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PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO THE
WORKING CLASSES
IMPOSSIBLE
UNDER THE PEW SYSTEM.

BY THE

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ON THE PEW SYSTEM.

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“PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO THE WORKING CLASSES.”

Such is the approved phrase for describing the work in which the Church in this country is supposed to fail. I am not going to find fault with this phrase, or to attempt to throw any doubt on the truth of this supposition; but to expose a chief cause of this failure, and urge the remedy.

The cause is the “Pew System,” or, to speak more accurately, the system of appropriation of seats in Churches.

The remedy is the making Churches absolutely free and open.

The practical working and real effects of this appropriation of seats have to be considered; and then the nature of the remedy as it is seen and known in practice.

The last refuge to which ordinary minds betake themselves when they would evade an irresistible argument in favour of any right-principled work, is to say, “Yes, it is very good in theory, but it won’t do in practice.”

Now I am prepared to show that what we advocate will do, and does do, in practice; but this very common mode of speaking must be noticed, and its true meaning understood.

And what is the true meaning of anything being “good in theory, not in practice?” It means, it is good in itself, in its nature, its essence, but it is not good to be done; in other words, it is good in God’s sight, not in ours! It is right, it is good, it is pleasing to God, but that is no reason why it should or could be done!

This implies that our judgment is better than that of God, and that a thing being right does not render it a duty. It might be shown (if this was the proper place) that such a principle, or rather denial of principles, is at the root of all infidelity and all immorality, for it necessarily implies that God does not aid and bless every effort to do His will, whether beset by apparent difficul-

ties or not, and that what is right is not, as such, practicable. On this point a clear statement here is sufficient exposure, and nothing more need be said.

As regards the principle on which the Church is to do her work of evangelising the people, it is that of *attempting everything by way of doing something*. "Be ye perfect" applies to every work we do for God and in His name. In such work it is most shallow and most false to say we fail by attempting too much. To do anything we must attempt everything. The Church must by some means (yet to be considered) bring the Divine system of the Gospel before men in all its fulness and perfection. She must hold back nothing; the whole faith—doctrine, sacraments, worship—must be declared and carried out in completeness and harmony.

We must have *earnest men*—men really in earnest, to preach the Gospel to the poor, to go into the "streets and lanes of the city," and bid them come in: and the churches must be open to receive them, or the words of invitation are words of mockery! All that repels and excludes must be swept away, and the freedom of the Church must at once symbolise and give effect to the freedom of the Gospel.

I have now to expose the practical working and real effects of the appropriation of seats in churches. On this point let the advocates of Exeter Hall services be first heard. The Dean of Carlisle, in preaching on one of these occasions, said—

Who are they that should cast a pebble of hindrance in our way? Is it those who are preaching on soft cushions to pampered hearers, in Churches the very antitype of that referred to by the Apostle: "Stand thou here, or sit thou here at my footstool?" Is there not very great guilt on the Church of England, that she has for so many years allowed, to say no more, the rich to accommodate themselves, and to care so little for her poorer members? No wonder she has gone so far astray! My friends, the answer to this is, we ask you to come here, because many desire, and cannot go to Church: many desire and cannot find a place to go in, without being insulted by distinctions in the presence of God, which are hateful to the God we worship.

A writer in the *Times*, of Nov. 14, observes—"If Mr. Edouart's and other churches were filled with the working classes, there would be little need of these services. But, alas! but few working men are to be found in London churches."

In these two passages the evil to be remedied is well described, and its effect truly stated. And in addition to the value of the testimony thus given, they show that the friends of Exeter Hall services admit a deep-seated and general evil, which they altogether evade; and instead of attempting a real remedy, they merely urge a local, superficial, and wretchedly inadequate substitute.

Lord Shaftesbury,* in the House of Lords, on December 8th, said:—

I consider it a great defect in our Churches—a defect which has not grown up of late years; on the contrary, we are now learning to avoid it—that the working classes, when they attend the services of the Establishment, generally find themselves pewed up to their very eyes, shut out from the places where they can hear and be well accommodated, and not placed on a footing of equality with the rest of the congregation. You find many nooks and corners reserved for the working classes; you have free seats set apart for them; but they will not occupy those places: they think they are despised and treated as beings of a secondary order. Unless, therefore, you show them proper respect, and in the House of God admit that there at least there is equality, depend upon it the vast proportion of the labouring population in London will never be brought to attend the worship of the Establishment.

Would there was on the part of those who desire to evangelise the working classes, as clear and full purpose to eradicate the evil which they admit, as there is perception of its reality and extent. Is nothing to be done to get rid of this monstrous evil? Can it be that while so many on all sides deplore the pew system, and reprobate the darkness and wickedness which are its desolating fruits, none will rise and act with faith and determination, which in such a cause are invincible?

