

THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN.

It is, in some respects, an advantage, when entering on the study of an unfamiliar subject, to do so with a mind entirely uninformed, and so without prejudice in reference to the matter on hand. This is especially my aim, in these studies of religious London—to make my mind, for the time being, a *tabula rasa*, ready to receive whatever impressions may reach it from without.

And probably in no section of religious development is this unbiassed judgment more essentially necessary than in the case of the so-called Plymouth Brethren. In the first place, the little that is popularly known, or supposed to be known about them, turns out on inquiry to be quite wrong, and the very title a misnomer—so much so that they invariably

treat it as simply a vulgar designation, writing the name of their body as I have done, thus, "The (so-called) Plymouth Brethren." The title appears to have originated in an idea that the sect originated in Plymouth, whereas the principal source was near Dublin, and instead of emanating from any of the outlying bodies of Nonconformity, many of their earlier apostles, and some of their present ministers, are ordained clergymen of the Church of England.

It is usually imagined that the Brethren—for so they elect to call themselves—have transferred to the nineteenth century the Apostolic doctrine of community of goods. That, however, as I imagined, is simply a popular fallacy. An intelligent member of their community, with whom I conversed on the subject, assured me they were not such poor political economists as that. They simply hold in great esteem that primitive constitution of the Church, and trust largely to the power of prayer for the supply of their temporal necessities. I have found the endeavour to grasp the distinctive doctrines of this sect as difficult as the attempt to catch Proteus. In fact, their *differentia* lies rather in an absence of positive dogma, and a broad division of mankind into the church and the world. Every "denomination" is wrong, because division is wrong; which amounts to saying that on

one side stands the Church—that is, the (so-called) Plymouth Brethren—on the other the world—that is, everybody who is *not* a Plymouth Brother. This, combined with an intense reverence for the written word—“the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible”—constitutes, broadly speaking, the special feature of the body. They date from the year 1827, and number, my informant supposed, possibly some 40,000; but as they have no external badge of distinction, and rather shun than court publicity or proselytism, it is not easy to gather statistics about them.

The Brethren have three principal places of meeting in London, and to one of these, the Priory, 198, Upper Street, Islington, I adjourned on a Sunday morning at eleven o'clock, armed with a few of the particulars above stated, and prepared to witness and report their exposition in public worship. The room, which is a moderate-sized school, was filled with a congregation of evident *habitués*, a very small portion at the back being railed off “for those not in communion.” The service consisted principally of the singing of a large number of hymns, without instrumental accompaniment of any kind, and the reading of Scripture. There is nothing in the shape of pulpit or reading-desk, nor any person occupying the posi-

tion of minister or president. There was, I suppose, some preconcerted arrangement as to who should read, pray, or give out the hymn; but, to an outsider, it appeared that any of the Brethren took part without premeditation. Between each portion of the service there was a long pause of several minutes, during which the congregation sat with eyes closed, seemingly engaged in private prayer. The special object of the morning assembly (as I gathered at the door) was "the breaking of bread." This was done in the most homely manner possible. A loaf of home-made bread was placed, in common plates, on a table in the centre of the room, divided into quarters, and passed round the benches; each member helped himself or herself to a portion, literally "breaking" it off the quarter loaf. The wine was passed round in like manner, in large common tumblers, the administration of each element being preceded by prayer. It was a simple ceremony; but the idea could not fail to strike one that its very homeliness made it a close representation of the original supper in the long upper room and the daily bread-breakings of Apostles. After the Communion—as I suppose one may term it—followed another hymn, sung to the tune of "God save the Queen." Whether this loyal melody was designed to occupy anything like the position of our

