paper. Not in anger, but with sincere grief, do we make these statements, and shall be amply compensated if they should lead, under the Divine blessing, to the establishment of any Christians who are wavering, or tend to recover any who have fallen into the unsound and unscriptural

tural practices on which we have animadverted. "It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace."

So great is the diversity of opinion amongst the Brethren, that we can readily imagine that some few of them may disavow several of the sentiments thus recorded, and, as individuals, they are entitled to exemption from the censure conveyed; but the conduct of the party, as a whole, has been faithfully delineated, and this, if needful, can be proved by lengthened quotations from their publications.* There are persons among them better in practice than in creed, and some few are found indulging a kind spirit to their fellow-Christians; but as a people their temper is morose, uncharitable, and bitter. While professedly attempting to promote union, they are in reality sowing discord, and doing what they can to divide the body of Christ. That there is no perfect church on earth may be readily admitted, and in this fact we find a reason for mutual forbearance and charity; but certainly the Plymouth Brethren are laid under deep obligation to purge themselves of many of their gross inconsistencies before they are entitled to be regarded as reformers of the Christian world; and even when this is done, we shall require strong proof of the divinity of their mission to denounce all other churches as apostate and in Babylon. May we, and they, have grace to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.

* The paragraphs and sentences in this paper, placed in inverted commas, are extracts from tracts and papers, published by the Brethren.