

**THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN:
REMINISCENCES OF OVER FIFTY YEARS AGO
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A.N. Harris's parents were members of the early Plymouth assembly in Ebrington Street. His manuscript account of the early days of the assembly gives a unique insight into its religious services, its personalities and the events which took place in it, including an unusual perspective on the infamous schism of 1845. As the reader will soon become aware, however, Harris is evidently less familiar with the later history of the Brethren. The MS is handwritten, and is in the Plymouth and West Devon Record Office (PWDRO, Accession 499). It is reproduced here by kind permission of the Archivist. The version of the MS printed below is from the typed transcript made by Dr David Brady for the Christian Brethren Archive in Manchester (CBA Box 13, Item 29). The orthography and grammar is that of the original document, and the only changes that have been made in the version printed here are that underlining has been replaced by italics and additional notes made by Harris are given as footnotes. The occasional obscurity in the handwriting or additional note by the copyist is indicated with square brackets.

The leaders of the movement at this time of which I write were a number of ladies and gentlemen who devoted their lives and fortunes in trying to further Christ's Kingdom on Earth, by forming a community of christians who should not be an hierarchy or episcopacy or a presbytery, but should be without a creed or any of the usual conventional machinery. No paid pastor waiting a call to an extended sphere of usefulness, no seat rents to pay in advance or otherwise, no verger—not even a [.....], or a shadow of anything that could be termed a *system*. They tried like the great gentile evangelist “to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” yet like him very soon afterwards, they said “things hard to be

understood” and as if to imitate the apostles more closely “withstood each other to the face”, thereby they scattered an immense congregation which their previous well doing and beautiful lives had gathered around them. As might have been expected owing to their *left hand* not knowing what the *right* was doing their followers numbered among them more needy people than usual. An ambitious brother wished to be set up in business, giving as a reason, he would then be able to *do more for the Lord*. A large business was established by an *unbeliever*, who exchanged to his own advantage deal furniture for articles carved in mahogany.

At this present time more philosophy is mixed with christianity, our two hands take council so that our alms shall not overlap. Of the sincerity and humility of the leaders there was no possible doubt although they did not parade this humility by wearing a distinctive dress, or label themselves with phylacteries on Sundays. One of them, a man of fortune, used to live on labourers’ wages and give away the remainder of his income, another forfeited an estate rather than give up his ideal life. I am sorry to say that one of them committed suicide, for which no reason could be given.

My first experience in connection with the Brethren was being led by the hand when a child one Sunday evening in winter to one of the meetings held in their own building adjoining the burial ground of the parish church of Charles the Martyr in Ebrington Street Plymouth (I may say here my Father and Mother were members).

The bells of the church were chiming plaintively, and people were walking briskly in the frosty air, with their religious books in front of them. I noticed some were not going our way and was informed they were probably going to *church* but we were going to the *Room*. The words *church* or *chapel* was never used in connection with their building, and I got quite accustomed afterwards to the smiling salutation, I was so glad to see you at the *room* on Sunday.

We were soon seated in a large hall, semi-circular in shape, well warmed and lighted. The extreme silence (although the place was half full of people) and subdued sound of the neighbouring bells seemed to induce a pleasant calm, the placid faces of the hundreds assembled

made a lasting impression on me. I have seen nothing like it since. It was a realization of brethren dwelling together in unity.

When the bells ceased, one of the ministering brethren read a portion of scripture and commented on it not like a sermon, in fact the conventional tone of voice seemed to be intentionally avoided. It seemed nice of the bells to wile away the waiting time previous to the commencement of the—I had almost written *service*—meeting, but was told subsequently they timed their meetings to prevent interruption, that bells in connection with churches formed part of a *system*, and were objectionable on that account, not that they disliked bells as bells, but regarded them as excrescences to christianity.

A quaker relative of my mother gave to church bells the name of “useless”, he lived in a small town and both his residence and the meeting house were not far from the parish church. She has often heard him say to his wife, “Get ready for meeting, Mary, the useless are ringing.”

Any brother who partook of the Lord’s Supper could speak or help at a meeting if moved to do so; there was no previous arrangement. When the brother who had read the scripture sat down, another would give out a hymn perhaps in some way illustrating the previous remarks. If it happened to be brother W.¹ he would say—dear brethren and sisters (this brother never omitted the sisters) we will sing so and so. Another would pray in the same strain, and so on. On the next Sunday the sequence would be quite different.

They had not even an *unwritten* law as to the order of the procedure like so many other denominations, such as hymn-prayer-scripture-hymn-sermon-hymn during collection.

