

**Lesson 46 What Was Troubling  
John Nelson Darby, 1826-1827**

# Introduction

- While the British millenarian movement was taking shape between 1800-1830, new views and voices were being formulated and articulated that would change the face of the movement.
- As we saw in Lessons 44 and 45, the early British millenarians were exclusively *historicist* in their approach to the book of Revelation. In the latter half of the 1820s a new brand of millenarianism was taking shape. John Nelson Darby (JND) and the Plymouth Brethren would propagate a view that was not only *futurist* concerning Revelation but also *dispensational* in its general approach to Scripture.
- Our goal in this lesson is to study the early history of how JND came to this conclusion.

# JND's: Family Background and Education

- “John Nelson Darby was born at Westminster, in his father’s London house, on November 18, 1800. He was the youngest son of John Darby, of Markley, Sussex, and of Leap Caste, King’s Country Ireland. His mother was of the Vaughn family, well known in Wales, whilst on his father’s side he was of Norman extraction, the family records going back before the Reformation.” (Turner, 12)
- “His uncle, Admiral Sir Henry Darby who commanded the *Bellerophon* in the Battle of the Nile, was a friend of Lord Nelson, and he, to the great delight of the parents, consented to be one of the sponsors at the christening of his friend’s little nephew. Hence the second Christian name given in compliment to England’s naval hero.” (Turner, 12)
- Those interested in more detailed information regarding JND’s parents or family tree should consult, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography*, by Max S. Weremchuk.

# JND's: Family Background and Education

- “On February 17, 1812, JND entered the Westminster public school . . .The school was, one might say, just around the corner and down the street from where JND lived; yet he was a boarder there. All the sons of Mr. Darby attended this school. . . Westminster was one of the greatest, though not the most fashionable, of English public schools. Only children of rich parents, such as could pay the school fees, attended, though there were scholarships that provided free education for forty out of the three hundred boys attending. The instruction was given by clergymen, and the subject matter consisted almost exclusively of Latin and Greek, with some English composition.” (Weremchuk, 29)
- “In 1815 Mr. Darby sent his youngest son to Dublin, Ireland, for further education; he entered Trinity College on July 3. Most writers, probably following the lead given by W.G. Turner in his biography of JND, say that at this time the entire family came to reside at their ancestral castle in Ireland. This statement is not correct. . .The letters of J.N. Darby’s father from the years 1813 to 1827 all carry addresses from places in England, none from Ireland. . . When JND left England for Ireland in 1815 he went alone. . .Darby was a fellow commoner at Trinity, which meant that he came from a wealthy background, paid double fees and dined with the fellows. Although his sister and brother-in-law had their house not far away from the college, Darby lived at school and not at their home.” (Weremchuk, 31)

# JND's: Family Background and Education

- “Trinity College was an Anglican institution and schooled many gentlemen in classical studies and mathematics. On July 10, 1819, Darby graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree and received the highest honors in the classics: the classical gold medal. After finishing his college studies Darby decided to become a lawyer and began to study law. This must have been a source of great joy for his brother-in-law, who in 1816 was a king's counsel, for he not only hoped that JND would rise to the highest honors in the profession, but also that his penetrating and generalizing genius would do much to bring order into the legal chaos of the day.” (Weremchuk, 31-32)
- “JND was admitted to Lincoln's Inn on November 9, 1819. He had first been admitted to King's Inn, the legal inn in Dublin, and was then recommended and admitted to Lincoln's Inn. He did not attend Lincoln's Inn in London, but remained in Dublin and received his schooling there. . . JND was called to the Irish bar on January 21, 1822. He was now a barrister. In Ireland a common citizen had to submit his complaint quietly to an attorney-today known as a solicitor-who then instructed the barrister to plead the cause in open court by legal argument.” (Weremchuk, 32)

# JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- Darby scholar, R.A. Huebner reports that JND was 20 or 21 years old when he was converted. (Huebner, 3) Max S. Weremchuk concurs with Huebner regarding when Darby was converted. Weremchuk states:
  - “In his twenty-first year, JND was converted to God and the entire course of his life changed. The thought that Darby was converted at the age of eighteen is wholly unfounded. This statement was made in one of his earliest biographies and has been accepted by nearly all writers since. Darby nowhere spoke of this, but rather he said repeatedly that after being under “the rod of the law” for seven years after his conversion, he was finally delivered at the end of 1827. The year of his conversion then was 1820 or 1821. His mention at the age of forty-five of having been converted twenty years ago was only a rounding off, which he often did, and not an exact statement. William Kelly confirmed the correctness of the 1820/1821 date by writing in a letter that Darby was converted while a barrister (or studying to be one). . . Yet, as hinted above, Darby did not at once have peace of soul after his conversion, for conversion (repentance) and the assurance of the forgiveness of sins are two different things.” (Weremchuk, 33-34)

## JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- “He had gone through a severe trial of soul with his conscience under law. This means that his soul was seeking acceptance with God upon the basis of performance rather than resting fully upon the Person and work of Christ for the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins, i.e., the knowledge of being in the forgiven position.” (Huebner, 3) He wrote:
  - “In my own case, I went through deep exercise of soul before there was a trace of peace, and it was not till after six or seven years that I was delivered.” (*Letters*, 2:310)
  - “. . . I fasted in Lent so as to be weak in the body as the result of it; ate no meat on weekdays—nothing till evening on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, then a little or nothing; observed strictly the weekly fasts, too. I went to my clergyman always if I wished to take the sacrament, that he might judge of the matter. I held apostolic succession fully, and the channels of grace to be there only.” (*Collected Writings*, 18:146)

## JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- “The principle of which you speak . . . is *monasticism*, where that is sincere. I gave way to it at the beginning of my conversion. I said to myself, If I fast two days, three would be better, seven better still. Then that would not do to go on, but I pursued the system long enough. It led to nothing, except the discovery of one's own powerlessness. I took Romans 6, and wondered at it, but I understood nothing of it. One cannot put the flesh to death, except by killing oneself. It is as dead and risen with Christ that we mortify our *members* (the apostle will not allow that we live in these things) which are upon the earth; and, in order to do it, we must have not only life, but deliverance by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit dwelling in us - we must be set free. "If ye then be risen. . . mortify therefore," etc. (Col. 3)” (*Letters*, 2:429-430)

# JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- “Darby felt that the so-called Christian world was characterized by deep ingratitude toward Christ, and he himself longed for complete devotedness to the Lord’s work. And so, in search of relief from the unceasing anguish of his soul, he followed the advice of those who were more advanced in ecclesiastical things and had himself ordained in the Anglican Church. His decision to be ordained must have been made sometime in the year 1824, for in the Darby collection there is a receipt dated December 9, 1824, for making a clergyman’s gown. . . Many writers have seen Darby’s deliverance from inner bondage as his real reason for ordination. This is not true. In fact he did not feel drawn to take up a regular post. He became ordained in the hope of finding inner peace and not because he already possessed it.” (Weremchuk, 36-37)
- “Darby was ordained as a deacon on August 7, 1825 by Bishop William Bissett in Raphoe Cathedral. The *Christian Examiner and Church of Ireland Magazine* for October 1825 does not mention the name *Darby* among the ordinations that took place at Raphoe Cathedral on August 7. The list does include the name *Darley*, and this is a misprint for *Darby*, as *b* in written form of then has the appearance of *le*.” (Weremchuk, 38)

## JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- “Darby’s decision not only disappointed his brother-in-law Pennefather, but also called for a violent reaction from his father. His father, it is said, not at all in agreement with his youngest son’s action, disinherited him.” (Weremchuk, 38)
  - “I was a lawyer; but feeling that, if the Son of God gave Himself for me I owed myself entirely to Him, and that the so-called Christian world was characterized by deep ingratitude towards Him, I longed for complete devotedness to the work of the Lord, my chief thought was to get round amongst the poor Catholics of Ireland. I was induced to be ordained. I did not feel drawn to take up a regular post, but, being young in the faith and not yet knowing deliverance, I was governed by the feeling of duty towards Christ, rather than by the consciousness that *He* had done *all* and that I was redeemed and saved; consequently it was easy to follow the advice of those who were more advanced than myself in the Christian world. 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.” (*Letters*, 3:297)

## JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- In 1826 JND became a priest in the Church of England. As such he had an unusually fruitful evangelic ministry among Catholics in his parish of County Wicklow, Ireland. (Floyd Elmore entry in Couch, 82) Reflecting upon this period of his life Darby wrote:
  - “. . . I was troubled in the same way when a clergyman, but never had the smallest shadow of it since. I judge it as Satan: but going from cabin to cabin to speak of Christ, and with souls, these thoughts sprang up, and if I sought to quote a text to myself it seemed a shadow and not real. I ought never to have been there, but do not think that this was the cause, but simply that I was not set free according to Romans 8.” (*Letters*, 3:453)
  - “I preached nothing but Christ, and had not peace, and had no business to be in any public ministry.” (*Letters*, 2:375)

