

JOHN NELSON DARBY: DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

by Larry Crutchfield

Few today who would identify themselves as Fundamentalists have ever heard of John Nelson Darby or the Plymouth Brethren. Yet as Ernest R. Sandeen correctly observes in *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, “much of the thought and attitudes of those who are known as Fundamentalists can be mirrored in the teachings of this man.”¹

Darby flourished at a time when the winds of higher criticism were sweeping through the established churches of the British Isles. Christians firmly rooted in orthodoxy were appalled to see unregenerate clergy not only paid out of state coffers, but openly attacking the inspiration and authority of the Word of God. A general disenchantment and despair over the state of the organized church caused many to withdraw and seek fellowship elsewhere.

A number of movements sprang up to bid for the moral high ground of biblical Christianity. One of these was the Bible society movement begun in 1804 with the establishment of the British and Foreign Bible Society in London by a group of theologically conservative Anglicans. Another was the ill-fated anti-liberalism Oxford movement which itself became entangled in an anti-Reformation Romanism. Yet another reaction against the established church, which was to leave its important but largely anonymous signature upon the Fundamentalist movement of a later time, was the movement begun by the “brethren” who were to eventually become known for their meetings at Plymouth. The chief architect and theologian of this movement was the Irish clergyman, J. N. Darby.

DARBY'S LIFE

John Nelson Darby, namesake of family friend and famed British admiral, Lord Nelson, was born in London of Irish parents on November 18, 1800. Ireland furnished the backdrop for his earliest years of development and education. In 1819 at the age of eighteen, Darby graduated from Trinity College Dublin as a Classical Medalist.

Brilliant, gifted, and with all the right connections, Darby had been groomed for and was practically assured a successful career in law. But a deep spiritual struggle gripped the budding young barrister in his eighteenth year and caused him to abandon that profession after only one year of practice between 1822 and 1823. Darby's spiritual odyssey lasted until 1825 when he received ordination as deacon in the Church of England. The following year, he was elevated to the priesthood and assigned a curacy in remote County Wicklow, Ireland.

Taking up residence in a peasant's cottage on a bog, Darby covered the great untamed expanse of his ecclesiastical responsibility on horseback in the manner of John Wesley. His gentleness of spirit and saintly bearing and conduct quickly earned him a place in the hearts of his poor parishioners. So committed

was Darby to the instruction of the peasantry in the Word of God that he was seldom found at his own humble dwelling before midnight. His labors did not go unrewarded. Although he expended most of his modest wages and personal inheritance on the local schools and charities, by Darby's on account Catholics were "becoming protestants at the rate of 600 to 800 a week."² Darby's standard of reward and gain was always in terms of souls won for the kingdom, never silver added to the purse.

For some time the young circuit-riding cleric had been troubled by the condition of the established church, but his demanding duties had prevented any decisive action. He was to receive time for undisturbed reflection on the issue, however, when his horse bolted during one journey through the parish, throwing its rider with tremendous force against a doorjamb. The ensuing lengthy convalescence from the required surgery in Dublin, served as an incubator for Darby's discontent.

Darby says, "During my solitude, conflicting thoughts increased; but much exercise of soul had the effect of causing the scriptures to gain complete ascendancy over me. I had always owned them to be the Word of God . . . the careful reading of the Acts afforded me a practical picture of the early church; which made me feel deeply the contrast with its actual present state; though still, as ever beloved by God."³ After only twenty-seven months with the Church of England and thoroughly dissatisfied with what he viewed as rampant Erastianism and clericalism, Darby sought fellowship and ministry outside the established church.

Eventually, Darby made the acquaintance of a group of like-minded believers, members of the Church of England in Dublin, and met with them for prayer and Bible study during the winter of 1827-28. It was this group which would later become known as the Plymouth Brethren. The two guiding principles of the movement were to be the breaking of bread every Lord's Day, and ministry based upon the call of Christ rather than the ordination of man. While Darby was not the founder of this group, he quickly emerged as its spiritual leader and dominant force.

