

JOHN NELSON DARBY AND THE PRE-TRIB RAPTURE

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

It has often been said of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) that he is the most famous person most people have never heard about. Said another way, he is the most influential Christian leader that many know nothing about. Darby is rightly considered the father of modern dispensationalism and pretribulationism. He was one of the founders and the most influential personalities of the Brethren movement. Darby is one of the top five most voluminous writers in the history of all Christianity and personally founded around the world about 1,500 local assemblies or Churches. He translated the entire Bible into three languages (English, French and German) and the New Testament into five languages (Dutch and Italian). Darby is certainly one of the most important Christian leaders since the Reformation.

DARBY'S BACKGROUND

John Nelson Darby was born in his parent's London house in Westminster, November 18, 1800. "He was the youngest son of John Darby, of Markley, Sussex, and of Leap Castle, King's County, Ireland,"¹ the eighth of nine children, six boys and three girls.² Darby's father was a wealthy merchant who had married the daughter of an even wealthier merchant, Anne Vaughan in 1784.³ In Darby's lineage there is a mixture of service to the Crown, landed aristocracy, and business. Thus, Timothy Stunt correctly observes, "Darby was descended from gentry."⁴

Records of the Darby family lineage can be traced back to the fifteenth century to Gaddesby, near Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire, England. The family connection to Ireland began in the sixteenth century when a John Darby, son of Edmund Darby, was involved in helping to siege and capture Leap Castle. This John Darby married the previous owner's daughter, Finola, and he also received part ownership of the castle. In the late 1600s the Darby's purchased the rest of the castle and became its full owners. The castle continued in the Darby family and was inherited by J. N. Darby's father's brother, Admiral Sir Henry D'Esterre Darby. Henry was captain of the HMS *Bellerophon* at the battle of the Nile in 1798 and said to be one of Lord Nelson's favorite commodores.⁵ J. N. Darby's father inherited the castle when Henry died in 1823.

Fifteen weeks after his birth, J. N. Darby was baptized on March 3, 1801, at St. Margaret's Anglican Church. His godfather was England's most famous naval admiral, Lord Nelson, who was not present at the event. J. N. Darby clearly received his first name from his father and his middle name from his godfather, Lord Nelson.

Darby's mother, Ann, was the daughter of Samuel Vaughan (1720–1801), who owned sugar plantations in the New World in Jamaica as well as large estates in Maine. John Darby (1751–1834), J. N.'s father, probably came into contact with the Vaughan family because of common commercial interests. Ann Vaughan "was half-American

¹ W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (London: C. A. Hammond, 1926), p. 14.

² Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992), p. 199.

³ Weremchuk, *Darby*, p. 19.

⁴ Timothy C. F. Stunt, "Influences in the Early Development of J. N. Darby" in Crawford Gribben and Timothy C. F. Stunt, eds., *Prisoners of Hope? Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1880* (Carlisle, UK: 2004), p. 49.

⁵ Weremchuk, *Darby*, p. 21.

and as a young woman in her mid-twenties, before she married, had lived with her parents in Philadelphia where her father, a respected naturalist was entrusted with the landscaping of Independence Square.”⁶ The Vaughan family was Unitarian and the Darby family was Anglican, which created a conflict in parents’ marriage. Eventually, it was overcome and Ann apparently adopted the religious heritage and Anglicanism of John Darby. Stunt says of John Darby that, “we may reasonably surmise that a man who married into the Vaughan Family shared some of their rationalist self-confidence and optimistic faith in humanity.”⁷ J. N. Darby was reared in a nominally Anglican home, with regular church attendance, but he did not encounter vital or “spiritual” Christianity until his arrival at Trinity College, Dublin.⁸

On February 17, 1812, J. N. Darby entered The Royal College of St. Peter in Westminster, more commonly known as Westminster School in London. Even though young John lived only a few blocks from the school, he was a boarder there. All of J. N. Darby’s brothers had attended this school since it was considered one of the finest public schools in London. It was a school attended mainly sons of the wealthy since its fees were too high for the poor. “The instruction was given by clergymen, and the subject matter consisted almost exclusively of Latin and Greek, with some English composition.”⁹ In 1815 Darby graduated from Westminster and was sent by his father to Ireland for the first time in his life to attend Trinity College, where he commenced studies on July 3, 1815.¹⁰

DARBY’S CONVERSION AND CALL INTO MINISTRY

Trinity College Dublin was an Anglican college founded in 1592 as a divinity school. Trinity was the leading academic institution in Ireland and on par with England’s premier universities, Oxford and Cambridge.¹¹ Darby took many classes in science and classics and graduated on July 10, 1819 as a gold medal winner in classics. At that time, such an award at Trinity meant that a student was the top student in his class in that academic field.

