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A table of contents for the *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_cbrfj.php

SURVEY ON FREEDOM FOR WOMEN WITHIN THE CHURCH. One member made the justifiable criticism that the terms of the questions posed (CBRFJ xiv) were too extreme on both sides, and that it was unfair to pose the questions in the context in which they appeared. The extremity of choice was in fact deliberate, as only strongly held views would then be expressed. 34 replies were received, of which 24 expressed support of propositions B for complete freedom for women within the services of the church, 8 supported the extreme alternative, and 2 expressed qualified views on opposite sides.

OVERSEAS REPRESENTATIVES. Mr. Frank Horton (Institut Emmaüs, 1806 St. Legier, Switzerland) will act as overseas representative for Switzerland and French-speaking Europe. Dr. J. K. Howard is now back in Britain, and can no longer act as Central African representative.

BACK NUMBERS OF JOURNAL. Can be obtained from the Publications Office. See details inside back cover.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

JAMES VAN SOMMER, AN UNDENOMINATIONAL CHRISTIAN AND MAN OF PRAYER

T. C. F. Stunt

Some years ago there appeared in the *Echoes Quarterly Review* for 1957, an article entitled *James Van Sommer: Missionary Enthusiast*¹ by one of the editors of the Review, Mr. W. T. Stunt. In this article the writer described a magazine called *The Missionary Reporter*,² edited by James Van Sommer from July 1853 to January 1858. The story centred around a number of Christians in North East London who had a burden for Missionary work. James Van Sommer was one of them, but apart from his magazine there seemed to be little definite information about him. Through a series of coincidences, the present writer has come across several sources of information about the missionary enthusiast and his circle and they may be of interest to others.

James Van Sommer was born in 1822, into a fairly prosperous business family.³ His grandfather, James Van Sommer, was Secretary to the Managers of the Stock Exchange.⁴ The younger James was trained as a solicitor and in 1870 he was given by Matthew Coulthurst of Coutts Bank, the legal practice of Coulthurst's late brother Henry who had been a friend of the family of Van Sommer's wife. At least one of Van Sommer's sons went into the business and the family name continues today in a distinguished firm of solicitors.

It is not clear where the Van Sommer family lived when James was a boy, but by 1847 he was living in or near Hackney and was included in the little group of Christians who met to study the Scriptures and out of which had grown the little assembly of Brethren which met each Sunday at Ellis's Room, Hackney. One of the leading figures in this group was William Thomas Berger. Converted as a young man in 1833,⁵ Berger

had discovered the power of the Scriptures and the usefulness of Bible study in a small group. It was through his brother who was a Methodist that he met the famous naturalist, Philip Henry Gosse.⁶ An account of the friendship is given in Gosse's own words in his biography, from which we extract the following: "Until I knew the dear Bergers, I was not aware that a movement of this character was in existence; nor had I so much as heard, during my three years' residence in Hackney, that in a little retired building, called Ellis's Room, a body of Christians holding these views met every Lord's day. Quite early on my new friends invited me to take part in a meeting held weekly at their house, for studying the Holy Word. Of such a "scripture reading", now so common, I had never heard. I found sitting round a large table in their dining-room, each with a bible before him, about ten persons—William and Mary Berger, George Pearse, Capel Berger, Edward Spencer, Edward Hanson, James Van Sommer, and perhaps one or two more; and I took my place in the little company.⁷ This was in 1847. In the following year Gosse met Miss Emily Bowes who used, each Sunday morning, to walk over to Hackney from Clapton where she lived, to join these Brethren. In November they were married at Tottenham from the house of Robert Howard.⁸

