

Lesson 58 Coming to America: JND's North American Ministry

Introduction

- In our last study we surveyed the history of the American millenarian movement between 1800 and 1860. In doing so we observed the following phenomena:
 - Postmillennialism dominated American eschatology for the majority of these years.
 - Fringe groups such as the Mormons and Shakers diverged from the theological establishment. Shakers taught that the Second Advent had already occurred with the “incarnation of God in Mother Ann Lee, the female and complementary form to the Christ of the first advent.” (Sandeem, 48-49) On the other hand, Mormon founder Joseph Smith taught an apocalyptic and premillennial eschatology that was not always clearly articulated. While looking for the return of Christ the Mormons labored to build the New Jerusalem in Utah.” (Sandeem, 47-48)
 - William Miller by far the most orthodox of the American millenarians adopted and articulated the historicist premillennial position at the same time Edward Irving and others were teaching the same thing in Britain. The failure of Miller’s prediction that the Second Coming would occur on October 22, 1844 did great harm to premillennial movement in the United States. (Blomberg and Chung, 7)
 - The Great Disappointment caused American Christians to either: 1) embrace postmillennialism, 2) seek out other forward thinking movements such as the Social Gospel, or 3) embrace a new type of premillennialism that was being imported from Great Britain, dispensational premillennialism.
- In this lesson we want to begin looking at how the dispensational teachings of JND impacted the American millenarian movement.

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- “The great period of expansion for the Plymouth Brethren movement is dated from 1832 to 1845, and it was during the first part of this period that Darby . . . did most of his writing. Plymouth Brethren missionaries scattered to many countries all over the world, and a flood of books and tracts from Brethren leaders made their way to the Continent and to America.” (Kraus, 46)
- “Darby himself visited Canada as early as 1859. He was back for extended visits in 1864 and 1866. He came to the United States in 1870, 1872-1873, and in 1874. During this time he visited New York, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Boston, and Philadelphia.” (Kraus, 46)
- In his book titled, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* H.A. Ironside states the following regarding the decade of the 1870s:
 - “In the 70’s many of these preachers from Scotland and the north of Ireland came to America and labored with great blessing, particularly in the province of Ontario and in nearby eastern states. Later the movement extended all over the two countries.” (Ironside, 73)

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- Sandeen reports that “Darby visited the United States and Canada seven times between 1862 and 1877, actually residing in and traveling through the two countries for nearly seven out of those sixteen years.” (Sandeen, 71)
- “His activities in North America began in Toronto during the autumn of 1862. Except for visits to Montreal and Ottawa, and one short trip to Halifax, Darby restricted his ministry to the area between London and Toronto, Ontario. The Brethren mission in this area had already been initiated when he arrived, and Darby gave credit to a Mr. R. Evans as the “founder of the work in Canada. An annual conference for Brethren was begun in Guelph and proved to be a good occasion both for strengthening the faith of new converts and for winning additional converts.” (Sandeen, 71) JND stated the following regarding these Canadian meetings:
 - “The evangelists had brought so many younger converts, that the beginning of the conference gave less communion than earlier ones, but met the need of the moment. . . Many came from different parts of the States, and all our evangelists were there, some under tents. The happiest spirit reigned throughout.” (*Letters*, 2:87)

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- JND ventured into the United States for four weeks during his first American trip and was not too impressed with the state of the American church.
 - “The church is more worldly in America than anywhere you would find it, that is, the professing bodies, the world - professedly such - inordinately wicked; yet I doubt not many Christians, and some really devoted ones.” (*Letters*, 1:351)
- “Except for his journey from Chicago to San Francisco in the spring of 1875, when he was traveling to New Zealand, and the return trip in June 1876, Darby appears to have confined his United States itineraries to the area from Detroit to Chicago to Saint Louis in the Midwest and to the area from Boston to New York in the East. He generally traveled from Chicago and Detroit to New York and Boston by way of Canada.” (Sandeep, 72)

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- “At first Darby was attracted to the United States by the number of his converts who had emigrated from Europe.” (Sandeem, 72) JND wrote the following regarding his trip to America in 1862:
 - “My object was to visit the French and Swiss brethren, which, save in one locality, I through mercy effected, and was out in the prairies, living among them as in old times, and glad indeed to see them as they are. And it has renewed bonds with the saints in general, cheered them, and I trust been directly healthful to them. The system of coming to America, taking up land without being able to pay for it (which they gradually fell into, as it is the custom), had brought them spiritually low, pinching as they must to pay, or careless in paying. But they have felt it, and there has been a reaction in conscience, which has had a most healthful effect on them, and there is a lively desire of profiting by the word. Many neighbouring French came, and their meeting-house could not hold the people.” (*Letters*, 1:352)