By 1840, the Plymouth movement had grown to 800 strong and would reach more than 1200 within the next five years. Even though Darby disliked denominational labels, preferring rather the simple biblical designation "brethren," it was perhaps inevitable that these "brethren" who met at Plymouth, should become known as the "Plymouth Brethren."

Many other Brethren groups formed in Britain and subsequently in other parts of the world. As a result of his extensive travels, Darby himself was responsible for the spread of Brethren doctrine to other countries. He made several trips to preach and teach in Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Holland. Between 1859 and 1874, Darby made six trips to the United States and Canada where he ministered in all the major cities and in some of the smaller ones as well. Included also in Darby's itinerary were visits to the West Indies and New Zealand.

Wherever Darby went, he never tired of expounding his views on the doctrine of the church and future things. He was convinced both that the organized church was in a state of ruin and that Christ's return to rapture the saints and establish the millennial kingdom was imminent. While Darby's call for a radical response to the apostate condition of the church was met with relative indifference, his teachings on eschatological themes were heartily embraced and provided much of the substance for the Bible conference movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But more than any one doctrine, it was Darby and the Brethren's fundamental orthodoxy that appealed to Bible believing Christians everywhere.

DARBY'S CHARACTER

Any portraiture of Darby the man must be painted in sharp black and white tones, never in shades of gray. He was a man of incredible intensity. First and foremost, he was intensely committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was his only love and all-consuming passion. He cared for little that this world had to offer. Though meticulous in personal cleanliness, for example, Darby wore only simple clothing and those to the point of shabbiness. It is said that on one occasion while he slept, some kindly friends seized the opportunity to substitute new clothing for old. Upon waking, Darby donned the new apparel without remark or even apparent notice.

Darby was kind and humble in nature and his compassion and generosity towards the poor was without bounds. He observed that "Christ preferred the poor; ever since I have been converted so have I. Let those who like society better have it. If I ever get into it . . . I return sick at heart. I go to the poor; I find the same evil nature as in the rich, but I find this difference: the rich, and those who keep their comforts and their society, judge and measure how much of Christ they can take and keep without committing themselves; the poor, how much of Christ they can have to comfort them in their sorrows. That, unworthy as I am, is where I am at home and happy." Darby in no way felt intellectually ill-equipped for cultivated society, it was just that given the choice, he rejected it all in preference for the cross.⁴

Kindly in disposition and humble in spirit though Darby was, his absolute devotion to the Word of God and demand for unflinching fidelity to its truth, as he understood it, made him ready prey for controversy. His limitless patience with the honest ignorance of the poor and unlearned was legendary. But so was his wrath against those among the well educated who played fast and loose with the truth of the gospel of Christ.

A full twenty-five years after one "heterodox teacher" had felt the brunt of Darby's indignation, he was to write, "J.N.D. writes with a pen in one hand and a thunderbolt in the other." But as Darby's biographer, W. G. Turner points out, "it was only fundamental error which roused his deepest grief and indignation, his patience with honest blunderers being proverbial."⁵

If ever the epithet, "fighting Fundamentalist" applied to anyone, it applied

to J. N. Darby. At the same time, it is true that Darby derived no pleasure from controversy and often expressed his love for the object of his more potent polemics. But in his view, faced with a choice between peace on the one hand and truth on the other, there could be no alternative but to defend the truth.

Wherever Darby went, whether peasant's home or hallowed halls of Oxford, his nobleness of character, keenness of mind, dedication to Christ, and commanding presence made him the focus of attention. The great Bible teacher and preacher, G. Campbell Morgan recounts as one of the "cherished recollections" of his boyhood his encounter with Darby who had come to visit his father. "He vividly recalls the almost reverential awe that lay upon him in the presence of that truly great man, and how the awe gave place and the reverence remained, when the visitor spoke kindly to him about his studies."⁶

DARBY'S DOCTRINE

Darby is called by many the father of modern dispensational theology, a theology made popular first by the Scofield Reference Bible⁷ and more recently by the Ryrie Study Bible. It is a theology that has gained wide influence through the publications and educational efforts of institutions like Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute. Yet while Darby is the center of almost every controversy over the origin of this theological system, his works are little known and seldom read. This is true among the critics and champions of dispensational theology alike. This neglect is unfortunate, for Darby is credited with much of the theological content of the Fundamentalist movement. There is little doubt too, that Darby had a tremendous part in the systematization and promotion of dispensational theology.