When a collection was taken for division among the *poor* (they never had a collection for any other purpose) it was immediately after the Lord’s Supper in the morning; they only received alms from *members*, not from the unconverted or children, in striking contrast to all other denominations.

1. [Wigram?]

They did not engage in the praise of God by singing a hymn during a collection to drown the noise of the coins dropping into the box.

They did not stand up when singing, therefore it was inclined to be weak, and having no musical instrument, no choir or week-day practice, their tunes were few, and the introduction of others difficult. —Once a brother having a strong voice, after giving out the number of a hymn, repeated the first line “Stand up and praise the Lord.” About twenty responded to what they thought to be an invitation, but on realizing they were conspicuous began to subside gradually one by one, and all were comfortably seated by the end of the third verse and those who were troubled at what appeared to be an invitation, breathed more freely.

Their dislike to anything *savouring* of *system* prevented them from ever using the beautiful form of prayer that our Lord gave to his disciples. Those who object to *forms of prayer*, or a *prayer book* tolerate a *form of praise* in a *hymn book*. Besides, most hymn books contain forms of prayer and thanksgiving, only they are in verse.

Of course the prayers of the Brethren were always extempore, sometimes short, at other times of inordinate length, according to the *gift* of the brother engaged, occupying over twenty minutes. Later on I was able to recognize the various idiomatic prayer sentences that were often repeated, so difficult is it to invent fresh wants from time to time.

Many of the leaders were men of high intellectual powers, several were Hebrew and Greek scholars, one of the latter was the late S.P. Tregelles LLD, a capital portrait of whom hangs in the Athenaeum, George St., Plymouth. I have to thank them for numerous literal translations from various manuscripts which I had hoped would have thrown some light on certain doctrines.

It was thought by some that reading the New Testament in Greek would tend to unanimity of thought, but that the Greek authorities vary was not generally known and each translator puts his own construction on what is written to the best of his ability.

In the parable “The rich man and Lazarus” Luke xiv, the Authorised version says, “he is comforted and thou art *tormented*.” In the Tischendorf edition translated from the manuscript of the Convent of Mt. Sinai the same word is used, the Revised Version substituted “*in anguish*” but one of the Brethren translators said it ought to be “*thou art sorrowing*” —Dr. Tregelles after travelling over a considerable part of the World to examine the various manuscripts for his new Greek Testament, declined to translate it into English, knowing full well that the translator’s own ideas are unconsciously introduced into the text. Another brother, not quite so diffident, published an English edition. Any that are extant now are curiosities (at least I should think so).

The estimable and scholarly leaders of the Brethren despised the prefix Rev. as a “rag of Rome” and would not allow themselves to be so designated on any account whatever, neither did they or their followers exercise the franchise. They considered a majority consisting of worldly minded or self-interested men did not of necessity represent God’s will; in fact, there was nothing of the political nonconformist about them.

Their ladies were modest and retiring, accepting without question the teaching of the scriptures by S. Paul. They never spoke in public, although some had a remarkable flow of language which was listened to with delight at the home or house meetings.

I never knew who was the architect to the Brethren, but he succeeded in producing something unlike anything in heaven above, or in the earth beneath. It was named the *Dutch Oven* (by ourselves, in derision), to which it really had a resemblance. The large flat side of it was towards Ebrington Street, with several smaller flat surfaces arranged in a semicircle behind. There were two entrances from Ebrington St. a few feet in from the ends of the building, and a row of plain windows above, two rows of windows upper and lower extended around the rest of the edifice. On the inside not a vestige of ornament or decoration was to be seen, but the place was comfortable and the seats admirably arranged. Each person could see and hear well, the tiers of seats arranged in a semicircle being well above each other, well warmed and lighted, printed notices were hung on the gas

standards on Sunday morning, pointing out where non-members were accommodated.

Although they tried, and wished to divest the commemoration of the Lord's Supper of all ceremony, yet their method of so doing became one of the Sunday sights of Plymouth partly on account of its magnitude. The three outermost semicircles of seats set apart for the unconverted were always filled with people anxious to view the proceedings. On a large table around which sat the ministering brethren something bulky was covered by a nice white table-cloth, which was removed at a certain time during the morning by one of the brothers, disclosing a brightly polished silver tankard, tall goblets and plates, also some small batch loaves; the brother who was "officiating" (I am not certain I have used the right word) then broke up the loaves and put a piece on each plate, a short extempore prayer followed, after which the plates of bread were distributed in the same way as a collection is taken, only that the bread got *less* as each one retained the plate to pinch off a bit to eat. Some used to keep their gloves on when pinching the bread, others used their bare finger nails (and oh! such nails) personally. I never decided which method was best (or worst). Afterwards the goblets were filled from the tankard, then a short prayer, and each block of seats had a goblet, the first brother or sister taking a sip and giving the cup to the next to pass it on.