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- JND never gave up ministering to the European immigrant population in the United States, but by 1873, he had found a more influential platform. Especially in the larger cities of the Midwest and East, JND began to preach publicly or, more frequently, to teach privately both laymen and ministers from the American denominations. (Sandeem, 72)
 - “the work in the States was essentially among settlers; my present, among real Americans, God opening the way distinctly. Some new gatherings are formed, weak, but still a testimony, and wholly of such, and I have had large readings, and some lectures in various places. . . Still there are doors open to truth, and I have been able in various places and circumstances to bring the whole truth before ministers and people, and they interested in it.” (*Letters*, 2:201)
- “They (Brethren Preachers) were willing to preach in any pulpit opened to them, and many were. Because of their zeal and upright character they were often very influential. The pulpits of A.J. Gordon at Clarendon Street Baptist Church in Boston, D.L. Moody in Chicago, and J.H. Brookes at Walnut Street Presbyterian Church in St. Louis were open to them, and there was widespread sympathy for many of their views.” (Kraus, 46)

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- Despite the warm reception in certain parts of the country, JND had difficulty convincing Americans to accept the whole of his theology. Darby was least successful in convincing Americans that acceptance of his doctrine of the ruin of Christendom obliged a minister or parishioner to abandon his former denomination to meet with the Brethren “gathered only in the name of the Lord.” (Sandeen, 73)
 - “. . . in the west (i.e., Midwest) a good many Presbyterians, several ministers among them, teach the Lord's coming, the presence of the Holy Ghost, that all sects are wrong, but as yet few move from their place.” (*Letters*, 73)
- “Slow and difficult though it was, the work of the Plymouth Brethren in the United States began to attract notice in the 1870s. As a result of proselytizing in Chicago, Robert T. Grant, a Brethren evangelist was able to report to Darby in 1868 that he had won some promising young men. “Moody,” he noted, “is quite in a pet about so many of them leaving him who were his best workers.” (Sandeen, 73)

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- Thomas Croskery, encapsulated many of the misgivings American Christians had about the Plymouth Brethren in an 1872 article titled “The Plymouth Brethren” in the *Princeton Review*. Croskery stated,
 - The aim of the Brethren is to ‘gather churches out of churches;’ to disintegrate all existing bodies by opening a door in each, not for the exit of the faithless and false-hearted, but of the pious and the good; and, accordingly, they prowl unceasingly round all our churches, seeking to reap where they have not sown, and leaving to the denominations generally the exclusive privilege of evangelizing the masses.” (Croskery)
- “Darby made his greatest impact in the United States, however, outside of the Brethren congregation in a few large cities—Saint Louis, Chicago, New York, and Boston. Since it is in just these centers that dispensationalist theology had the most effect upon American denominations and won its foremost champions among denominational leaders (as distinct from converts to the Plymouth Brethren), a detailed picture of Darby’s activities in these cities ought to prove most helpful. Unfortunately, his correspondence does not reveal much about the details of his life, . . .” (Sandein, 74)

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- *St. Louis*—JND stated the following regarding his experience in St. Louis during the summer of 1872.
 - “I have had good opportunities here, and the door open as it had not been . . . and I am in pretty full intercourse with those exercised, among whom are more than one official minister.” (*Letters*, 2:180)
- “Whether Darby is referring to James Hall Brookes, pastor of the Walnut Street Presbyterian Church, remains an intriguing but unanswerable question. Brookes became a leader in American millenarian conferences soon after this visit and for most of the remainder of his life taught a dispensational theology.” (Sandein, 74)
- According to Ironside, JND and other Brethren preachers had preached in the Dr. James H. Brookes St. Louis church:
 - “Dr. Brookes knew and loved many of them. His pulpit had often been opened to them. J.N. Darby, Malachi Taylor, Paul J. Loizeaux and others had preached in his church at various times.” (Ironside)
 - “Dr. James H. Brookes, in whose church Mr. Darby held two weeks’ meetings while in St. Louis in the 70’s, considered him one of the greatest Bible scholars of his generation.” (Ironside)

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- *Chicago*—there is more clarity regarding JND's ministry in Chicago than in St. Louis. The Chicagoan who most characterized the American style of religion at the time was Dwight L. Moody. "Since Moody had a hand in everything religious in Chicago, it is not surprising to discover that he and Darby met and exchanged views. Darby found Moody shockingly ignorant of what Darby considered the first principles of the Gospel." (Sandeem, 75)
 - "As to the work at Edinburgh, I dare say there may have been conversions, and one must bless God for that. But Moody before he came to England denied openly all work of grace in conversion, and denounced it as diabolical in his own pulpit. I hear he has got on in this subject, that M.'s tract did him good, which is in a great measure a résumé of brethren's teaching; the author not concealing in his intercourse with others where he learned it. But some of Moody's false doctrine was taught in his public ministrations at Edinburgh, according to R. and M.'s account, which no doubt is correct, for we discussed it at Chicago, and he held it there, namely, that no man is condemned for his sins, but for not coming to the refuge - sins are all borne and put away for everybody." (*Letters*, 2:259)

