

The People's Chapel  
Great King Street, Birmingham  
150 years 1848 -1998



*From an address delivered by William Finnemore in 1933 at the 85th Anniversary of the founding of the People's Chapel.*

It was six o'clock on a morning of early summer in 1848 that several men came down Great King Street and surveyed a piece of waste ground here and decided it was suitable for the experiment they felt urged to make. They erected a simple room with whatever savings they had, and opened it for the first service in August of that year. They numbered 40, and were mostly young men and women. What a happy experiment it proved. Most of them remained in association with this Church for the rest of their lives. Others carried its influence to other towns and at least one family moved to America. Let us run through some of the distinctive points which characterised this new Exodus.

First then, the name they gave to this place. In those days many Nonconformist Chapels bore scriptural names but our fathers would have none of these, such names were not sufficiently practical, and left them looking too much like other places. What they wanted was a name that would mark their difference from other places. So after careful consideration they named their white washed hut, for it was little more, the People's Chapel, and that name it has borne through its 85 years of history and by that name everybody knows us. I sometimes wonder whether we realise the greatness of this title. I well remember when the fullness of its meaning came home to me. It was in my very early teens, and one Sunday night I made a journey to the Wesleyan Chapel in Bath Street, now part of a factory. The preacher was a well known poet and lecturer of that day, Thomas Cooper by name. He had spent two years in Stafford Gaol because of his Chartist activities; he loved the people and suffered for them. His later years were spent in preaching and lecturing on the evidences of Christianity. At this service he announced his lectures for the ensuing days. How well I remember him saying, "And on Wednesday I lecture at the People's Chapel." Pausing, he said, "**The People's Chapel** - what a great title I wonder whether they are worthy of it." Well, when he came and lectured in this place on the Wednesday, he probably found some things which justified the name.

Let me say quite clearly and frankly our founders were not specially keen on founding a new Baptist Church - nothing was further from their minds than any mere denominational movement - they were after something greater, viz : a Chapel for the People, a place to which ordinary people, and poor people, and suffering people, and ignorant people, could come for the worship provided by a simple religious service conducted and carried through in every detail by those who themselves belonged to the common people.

To attain this they thought certain drastic alterations should be made in matters that were customary in chapels in those days.

First, they decided to have no stated minister. No doubt the immediate cause of this was the ministerial dissensions in the Church they had left. But when they came to face the question, they learned from their New Testament that the first and greatest preachers of the Gospel were plain unlettered men - fishermen, labourers and men of lowly position. These men told of their own experience with that Matchless Leader who had loved them, and taught them, and at last had died for them. They told the wondrous story of their sight of him after His resurrection, and their story moved the hearts of crowds of their fellowmen. These simple men laid broad and deep the foundations of the Christian Church, and centuries of opposition have been powerless to move them. If these things could be done in Palestine in the first century why not in England in the 19th century? If this testimony availed in Jerusalem, why not in Birmingham? This was their simple faith, and it did not fail them. Perhaps I ought to say here that they did not denounce or belittle the ministerial calling, but they felt its importance had been exaggerated, and that a valuable, nay, a vital end would be served by showing that God was indeed no respecter of persons or professions, and that the Holy Spirit could do His effectual work through a body composed entirely of laymen.

The second alteration they made was even more startling. It was that no collection by plate or box should ever be taken from seat to seat. You all know that this would be a tremendous innovation in thousands of chapels to-day. It did not mean that this place could be carried on without money, it meant that this money must be given of one's own free will and to enable this to be done boxes were placed at the doors to receive whatever worshippers were anxious to give. After all the most touching lesson taught by Jesus about Free Will Offerings had to do with the widow who cast her two mites into the Temple treasury, that is, into the box at the Temple door. Our

Founders were always safe in finding sanctions in the New Testament for all they did.

On various occasions there have arisen amongst us faint-hearts. who would have abolished this custom if they could. Whatever criticisms may be urged against the system, it has carried us through thus far, and it would indeed be a calamity to make any alteration in these days. The chief idea was that in inviting the people, no poor soul without money should shrink because of inability to put anything in the plate.

The third had also to do with money. In those days one of the commonest ways of raising money was to charge what were called seat rents. The sittings steward allotted you a seat or seats, which you could claim as your own, and for which you were charged an amount every quarter. In other words the seats in God's House were bought and sold. Often, too, there was a sliding scale, better seats were priced higher than those considered less good. This was really more repulsive than passing round the plate at collection time. Some unpleasant incidents are in danger of arising wherever this form of raising money is practised. You have perhaps heard of cases where people at a strange place of worship have been shown to seats from which they have been asked to move, when the rightful owners have arrived. Stated coldly like this it sounds perfectly dreadful. Our Founders would have none of it. All seats are free and unappropriated - that is to say, while there is no charge you may sit just where you like, and nobody can say "that is my seat and you cannot sit there." This is one of the few things we can admire in the Roman Catholic Church. As a rule all her buildings are open to all who may come.

Now while very few congregations have given up their formal collections, a considerable number have abolished seat-rents. and to a less extent, the allocation of seats ; and I expect progress in this direction will go on rapidly - till it becomes universal. When at home I never go to any other chapel but this, but when away from home I see something of what goes on elsewhere, and the last three places I have attended in holiday time, I was invited to take any seat I liked that was vacant. I am not quite sure what happens in these days in ordinary Methodist Chapels, but I know from experience what happened in the old days. I used occasionally to go to Wesley Chapel in Constitution Hill (now, alas! a billiard hall) and old Cherry-Street Chapel (which was removed in the making of Corporation

Street) to hear some of their great preachers. At the left and right hand corners farthest away from the pulpit, a portion was railed off and called " the Free Seats,' where folks sat who could not afford to hire a seat or were supposed to be unable. All the times I went to either of these Chapels I always refused to be shown to a seat amongst the respectable, and found a place among the Free Seats. The benches were very hard, and the lighting none too good, but I preserved my independent People's Chapel spirit! The final stage of seat letting has been reached in New York, where in several Churches like the Brooklyn Tabernacle, which enjoyed enormous popularity, the seats were annually put up to auction. and great sums of money were raised. Fortunately, that is not generally possible even in the States, and such a thing is inconceivable in England. But it serves to show how dangerous the system is.

The fourth point in which our Founders differed from others was in making the government of the Church purely democratic. There must be a small body to attend to the business of the Church both on its material and its spiritual sides, and accordingly a small committee of Elders is elected every year. There were to be and are no preferences. A complete list of eligible members is issued each year, and the Church indicates its choice by means of a ballot. We thus avoid all necessity for nominations, and anything like canvassing is reduced to a vanishing point. Only once in the whole period of our existence has that vote ever been challenged. A brother declared he was sure he had been elected. The Church made no criticism, but asked him to appoint a certain number of his friends to act with a similar number chosen by the Church. Into their hands were placed the ballot papers, and their investigation proved the absolute accuracy of the report of the scrutineers in the first instance.

Can you imagine any method more likely to secure the real wishes of the Church? I cannot. It is the line too, of New Testament procedure. We read in the first chapter of the Acts that a choice had to be made to fill a vacancy among the apostles caused by the fall of Judas. "After prayer they gave lots for them; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles."

These then were the four variations adopted by our Founders. And why were they adopted? Absolutely and entirely with the object of making this place a real **People's Chapel**.