Upon graduation from Trinity College, Darby began the study of law and was admitted to Lincoln’s Inn, Dublin, on November 9, 1819.¹² Upon completion of the eight terms in preparation for a legal career, Darby, a newly minted barrister “was called to the Irish bar on January 21, 1822.”¹³ There is however no indication that he ever practiced law. It was sometime during his law studies that Darby experienced personal conversion to Christ, around 1820 or 1821. Darby said, “I loved Christ, I have no doubt, sincerely and growingly since June or July 1820, or 21, I forgot which.”¹⁴

DARBY’S EARLY PARISH AND PASTORAL MINISTRY

⁶ Stunt, “Influences,” p. 50.

⁷ Stunt, “Influences,” p. 51.

⁸ Stunt, “Influences,” pp. 51–2.

⁹ Weremchuk, *Darby*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Weremchuk, *Darby*, p. 30.

¹¹ Floyd Sanders Elmore, “A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby,” (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990), p. 52–4.

¹² Weremchuk, *Darby*, p. 32.

¹³ Weremchuk, *Darby*, p. 32.

¹⁴ “Darby’s Marginal Notes, Next to 2 Timothy 3 in His Greek New Testament” in Weremchuk, *Darby*, Appendix C, p. 204.

Darby's career in the Church of Ireland began on August 7, 1825 when Bishop William Bissett ordained him as an Anglican deacon in Raphoe Cathedral. The Archbishop of Dublin, William Magee (1766–1831) ordained Darby as a priest on February 19, 1826 and appointed him curate over a large rural parish of Calary in County Wicklow, "one of the most impoverished regions in the Dublin diocese."¹⁵ Of this assignment, Darby said, "As soon as I was ordained, I went amongst the poor Irish mountaineers, in a wild and uncultivated district, where I remained two years and three months, working as best I could."¹⁶

During Darby's ministry in 1826–27, it is estimated that about 600 to 800 people a week "were converting to Protestantism through the vigorous efforts of the evangelical clergy."¹⁷ However, the conversion rate would soon drop to almost zero, as a result of Archbishop Magee's issuance of a petition by "imposing the oaths of allegiance [to the British Crown] and supremacy [acknowledging the King as the Supreme Head of the Church] on all converts from Romanism within his diocese."¹⁸

A PROVIDENTIAL ACCIDENT

At this time, Darby was experiencing a disappointment from a failed spiritual and physical austerity phase in his life, the reality of a state-run church that he believed was in ruins and differed little from the unbelieving world, and his search for an assurance of salvation in his conscience. "Darby's Christian understanding and experience were about to change radically,"¹⁹ notes Brethren historian Tim Grass. As one who began his ministry as a high churchman, Darby was on the verge of becoming an evangelical dissenter when he experienced a riding accident. "While seeking assiduously to fulfil the duties of the ministry confided to me," says Darby, "working day and night amongst the people. . . An accident happened which laid me aside for a time; my horse was frightened and had thrown me against a door-post."²⁰

In December 1827 through at least January 1828, Darby was recuperating from the accident he read and studied the Bible, which resulted in realizing certain truths. He said he learned that "the church as His body; Christ coming to receive us to Himself; and collaterally with that, the setting up of a new earthly dispensation, from Isaiah xxxii. (more particularly the end)."²¹

What did Darby discover during this time of Bible study? Darby says, "I came to understand that I was united to Christ in heaven, and that consequently, my place before God was represented by His own."²² He understood his present standing with Christ in heaven. Such a heavenly standing becomes the basis for much of Darby's theology that sees the believer already positioned with Christ in heaven. "I was in Christ, accepted in the Beloved, and sitting in heavenly places in Him. This led me directly to the apprehension of what the true church of God was, those that were united

¹⁵ Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2007), p. 68.

¹⁶ Darby, *Letters*, vol. III, p. 297.

¹⁷ Weremchuk, *Darby*, p. 45.

¹⁸ Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815–35* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 169.

¹⁹ Tim Grass, *Gathering to his Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britain & Ireland* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2006), p. 17.

²⁰ Darby, *Letters*, vol. III, pp. 297–8.

²¹ Darby, *Letters*, vol. I, pp. 344–5.

²² Darby, *Letters*, vol. III, p. 298.

to Christ in heaven."²³ Further he says, "I saw in that word the coming of Christ to take the church to Himself in glory."²⁴ Darby speaks of "being in Christ; the church as His body; *Christ coming to receive us to Himself.*"²⁵ Thus, it was during this time that Darby first learned of a pre-trib rapture from the Bible. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

²³ Darby, *Letters*, vol. I, p. 515.

²⁴ Darby, *Letters*, vol. III, p. 299.

²⁵ (Italics added) Darby, *Letters*, vol. I, p. 344.