Clearly the Hackney group was in close contact with the assembly at Brook Street, Tottenham, where John Eliot Howard and his brother Robert were leading figures.⁹ At both Tottenham and Hackney there was great missionary interest. George Pearse who was in the little study group that Gosse described, and Richard Ball of Taunton who had left the Society of Friends about the same time as the Howard brothers,¹⁰ began to edit in 1850 *The Gleaner in the Missionary Field* which in 1853 became exclusively occupied with work in China under the name of *The Chinese Missionary Gleaner*.¹¹ Pearse was the Secretary of the Chinese Evangelisation Society through which Hudson Taylor first went to China.¹² Taylor himself was a frequent visitor, in the early 1850's, to the assemblies at Tottenham and Hackney and it was at the latter that he met W. T. Berger (whom we have already mentioned) when George Pearse took him and his future brother-in-law, Benjamin Broomhall, to lunch with the Bergers one Sunday after morning worship.¹³

It will thus be seen that James Van Sommer, while at Hackney in the 1840's and at Tottenham from 1851 to 1857, was in the midst of some considerable missionary interest. Berger, who was to prove a faithful friend to Hudson Taylor as the China Inland Mission's first home director, married Van Sommer's sister Mary in about 1847.¹⁴ Missionary interest, however, was not confined to China. The pioneer missionary, Anthony Norris Groves, visited Tottenham in October 1852, and on November 1st he noted in his journal that he had brought the subject of foreign missions before the brethren at Tottenham and 'they hope, in union with the believers in Hackney, Orchard Street, and other places, to form an effectual committee to care for these things.'¹⁵ On March 13th 1853 he observed: 'There is an increasing interest about missions especially at Tottenham and Hackney . . .'¹⁶ Three or four months later James Van Sommer began to publish *The Missionary Reporter*.

The contents of this magazine are admirably described, together with Van Sommer's missionary principles, in the article mentioned above.¹⁷ The missionaries referred to in the magazine worked in a wide variety of countries and the magazine must have proved very informative to those who read it. But the great object was to stimulate local churches to have direct relations with missionaries. Van Sommer wanted every church to be a missionary society, supporting the work overseas by gifts and especially by prayer.¹⁸ He believed in prayer more than many Christians, and spent a great part of his life trying to encourage other believers to pray more and to pray corporately. From his writings it is possible to follow the development of his thinking in this respect. In 1849 he became a Sunday-school teacher¹⁹—a work which he continued when he moved to Tottenham after his marriage to Mary Arnott. He was also involved with the work of the London City Mission.²⁰ In both these spheres of service he was troubled by the fact that very few of the Christians with whom he was working enjoyed real liberty in public prayer. The first time he arranged, at his own home, a study period for Sunday-school teachers, he 'spent parts of many days in composing and recomposing a little prayer, learned it by heart, escaped from the drawing room while the tea was being removed, prayed it all over again in private with much perturbation of mind, and finally uttered it with my fellow Sunday-school teachers, feeling much relieved when it was over.'²¹

He saw a similar problem at a meeting of the London City Mission when the superintendent failed to turn up. 'Several of us felt it was desirable that the meeting should be commenced with prayer, but there was a general unwillingness to be the one who should open his lips.'²² Eventually someone read some collects from the Prayer Book, but Van Sommer could not but be struck by their inappropriateness. Over the years he came to value the freedom of extempore prayer without despising the composed prayer of his younger days. Such an interest in the practice of prayer was an obvious asset to a missionary enthusiast.²³ *The Missionary Reporter* announced prayer meetings and clearly Van Sommer's work as editor was designed to promote *informed* corporate prayer. In later years (c. 1869) Van Sommer produced two excellent little pamphlets which could well be reprinted today with profit: *Prayer Meetings: Practical Suggestions*; and *Practical Suggestions on the Use of Scripture in Extempore Prayer*. Some of the advice and warnings in these pamphlets clearly comes from the heart of one who has pondered deeply over the problems of both personal and corporate prayer.