Today, however, Darby's theological distinctives have virtually been reduced to his doctrine of the church in ruins, the premillennial return of Christ—with special emphasis upon Israel and the church's role in that kingdom age—and the rapture of the church. As important as these doctrines are in Darby's theology, they were but an outgrowth of other doctrines which must be considered the bedrock of his and the Brethren's teaching. It is the bedrock upon which orthodox Christianity has stood since Pentecost and upon which Fundamentalists made their stand shortly after the turn of the century.

Inspiration and Infallibility of Scripture

Darby was unswerving in his belief that the Bible was the inspired, infallible Word of God, absolutely authoritative⁸ and faithfully transmitted from the original autographs.⁹ If the world itself were to disappear and be annihilated, asserts Darby, "and the word of God alone remained as an invisible thread over the abyss, my soul would trust in it. After deep exercise of soul I was brought by grace to feel I could entirely. I never found it fail me since. I have often failed; but I never found it failed me."

Once questioned as to whether he might not allow that some parts of the New Testament may have had only temporary significance, Darby retorted, "No! every word, depend upon it, is from the Spirit and is for eternal service!"¹⁰ Darby

felt compelled to affirm his fidelity to the Word of God because “In these days especially . . . the authority of His written word is called in question on every side . . .”¹⁰

Deity and Virgin Birth of Christ

On the deity of Christ, Darby is no less compromising than he is on the place of Scripture in the believer’s life. “The great truth of the divinity of Jesus, that He is God,” says Darby, “is written all through scripture with a sunbeam, but written to faith. I cannot hesitate in seeing the Son, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, the First and the Last, Alpha and Omega, and thus it shines all through. But He fills all things, and His manhood, true, proper manhood, as true, proper Godhead, is as precious to me, and makes me know God, and so indeed only as the other, He is ‘the true God and eternal life.’”¹¹ If Christ is not God, concludes Darby, then “I do not know Him, have not met Him, nor know what He is.”¹² As one of the truths connected with the person and work of Christ, Darby cites the “miraculous birth of the Saviour, who was absolutely without sin . . .”¹³

Substitutionary Atonement

Just as the doctrine of the deity of Christ is written all through the Bible, Darby maintains that the propitiation secured by the sacrificial death of Christ “is a doctrine interwoven with all Scripture, forms one of the bases of Christianity, is the sole ground of remission—and there is none without shedding blood—and that by which Christ has made peace; Col. 1:20.”¹⁴

Darby is convinced that without the atoning work of Christ, man must bear the guilt of his sin, and remain at a distance from God without knowledge of Him or of His love. But thankfully that is not the case, for as Darby points out, “There is death in substitution—He ‘bore our sins in his own body on the tree’—‘died for our sins according to the scriptures’ . . .”¹⁵

Resurrection of Christ

For Darby, “the Person of Christ regarded as risen,” is the pivot around which “all the truths found in the word revolve.”¹⁶ “Many have, perhaps, been able, in looking at the Church’s hope in Christ,” says Darby, “to see the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection. But the more we search the Scriptures, the more we perceive, in this doctrine, the fundamental truth of the gospel—that truth which gives to redemption its character, and to all other truths their real power.” It is the victory of Christ over death which gives the certainty of salvation.¹⁷ It is the resurrection, asserts Darby, which “leaves behind, in the tomb, all that could condemn us, and ushers the Lord into that new world of which he is the perfection, the Head, and the glory.”¹⁸ Consequently, this doctrine characterized apostolic preaching.¹⁹

Return of Christ

Darby believed that it was essential that the church have a right hope. That hope he understood to be the second coming of Christ. At his coming,

Darby maintained, Christ would take the saints to glory with Him, to become the bride, the wife of the Lamb.²⁰

