

Reminiscences of the Strict and Particulars.

MY earliest recollections of religious life, dim it must be confessed, are of Unicorn Yard Baptist Chapel, Tooley Street, the home of the church which in earlier days had worshipped in Goat Yard, Horselydown, the mother church of the Metropolitan Tabernacle and Maze Pond. My father was a deacon, and I was taken as a very young child to the morning service. A child of six naturally became restless during the long service and that distressed my mother, and as she told me in later years, the aged minister, a Mr. Bewick, said to her, at least on one occasion, "Don't worry, Mrs. Philcox, let him run up and down the aisle—it won't disturb me." There was no musical instrument; my father acted as precentor (we did not use that name in those far-off days), pitching a tune with a long instrument known as a pitch pipe.

In or about 1870 Unicorn Yard ceased to exist. Part of its site is now occupied by a fire station. We then attended Ebenezer Strict Baptist Chapel, situate in Webb Street, a side street off what is now Tower Bridge Road. The order of service rigidly adhered to was a hymn, either from Watts' or Denham's selection, Scripture reading, with a running and sometimes lengthy commentary, a really long prayer (during which the present writer acquired the habit of Bible reading), another hymn, sermon, closing hymn, closing prayer.

Years later, it became the custom at some churches to sing a fourth hymn. A visiting preacher, a deacon of another church which adhered to the old paths, complained of the change in the service to one of the church officers. "You have made a change in the service, I notice." The officer did not realise what was meant by the complaint and replied, "Oh, no!" "Yes," said the visitor, "you used only to have three hymns—you have four now." My friend, who told me the story, was equal to the occasion and replied, "You, too, have made a change." The aged visitor was shocked. "A change! What?" "I remember when you used to give out the hymns a line at a time: you don't do that now!"

The minister at Ebenezer was a Mr. R. A. Lawrence. His secular occupation was that of a wine merchant's clerk. He was then somewhat over thirty years of age; a good man, who was done to death a few years later by scurrilous anonymous

letters. Theoretically he was, to use the old-time designation, a hyper-Calvinist. His sermons were lengthy, and at 12.30 he would sometimes say, "My time has gone: I will tell you what I meant to say if I had time," and so was good for another ten minutes. He was a versifier, and after a series of sermons on "Moses' blessing of the tribes," he summarised them in a booklet of verses. He also wrote a hymn for the Sunday School Anniversary, but, as far as my recollection goes, it was never sung. As one verse was as follows, my readers will be glad to know that this was so:

"My teacher often tells me
 Seek Christ I never can,
 Unless the Father chose me
 Before the world began:
 So if I'm seeking Jesus
 'Tis by Divine decree,
 And so my teacher opens up
 Election unto me."

Believer as I am in the "Doctrines of Grace," I am glad to say that my teachers did not give such teaching to their scholars.

Here is a gem from a hymn book issued by the Strict Baptist Committee because the Sunday School Union hymn book was not considered "sound."

"Infinite years in torment must I spend
 And never, never, never have an end,
 As many sands as on the ocean shore," etc.

We never sang that but once, when a speaker gave an address which was regarded as rather pointing to "free-will," we afterwards sang:

"How helpless guilty nature lies,
 Unconscious of its load,
 The heart unchanged can never rise
 To happiness and God."

The real spirit of minister and others may better perhaps be judged by a hymn which was sung at our Sunday School anniversary sixty years ago:

"What a friend we have in Jesus."

It went so to the heart of the minister, Mr. Lawrence, who was then burdened with care, that he asked for it a second time at the evening service.

It was at another Sunday School anniversary about this time that I first heard a sermon by Isaac Levinson, who subsequently became Secretary of the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews, of which I have had the honour of being Treasurer for many years. At that time he had but

recently arrived in England, a convert from Judaism, who had found home surroundings in Russia scarcely comfortable for a young Hebrew Christian. There was something to seek as yet in his pronunciation of English. One still remembers his tone as he announced his text, "Manna." Neither he nor I realised then how forty years later we should be brought into close association through Jewish Missions.

