

Sunday, December 4, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 48 Darby and the Founding of the Plymouth Brethren

JND's Separation from the Church of England

- “The truths we have been tracing led to JND’s separation from the Church of England, as he says in the following extracts. Notice also, once again the interconnectedness of the various truths which were made good in his soul.” (Huebner, 22)
 - “It was the unity of the assembly of God, of those who are united to Christ by the Holy Ghost, which forced me to leave the Anglican church, and prevented me from joining any other; and I have found in the word of God all the directions needed for walking according to the will of God, amid the ruin and confusion which surrounds us. I own then every true Christian as a member of the body of Christ, but I cannot walk with them when they do not walk according to the will of God, according to the word.” (*Letters*, 2:386)
 - “We began to meet in Dublin, Ireland, 1827-28.* It was not dissatisfaction with the apostolic succession of the English national episcopal body. I had found peace to my own soul by finding my oneness with Christ, that it was no longer myself as in the flesh before God, but that 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 to Christ in heaven: I at once felt that all the parish was not that. The tract I then published was no attack upon anybody, but upon the unity of the church of Christ. When I looked around to find this unity I found it nowhere: if I joined one set of Christians I did not belong to another. The church, God's church, was broken up, and the members scattered among various self-formed bodies. I found membership in scripture was not membership of a voluntary association on earth, but membership of Christ, a hand, a foot, &c. And as the Holy Ghost had formed one body on descending on the day of Pentecost (1 Cor. 12), so ministry was those whom He qualified for such or such a service. So in Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4: 10. At the same time Acts 2 and 4 made me feel how dreadfully far we had all got from the true effect of His presence. I found, however, that wherever two or three were met in Christ's name He would be in our midst, and acted on the promise with three other brethren and the wife of one of them; and never thought to go beyond thus meeting the need of our consciences and hearts according to the word. God was doing a work I had no idea of myself, and it spread over the world.” (*Letters*, 1:515)
- In connection with leaving the Church of England, Darby later wrote:
 - “The cross is the end of the world, and it is the starting-point for the church! The goal before her is the coming of Christ. Between the two we have the Supper which connects the two points. These are the three fundamental principles of the church, which I immediately saw to be laid down when I left Nationalism.” (*Collected Works*, 20:343 Note)
 - “It was not the details of the sacramental and priestly system which drove me from the Establishment, deadly as they are in their nature. It was that I was looking for the body of Christ (which was not there, but in all the parish perhaps

not one converted person); and collaterally because I believed in a divinely appointed ministry. If Paul had come, he could not have preached, he had never been ordained; if a wicked ordained man, he had his title and must be recognized as a minister: the truest minister of Christ unordained could not. It was a system contrary to what I found in scripture. It was clear, a multitude of sects did not furnish the one body I looked for.” (*Collected Works*, 14:293)

- Following J.G. Bellett’s visit to JND in Feb. 1827 (see Lesson 47 for details), both JND and J.G. Bellett were still connected with the Church of England. J.G. Bellett’s daughter’s opinion was that “it must have been about this time that my father withdrew from the Communion of the Church of England.” (Bellett. *Recollections*, 27) J.G. Bellett himself stated the following in a letter to Mr. J. McAllister,
 - “I continued, however, in Dublin, and he more generally in the county Wicklow, but he had introduced me to dear F. Hutchinson, whose memory is very dear to me and much honoured by me. He and I found we had much in common, and dear Francis too. Dissatisfied as I was, we went occasionally to the dissenting chapels together, but we had not much sympathy with the tone prevalent. The sermons we heard had generally, perhaps, less of the sympathy of Christ in them than what we had in the pulpits of the Established Church, and the things of God were dealt with more for the intellect and by the intellect, than, as we judged, suited the proper cravings of the renewed and spiritual mind. I believe I may say this for him as well as for myself, so we held on (loosely though it was) by the Established Church still.” (Bellett. *Interesting Reminiscences*, 3)
- One day in 1827 J.G. Bellett was talking with A.N. Groves:
 - “Edward Cronin had been by profession an Independent, and a member of York Street, but his mind at the same time was under a like influence, I may say, with us all. In a private room he had the Lord’s Supper with, I believe, three others, while I was going still to Sandford Chapel and J. N. Darby was still in county Wicklow as a clergyman. In the summer of 1829 our family was at Kingstown, and dear F. Hutchinson at Bray. We saw each other occasionally, and spoke of the things of the Lord, but where he went on a Sunday at that time I cannot tell. I attended the Scotch Church at Kingstown, where all who were understood to be new-born were welcome. But on returning to Dublin in the November of that year, F. Hutchinson was quite prepared for communion in the name of the Lord with all, whosoever they might be, who loved Him in sincerity, and proposed to have a room in his house in Fitzwilliam Square for that purpose. He did so, designing, however, so to have it that if any were disposed to attend the services in the Parish Church or Dissenting chapels they might not be hindered; and he also prescribed a certain line of things as to the services of prayer, singing and teaching that should be found among us each day. E. Cronin was prepared for this fully. I joined, but not, I think at all with the same liberty and decision of mind. Several others also were ready, and just at this time we first knew William Stokes. Thus we continued from November, 1829.” (Bellett. *Interesting Reminiscences*, 5-6)
- “Here, as elsewhere, J.G. Bellett has assigned the wrong year (in this case 1829 should be 1827) to certain events (unless someone tampered with the dates in his reminiscences before printing them). Notice that he assigned November as the month when the

