

A Reminiscence

1935

Last anniversary night when I gave you an account of the important happenings in the church, from the time I joined, over 50 years ago, I forgot to mention an event which, I think, you might like to hear tonight.

The incident was a debate which took place in the old Centennial Hall in Adelaide St. - perhaps some of you know it at the present time as the Coconut Grove Dance Hall. It was our principal concert hall in the early days.

The debate was between one of our members, Mr. Isaac Selley, who was the minister of one of our leading churches in Melbourne, and Mr. Wallace Nelson, an atheist or freethinker as they were generally known. I don't know what brought Mr. Selley up to Brisbane very likely he was on holidays and wanted to enjoy our genial sunshine. An interesting point is that Mr. Selley was himself a freethinker before his conversion.

Mr. Nelson was a journalist, the Editor

he Brisbane Worker or Truth, I am not
 re which - The subject of the debate was
 "Is Christianity a Myth" It was well
 advertised and caused great interest in
 the City. A small charge was made for
 admission, and the proceeds were given to
 Charity. I still can visualise the
 scene inside the building. The hall
 was packed. The majority of the Church-
 going people went up into the gallery.
 It was rather significant that they should
 be there while the freethinkers preferred
 the body of the hall. It seemed as
 though we were on a higher plane.

On the platform the two debators sat
 at a table with the Chairman in between.

I remember in front of Mr Nelson was a
 number of reference books. Mr Selby had
 only one book - his Bible - and as he
 sat there with his arm resting on it I
 could not help ~~thinking~~ being impressed
 by his attitude. It seemed to say "My
 whole faith rests upon the contents of this book"

After the Chairman had explained the
 rules of the debate Mr Nelson opened up.
 They were allowed timed sessions alternatively.

The debate proceeded the excitement grew. Selby was splendid. He had us on our toes. He complained more than once that Mr. Nelson was not introducing much new matter that he could reply to. The initiative seemed to be with Mr. Selby all the time. I remember also our Champion said that the arguments his opponent was bringing forward were nothing new to him because he himself had often made use of them in debates when he was an atheist.

At ~~the~~ this time the atmosphere was becoming very tense. The climax came in Mr. Selby's last session. He ^(Mr. Selby) seemed to summarise all his opponent's arguments. He simply tore into poor Wallace who could not restrain himself and kept jumping up from his seat and interjecting.

At last Mr. Nelson's friends could not stand it any longer. They rose to ~~their~~ their feet and caused an uproar, making all kinds of noises. The Chairman tried to restore order without avail. His voice could not be heard above the din.

to our people rose in a body and
sang "all hail the power of Jesus'
Name" and as we left the hall I
heard the psalm being sung

Thus ended the first and last
debate I ever attended.

[Faint, mostly illegible handwriting]

The little episode I would like to
tell you about tonight as my ^{contribution} to
place. It is 40 years ago - All the incidents
are still fresh in my memory. They say that
is typical of Old People - they remember things
that happened in their youth as if they were
yesterday. I am sure that at your
Sunday night -

I am sure that it will be a most
time was good propaganda

Dr. Nelson was a journalist, the