The following valuable letter is from the pen of Dr. Stanley, the late Bishop of Norwich:—

Palace, Norwich, Dec. 16, 1842.

Dear Sir,—Agreeing with you, as I entirely do, upon the injustice and evil tendency of pews, by which the benefits of our Church services are, comparatively speaking, confined to the higher and wealthier classes, to the exclusion of the poor, I sincerely hope your appeal to the inhabitants of Ipswich may be successful, and that they may be amongst the first to express, as a collective body, their disappro-

* The Committee are glad to be able to state, that since the above was penned, Lord Shaftesbury has written to one of the Secretaries as follows:—“This Pew Question, now that it has been raised, must not be allowed to drop. I shall be happy to make an alliance with you for this cause.”

bation of a system so adverse, in my opinion, to the true interests of our national Church, which professes to have so much at heart the spiritual welfare of the poorer and humbler classes of our population. I am persuaded, indeed, that one of the prominent causes of dissent, as well as utter disregard and indifference to religion, manifested by too many of these classes, is attributable, in a great degree, to that exclusive system of pews which has for so many years prevailed. If you have not yet seen a Charge, delivered November, 1842, by Archdeacon Samuel Willberforce, I would recommend it to your notice, as containing much valuable information and able remarks upon so important a subject.

I remain, yours respectfully,

E. NORWICH.

“Everybody,” observes the late Professor Blount, in his ‘Duties of the Parish Priest,’ “must see that the Church of England had had its basis greatly narrowed by our pew system, till it was ceasing to be the Church of the people, with everything in it to fix itself in their affections the while; that the man in the goodly apparel and with the gold ring was pretty well securing to himself the whole area of the building.”

Statements similar to these might be quoted to a very great extent, from writers of all kinds of theological opinion. The necessity for brevity here renders such quotation impossible; but I may refer those who care to see a great variety of testimony to the disastrous and deadly effects of the pew system, to a *Letter to the Bishop of Ely, on the Evils of the Appropriation of Seats in Churches*, published by Parker.

The matter with which we have now to deal is greatly simplified, and long argument rendered unnecessary, by the fact that the working and results of the system of “appropriation” are exactly what, from the nature of the case, we should expect them to be. Here the conclusions of reason and observation are found exactly to coincide.

This evil, which we have to expel from the Church, is a gigantic one, but so much the more need for assailing it with determination to subdue it, and not quailing and succumbing before it. If the greatness of an evil does not stimulate our efforts against it, we may as well at once give up all conflict with sin and the devil. Like all other evils, this will vanish before faithful and fearless men: many such there are; they only need to have it plainly exposed,

and they will not rest till they have overcome it. There cannot be a cause more fitted to enlist the sympathies and excite the energies of all earnest men. It does not involve the smallest degree of party feeling; and as it aims at the benefit, so should it have the aid, of all classes of people.

It is impossible to over-state or over-estimate the evil of the pew system in its principle or in its effect. Many tolerated practices are inconsistent with the Gospel, but this essentially and directly contradicts it. It fosters and manifests pride, selfishness, and exclusiveness in the holy places where, if at all, men must learn to mortify and cast off these vices. It introduces distinctions founded on wealth and rank, where the Bible declares there are no such—viz.: in the presence of God. It divides into private properties the House of God, which belongs to Him only, and which, according to His will, is for the free use, in His service, of all His children. It says, in unmistakeable language—You shall not come freely to worship God and hear the message of the Gospel; He says—“Whosoever will, let him come freely.” In effect, it renders churches useless except for services which the same families and individuals attend, and so makes it impossible to have multiplied services for different congregations. It has driven many altogether from Church by its intense selfishness and insolent exclusiveness. It repels all but those who either have seats allotted to them, or who have attained the habit of Church attendance, or the great desire to attend, in spite of every discouragement; and therefore it destroys the use of our churches as places for missionary effort. And further, it paralyses the efforts of men who would rouse and win those who are negligent and estranged, because it prevents there being churches into which to invite and gather them. It at once, in the highest degree, promotes the work of the evil one, and hinders the work of Christ. God’s curse is on this system, and will assuredly fall on the Church of England if we continue to tolerate it.

