

JOHN NELSON DARBY

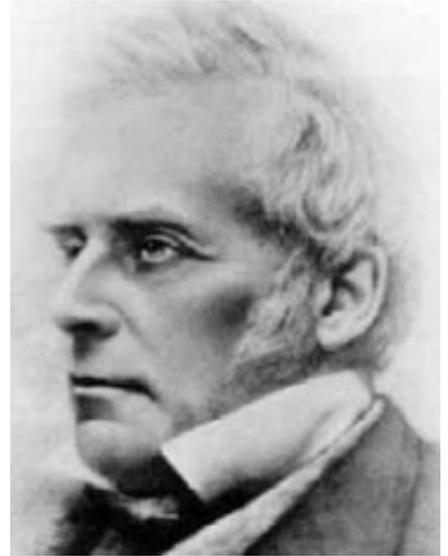
David C F Wright DD

There is nothing new in this account of Mr Darby. Much of it exists in other writings and in exactly the same manner and way.

John Nelson Darby is to the Brethren movement what John Wesley was to Methodism.

People who followed Darby's teaching were called Darbyites and some say that he was the originator of the Exclusive Brethren. That is unfair for he was and is nothing like the modern day Exclusives.

He was the youngest son of wealthy landowner John Darby of Leap Castle, Kings County, Ireland. He was born on 18 November 1800 at Westminster, the Darby's London house. He was christened at St Margarets. His uncle was Admiral Sir Henry Darby commander of HMS Bellerophon at the battle of the Nile. His godfather was Admiral Lord Nelson, hence his middle name was Nelson.



When still a boy it appears that there was a domestic crisis in the Darby household when his mother was no longer around.

JND, as he has become known, set out to be a lawyer and was educated at Westminster School and Trinity College, Dublin. He graduated as a Classical Gold Medallist in 1819.

He was called to the Bar in 1822 but he decided not to practice law but to take Holy Orders in the Anglican Church of Ireland. He had been converted around 1827 and for seven years had been contemplating his future life. His father was against his son entering the church.

Darby became a curate in Delgany in the mountains of County Wicklow being ordained by Archbishop William Magee in 1825.

This Archbishop of Dublin issued a statement that, in preaching the Word of God we should, if necessary, seek the protection from the world and the current legal system which, in effect, bound the Church and the State together. This included an oath of allegiance to the King, George IV.

This had a profound effect on Darby and he began to question the whole subject of the clergy, that is to say clericalism, and with other like minded brethren began the Brethren Movement around 1825 to 1827 He had resigned from his curacy.

He fell from his horse in October 1827 and was badly injured and had medical care in Dublin where he found many new friends.

The Brethren services were simple. Each Sunday Morning they had a breaking of bread service without a vicar, minister or pastor but each brother could stand up and give out a hymn, a prayer or speak from the Bible and another would give thanks for the bread and wine. It was all spontaneous. Nothing was prepared. It was led by the Holy Spirit. No one was salaried and the singing was unaccompanied as it remains to this day in brethren assemblies.

The other main service was the Gospel Meeting usually on Sunday evenings which meetings were evangelical, that is to say that salvation was preached with the urgent need to turn from sin and to the Lord Jesus.

The leaders of the early brethren were mainly professional men. John Gifford Bellett (1795-1864) who also studied law, Edward Cronin (1801-1882) was a pioneer in homeopathy, John Parnall, later Lord Congleton, (1805-1882) who hired a large auction room in Aungier Street, Dublin for the meetings as it may have been thought that the original meeting place a room in Francis Hutchinson's wealthy house at 9 Fitzwilliam Street might deter some people.

Other well-known brethren were Henry Craik (1805-1866) who tutored Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853). Norris was a missionary to Baghdad, when a plague was rife, together with his wife, Mary and then served in India. Craik later joined George Muller (1806-1898) with his work with the Ashley Downs Orphanage in Bristol.

Mention must be made of J G Deck (1807-1884) who wrote some very fine hymns.