- breaking of bread began. It was near the end of 1827 that the breaking of bread began as we shall see. . . Some of the histories and articles err by following J.G. Bellett's two year errors instead of what JND repeatedly indicated. At any rate, J.G. Bellett's account provides us with a little idea of what was transpiring after his visit with JND in early Feb. 1827. It was between then and when the breaking of bread began at the end of the year that JND left the Church of England." (Huebner, 23)
- "It appears that for a time after the period of solitude (Dec. 1826-Jan. 1827) he continued in ministry to the Irish mountaineers among whom he had been serving since he was ordained deacon in Aug. 1825. The reference to the two years and three months refers back to his ordination as a deacon in Aug. 1825. This shows that he left his ministry in the mountains in Nov. 1827. It was perhaps two months before this that he left the Church of England." (Huebner, 23)
 - In a letter dated Feb. 27, 1901, W. Kelly said that JND left the Church of England in 1827. The following references also show that 1827 was the correct year.
 - Letter of JND dated March 5, 1877—"I have been walking in this way for **fifty years**. . ." (*Letters*, 2:385) 1877-50=1827
 - Letter of JND dated June 1866—"My idea is that he is aiming at Christians gathering together without knowing where God will lead them - just as I did **thirty-nine years** ago, only I had got the idea of the church, one by its union with Christ." (*Letters*, 1:451) 1866-39=1827
 - Letter of JND dated August 20, 1876—"I have worked **unceasingly forty-nine years**. I was set to it as positive ministry four years before: I preached nothing but Christ, and had not peace, and had no business to be in any public ministry." (*Letters*, 2:376) 1876-49=1827
 - Speaking more generally, on Feb. 20, 1869 JND wrote, "I left the Establishment more than forty years ago, because I did not think it the church of God." (*Collected Works*, 20:288)
 - In a letter dated September 21, 1876 JND stated, "We cannot mix ourselves up with evil and testify against those who are in it. But grace and patience are needful. "If thou take forth," God said to Jeremiah (chap. 15), "the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth." This verse acted powerfully upon my mind fifty years ago, when I began; for in a few days it will be fifty years since I left the camp." (*Letters*, 2:379)
 - The evidence, then, points to Sept. 1827 for the resignation of his curacy. Speaking of when he left the Church of England JND wrote: "When I left it, I published the tract on "The Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ." (*Collected Works*, 1:36) This does not mean immediately upon leaving, but states the order. He published that paper in 1828. He left in 1827, Concerning this paper, W. Kelly said:
 - "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ." (Dublin, 1828.) This is as fresh and distinct as possible, and in a practical point of view. It would be impossible for any godly soul who accepted that paper as a just

application of divine truth to the actual state of Christendom, to continue a churchman or a dissenter. And in fact neither the writer nor those who felt with him is to this remained at that date in the denominations of which they had previously been members or ministers.” (Kelly, *The Achill Herald* Recollections, 6:254)

- “It is an interesting phenomenon that writers on this history will not believe JND concerning when he left the Church of England. He stated that he left before he wrote the 1828 paper. And with the evidence before us it is an astonishing phenomenon that historians continue to assert that JND left the Church of England in 1834.” (Huebner, 24)

Separation Led to Scriptural Assembling (Late Nov. or Early Dec. 1827)