Go into almost any town church, especially in London, and what do you see? Possibly, as the *Times* says of the Exeter Hall

meetings, "a crowd of well-dressed people;" go then into any of the neighbouring back streets and courts, and what do you there see? Crowds of ill-dressed people. Have not these as much right, yea, as great necessity, to worship God and hear His word as the well-dressed? Oh! one's heart burns with indignation at their exclusion from the means of salvation, "from the house of God and the gate of heaven," by the gigantic injustice of the pew system! What chance, what possibility, is there of "gaining the working classes" while this system continues? If they were roused, by any conceivable effort of house-to-house visitations, open-air preaching, by all that the most earnest men can accomplish or aspire to, what can be the result? Nothing but inevitable total failure! Desires may be excited, feelings may be stirred, impressions may be made, but—as the morning mist—they will pass away unless there is formed the habit of worshipping God and continually using the means of grace. In the Church alone can these be attained and enjoyed, and, unless we tell a lie to God every time we say "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church," in the Church are we bound to cherish these habits and provide these means for all whose salvation we profess to desire.

If an intelligent working man, brought up with all the religious disadvantages common to such, is persuaded to enter the Church which he has hitherto neglected, what does he meet with? and with what is he likely to be struck? Generally, he meets with what is enough to disgust and repel him for ever—with what is fitted to make him believe that the religion of minister and congregation is but a mockery both of God and man. He meets with no welcome where every heart should be open to receive him. He is a stranger in what is, in truth and right, his own home, his own Father's house! He sees some well-dressed "respectable" Christians sitting in their private seats, from which he is as much excluded as from their drawing-rooms; and he sees some ill-dressed and mostly crushed looking people sitting in pauper seats; and he hears the minister, who acquiesces in this state of things, saying "With God is no respect of persons!" No wonder free seats are

generally half empty, and the occupiers of pews keep the doors of their hearts, as well as of their seats, closed.*

At the present time, a "fitting place" is being sought in London for "services for the working classes." A result of the pew system is, then, that the churches are regarded as out of the question for the purpose of preaching the Gospel to the people. A spare music-hall is required! Is this to be borne? In the name of truth and justice, I ask, for what were the churches built? In the name of the people, I ask, shall we submit to have the churches kept shut throughout the week, during one half of the Lord's day, open only at rare hours to a select class, and meanwhile be looking for a "fitting place" in which to worship God? So monstrous an abuse cannot stand. Contemptible notions of personal dignity, unchristian notions of personal ease and convenience, considerations of carpets, cushions, and hassocks, cannot long be allowed thus to hinder the Church's work and the people's salvation; for though the pew system is "highly esteemed among men," it "is abomination in the sight of God."

We are in want of fit places in which to preach the Gospel to the working classes. The churches, *as they are* (we are all agreed) are not fit places. They ought to be fit places (I suppose we are all agreed in this also.) They can and must be made such, and we ought never to rest till we have made them such.

The vicious arrangement of our churches, through the appropriation of seats, has deprived the people generally of the power, and in a still greater degree of the will, to frequent them. A flagrant wrong has thus been inflicted, especially upon the working classes. A greater wrong there could hardly be, for it hinders the salvation of Christians more than any other evil or abuse that ever

* The following sad statement, made by the Bishop of Lincoln, in Convocation, on February 10th, shews that the hardening effect of the Pew System on those who are supposed to benefit by it, is not the least of its manifold evils:—"In one church in my diocese, where there were morning and evening services, all the seats were appropriated. The incumbent was desirous of introducing an additional service, in order to accommodate a number of parishioners who could not obtain seats at other times. I told him I would support him, but the opposition from the seat-holders was so great that he found if he persevered he would lose every sixpence of the subscriptions towards his charities, and he was obliged to abandon the plan."

was tolerated in the Church. It is a wrong which demands, therefore, in the highest degree, repentance and restitution on the part of those who have promoted it or connived at it.

In this matter it is as easy to point out the remedy as it is to expose the evil. We cannot doubt that it is right and necessary to restore the Churches to the perfectly free use of all classes : we must not allow ourselves to doubt its being possible to do so. Well and happy is it that what needs to be done requires some earnest effort and self-sacrifice ; for such are the works which God blesses, and which, therefore, as certainly secure success as they prove sincerity.

By the common law of England, all parishioners have a right to the common, free, and equal use of their parish Church.* In almost all cases of town Churches the great majority of parishioners have been despoiled—plainly robbed—of the enjoyment of this right—a most sacred right, sanctioned, as it is, by the principle of divine as well as human law. This inalienable right must be practically restored — perfectly and absolutely restored, without reserve or compromise.