Let it not be supposed from what I have written that our minister or teachers were "kill-joys." A glimpse, if it were possible to the reader, at the children's parties at our pastor's house or at the Sunday School winter treat, at each of which the fun was fast and furious, would soon have demonstrated the contrary.

In 1873 a new Chapel, to replace "Ebenezer," was built in Lynton Road, a developing district in another part of Bermondsey, for the problem of new areas is not quite so modern as some may imagine. Some three years later the Maze Pond congregation similarly removed from Maze Pond, a little turning near Guy's Hospital, to the Old Kent Road. I just remember the interior of old Maze Pond, the site of which was purchased for Guy's Hospital Medical School, of which the stone was laid by Mr. Gladstone.

The anniversaries of the church were great occasions; an afternoon service, a largely attended tea, and a public meeting with some five or six addresses, sometimes all planned to centre on a selected topic. In spite of the limited time thus available for each speaker, or perhaps because of it, some of these addresses were very fine, but then, as now, some speakers thought it their business to attack others "who followed not with them." I remember one, Thomas Stringer, who used to call Spurgeon's College "the parson foundry," and who, on one occasion, at Trinity Chapel, Trinity Street, Borough (now a cinema almost opposite my office), to the intense disgust of my mother, who was present, spoke thus of Spurgeon: "Prince of preachers they call him—Prince of erroneous characters, rather!" But Strict Baptist ministers of the "Earthen Vessel" type were by no means all like this, for there were two sections of Strict Baptists—"Vesselites" and "Standardites" (supporters of the Gospel Standard). Theologically they differed on some recondite point, but I must confess I never grasped it. To-day the two sections seem wider apart than ever.

Although ours was a Strict Baptist home, my father and mother had a broader outlook, perhaps because of business contacts with all the Churches, and, although my father was a keen opponent of the "Rector's Rate," which continued in Bermondsey long after Church Rates in general were abolished,

we were on friendly terms with the Rector, an old-fashioned Evangelical, Canon Tugwell by name. He gave us children the privilege, which no others had, of playing in the churchyard, which later on was converted into a public recreation ground. On Sunday evenings, too, I sometimes attended the service at the parish church, and my earliest recollection of the details of a service is of one at St. Paul's Cathedral in the late seventies, when Dr. Harvey Goodwin, Bishop of Carlisle, preached on a text which has remained with me down the years, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" I still remember all the hymns, one of which was "When I survey the wondrous Cross."

Our new chapel had a commodious schoolroom in a half basement, with two classrooms for seniors. The infants met in the gallery at the end of the chapel, quite remote from the rest of the school, and here, by the time I was about fourteen, the minister's son and I were installed as joint teachers. We had good times, with plenty of singing, using the rolls of hymns provided by the Sunday School Union. At various times the minister addressed the whole school, not always limiting himself for his topic to a Scripture story. Indeed, the one title I still remember was a message sent through by men entombed in a colliery to their coming rescuers: "Keep to the right—work on—you're almost through"—a title and topic scarcely suggestive of very "high" doctrine.

During the first visit of Messrs. Moody and Sankey to London in 1874, my mother took us to one of the afternoon services held by them near Camberwell Green. It was, I think, the only time I heard Moody, but one remembers Sankey in later years at the Spurgeon Memorial Service. I still remember Sankey singing at Camberwell "There were ninety and nine." It must have been one of the earliest occasions on which he sang it. I have not forgotten, either, the choir's appealing rendering of Dr. Watts' hymn, "Give me the Wings of Faith," with a tender chorus:

"Many are the friends who are waiting to-day
Happy on the golden strand,
Many are the voices calling us away
To join their glorious band."