The suggestion in the latter of these pamphlets is often ignored today. To pray simply in the language of Scripture that is open in front of the person praying is both easier and more comprehensible, but instead we so often fall into the error of the pharisees and think that a short prayer is not as good as a long one. Other advice is equally relevant today as it was a hundred years ago when Van Sommer gave it. 'Those who pray aloud have to be careful lest they add to the temptation of passing from *supplication* to God into *meditation*..²⁴ 'It sometimes happens that the assembly

do not find themselves assisted in praying to God by the supplications of those who engage in prayer; in which case the latter would probably feel it right (or if they do not, it might be desirable for some elder Christian) to ask them privately to refrain from that which they design to be an assistance, but which others do not find to be so'.²⁵ 'Everything approaching to loud vociferation should be far from us . . . Some years' experience of prayer meetings leads me to the conclusion, when I hear an excitable prayer, that it is a delusion to think that it arises from fervency of spirit. The cause is sometimes a nervous temperament in a truly Christian man . . . and sometimes . . . excitement of what the Scripture calls the flesh'.²⁶ The present writer was reminded at more than one point when reading the tract on *Prayer Meetings*, of that admirable little tract by the late W. E. Vine entitled *Leading in Prayer*, which also could be usefully reprinted. Far too many writers on this subject avoid practical problems and as a result frequently render their work less useful than it might have been. Van Sommer had no illusions on that point. Today we may be no longer frightened by extempore prayer as some were a hundred years ago, but it would seem that many other failings have not changed much.

In 1857 James Van Sommer moved from Tottenham to Eastbourne.²⁷ The family seem to have also had a house at Reigate where his second son, William was born in 1859. He was named after William Berger who had married his father's sister, and whom we have mentioned, and who had a large estate nearby at East Grinstead²⁸ where the children used to play. At Eastbourne Van Sommer continued to encourage meetings for corporate prayer and Bible study. Describing the latter, at a later date, he wrote: 'No-one presided. The passage to be considered was always known beforehand and it was with some a subject of previous study. The exact meaning in orderly detail of words and sentences came into view, which has its place even with well-educated persons . . . This meeting was sometimes attended by several ministers, some coming from a distance—even seven on one occasion—and by twenty or twenty-five private Christians, being residents or visitors'.²⁹ His suggestions for such gatherings are again very practical. Those likely to take part should not sit together. Speakers should not address individuals so as to avoid breaking the corporate nature of the meeting. No-one should be afraid of pauses in such a study circle.³⁰

In 1873 Van Sommer moved back to London and bought a house in Wimbledon, where he lived until his death in 1901.³¹ It seems likely that in this last period of his life he worshipped with an Anglican communion as his wife and daughter were buried with him at St. Mary's Wimbledon. One of the pamphlets that he published at this time was entitled: *Lay Service: its nurseries and its spheres*, which made further practical suggestions about work in Sunday schools, the Y.M.C.A., Family Prayers, Christian visitation, Scripture reading meetings, and public addresses. The use of the word 'lay' would seem to point to an Anglican readership.³²

If this was the case we may have here some tangible evidence for assessing the influence of early brethren upon evangelical Christians in communion with other denominations. Clearly, Van Sommer carried much of his earlier experience with him into his new ecclesiastical connections. Today, and indeed fifty years ago, extempore prayer is a commonplace among evangelicals of most denominations though it evidently was not in the 1840s and 50s. Philip Gosse had never heard of a Scripture reading meeting in the 1840s though he was a Methodist of the more primitive type. Perhaps the proliferation of such meetings among evangelicals may have been, in some measure, due to men like Van Sommer.

Similarly one can detect the ecclesiastical principles of earlier years in another later publication of Van Sommer. In a booklet entitled: *Outline of Scriptural Facts, past, present and prophetic*, we read the following: The Church's 'name in its own proper unity is *The Church of God*. As such it does not possess in addition any earthly name as Roman, Greek, Protestant, Established, Dissenting etc. Still in a subordinate sense, a local assembly of those who have repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a Church.