This we can do—we can give back to all classes the power and opportunity of freely attending the services of the Church ; and I believe and am sure that when this is done, the will to come will not be found wanting. For this, however, we may have to be patient. A disease does not always vanish immediately on the removal of its cause. And the very essence of the mischief of the pew system is that it has produced indifference and dislike to even a greater extent than inability to attend Church. It is this special evil effect of the system which constitutes the chief, it may almost be said the only, difficulty in the way of its removal ; for were the people generally sensible of the value of that of which they have been robbed, did they prize it as they do worldly advantages and political privileges, there would be such an agitation and demand as would soon rescue the churches from appropriation. Private seats in the parish churches of London would then be as much out of the question as private paths in its thoroughfares !

* See Appendix.

As it is, however, those who have been most injured care least ; and we have to plead for those who plead not for themselves, and to contend for those who, for the most part, neither sympathise with nor understand the efforts which are made in their behalf. They have been of no account with the Church, and the Church is now of no account with them. If we wait till the people cry out for the use of the Church, we may wait for ever. We might as well wait for the heathen to cry out for the Gospel, before we send missionaries to them. We must anticipate demand, and by supply create it. The Church must open her doors and throw wide her gates, and in so doing show that her arms and her heart are open to embrace with tenderest love all her lost and wandering children. She must act like her Master, who said, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you."

Facts are not wanting to confirm the most sanguine expectations of the results of making churches perfectly open and free. I could allege very many within my own experience ; but none can be more to the purpose or more forcible than what may now be generally known concerning the special services which are, during this Advent, being held in the Bethnal Green churches. Why are the Churches crowded on these occasions ? Why do great numbers of weavers, and other men of the working class, resort to them in this extraordinary manner ? See the notice put forth by the Bishop ; it is headed with these words—"All the seats are perfectly free." This is the secret ! Never were cause and effect more clearly shown than in this matter. What is thus good for Advent season is good for all seasons ; what is thus good for the Bethnal Green churches is good for all churches. We cannot any more plead ignorance. Christianity, reason, and experience, all speak the same decisive language, and with one voice say—If you would preach the Gospel to the working classes, make the churches perfectly free and open.

To secure this is to secure all that we most want—all that is most precious. It is as "the pearl of great price." All that is of less value must, if needful, be sacrificed for it. It cannot be obtained too dearly. Private claims (rights there can be none) must be denied : personal feelings must be disregarded. The

difficulties in the way are not to be kept out of sight. It is not to be supposed that a monster of selfishness, such as the pew system, which has been fostered and made "respectable" by custom, is to be quietly and easily destroyed. No, far otherwise; all who act rightly in this cause, which is indeed the cause of God and the Church against the world, will meet with trouble and conflict. They must be prepared for the pains of giving offence, very great offence; but the cause is worth it, infinitely more than worth it. They who value the gratification of their pride* and love of ease more than the honour of God's house and the salvation of men, must not be allowed to stand in the way of such work as this; and they themselves may be benefitted by the conflict; the latent selfishness which is manifested may startle them into self-knowledge, and lead to their conversion.

"The churches for the people and the people for the churches;" for this we must agitate and strive. Anything short of this is wrong, or useless, or inadequate. We do not want music-halls; we do not want newly-arranged "third services;" we do not want a new church here and there for the working class. We want to use what we have, to turn to good account what we already possess. We want the parish churches in London, and all the churches, open and free to all classes. This is what we want; and in the name of the working class, and of the whole Church, we must demand it, insist upon it, and work for it, till we get it.

Good is always more powerful than evil, though it often seems otherwise; evil men being, in general, more in earnest than good men. All that is wanted to the success of the cause is real earnestness. There must be an earnest and determined, and, if possible, a combined movement. There must, above all, be faith that the

* "When our Churches were first built, people had not yet thought of cramming them with pews as a stable is filled with stalls. When they had reared a fine and noble building, they did not dream of disfiguring the inside of it by filling its floor with large and deep boxes made of deal boards; in short, the floor was the place for the worshippers to stand and to kneel; and there was no *distinction*, no high place and no low place—all were upon a level *before God* at any rate. Some were not stuck into pews lined with green or red cloth, while others were crammed into corners to stand erect, or sit on the floor. Those who built these Churches made their calculations as to the people to be contained in them, not making any allowance for the *deal boards*."—*The late William Cobbett*.

cause of free and open churches is the cause of the Church of Christ against the world. There must be no compromise with worldly principles, or there can be no success; apparent success, so obtained, is worth nothing. The system of appropriation must be denounced and exposed as avowedly selfish; it must be written against and preached against till men are made to see and feel the evil and sin which is involved in it, and those who are ignorantly partakers in the sin made aware what they are doing. When this is done, many persons (far more than could be expected) are found ready to resign their private seats and declare them free. I believe there are few churches in which the great majority of pews or appropriated seats might not in this way be made absolutely free and open. In old parish churches this is probably the best way of introducing and first carrying out the principle of freedom. This, however, will be only a transitory state of things. When once there is experience, to a fair extent, of the advantages of such freedom, there will be no insuperable difficulty in getting rid of appropriation altogether.