The Napoleonic Wars had encouraged Bible study along with the subject of the Second Coming. Brethren developed the thinking about both dispensationalism and premilleniumism which teaches that Christ will come for believers to take them into heaven before the Great Tribulation, sometimes called the pre-tribulation rapture, and His millennial reign.

Dispensationalism can have up to eight ages namely innocence, conscience, civil government, patriarchs, mosaic, grace, millennial kingdom and eternal state.

Darby could not bring himself to be attached to the establishment.

In the early days of his ministry at Powerscourt Castle (1831-1833) people took great interest in his preaching. He would speak about all believers being the Body of Christ, the vital importance of the Word of God, the work of the Holy Spirit drawing attention to Christ, prophecy in the New Testament which spoke of the Lord's Second Coming.

Up to about 70 clergymen and other dissenting ministers came to hear him preach but some wondered where this teaching would go. Darby would speak of the separation from evil which was the grounds for unity and this separation from evil was deemed exclusiveness.

Powerscourt was in County Wicklow.

There were some suggestions that Darby was in love with Lady Theodosia Powerscourt. She was born Theodosia Anne Howard in 1800, was converted in 1819, married Robert Wingfield who became the fifth Viscount Powerscourt in 1809. He died within the first year of the marriage.

Theodosia was a devoted member of the Church of Ireland but withdrew in 1832 to join the Brethren in Aungier Street, Dublin. She was a keen student of the Bible and wrote papers on Genesis 22 and Psalms 22 and 23. She died on 31 December 1836.

Among those present at the Powerscourt meetings were G V Wigram, Sir Edward Denny, Dr Tregelles and J G Bellett.

George Vicesimus Wigram was the twentieth child (hence his middle name) of Sir Robert Wigram, a merchant and ship owner. GVW was born on 29 March 1805, left the Army in 1826 and entered Queen's College, Oxford with a view to taking Holy Orders in the Anglican Church. He went to Ireland in 1830, met Darby and spent about 90 minutes with him.

Wigram married an Irish girl, Fanny Bligh, in 1830 but she died in 1834. On 18 August 1835, he married Catherine Parnall, an aunt to Charles Stewart Parnall (1846 - 1891), the Irish landowner and nationalist. GVW was associated with the Brethren for most of his life. During a visit to Canada in 1867, Catherine died. Wigram ministered in British Guiana in 1871, New Zealand in 1876 and Australia in 1877.

He died 1 January 1879, He was 73.

Sir Edward Denny was an Irish baronet and hymn writer and born on 2 October 1796 and died 13 June 1889. He was the High Sheriff of Kerry in 1827. Associated with the Brethren, he was fascinated by prophecy and prepared diagrams and charts. Latterly, he lived in Bolton Gardens, Kensington. He died, aged 93, and was buried in Paddington Cemetery close to Wigram.

Another scholar was Dr Samuel Prideaux Tregelles born in Falmouth on 30 July 1813. His parents were Quakers and, at a young age, he worked at Neath Abbey's iron works. His preoccupation was with languages such as Hebrew, Greek, Chaldee and Welsh and he was fascinated with the critical study of the New Testament and in seeing old manuscripts such as his intention to see Codex B in the Vatican. He spent five months in Rome in 1845 in an attempt to achieve this. He wrote some fine hymns and died in Plymouth on 24 April 1875.

But to return to Darby. His views had an adverse effect in some quarters where he was deemed a mystic and his teaching was said by some to be contrary to the practical needs of Christianity. But he was a practical man preaching and ministering all over the UK, Ireland, and Guernsey. France, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Italy, Canada, America and New Zealand taking the simple Gospel message and the Word of God to all. His Geneva lectures of 1840 were widely admired.

Darby's travels can be gauged from his letters. The list does not, of course, include every location but those identified in his letters.