Darby insists that “Nothing is more prominently brought forward in the New Testament than the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He points out that it was the promise of Christ’s return which was first offered to the sorrowing disciples as they witnessed the ascension of their Lord as recorded in Acts 1:11. Furthermore, says Darby, “It was not at all a strange thing—immediately after conversion to the living God—to wait for his Son from heaven, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come.”²¹

In light of the foregoing, John F. Walvoord, president emeritus of Dallas Theological Seminary, is certainly correct in saying that “Much of the Truth promulgated by fundamental Christians to-day had its rebirth in the movement known as the ‘Plymouth Brethren.’”²²

Darby’s Influence

It should be evident from the foregoing that there is a distinct connection between the doctrines of the Brethren and the Fundamentalists who rose to challenge modernism shortly before and especially after the turn of the century. Well before publication of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth* in 1909, the Brethren were proclaiming the same basic truths of Scripture and staunchly defending them against all comers. The very character of Brethren fellowship and beliefs is such that to entertain liberal doctrines would destroy the movement altogether.

Many of the greatest Fundamentalist leaders of the past have openly acknowledged their indebtedness to the teachings and ministry of Darby and the Brethren. After securing the writings of C. H. Mackintosh, the man most responsible for popularizing Darby’s works, D. L. Moody said, “if they could not be replaced, [I] would rather part with my entire library, excepting my Bible, than with these writings. They have been to me a very key to the Scriptures.”²³

A. C. Gaebelain, contributor to *The Fundamentals* and one of the most potent influences on the life and doctrine of C. I. Scofield, says of Darby and other Brethren writers, “I found in his writings, in the works of William Kelly, McIntosh [Mackintosh], F. W. Grant, Bellett, and others the soul food I needed. I esteem these men next to the Apostles in their sound and spiritual teachings.” In the same breath Gaebelain speaks of four saints named John who will be present at that great celestial meeting when Christ returns—John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, and John Darby.²⁴

William Kelly, Darby’s closest friend and greatest student, never tired of admonishing others to “Read Darby!” With some fifty-three volumes to his credit—including everything from a complete translation of the Bible to a volume of verse—there is much of Darby to read.

John Nelson Darby continued to serve and proclaim his Savior both with the written and spoken word until his departure to be with Him on the 29th of April, 1882. And no matter what subject he addressed, one theme always came to the fore—Jesus Christ. Just a few days before his home-going Darby wrote in

a final letter to the Brethren, “I can say, Christ has been my only object; thank God, my righteousness too . . . Hold fast to Christ.”²⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970; reprinted., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. xix.

² W. Blair Neatby. *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), p. 16.

³ Darby as quoted in W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby* (London: C. A. Hammond, 1944), p. 17.

⁴ Turner, p. 77.

⁵ John Nelson Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby*, 3 vols., reprint ed. (Sunbury, Penn.: Believers Bookshelf, 1971), 1:205.

⁶ Turner, p. 31.

⁷ John Harries, *G. Campbell Morgan, The Man and His Ministry*, p. 27; quoted in Turner, p. 78.

⁸ For a full treatment of the relationship between Darby and Scofield’s dispensational doctrines, see Larry V. Crutchfield’s *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1992).

⁹ John Nelson Darby, *Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, 34 vols., ed. by William Kelly (Sunbury, Penn.: Believers Bookshelf, n.d.), 23:13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23:31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:38

¹² Darby, *Letters*, 1:28-29.

¹³ Darby, *Collected Writings*, 33:82.

¹⁴ Darby, *Letters*, 2:432.

¹⁵ Darby, *Collected Writings*, 33:82.

¹⁶ Darby, *Letters*, 3:102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:47.

¹⁸ Darby, *Collected Writings*, 3:147.

¹⁹ Darby, *Letters*, 1:47.

²⁰ Darby, *Collected Writings*, 3:147.

²¹ Darby, *Letters*, 2:361.

²² Darby, *Collected Writings*, 27:306.

²³ John F. Walvoord, review of *An Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement*, by H. A. Ironside, in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 1942, p. 378.

²⁴ Sandeen, p. 173.

²⁵ A. C. Gaebelien, *Half a Century* (New York: Our Hope Publication Office, 1930), p. 85.