By about 1877, boy as I was, I had become an occasional preacher of some sort. I must not stay to tell how it began in a country village, and how, as a boy, I preached in the little village Methodist chapel, but somehow the story got into one of the religious papers of the day, and the news led to a service at Green Walk Mission, the predecessor of Haddon Hall, Bermondsey, of which Mr. William Olney, who is still with us,

and whose father was then a deacon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, was leader. The father was, at this time, very ill, and before the service at Green Walk, his son had taken me to visit him, and sitting up in bed the good man gave me his blessing. More than thirty years later, after I had preached one Sunday morning at Holland Road, Hove, one of the congregation informed me that he had heard the earlier sermon.

I was at this time an occasional worshipper at "Spurgeon's." I have in mind a sermon preached by him in the late seventies, during one of England's little wars (the Zulu, I think), when he spoke of the soldier going into battle with a Martini-Henry rifle in his hand and a Bible in his knapsack.

Early in 1881 my parents removed to Peckham Rye, and my more regular attendance at the Strict Baptist Chapel in Bermondsey ceased, and my Sundays were often divided between "Spurgeon's" and Nunhead Green Baptist Chapel. The minister, John Mead, a City business man, was a quiet, gracious person, not afraid to bring the Bible into contact with English history. On one occasion, reading the Psalm as to the overthrow of Sihon and Og, "for His mercy endureth for ever," he added, "and why may we not say :

Charles Stuart, King of England
For his mercy endureth for ever :
James Stuart, King of England
For his mercy endureth for ever."

Sometimes we attended another Strict Baptist Chapel in Peckham at Heaton Road, and I applied there for membership. I was approved by my visitors, but in a fortunate moment, as it has seemed since, one of them handed me a copy of the Articles of Faith of the Church. I read them and found that I was expected to approve of an Article which taught "the eternal misery of the impenitent." Consequently, I did not proceed with my application. My visitor said that he did not know how it was that he had handed to me the Articles, that he did not usually do so, and regretted that this had occurred. Curiously enough, but "God moves in a mysterious way," it was owing to a mistake that I became a member of Rye Lane, but that is another story.

Although I did not join the Church at Heaton Road, I was Secretary of the Sunday School, and conducted a preparation class for the Sunday School Union Scripture Examination, but a painful incident connected with the ministry there led me to leave towards the end of 1885, and I became a worshipper at Rye Lane, although still continuing my occasional attendance at "Spurgeon's." I had been once only to Rye Lane in earlier years, on January 27th, 1884, when Dr. Angus preached; his text

still remains with me, "He findeth first his own brother Simon and brought him to Jesus." I ought here to pay a tribute to one of the deacons, Mr. W. B. Hackett, whose heartiness went a long way towards attaching me to Rye Lane. He always made one welcome, and made one feel that he had been missed if absent. It was my joy for many years while a deacon to seek to carry on the tradition. Rev. J. T. Briscoe and I became, and continued during his life, real friends, although it was not until after Dr. Ewing had become pastor that I became a member of the church.

But I must not continue my "anecdoteage." I am not writing my autobiography, and to continue would take me into many fields beyond the scope of this magazine—social, political, educational, and religious. Let me be content to have given to some of my readers a little fresh insight into denominational life half a century or so ago.

But I must add a postscript. Some twenty-five years ago I spent a number of week-ends at Crowborough. The only Baptist Church in the village was one of the "Gospel Standard" section. There was no morning service, as the minister had to preach elsewhere also. I went each Sunday evening to the Chapel and learned to admire the very aged minister, a Mr. E. Littleton. To my surprise, one evening he spoke in his sermon in by no means an unfriendly way of Dr. Clifford. At the close of the service I challenged him as to this. His reply is worth remembering. I had said that neither he nor I would agree with the doctor on some things. "We must not make a man an offender for a word," the aged man replied. Later, I found that the doctor had stayed at Crowborough for some time, and each Sunday had attended the little "Standard" Chapel. The two had also met at the house of a mutual friend and each had fallen in love with the other. They had also exchanged books, and the "Standard" minister became a personal member of the Baptist Union, and his church was in membership, at least until he died. Some of our very orthodox brethren might learn a lesson from this village pastor.

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