1832 Plymouth Limerick
1834 Dublin
1838 Hereford
1839 Stafford Edmondsbury
1843 Switzerland London Kendal
1844 Montpelier
1845 Plymouth Hereford
1847 Guernsey Montpelier Plymouth
1848 Montpelier Leeds Plymouth Keswick Hull Switzerland Pau Nismes
and
1849
1850 Switzerland
1851 London Bristol Hereford
1852 London Hereford
1853 Montpelier
1854 Dublin London
1855 Elberfeld Bath
1857 Rotterdam
1858 Bristol London
1859 Dublin
1860 Nismes France Switzerland Elberfeld
1862 Canada
1864 Pau South of France Switzerland Canada
1865 Ryde Dublin Glasgow

1866 London Dublin Canada New York
 1867 Boston New York Canada
 1868 Canada Dublin USA. Georgetown
 1869 Barbados Jamaica London Geneva Pau
 1869 Elberfeld London Guelph
 and
 1870
 1871 London Dublin Belfast
 1872 USA
 1873 Canada New York Ventnor Bath Hereford London Edinburgh Leeds DUblin
 1874 Belfast Paris Milan Dillenburg Prussia Elberfeeld London
 1874 USA Auckland, New Zealand
 and
 1875
 1876 Toronto
 1879 Pau Liskeard London New Zealand France
 1880 London Hereford Dublin Edinburgh Aberdeen Perth
 1881 London Croydon London Ventnor
 1882 London Bournemouth

Many commented that he not only wanted souls saved but that saved people be united and that there be devotion between believers. He had renounced his fortune in order to travel the world with the Gospel message.

Because of his busy life, he did not make friends in the usual way. The brother of Cardinal Newman, Francis William Newman, was a friend in the early days but they drifted apart on theological matters. Darby was friendly with Benjamin Willis Newton until the Plymouth divergence of 1845.

Darby and Newton met in Oxford in 1830. Newton was a serious man and had considerable influence. He was a preacher at Providence Chapel in Plymouth having Bible readings but not allowing other ministering Brethren to attend.

But he had some strange teachings. To please the Jewish community he said that the Lord had the experience of an unconverted Israelite. Newton also said that as Christ took on sinful flesh he could therefore sin and the assembly he founded in Ebrington Street began to go astray.

In the 1840s there had been some well-known Brethren in the Plymouth meeting. J L Harris expounded the doctrine of grace, H W Soltau the types and sacrifices, W H Cole the godly life and S P Tregelles the Greek New Testament. Often the breaking of bread service was apparently ‘arranged’ as to who was to do what.

Darby withdrew from this meeting and set up another assembly in Plymouth.

The assembly known as Bethesda in Bristol accepted a member from the Ebrington Street meeting in Plymouth. Darby issued a circular of 26th August 1848. Bethseda stood by their decision and Darby cut this assembly off and any other assembly that accepted members from this rogue assembly although these new members were not implicated in Newton’s errors.

This schism gave rise to the beginning of the Open Brethren who were to be independent and autonomous as at Plymouth and Bristol whereas the Exclusives lead by Darby were combining assemblies ‘under one umbrella’.

Darby had left the Church of Ireland partly because it governed its churches as one complete unit but

Darby was now advocating unity among all Exclusives assemblies.

One has to question Darby's decision.

He was a prolific writer with about 1000 letters, a five volume work entitled Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, originally written in French, and a translation of the complete Bible dating from 1867 which was revised in 1872. He wrote Pilgrim Portions and Spiritual Songs, a selection of his own hymns.

His writings tends to be difficult and, indeed, somewhat tortuous at times and parts of his Bible translation is somewhat off-putting.

He is said to be Calvinistic which teaching states that God chose who were to be saved before the foundation of the world, and therefore who would be lost.

Darby wrote, 'Our place was given to us in Christ before the world existed. We are chosen in Him before the foundation of the world.'

This is Scripture (Ephesians 1) but we are chosen to be holy, without blame and before Him in love having been predestinated for that purpose. In other words, predestination and election is that believers be holy, blameless and love the Lord. Predestination has to do with character and holy living.

George Harpur says, 'The purpose of election is clearly stated in that we should be holy and blameless. Positive sanctification and negative blamelessness begins now but is not fully achieved until we are before Him'.

Concerning John 3.16 Darby says Christ lifted up from the earth draws ALL men to himself in order that people will believe in Him and have everlasting life.