'Were local Churches all pure and perfect it would be otherwise; but this being not so, local churches do not in the aggregate, form the Universal Church, but every individual believer whether in a local church or not is a true member of the one Catholic Church'.³³

This approach continued to be coupled with an emphasis upon the insignificance of denomination. Van Sommer had learnt at Hackney and Brook Street the value of a non-sectarian outlook and he carried this with him. In his book on *Lay Service* he observed that one of the blessings of working with the Y.M.C.A. was that denominations were forgotten.³⁴ The whole question is treated very valuably in another of his works which, up till now, has only been found in the Library of Count Guicciardini, in Florence.³⁵ The booklet is entitled: *Christian Catholicity distinguished from Roman Catholicity*. It was a lecture to the Y.M.C.A. at Eastbourne in March 1870 at the time of the Vatican Council and the decree of Papal Infallibility. The principle enunciated by Van Sommer is no less valuable today, and with three brief extracts from it we shall close. 'Christian catholicity embraces a l the flock and all God's servants . . . By God's servants I mean all who, loving the souls of men tell them of the provision of God's love through His Son and through His Spirit, and seek to train the followers of Jesus to put on His holy and loving character, to tread in His footsteps and to learn His mind. This breadth of view becomes the children of God.' The Christian 'may be called indeed, of the Established Church, a Baptist, a Wesleyan, a Congregationalist, a Presbyterian, of the Roman Catholic Church, of the Greek Church. This is partly his own matter and partly the result of his birth; he was born such in the language of men . . . Sectarian feelings and strife and jealousy are altogether out of place here. It is not a question of what denomination to join. It is darkness or light, the power of Satan or the Kingdom of God; having life or not having life'.³⁶

General Note

It is important to recall that though the Christians in the assemblies at Tottenham and Hackney were called Brethren, their direct contact with the leaders of the movement in the West Country (apart from Bristol) in the 1830's was not very great. It would not be true to say that they were separate from them from the start, but clearly at Tottenham there was comparatively little internal division over the sorrows of 1845-9. This may indicate a greater measure of independence than is often imagined. It seems that the great dispensational question was not so fiercely debated among these people with the result that though prophetic questions were not ignored, they did not become such a bone of contention.

Perhaps it is significant that Groves found these people more responsive to the challenge of missionary labour. Together with the assemblies at Bristol, the North London meetings derived more in origin from dissenting denominations whereas the Irish and Plymouth leaders were almost entirely drawn from the Established Church. This may explain the truly non-denominational emphasis of men like Müller and the Howards which so influenced the circle of which James Van Sommer was a member for a time.

Notes

1. *Echoes Quarterly Review* (Bath, Vol. IX No. 4. Oct-Dec. 1957. pp.18-23, (hereafter cited as E.Q.R.)
2. *The Missionary Reporter* (London 1853-8 hereafter cited as M.R.).
3. General details of James Van Sommer and his family unless otherwise stated are taken from *Records of the Van Sommer Family* (Bath 1945) which contains the pedigrees and a memorial of James Van Sommer's younger son William.
4. There are several works on financial subjects by him in the Library of the British Museum.
5. W. T. Berger. *The Wages of Sin and Eternal Punishment* (London 1886) p.1, also see Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor. *Hudson Taylor* (London 1911-18) vol. II p.25, (hereafter cited as *Life of Hudson Taylor*); J. C. Pollock: *Hudson Taylor and Maria* (London 1962) pp. 114-5. (hereafter cited as *Hudson Taylor and Maria*).
6. Edmund Gosse: *Life of Philip Henry Gosse, F.R.S.*, (London 1890). This book was written seventeen years before the notorious *Father and Son* and is far more reliable. (Hereafter cited as *Life of Gosse*).
7. *Life of Gosse* pp. 377-8.
8. *Life of Gosse* pp. 217-8.
9. *Life of Hudson Taylor*. Vol. 1 p.116 see also D. J. Beattie: *Brethren: The story of a great Recovery* (Kilmarnock 1940) pp. 79-84 and H. Pickering: *Chief Men among the Brethren* (London, 2nd. ed. 1931) pp. 58-60.
10. For the controversy with the Society of Friends see *The Inquirer* (London) vol. 1 (1838) passim. Ball was baptized by immersion by B. W. Newton, at Exeter in 1837, *Inquirer* vol. 1 p.64.
11. *Life of Hudson Taylor* vol. 1 p. 90; M.R. No. 1 p.2.
12. A somewhat critical assessment of the work of the C.E.S. is given in *Hudson Taylor and Maria* pp.22, 31-2, 34-5, 48, 67-8, 78-9. These criticisms do not detract from the fact that Pearce and his co-workers were facing up to a challenge that few others were prepared for. The fact that they accepted Taylor and sent him to China when he was only 21 is considerably in their favour.
13. *Life of Hudson Taylor* vol. 11 p.25 footnote.
14. *Life of Gosse* p.377. Philip Gosse gave the date as 1843 but it must have been after 1846 when he returned from Jamaica. See p.213.
15. *Memoir of Anthony Norris Groves* (London 1st ed. 1856) p.488.
16. *Ibid.* p.494.
17. See note 1.
18. M.R. No. 1 p.8.
19. *Practical Suggestions on the Use of Scripture in Extempore Prayer* by James Van Sommer (London 1869) pp.7-8.