When principles are truly recognised and acted upon, matters of detail may generally be left to take care of themselves. Little, therefore, need here be said as to what arrangement of seats, and provision for kneeling, &c. are found most convenient in a free church.

I believe it is generally appointed that we must do right before we can understand or perceive the whole good which we shall experience by so doing; I am sure it is so in this case. Nothing but the constant use and observation of a church perfectly free will fully convince any person of the power it carries with it, and the influence for good it has on those who attend it, and the degree in which it sets forth the idea of the Church and the Gospel, and so sets forward the glory of God and the salvation of men. All these it does notwithstanding and in spite of even the greatest hindrances and imperfections in the work which accompanies it.

APPENDIX OF LEGAL AUTHORITIES.

In “*Fuller v. Lane*,” 2 Add. Eocl. Rep. 425, Sir John Micholl observed:—
 “All the pews in a parish church are the common property of the parish; they are for the use, *in common*, of the parishioners, who are all entitled to be seated orderly and conveniently, so as best to provide for the accommodation of all.”

“It is well known that pews are a modern innovation, and one of the growths of Puritanism. The result has certainly been different from what the Puritans intended; for pews have been one of the main causes of setting up distinctions, offensive to all good taste and Christian simplicity, even in the house of God. In a remarkable old case, (Year Books, 8 Henry VII. fo. 12) though the seats then found in churches were, as is now the case in Continental churches, but a few loose and moveable ones, it is declared that even such a seat is ‘*a nuisance*,’ as interfering with the right of ‘*ease and standing*’ that belongs to the people: ‘for the Church,’ it says, ‘is in common to everyone; and there is no reason why one should have a seat, and that two should stand: for no place in the Church belongs more to one than to another;’ while the parishioners ‘are not able to have their standing room on account of these seats.’ How much more, then, is this true with the modern pew system. It is of great importance to remember that the sale or letting of pews in a Parish Church, whether by Churchwardens or by any holder of a seat by prescription, is altogether illegal. Nothing can legalize this;—unless, indeed, it be an Act of Parliament; and any such Act of Parliament would be an absolutely revolutionary²⁵ measure. Neither can a parishioner, to whom a seat has been assigned by the churchwardens, let it. The latter are bound, indeed, to take care that no such practice grows up. It is one of the marks of the disregard of principle which, in so many respects, characterizes the modern Church Building Acts, that they admit of the letting of seats in the churches built under them. Thereby they do but further prove, that the ‘ecclesiastical districts’ and ‘new parishes’ which they establish, are merely sectarian arrangements. Propositions have been made for legalizing the letting of seats in Parish Churches. The

moment this shall be done, the Church will lose every character of an institution standing in any relation to the Parish as the *Church of the People*, and claiming, in that character, reverence, affection, and support, from sincere men of all creeds and opinions.”—*The Parish, by Toulmin Smith, Esq. of Lincoln's Inn, Barrister at Law.*

“Can it be wondered at that such practices have done much to alienate the affections of the poor from the Church? By these means they are almost literally shut out. The law tells them that the floor of the church is common ground; but this, like many other things, is in reality only a *pleasant legal fiction!* Yet they are not so dull as not to know that the English Clergy are appointed for the cure of all souls with equal diligence within the limits of their charge; that one soul is as precious as another in the sight of God; and that the accidents of wealth and rank can attach no spiritual value to one above the other. Can it be a matter of surprise then, that when, knowing all this, they find the Churches of England furnished and arranged on a system diametrically opposite to these truths, they turn their backs on her? It is in vain to call the Church of England ‘the poor man’s Church,’ whilst, upon her present system, she is emphatically the Church of the rich.”—*Mr. Coke Fowler, on the Law, &c. of Pews, p. 69.*

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OBJECTS.

To direct attention, through the press and otherwise, to the fatal effects of the Pew System in churches, upon the religious and moral condition of the people.

To secure the full and free access of all classes, "without respect of persons," to churches hereafter to be built in populous districts.

To enforce the fundamental principle of the parochial system,—the common and equal right of all parishioners to worship in their Parish Church.

Prospectuses, and lists of subscriptions (half a crown and upwards), may be obtained from the Secretaries. Subscriptions may be paid into the Bank, or remitted in postage stamps, or by Post Office order, payable to Mr. JAMES SIMPSON, Ridgefield, Manchester; and all sums received are announced monthly, in the *Church of the People and Open Church Circular*, Kent and Co. London.