It would be wrong to state that Darby was a Calvinist. He talks about God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Darby would endorse the New Testament that whosoever will may come. There is absolutely nothing in Scripture to say or suggest that God has predestined or elected anyone to eternal damnation.

Reverend Cyrus I Scofield's translation of the Bible is in some ways alike to Darby's. Both advocate that Solomon is a type of Christ, as in the Song of Solomon, and that the Bride is a picture of the Church. To an increasing number of saints and scholars, the type of Christ in this Canticle is not Solomon but the Shepherd bidding the Shulamite to come away, Solomon brought her into his banqueting hall with a banner over her of love but she is sick of this love and her real love says 'Rise up, my love and come away (Song of Solomon 2. 4, 5 and 10). The woman says, 'I will arise now and seek him who my soul loves' (Song of Solomon 3. 2) She is out of the banqueting hall and is certainly not seeking Solomon.

Solomon as a type of Christ is anathema. In the Lord Jesus was no sin (1 John 3. 5) yet Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord (1 Kings 11. 6).

People are confused about Darby's position on baptism. He felt that too much was made about this subject. Would he have probably accepted household baptism which would include children and servants of the house and could be performed as sprinkling? Immersing children would not be appropriate. The purpose of household baptism would be to introduce the household to the grounds of Christianity. It must not be confused with infant baptism or christening. Baptism does not bring you into the Church or grant salvation. It is clearly not a means of grace.

Would Darby have approved of baptism by immersion as set out in Romans 6 and approve of those who had received household baptism to be encouraged to undergo believer's baptism on their personal confession of faith.

Of special note we must say that Darby was very generous. He would apply Scriptures to himself and not just to others. He was kind to poor brethren. He had a wonderful capacity to remember people's faces and names. He possessed great patience. He was manly and not weak. If he was speaking at a meeting and a child was falling asleep he would roll up his great coat and allow it to be used as a pillow. On other occasions, particularly when travelling, he would walk up and down with a child in his arms so that the mother could sleep and, remember, Darby never married. He had no plans for personal gain, fame or prosperity.

Yet when it came to the Scriptures he could be ruthless in defending the truth and had an authority about him.

A close friend of Darby was the Ulsterman William Kelly born in May 1821 in Misille, County Down. His father died young and he and his sister were brought up by a devoted mother. He was always religious and conscientious and had plans to enter the Established Church. He graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, where he specialised in languages and the classics receiving the highest honours. He worked with Tregelles on Biblical texts.

He was 24 when he met Darby.

His second wife who died in 1884 was a daughter of the Rev Gipps of Hereford and she was a clever linguist.

He was the tutor to the family of Mr Cachemouille the Rector of Sark and had a close connection with the Channel Island, particularly Guernsey for 20 years. Thereafter he joined the brethren in Blackheath, London where he remained for 35 years until his death on 27 March 1906.

In 1860 he published a book on the book of Revelation which was admired. He was the editor of The Bible Treasury from 1867 until his death.

He was an intimate friend and co-worker with Darby who entrusted his Synopsis of the Bible to him for editing along with some of his other writings and into other languages.

He was a brilliant teacher and wrote many commentaries on the Pentateuch, Judges, Ezra and Nehemiah, Job, Psalms Daniel's 70 weeks, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Minor Prophets, Matthew, Mark, John, Acts, Galatians, Colossians, Hebrews, Epistles to James, Timothy, Thessalonians, Peter, Jude and Christian Doctrine and many other writings.

Darby's Synopsis of the Bible does not deal with some of the issues we may be interested in but in five volumes that could not be possible. His Collective Writings goes into 34 volumes and His Letters could be read as a diary of his travels. There are volumes of his Notes and Jottings, Lectures on the Second Coming and commentaries/studies on Psalms, the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, Acts, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews and the epistles of John. He also wrote a lot of brief tracts on various subjects.

Darby's hymns and poems are varied in quality. As W G Turner points out, the earlier ones seem more ardent.

This one is named The Call and dates from 1832

Lord! let me wait for Thee alone
My life be only this-
To serve Thee , here on earth unknown;
the share Thy heavenly bliss.