20. Ibid. pp.5-6. Social problems were not neglected by early brethren as much as one is sometimes led to suppose. In the *M.R.* No. 1 pp.57-9 there is a review (of a page and a half) of a pamphlet entitled *London by Moonlight*, which dealt at some length with the problems of prostitution in London and Christian work relating to it—a subject rarely even mentioned in Victorian England except by men like Gladstone.
21. *Practical Suggestions* etc. p.8.
22. Ibid. p.5.
23. Though never (in the traditional sense of the word) a missionary himself, Van Sommer's enthusiasm seems to have infected his children. Two of his daughters, Ann and Elizabeth were missionaries with the Egypt General Mission and the Nile Mission Press. A grandson by another of his daughters, Catherine, was Dr. H. W. L. Paddon of the Grenfell Mission in Labrador.
24. *Prayer Meetings: Practical Suggestions* by James Van Sommer, (London, 1869) pp.12-13.
25. Ibid. p.9.
26. Ibid. pp. 14-15.
27. Information kindly supplied by Mr. H. C. Hitchcock, from the *Brook Street Chapel Register*. The date is not 1851 as stated in *E.Q.R.* p.22.
28. See *Life of Hudson Taylor* vol. 11 p.26; and *Hudson Taylor and Maria* p.114.
29. J. Van Sommer: *Lay Service: its nurseries and its spheres*, (London ?1884) pp.29-30.
30. *Lay Service*, pp.30-31.
31. Information obtained from the register of burials at St. Mary's Church, Wimbledon. *Records of the Van Sommer Family* gives 1908 as the date of his death on Chart IV, but this is incorrect.
32. A later edition (?1884) of *Practical Suggestions* gives 'Prayer-book' with a capital 'P' whereas in the earlier edition there was only a small 'p'. Similarly the later edition describes the collects in the Prayer-book as 'very, very, good', instead of merely 'very good', as earlier. See *Practical Suggestions* etc. (1869) pp. 6-7, and *Extempore Prayer* (?1884) pp. 4-5.
33. J. Van Sommer: *Outline of Scriptural Facts, past, present and prophetic*, (London, ?1884) p.11.
34. *Lay Service* (London, 1884) pp.12-13.
35. Count Guicciardini, as an exile in England was well acquainted with the Brethren in London and was probably a frequent visitor at Tottenham and Hackney, thus knowing Van Sommer. The booklet in question was possibly sent to him by William Berger who in later years lived at Cannes, (*Life of Hudson Taylor*) vol. 1 facing p.492, 11 p.560) and who, according to Count Guicciardini's biographer was 'one of the great benefactors' of the work in Italy. S. Jacini: *Un Riformatore Toscano dell'epoca del Risorgimento* (Florence, 1940) p.236, see also p.260.
36. J. Van Sommer: *Christian Catholicity distinguished from Roman Catholicity* (London 1870). Page references have been mislaid. The reference number in the Guicciardiniana, Biblioteca Nazionale, in Florence, is 18-12-1.