- “Edward Cronin, who was at the first meeting for the breaking of bread with JND and the two others, lived as long as JND and did not contradict JND’s account of this, including that it took place in 1827.” (Huebner, 27)
- Andrew Miller, author of *The Brethren: A Brief Sketch of Their Origin, Progress, and Testimony* states the following regarding their first meeting:
 - “In the winter of 1827-28, four Christian men, who had for some time been exercised as to the condition of the entire professing church, agreed, after much conference and prayer, to come together on Lord’s day morning for the breaking of bread, as the early Christians did, counting on the Lord to be with them, namely, Mr. Darby, Mr. (afterwards Dr.) Cronin, Mr. Bellett, and Mr. Hutchinson. Their first meeting was held in the house of Mr. Hutchinson, No. 9, Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin.” (Miller, 9)
- According to JND’s own testimony, the Brethren began meeting in Dec. 1827 at the latest or Nov. 1827 at the earliest. (Huebner, 27)
 - Letter of JND dated Dec. 19, 1877—“I have the fullest persuasion that the testimony we have is God’s testimony for the last days - the gospel Paul preached, brought out to light - what I never suspected when I began in this city, just **fifty years ago** now. I sought to walk for my own conscience as the word taught me.” (*Letters*, 2:422)
 - “We began to meet in Dublin, Ireland, 1827-28.” (*Letters*, 1:515)
 - “At first, when I left the Episcopal church, there was no one with whom I could walk; I was led on and guided simply by the word of God. Afterwards four of us met together; I thought only of satisfying my conscience according to the word of God.” (*Letters*, 2:386)
- Despite having formally left the Church of England, JND still accepted invitations to preach in their churches for a time.
 - “It is very often the question whether the *way of doing* a particular thing is right. By the manner you may do a great good, or a great deal of evil. Am I to accept the evil in order to do good, or am I to trust the Lord? What God is now doing is

separating the precious from the vile; and this is not a matter about which I have no feeling. It is often pressed upon my spirit, Am I to put water in the wine that people may drink it? At first, I did not care where I went - into a church or elsewhere - to preach the gospel, or into a Methodist chapel, and so on. I have no principle that directly hinders me, but one day, at Plymouth, they brought me short up, for I had in the vestry to write down who ordained me, and this brought me to a point. There was the question straight out: Am I to accept that, in order to get an opportunity to preach to five thousand people?" (*Collected Works*, 26:363)

- Concerning the question of who started the Brethren Movement JND stated the following:
 - "Four persons who were pretty much in the same state of soul as myself, came together to my lodging; we spoke together about these things, and I proposed to them to break bread the following Sunday, which we did. Others then joined us. I left Dublin soon after, but the work immediately began at Limerick, a town in Ireland, and then in other places. Two years later (1830), I went to Cambridge and Oxford." (*Letters*, 3:301)
 - "We began to meet in Dublin, Ireland, 1827-28. It was not dissatisfaction with the apostolic succession of the English national episcopal body. I had found peace to my own soul by finding my oneness with Christ, that it was no longer myself as in the flesh before God, but that 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 to Christ in heaven: I at once felt that all the parish was not that." (*Letters*, 1:515)
 - "I was myself the beginning of what the world calls Plymouth brethren, though we began in Dublin. The name Plymouth arose from the earliest publications which attracted attention issuing thence, and was so far harmless, as no human name was attached to them; one cannot help the world giving some. The great question is, what the word of God says. . . . We have the promise which first led me to meet, that wherever two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, He is in their midst, only it must be in the unity of the body." (*Letters*, 2:208)
 - "Besides the value I had for you, it was not a small thing to me that you, with dear C. (E. Cronin) and H. (F. Hutchinson), were one of the first four, who with me, through God's grace the fourth, began to break bread in Dublin, what I believe was God's own work: much weakness I own in carrying it out, little faith to make good the power which was and is in the testimony, but God's own testimony I am assured - in every respect, even as to the gospel to sinners, what He was doing. I knew, for one, in no wise, the bearing and importance of what I was about, though I felt in lowliness we were doing God's work. The more I go on, the more I have seen of the world, the more of Christians, the more I am assured that it was God using us for His testimony at this time." (*Letters*, 1:383)
- Concerning the last quotation in the above section, Huebner states the following, "According to an old copy of a printed letter by JND entitled "Heart to Heart," the last letter JND wrote to J.G. Bellett. . . Could you really believe that JND was lying in this letter to his good friend JGB, who was present at the first breaking of bread together?" (Huebner, 29)