The breath of several hundred "partakers" quite pervaded the air with the flavour of good old port wine. Quite a considerable quantity must have been consumed as I have occasionally seen them taken back to the table to be refilled.

² Their building in Ebrington Street, which had not been used for a generation or two, was taken down many years since and was replaced by a building called Hope Chapel, now used by the United Methodists. The Brethren's burial ground is on the west of the chapel, where a goodly number of saints (they used to call themselves thus) await a glorious resurrection (Amen A.N.H. I hope the present owners

2. This should come later on.

will not ignore the character of the ground and build on it) although no tombstones mark their resting place. I likewise hope no Plymouth brother or sister will accuse me of *sacerdotalism* for expressing the above wish in reference to burial grounds.

The deceased members were carried by willing volunteers from the house to the grave on a bier, the mourners walking two and two behind, there was no display of hearse and coaches, the ministering brethren and classical scholar helping in turn with the shopkeeper or labourer. I have seen these processions slowly winding their way through pouring rain, a very depressing spectacle indeed.

But even then there was “the little rift within the lute” that should ultimately necessitate the desertion of their commodious conventicle and leave it a melancholy and silent witness of their failure to carry on a large work.

The collapse of this great and promising assembly began in this wise. A brother named Peter a fisherman was sometimes *moved to take part*, by giving out a hymn, or reading a chapter. His education had been of a very elementary character, his thoughts and language were very simple, and well suited to the poor and illiterate part of the congregation, by whom he was looked upon as a posterior type of the apostle our Lord said he would build his church on. This would have gone on all right but as he gained confidence he was *moved to expound* in a literal way some parts of scripture his more learned brethren considered questionable. His simple explanations delighted the illiterate but to the classical leaders it was painful if not positive discomfiture, his diction at times being very faulty and his similitudes absurd. A very private consultation of experts decided that Bro. Peter be asked to discontinue his expositions. But who should tell him he was not moved? as they feared the people who almost thought him a prophet. However, Peter acquiesced quietly. He was really a nice fellow, but some began to ask who it was that dared to *quench the Spirit?* Many seceded on this account and walked no more with them.

When anyone wished to join the Brethren and asked, “What must I do to be saved?” the answer was, “*believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ” and similar texts where *belief* and *trust* was enjoined. But the converts had to learn afterwards that in addition to taking up a cross daily to

resist not evil, not to go to law, to forgive or no forgiveness would be obtained, in fact a certain line of conduct was insisted on, which many professed to comply with but did not. Thus, a large number of hypocrites were manufactured. Others with more candour openly refused to have their good conduct described as “filthy rags”—and so fell away.

One old pensioner from the army, a Serjeant V., used to take a little drop too much sometimes on pension days. This was discovered by a visiting sister, who reported her conversation with him. He was duly visited by some brethren who admonished him and advised his removal from the list of members, their desire being to keep the field free from tares. “But,” said he, “the tares must be left until the harvest. I am not a tare. Our Lord said he that is not against me is for me. The Lord knows I am not against him. I know that I am not perfect, neither are you. You must not think you are whole or without sin, perhaps envy or uncharitableness in you is as distasteful to God as you think me. I make a little merry when I meet my old comrades, and my wife will tell you that she has nothing to complain of.”

As he refused to take himself off, they refused him the bread and wine, but he still continued to attend and sat with the unconverted when the Lord’s Supper was in progress.

Well, these estimable men who agreed that the spirit that moved bro. Peter the fisherman was uneducated, very soon afterwards *disagreed* among themselves as to the correct rendering of their Greek Testaments. They quarrelled over “Sheol”, “Hades”, “Geenna” and many other debatable words, each one contending for verbal accuracy. Mr. Morris maintained that eternal death was *not* eternal dying. “Geenna,” he said may go on for ever, but that did not imply that souls would go on burning for ever, that “perish” really did mean “perish”, not always perishing. What he gathered from the Greek was that the fire caused them to burn themselves out; they were in fact “lost”, “perished”, “destroyed”. This doctrine was called *annihilation* of the wicked. When this heresy was first sniffed by his brethren, he was admonished as to his future utterances, but instead of adopting the interpretation of others he hardened his heart.

So these good people *without a system* decided to put in force the most extreme process of *ecclesiasticism*, viz excommunication. One Sunday morning, a ministering brother felt called on to warn his fellows against false doctrine, after which he proceeded to make the devil a present of his erring brother (1 Tim. 1.20) with as *little ceremony* as one would pass the salt at dinner.