## **JND's: Conversion and Ordination**

- “Archbishop Magee delivered a charge in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin on Tuesday, October 10, 1826. . . Spoke strongly against the Roman Catholic system, and in favor of the Church of England and Ireland, praising it especially for its loyalty to the state. He saw the church and the state as two aspects of the same Christian community, harmonized in the acknowledgement of the king as the supreme sovereign within the realm. The state had the right of intervention in things spiritual, though no authority to order spiritual affairs (for example, ordain ministers); the church had the right of comment on things temporal, though it acknowledged, and subjected itself to, the state. The sovereign’s duty was to establish the best religion.” (Weremchuk, 44)

# JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- J.G. Bellett, a good friend of Darby's recorded his thoughts regarding the sentiments of the Archbishop. Bellett states,
  - “It was in that year 1827 (date is not correct see above point) that the late Archbishop of Dublin, in a charge delivered to the clergy of his diocese, recommended that a petition should go up to the legislature seeking for increased protection for them in the discharge of their ministerial duties as the teachers of religion in these lands. John Darby was then a curate in the county Wicklow, and often did I visit in his mountain parish. This charge of his Diocesan greatly moved him; he could not understand the common Christianity of such a principle, as it assumed that the ministers in doing their business as witnesses against the world for a rejected Jesus should, on meeting the resistance of the enemy, turn round and seek security from the world. This greatly offended him. He printed his objections to such a principle in a pretty large pamphlet, and with publishing it or putting it on sale, sent copies of it to all the clergy in the diocese. All this had a very decided influence on his mind, for I remember him at one time as a very exact churchman, as I may speak, but it was evident that his mind had now received a shock, and it was never again what it had been; however, he continued in his mountain curacy, at times as a clergyman visiting distant parts of the country, either to preach sermons or to speak at some meeting of the religious societies.” (Bellett, 2-3)

# JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- “In response to the archbishop’s charge and the petition itself. Darby wrote a paper entitled *Considerations Addressed to the Archbishop of Dublin and the Clergy Who Signed the Petition to the House of Commons for Protection*. However, Darby “suppressed” (as he said) this paper after writing it. Only later, after the archbishop in a sermon required oaths of allegiance for the admittance of Catholic converts to the established church, did Darby complete the paper, have it printed and sent it privately to the archbishop and clergy. He called it “the first germinating of the truth which has since developed itself in the Church of God.” (Weremchuk, 45-46)
- The following is a quotation from the prefatory note add to JND’s paper before it was printed:
  - “It was sent privately to the Archbishop and Clergy, having been written some time before it was printed, and withheld, from anxiety as to the justness of the step; the course of the Archbishop and Clergy, with which I had from circumstances nothing personally to do, having greatly tried my spirit, and I was about twenty-six years old at the utmost, when it was written. I may mention that just at that time the Roman Catholics were becoming Protestants at the rate of 600 to 800 a week. The Archbishop (Magee) imposed, within the limits of his jurisdiction, the oaths of allegiance and supremacy; and the work everywhere instantly ceased. I remember Mr. R. Daly, since a prelate of the Establishment, saying to me after receiving it, You ought to become a Dissenter. I said, No; you have got into the wrong, and you want to put me there - but that you will not do. I attach no importance to the paper, which I have never read since, but as the first germinating of truth which has since developed itself in the Church of God.” (*Collected Writings*, 1:1. Cp. 20:288.)

## **JND's: Conversion and Ordination**

- “In the paper Darby wrote of denying the protection of the church by the state, the apprehension of the believer’s life as being in Heaven (at this time the unities of believers as being due to a common faith in Christ; later he came to see this unity as being through the Spirit’s work of baptizing all believers into the body of Christ), the church as being composed of a heavenly people, the aim of Christian ministry, the position of the clergy, and of suffering with Christ. Darby held Christ, and not the king, to be the true head of the church. The charge simply substituted the king for the pope. Darby felt that Christ’s ministers should not be spared from a share, little as it might be, in the sufferings of Christ. Such suffering would affect their daily lives and stamp them with Christian character.”  
(Weremchuk, 46)

# JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- Please carefully consider the following lengthy section from Darby's paper:
  - “We have the following public acts - a Charge from the Metropolitan, stating the ground on which the Church stands, and then Petitions forwarded by the instrumentality of the hierarchy, seeking the exercise of civil authority for the protection of that Church as a body in this country. To these I beg attention. It is to be remarked that the Charge is stated to be published at the request of the Clergy, and the Petition is signed by a numerous body of them to say the least, and ostensibly is the act of them as a body interested in the cause of true religion in this country. As there are, thank God! many in the orders of the Church of Ireland who are zealous ministers of divine truth, and as they might seem included in the above general body, it is to them particularly that I address myself. I am not going to discuss the merits of the Archbishop's Charge at all. I purposely decline it. My business is with the principles contained and expounded in it. It amounts to a claim on behalf of the Established Church to protection from the civil Sovereign, founded on these two positions - that the civil Sovereign is bound and has accordingly the right to choose the best religion for his people, and that the Established Church has every character on which such a choice ought to depend; but, in doing this, the Charge gives a statement of the foundation, nature, and office of the Church, in the principles of which no clergyman zealous in his office as a minister of the Church of Christ, could, I submit, acquiesce.

# JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- What is the Church of Christ in its purpose and perfection? And our Lord has taught us to ascribe whatever is inconsistent with this to the hand of an enemy. It is a congregation of souls redeemed out of 'this naughty world' by God manifest in the flesh, a people purified to Himself by Christ, purified in the heart by faith, knit together, by the bond of this common faith in Him, to Him their Head sitting at the right hand of the Father, having consequently their conversation (*commonwealth*) in heaven, from whence they look for the Saviour, the Lord of glory; Phil. 3: 20. As a body, therefore, they belong to heaven; *there* is their portion in the restitution of all things, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord. On earth they are, as a people, necessarily subordinate; they are nothing and nobody; their King is in heaven, their interests and constitution heavenly. "My kingdom is not of this world: if it were, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews." As such, consequently, they have no power. The result is, that they are formed into a spiritual community; they are raised, by their Head and centre and source of hope and object of allegiance being in heaven, to be heavenly. They are delivered in spirit out of this present evil world, and become heavenly, spiritual, in their connections, interests, thoughts, and prospects; while their habits on earth are those, by necessary consequence, of pilgrims and strangers, adorning (by consistent humility, gentleness, patience, and kindness) the grace of which they have been made partakers, through faith which works by love, while they avow and are in their own persons witnesses of the divine dominion. Their personal and common delights are correspondent, and their activities flow from this spring and have their motive and their order in the interests of this kingdom of divine love and grace.

# JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- What is the Papacy? Satan's fiction to answer to all this. While men are kept down in the lowest desires of a depraved world, in the bondage of the corrupt affections of a nature alienated from the gift of God, it presents a head on earth, earthly in his interests and in his objects, knitting together in a body, not a people separated out of the world to spiritual objects, but one tied by the closest interests to maintain his earthly supremacy, and with it their own importance upon earth, and in an earthly way; and by this universal and astonishing scheme of antichristianity, which is antitheism, precluding the application of the divine word, the instrument of divine sovereignty, to the souls of men. In short, the system of Popery I look upon as an entire counterpart of the Christian scheme, set up by Satan on the decay of faith to hold its place, uniting men to an earthly head and to each other by those interests from which Christianity delivers, and keeping the world in bondage, instead of leading men to heavenly things out of those interests, to be humbled in the presence of the world's dominion. The members of the papal system will accordingly be found, in their interests, objects, and activities, such as would result from such a system. We know, blessed be God! that, in result, the kingdom of His Son will be glorified in the splendour of its great Head, and the destruction of that antichristian counterpart, by which Satan has deceived the nations under the pretence of Christianity.

# JND's: Conversion and Ordination

- Further, what is the ministry of the Church of Christ? They are as ambassadors in Christ's stead, beseeching men to be reconciled to God, and ministering that grace and truth of which the fulness is in Him, according to the wisdom given unto them, gathering that very congregation of souls of which I have spoken, and edifying them when gathered.”  
(*Collected Writings*, 1:4-6)
- JND's mind was slowly being awakened to what he now felt to be the truth. Darby's paper appeared but had little effect. “The Reverend Robert Daley said to him after receiving a copy of the paper, “You ought to become a Dissenter.” (Dissenters were those who disagreed with the doctrines or practices of the Church of England and Ireland and formed their own separate companies.) “No,” Darby replied, “you have got into the wrong, and you want to put me there—but that you will not do.”” (Weremchuk, 46)

## **JND's: Conversion and Ordination**

- It does not follow from his thoughts concerning state protection that he thought of joining the non-conformists (“dissenters”) to the state-supported Church of England. That he also rejected, as we can see from the citation above. (Huebner, 5)
- In our next study we shall focus our attention on JND's period of solitude between December 1826 and January 1827 when he came to understand many important dispensational truths.

# Works Cited

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