Collect for the Queen I cannot say, but the effect was slightly incongruous. With this I imagined the proceedings would have closed, as I had been told there would be no sermon; but a sort of *sermonette* was introduced, it seemed—and, I believe, really was—on the spur of the moment. It was delivered by a very humble Brother indeed, in homely and not always accurate English; but he displayed minute knowledge of Scripture, and his sermon was intensely earnest—as the whole service had been—consisting, I am sure, as the preacher kept telling us, of “thoughts that had been pressing in upon his own soul.” The two concluding prayers were offered by gentlemen of a very different mental *calibre*, and the congregation evidently numbered many persons of position and education. The names of “intending and accepted brethren” were then read, together with one who “sought restoration,” and another who proposed to take to himself a Sister; and so the proceedings terminated, without—as will be evident—anything having transpired to inform one as to the special doctrines of the body. As I emerged from the Priory I saw the congregation coming out of Unity Church, Upper Street, where Baboo Keshub Chunder Sen, the Hindoo Reformer, had been enlightening the Unitarians on the doctrines of the Bramo Somaj; whilst, a little lower down,

another was beginning to besiege the doors of the Agricultural Hall, where Ned Wright was to preach to the working man. *Quot homines tot sententiæ.*

On the succeeding Wednesday evening I had been informed that a series of twelve lectures on the Five Books of Moses was to be opened by one of the principal men belonging to this body, a Mr. Kelly—for he eschews the title of Reverend, though he was, I believe, a minister of the Established Church, or certainly educated for the ministry. Thither I again adjourned in quest of information, and found a large congregation assembled, armed to the very teeth with their Bibles. I am bound to say that the lecture displayed an amount of critical and exegetical power for which I was not prepared. Mr. Kelly is a fluent and pleasing speaker, with every word of the sacred text at his fingers' ends; and having, moreover, a very complete knowledge of Bishop Colenso's book on the first eleven chapters of Genesis, against which his remarks were naturally, in the first instance, levelled.

Taking the first verse of the first chapter to embody the earliest creation of matter, the lecturer protested against the idea of its being originally created in confusion, but supposed an interval of undefined extent to have occurred between the narrative of the first and second verses, during which creation had,

from causes unexplained, got into confusion. He then plunged boldly into the Jehovistic and Elohistie theory, protesting against any diversity of documents, and, with great ingenuity, taking the name Elohim to refer to the Creative Power, whilst that of Jehovah pointed to the Covenant God of the Jews. Elohim was simply an historic name. Jehovah indicated special moral relationship. Passing on to the tree of life, he combated the idea that the smallness of the transgression was disproportionate to the punishment. The very essence of the matter lay in its smallness. It was simple disobedience to the expressed will of God. There was, and could be, no knowledge of good and evil; that only came with the Fall. He then passed on to consider the position of Paradise, and the naming of the objects of creation by Adam, inferring from the fact of Eve's not being named until after the Fall, that the Fall occurred very shortly after creation—"in fact, possibly on the very day." I ought to have mentioned that, after assuming the undefined *hiatus* between verses 1 and 2 of Genesis i., Mr. Kelly reads the succeeding days of creation as literal days of twenty-four hours. With regard to the actual Fall, he combated the idea that the narrative was in any way allegorical. It was not, as some supposed, the advent of lust that was typified; for lust did not come until after the Fall. After tracing

the ancient mythologies to the eve of the Deluge, and the association of the "sons of God" with the "daughters of men," Mr. Kelly applied the same method of explanation adverted to above in order to get over the two different accounts of the Deluge; and he concluded with arguments as to the unity of stock and the convergence of languages to a common point, showing himself fully conversant with modern controversy and well fitted to grapple with all its difficulties. Whatever else might be thought of the theories advanced, there could be no question as to their ingenuity and the minute acquaintance with the details of Scripture displayed in their exposition. The lecture, which was altogether extemporaneous, lasted an hour and a half, and I am free to confess I came away with a very different impression of the body from what I had previously possessed, when I thought them, as many I know do, only one other set of enthusiasts seeking to revive the first century literally in the nineteenth. I find—as one always does find in microscopic investigations—that there is still a "wheel within a wheel." There exists a schism from this body, occupying a position sufficiently important to justify a place in these papers; and the delineation of the offshoot will serve to bring into greater prominence still the distinguishing doctrines of the parent stock.

MR. NEWTON AT BAYSWATER.

THOUGH the primary object of those papers is rather to describe opinions than individuals, yet it generally happens that one man stands forth as prominently representative of a particular school of thought—and occasionally, as in the present instance, that an individual not only represents but exhausts, and in his single person embodies opinions so far diffused as to render their consideration necessary in a *résumé* of religious London. As an offshoot from Plymouth Brethrenism, too, Mr. Newton's creed and cultus serve to illustrate in a remarkable manner some of the principles of this little-understood but growing sect.