In the Lord's Supper which followed, the brethren on either side of him with the bread and wine passed him over, but in the hymn after the Lord's Supper "Jesus thy blood and righteousness", he sang as well and looked happier than the others. I may add that this excommunication scene quite upset my father and made him ill for some days. Mr. Morris left soon after to preach in a chapel situated in Princess St. and quite a lot of people followed him thither.

Later on he went to the United States of America, from whence he returned to Plymouth as Dr. Morris, honoured and loved by those who knew him. He died well stricken in years.

Another brother favoured the doctrine of universalism and could prove from his Greek Testament that Christ died for the sins of the *whole* world, therefore *all* would be saved after refining as gold is refined. This doctrine involved a purgatory of some sort; again "as in Adam *all* died even so in Christ shall *all* be made alive." I do not know how he dealt with such words as "lost", "perish", "destroyed" and the Lord's words, "Fear not them that *kill* the body but him that can *destroy* both *body* and *soul*, fear him."

However, his was a most benevolent doctrine but found few adherents. As the leaders developed different ideas although equally honest, equally learned, equally desirous of truth, they could not but acknowledge a doubt, as to God dictating the utterances of the different teachers, especially after deciding that Bro. Peter was not taught by the Holy Spirit.

Nonconformity generally means a disagreement or hostility to some other section of christianity, all of which conform to something, some creed, written or *unwritten*, some confession of faith, system, usage, custom; but the brethren repudiated all creeds, ceremonies, or precedents and acknowledged no authority but themselves, the result being that their followers, to put it mildly, were a "peculiar people".

After the excommunication of Mr. Morris rumours of heated dispute on doctrinal matters began to be circulated. One brother was said to have (in private) called another an heretic but had repented of his indiscretion, another was troubled about the use of the word "Trinity" seeing that no such word occurs in the scriptures. This brother pointed out that the principal text implying the doctrine of the Trinity was an interpolation, and it says a great deal for their investigations, that the text has really been omitted in the Revised Version of the New Testament. (Compare 1 John V chapter, 7 verse with Revised Version.) Things came to a crisis one Sunday when it was announced that on the following Monday evening there were certain disquieting thoughts to *lay before the Lord* and as many of the "saints" that could attend.

On the Monday evening the people gathered together, distress and uncertainty depicted on their scared faces.

The meeting began without any introductory remarks, by one brother literally and actually *falling* on his knees to the floor, and confessing his most inmost doubts of his brother's orthodoxy before the Lord, and of course before those assembled; others followed in the same way, but all their accusations and recriminations of each other took the form of prayer and confession to God beseeching his guidance, thus a personal quarrel was avoided.

The audience were alarmed at the hysterical behaviour of the leaders. Some of the females in the body of the hail caught the infection and sinking to the floor had to be carried out in a pitiful state.

This condition of affairs continued for two and a half hours, when the meeting broke up as abruptly as it had commenced.

The event just described was for many years after referred to as that awful Monday-night meeting and always spoken of with sorrow.

During the ensuing week it became known that most of the leaders were leaving the town and the brethren were left as sheep having no shepherd. Yet they (the leaders) could not be called hirelings as they received no pay.

After this rupture their large building ceased to be used and a consignment of the brethren met in Raleigh St. Hall, the rest were glad of any large room available for Sunday meetings, each little knot of “*believers*”, a name that now came to be adopted instead of “*saints*”, representing a different edition of the faith. It was really difficult to ascertain what they did believe. The most erudite in each of these sections dominated, whatever his opinions were.

Very few joined other denominations although some who were tired of the continual bickerings and shocked at the revelations of the “Monday night meeting” attached themselves to the Church of England with its printed formularys and creeds and were seemingly soothed and satisfied, but I knew of one lady (a sister of a medical man) who left again on account of the litany. “I will not own I am a *miserable* sinner,” said she. “I am a saved sinner, so how can I be miserable? Oh! no that sort of doctrine will not do for me.”³

The first school of art established in Plymouth with Mr. Offord headmaster occupied the picture gallery of the late Mr. James Harris, portrait painter of Park Street, but the accommodation becoming insufficient, the managers engaged the vacant Brethren Building, the seats were removed and desks erected, nude heroic pagan statues of Apollo, Venus and others took the place of christian worshippers, and a party of “*believers*” eagerly occupied the picture gallery, a surgeon and wine merchant turned their parlours into Sunday meeting places, others followed their example, the accommodation in some cases being very limited, very small parties met in turn at each other’s houses.