By 1845 he was writing about the Saints Rest Above in the Jerusalem of God.

Rest of the saints above
Jerusalem of God!
Who in Thy palaces of love
Thy golden streets have trod.

He was prone to illness and once had an eye disorder and sat in the dark composing in his mind

Hark! ten thousand voices crying
“Lamb of God” with one accord:
Thousand, thousand saints replying
Wake at once the echoing chord.

Travelling in Canada in 1867, he was taken very ill and people feared for his life. During this time and while on the way to recovery he wrote Man of Sorrows which is really a poem. The first verse and two subsequent verses are set out below

O ever homeless Stranger
Thou dearest friend to me
An outcast in a manger
That Thou might'st with us be.

Yet with all grief acquainted,
The Man of Sorrows view
Unmoved — by all unstained —
The path of grace pursue.

Come then, expected Saviour,
Thou Man of Sorrows come!
Almighty, Blessed Deliverer!
And take us to Thee- home!

It is reported that soon after he had written these lines he was taken ill again and confined to bed for some time.

He was a man of contrasts. He could be tender and loving and, in contending for the truth, he could appear controversial and oppressive. He had many followers and inspired enthusiasm and there are still people who admire him but he would not have countenanced that. “For me Christ is the only object of my life,” he said, “If I am useful to any, and the Lord accepts it as service done to Him, I am content”.

After the Berthesda troubles and under his leadership the Brethren prospered. It was after his death on 29 April 1882 that schisms occurred. In the USA there were cleavages and in the UK there was the Stuart problem of 1885, the Raven divergence of 1890, the Glanton problems of 1908, the Tunbridge Wells split of 1909 followed by Ilford (1917) Holloway (1923), Bath (1925) the Taylor cleavages of 1920 and 1929 and the Rentons of 1930.

W G Turner records in detail the last months of JND's life of his dropsy. The abnormal accumulation of fluids, his swollen legs, his respiratory problems and how he was nursed at Sunridge the home of Mr H A Hammond in Bournemouth where he had been since early March 1882. He was visited by many brethren including J B Stoney and Dr Charles Wolston. JND would pray with visitors often when he was in bed. He rediscovered the comfort of Psalm 23 and urged readers to study the writings of John. He took an interest in the churches, that is to say assemblies, as he read the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. He was sometimes apologetic about any trouble he had caused any brethren. When well enough he would sit in the garden and was often cheerful but becoming weaker. Sometimes he would soliloquize to himself. Once he was abrupt with his nurse and later apologised telling her to rebuke him if he ever did this again.

He died at 11.05 on the morning of 29 April 1882. He was 81. He was buried in Bournemouth Cemetery and at the graveside contributions were made by C E Stuart, W J Lowe, J E Trench, Charles Stanley, Captain Kingscote, Dr Wolston with ministry and introduced Darby's hymn Rest of the saints above.

So many well-known brethren came to say farewell to this remarkable man. Some travelled great distances.

John Butler Stoney was born in Ireland on 13 May 1814 and briefly connected with the meeting in Aungier Street. He went to Trinity College, Dublin and gave up law for theology. An epidemic of cholera in Dublin gave him the fear of death and the consideration of his future. He supported some of F E Raven's views which apparently denied the Eternal Sonship, the quality of eternal life and the two natures of the Lord Jesus. Raven left the Greenwich meeting for the one in Bexhill and he was considered Darby's successor.

Stoney developed some mystical views. When ill, he saw bright lights and said that they were God's celestial glory. He died in 1897.

Clarence Esme Stuart was born in 1828 and developed views that were considered erroneous. He said that the Lord Jesus did not propitiation for sin on the Cross but in Heaven after the resurrection and therefore became a High Priest then. A meeting was convened to discuss this and Stuart's meeting in Reading did not attend and so were put out of fellowship.

It is such a pity that these things happened as did further schisms and how it distracts from the sterling work of JND. As Darby was regarded as an Exclusive, and he was, it is deplorable that he is considered in the same light as modern day Exclusives who hold extreme views which Darby did not. To him exclusivism was simply separation from evil.

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J N Darby not a Jesuit