It is twenty-three years since Mr. Newton was virtually excommunicated by the Darbyite portion of the Brethren, so named from the leader of the

exclusive school. The gravamen was an accusation of holding doctrines similar to those which brought Edward Irving into collision with Scotch Presbyterianism. It was, in fact, in the course of a controversy with the Irvingites that some unguarded expressions fell from Mr. Newton's pen, making it possible to deduce from them the doctrine of the peccability of Christ's nature. Such a deduction was not made for several years, when the Brethren wished to exclude him from their ranks on account of certain peculiar views on prophetic subjects and matters of internal discipline. Then the old grievance was raked up, and the offending minister was expelled and anathematised with a zeal worthy of an Œcumenical Council at least, and curiously illustrative of the superior bitterness of the *odium theologicum* over other forms of "envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness."

The history of this dispute, ranging, as has been said, over more than twenty years, embraces a literature of its own. It has positively rained tracts. In the innocence of my heart, when first I commenced the study of Brethrenism, I inquired, "Has it any literature! Are there any published documents to guide me?" Any literature! The bundle of broadsides before me, as I write, is a pleasing satire on the question. The differences between Mr. Newton and

the Brethren, however, may be, to a great extent, summarised under two or three heads. (1.) Whilst the Brethren exclude all denominations, and calmly date those documents, emanating from the Priory, Islington, as from "The One Assembly of God in London," Mr. Newton—who, I should add, is a former Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford—acknowledges the three Creeds of the Church and the first eighteen of the Thirty-nine Articles of the English Church. (2.) Among the distinguishing doctrines of the Brethren is the imminence of Christ's coming and the "secret rapture of the Saints;" whereas, Mr. Newton, basing his views on the revelations of prophecy, holds that certain events, to which I shall refer more at length in my account of his lecture, have yet to precede the closing-in of the present dispensation. (3.) The constitution of the Brethren is essentially democratic; it holds a "many-men ministry;" whilst Mr. Newton deems it essential to order that a definite head, or "one-man ministry," should exist. *Hinc illæ lacrymæ!* On these seemingly insufficient grounds—insufficient except on the theory of an Infallible Church—Mr. Newton has been expelled from "The One Church of God," and the members of that communion have been forbidden, under pain of excommunication and all sorts of un-

comfortable things, from holding any intercourse with one whose doctrines are described as "Satanic," "blasphemous," "deep, damnable, fundamental heresies." The upshot of all this has been a schism in the body—one more among the many sects whose existence was held to be symptomatic of the world in contradistinction to the Church. Numerous "followers" joined Mr. Newton in establishing a commodious iron church in the Queen's Road, Bayswater, where, at the time of writing this paper, he preached on Sundays, and delivered a lecture, generally on some prophetic subject, on Monday mornings at eleven o'clock. The chapel is now closed, but Mr. Newton retains, I believe, his interest therein.

The subjects of Mr. Newton's two preceding lectures had been largely illustrative of his peculiar views. They were "The Ephah of Zechariah," and "Exposition of Revelations xvii., xviii." In the former, which, by the way, has been already utilised by him in reference to the Exhibition of 1851—the ephah is taken to represent the spirit of commerce, in the same way as the crown represents monarchy, or the keys of the Church; and the woman within the ephah, pressed down with a leaden lid, symbolises morality repressed by this commercial spirit. Everything bad is covered by Mr. Newton's ever-recurring bugbears,

indifferentism and latitudinarianism. This spirit of commerce, levelling all religious differences, which Mr. Newton considers immoral, is carried to Shinar, where a house is builded for it. In this circumstance is detected an undoubted prediction of the revival of the ancient Assyrian Empire, with Babylon as its capital. Here the lawless spirit of commerce is to have full swing until the return of the Jews to Palestine, which will mark the close of this dispensation, and form the immediate precursor of the Millennium. These are the events which Mr. Newton expects, in place of the secret "rapture of the saints" hourly anticipated by the Brethren.