A text oft repeated at that time was, “Where *two* or *three* are gathered together in my name there am I in their midst.” In some cases it had almost dwindled down to this. In fact, one friend of mine whose views were rather exclusive, a bro. L., told me he felt like Noah’s dove with no rest for the soles of his feet. Meeting him one Sunday he said he attended nowhere but was “returning home to his own fireside to worship with his wife,” these two forming the

3. It is no great harm to mention her name (Jane Whipple) sister of the eminent [?] surgeon, aunt of the late surgeon Whipple of Lockyer St.

minimum quorum and considering themselves entitled to the fulfilment of the promise contained in the text.

All went off fairly well in these scattered homes except the singing. Few people are able to lead and of these some are diffident, others more confident are not musically endowed, it often happened that no one was able to *raise the tune* and after a few “bleating lamb”-like efforts of some weak sister, or the falsetto of a well-intentioned brother suffering from a cold, the hymn singing had to be abandoned, each and all of them believing God was as well pleased as if they had been trained singers with good voices.

It was proposed (by a builder I suspect) that a building be erected for the purpose of uniting some of the small parties. A site was obtained in Compton St. and a suitable building soon appeared. A new departure was agreed on, viz a paid preacher, the first in Plymouth, to occupy that position among the Brethren. He was allowed to introduce a very small amount of the *dreaded system* such as the Lord’s prayer, a benediction to dismiss the congregation with, and a few minor unwritten arrangements.

Strange to say his name was Offord (the same as the first *art* teacher), a most amiable gentleman, a good preacher with no pretensions to a classical education. He carried on his work for many years. I remember drawing his attention once to a doctrine implied in a hymn. He said, “Never go to hymns for doctrine; poets often take flights of fancy.”

After Mr. Offord’s time there were other preachers and other congregations of which I have nothing to say. The chapel is now turned into a paint store for Mrss. Widger & Co. —A goodly number used to meet in a large room in Union St. under the guidance of Mr. Snell, but their numbers became so reduced that bro. Snell had to go elsewhere. This place is now used as a long drinking bar.

Much more could be written about the brethren as they existed in Plymouth over half a century since, but this seems quite enough to enable anyone acquainted with the denomination as they are *now*, to make a comparison which personally I am unable to do. I suppose by this time everything is settled with a complete set of dogmas and

doctrines, *unwritten* of course, but any brother could tell me exactly on what grounds they admit persons to their community, what opinions he or she was expected to hold, say on future rewards and punishments, *original* and *actual* sin, how much of the latter would keep one from going to heaven, or if a teetotal pledge ticket is a sure passport, or if one can be declared saved and at a subsequent time *unsaved*, or if what is generally called “good deeds” are in fact *no good at all*, who are the elect? &c.

Or if the Jews’ killing all the inhabitants of Canaan, men, women, and children, is a type of christians entering heaven?

I could fill pages with the problems that used to trouble them in the past, but I suppose all is settled by this time. Fifty years seems quite time enough to have developed a desirable “ism”, Brethrenism sounds as euphonistic as Unitarianism, Arminianism, Methodism, or Calvinism.

Brother C— used to preach in the rural districts on Sundays and sometimes could be seen coming home to Plymouth with his coat buttoned up under his chin, having given away his shirt to a tramp on the way.⁴

Sister S [?]- had to be removed to a mad house on account of religious mama.

Brother P— , by his own account to be “accounted worthy”, left his wife and children chargeable to the parish, to preach Christ crucified; he never came back.

Brother H—, actuary at a bank, committed suicide, second attempt, to be with Christ which was far better.

There are two Gentlemen Leaders of the Brethren, Mr. B. Newton & Mr. Darby, whose ideas seemed to be in opposition to each other. Mr. Newton seemed to be content with our English scriptures, not so Mr. Darby, who brought out a fresh translation of the New Testament, corrected according to his own views, for the use of the

4. The change was usually affected behind a haystack after an admonition, and mutual prayer.

Brethren. I was kindly lent one some little time since; they are getting scarce now. Their names afterwards stood for two great parties: Darbyites and Newtonites. I suppose this is all gone by this time.

The name of the Gentleman who gave away his shirts was Mr. Clulow.

The name of the lady who went insane was Miss Chandler.

The lady who joined the Church of England and left again because she called herself a miserable sinner was Miss Jane Whipple, aunt of the celebrated surgeon late of Lockyer Street.

The man who deserted his family was called Potter.

The Gentleman who committed suicide was Haydon, Cashier at the Plymouth Savings Bank.