The Testimony in Ireland and England

- JND described what followed in the ignition of the meeting in Fitzwilliam Square, Ireland, in Dec. 1827:
 - “Others then joined us. I left Dublin soon after, but the work immediately began at Limerick, a town in Ireland, and then in other places.” (*Letters*, 3:301)
- According to N. Noel, author of *The History of the Brethren*, “there were four or five other small meetings in Ireland.” (quoted in Huebner, 47)
- In early 1829 JND was threatened to stop his preaching in Ireland. Consider the following letter dated the 2nd of February 1829.
 - “Dear Sir, I hope you will take notice for your own sake not be Disturbing the people of Corofin—by you swaddling business coming like a thief in the night seducing the people of Corofin by you Bible business and if you don’t mind what I say will meet with you fate at last in Corofin so darby return to your own Native place we have heard you are and what your sceaming way of living is so you Rascal we have listened a long time to you But no longer make off as soon as possible. . . Written by Captain Rock” (quoted in Huebner, 47)
- J.G. Bellett offers the following account of what transpired as the movement picked up steam.
 - “Some time before this (the commencement of the breaking bread) I had become acquainted with J. Parnell (now Lord Congleton), and in that month (November, 1829 {1827}) and through the spring of 1830, he was occasionally in Dublin and frequently amongst us. He became very familiar with Edward Cronin, and in the month of May, purposing to let the Lord’s Table in the midst of us become somewhat more of a witness, he took a large room in Aungier Street belonging to a cabinet maker. There the meeting was transferred during that month. This tried me still more — the publicity of it was too much for me. I instinctively shrank. F. Hutchinson, as I remember, would also rather have continued in the private house, so that I believe I did not join them for one or two Sundays, and I am not sure that he did, but the others were there at once. J. Parnell, W. Stokes, E. Cronin and a few sisters, and shortly several were added.” (Bellett, *Interesting Reminiscences*, 7)
 - “In the summer of 1831, the mission party to Bagdad was formed. Mr Groves had been there for some months previously, and E. Cronin and his sister and J. Parnell with two or three more were desirous of joining him. . . They sailed, and we continued our room in Aungier Street. It was poor material we had, dear James, and we had one or two solemn and awful cases of backsliding. There was but little spiritual energy and much that was poor treasure for a living Temple, but we held together in the Lord’s mercy and care, I believe advancing in the knowledge of His mind. The settled order of worship that we had in Fitzwilliam Square gave place gradually, teaching and exhorting were first made common duties and services, while prayer was restricted under the care of two or three

who were regarded as elders, but gradually all this yielded. In a little time no appointed or recognised eldership was understood to be in the midst of us, and all service was of a free character, the presence of God through the Spirit being more simply believed and used. In the year 1834 many more were added, and that year J. N. Darby being in Dublin, it was a question with him whether he should come and help us, as God might give him grace, in Aungier Street, or preach, as he had been invited, at the Asylum in Leeson Street, but he was all but detached from the Church of England. He visited different places either that year or the next, and amongst them *Oxford, Plymouth, Cork and Limerick, ministering wherever he might the truth which God had given him from His Word, and I doubt not, from what I remember, he found in all these places other evidences of the independent work of the Spirit of God on the hearts and consciences of the saints of which I have spoken. In Limerick and Cork occasionally preaching in the pulpits of the Established Church, he also met Christians in private houses, and the influence of his ministry was greatly blessed, light and refreshment visited many a soul, and that, too, of an order to which they had before been strangers; and by invitation going from Wexford to Plymouth, he found the same there, and that in those distant places which had, perhaps, never been combined before in any one kindred influence, this grace was magnified, and happy promising little groups of saints, who sought relief from their heaviness, were found in these places. ." (Bellett, *Interesting Reminiscences*, 7)

- In the preceding quotation from Bellett, he mentions that JND traveled to "Oxford, Plymouth, Cork, and Limerick ministering wherever he might the truth which God had given him from his Word." R.A. Huebner maintains based upon the correspondence of F.W. Newman and B.W. Newton that JND first visited Oxford, England in early 1829 followed by a subsequent visit in July 1830. (Huebner, 51)
- As with many things pertaining to the history of the Brethren movement the settling of dates regarding the beginnings at Plymouth has been difficult. Concerning a later visit to Oxford, in 1830, JND remarked:
 - "About the year 1831," says Mr. Darby in a letter to a friend, "I went to Oxford where many doors were open, and where I found Mr. Wigram and Mr. Jarratt. Subsequently in calling on Mr. F. Newman I met Mr. Newton, who asked me to go down to Plymouth, which I did. On arriving I found in the house Captain Hall, who was already preaching in the villages. We had reading meetings, and ere long began to break bread. Though Mr. Wigram began the work in London, he was a great deal at Plymouth." (Miller, 40)
- We do not know how long JND stayed in and around Plymouth after he arrived there in May 1830. He was there in Jan. 1831, as indicated by the fact that his *Collected Writings* 2:42 has a letter of his dated "Plymouth Jan. 13, 1831."
- Huebner quotes from primary sources which indicate that an old dissenting chapel was purchased by the saints in Plymouth for hosting meetings. (Huebner, 53) It appears that these things happened during the first half of 1832. On April 13, 1832 JND wrote

- “Plymouth, I assure you, has altered the face of Christianity to me, from finding brethren, and they acting together. There are, as you know, individuals here, but scattered as missionaries over the country.” (*Letters*, 3:230)
- “The name Plymouth Brethren derived from the fact that Christians were gathered together to Christ’s name at Plymouth, which became well known.” (Huebner, 54)

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