In his exposition of the two chapters, xvii. and xviii. of the Apocalypse, Mr. Newton deals first with the person, and secondly with the history, of this woman borne in the ephah to Shinar—in other words, the description and destiny of this great city Babylon, which is to rise from its ruins on the Assyrian Plains as the head of the resuscitated Roman Empire. Above the pulpit from which he lectured Mr. Newton had suspended a map embracing the territories of the Eastern and Western Empires, and divided into ten kingdoms, which he considers to be symbolised by the "ten horns of the beast." He then proceeded to pass in rapid review the tendencies exhibited in mo-

dern politics towards a revival of the Eastern Empire. The Emperor of the French, he said, had expressed a hope that the jealousy of the Western Powers would no longer prevent the development of the East. Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor are in process of re-civilization; but that civilization is only secular, and on that account it must have an awful failure. The Euphrates, however, is once more to become the great artery of the world, and the Euphratean railway will be the means of importing to the East the spirit of godless commerce. That a specious morality existed he did not deny; but it was a form of godliness renouncing definite truth—that is, it did not hold the three Creeds and the first eighteen Articles. The climax of such latitudinarianism might almost seem to have been reached when a Mahometan “officiated” at the opening of the Ephesus and Smyrna railway. In fact, he said, we were beginning now to put in practice the late Lord Macaulay’s distinctly “atheistic” doctrine, that Christianity had no more to do with legislation than it had with mechanics. Earl Russell cannot quite “cave in,” to this; but he says, “Sustain all religions;” and look at the result: here we have Baboo Keshub Chunder Sen put forward “with all his awful Theism,” on professedly Christian platforms, asked his opinion as to what we are

to do with India, and last, but far from least, introduced to the British public by the Dean of Westminster (I am afraid Mr. Newton called the Dean "latitudinarian" when he came to England at the invitation of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. Now, says Mr. Newton, God requires definiteness. "Stanley," says there is no necessity for that—says that Scripture does not exhaust truth, that there is truth in Shakespeare and Milton as well as in Scripture. This is exactly what Alexander and the Roman emperors said. They were "latitudinarian." And this spirit will grow and spread until a climax is reached; that climax will be marked by the return of the Jews to the Holy Land. This position was not proved at all, but advanced as a mere assertion. Mr. Newton recurred once more at this point to the political question of the hour as illustrative of prophecy. There was the need of a strong central Power amongst the representatives of the old Roman world (France, England, etc.), in presence of the threatening Powers of Russia and America. All these ten kingdoms will need a strong federal union which is symbolised by the seven mountains—seven being the number of perfection, and the mountain typical of governmental skill. These different branches of governmental perfection have

never yet been concentrated. Napoleon approached their union most nearly, and so he himself approximated to the position of Antichrist; but the Antichrist who shall comprise all these governmental functions in their perfection is yet to come; and he will be the "Assyrian" of Isaiah x. Strangely enough, with all his love of order, Mr. Newton strongly objects to constitutional monarchy, and "goes in" for the "right divine of kings" in a way that would have delighted the heart of a Stuart. He holds it as idle to ask the people how they will be governed as it would be to assemble the servants and children of a family and consult them how *Paterfamilias* should manage affairs.

Such is the outline of a discourse, curious enough as delivered in London in the nineteenth century, and yet certainly interesting to those who are philosophical enough, or "latitudinarian" enough, to be able to appreciate the opinions of one with whom they fail to agree, and who evidently brings to the study—though it may be with a foregone conclusion—the work and devotion of a lifetime. It is only right to add, that Mr. Newton does not seek publicity or aim at proselytism; though I doubt if any church in Bayswater ever gathered such a congregation as he attracted on a Monday morning—except, perhaps, for

a fashionable marriage. But this gentleman and his "followers" are thoroughly in earnest. The Bible is to them the one rule of life. If commerce, constitutional monarchy, or Christian charity seems to clash with the Bible, then these things must go, and the Bible—as they expound it—the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, must reign supreme. To many of us, "optimists and latitudinarians," these things seem a little unreal. It looks somewhat like Infallibility, which may be made to attach to a book as well as to a man or to a Church. In fact, one is almost inclined to quote as *à propos* to Mr. Newton's position, what a zealous defender of his wrote about the Brethren who ejected him. "They (the Brethren) tell you, 'This is to be received. You are in darkness.' But where is the difference between this 'guidance' of the Brethren, and the 'inner light' of Fox, and the 'verifying faculty' of Colenso and the Rationalists, and the Infallibility of Rome?"