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- By 1875 Darby had changed his opinion of Moody somewhat, but only because he felt that Moody had “greatly got on in the truth.” (*Letters*, 2:368)
Darby’s reputation in Chicago seems to have markedly improved; he noted in May 1875, “I am suddenly in great vogue with a certain number.” (*Letters*, 2:346)

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- *New York*—although JND visited New York City at least nine times and stayed in the city for five months from October 1867 to February 1868 and for four months from November 1874 through February 1875, his letters reveal little about his activities. As usual JND's first impressions were bleak; he found New York ecclesiastically in total confusion.
 - “But the truth has spread after all considerably, and some fruits even now appear, not only in many souls who have found peace and see clear as to grace, of which there are many - I find some new one constantly, so that the truth is borne witness to and propagated by them, people seeing in them the effect - but the Lord's coming is planted in many souls, and that they have seen, though not all, its connection with the church; and some have at once seen the state of things around them. . . . There are others, less simple perhaps, but in heart seeing what is right. Strong as is the influence of belonging to a church here, for position and everything depend on it, with most, at least, in their estimation, the evil state of things is beginning to be felt - what it is, that is, for its effect was felt by upright souls often before; and through mercy I hear daily of souls that the word has reached for conversion, or finding peace, or getting clear as to the position of themselves or the church; though public meetings, I may say I have none, but I meet with people. People interested come in small numbers: I have reading meetings, and so on.” (*Letters*, 1:495)

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- *Boston*—offers one of clearest pictures of JND's ministry in America. "He traveled to Boston on at least eight occasions, settling down twice for periods of at least two months—during the first months of 1875 and the last few of 1876. During 1875 and for some years later, Darby reached a great many Millerite millenarians in the Boston area. As Darby described the situation, he was able to destroy their pretensions at prophetic interpretation and convince a good many of them that they were mistaken." (Sandeen, 76-77)
 - ". . . their grand array proved to be ignorance, and no more, and the foundations fell. This did every way much good: their whole relative position was altered. Their scraps of Greek and Hebrew I could meet, and their calculations of dates for the Lord's coming only baffled them, and the word of God resumed its ascendancy. But still it was only some deliverances, and an unfinished work. But a door was opened in Boston, and I was greatly begged to stay: one devoted man, I trust delivered from danger, having just now as I was leaving got a fine room, where he wants me to speak." (*Letters*, 1:402)
- In Boston, JND also won a notable convert to the Plymouth Brethren from Millerite Adventism. Mr. F.G. Brown, an elder in the Adventist church and, with Joshua V. Himes, a member of the English mission of 1846, was converted to the Brethren at about this time and opened a book and tract depot on Pemberton Square, Boston. (Sandeen, 77)

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- In 1875 JND stated the following regarding his time in Boston:
 - “A notion of perfectionism accompanied by a wild looking for the Spirit, is one thing one has to contend with - merely deliverance really, with a taint of Wesleyan perfectionism, but a good deal of pretension, and some good. There can be no doubt that a testimony is so far raised up; if we look at what is visible, it is a cloud as a man's hand; and if there is faithful devotedness others will reap. That is my great desire now. We have more to do now with inquirers than with heretics. Yesterday I had the two principal Wesleyan ministers and their chief members, and some others, all the afternoon on deliverance from sin, full acceptance, the Lord's coming. It was on the whole a satisfactory meeting, one of the ministers was deeply interested in the truth, and said he should return, also **the chief Baptist minister.**” (*Letters*, 2:330)

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- “In this last comment about the chief Baptist minister of Boston Darby has managed, as usual, to be tantalizingly imprecise. One of the chief Baptist ministers in Boston at that time was Adoniram Judson Gordon, pastor of the Clarendon Street Baptist Church from 1869 to 1885. He joined James Hall Brookes to lead the millenarian movement during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But this little hint is the closest that the historian can come to showing that Darby had any direct contact with A.J. Gordon.” (Sandeem, 78)
- JND crossed the Atlantic for the last time in 1877 at which time he said, “at my age (77), I shall hardly return to America.” (*Letters*, 2:375) In his last letter penned in North America Darby reflected upon his sixteen years of labor in the Western Hemisphere.
 - See Notes for lengthy quotation

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- “At about this time there were eighty-eight Brethren meetings in existence, none of them large. The New York City meetings, for example, counted about fifty members, Philadelphia a few more than twenty and Springfield, Illinois, hardly ten. Throughout his ministry in the United States, Darby had been frustrated by his inability to arouse more dissatisfaction among Americans with their denominations, . . . Darby never understood the difference that the disestablishment of the church had made in the United States or how much his own doctrine of the ruin of the church had been shaped by early nineteenth century British social conditions. That Americans showed little concern about abandoning their denominations remained the greatest puzzle of Darby’s American experience.” (Sandeen, 79)
- But Darby did do much to publicize his own brand of dispensational theology. Although Darby thought them inconsistent, many American ministers and laymen accepted his theology without feeling obligated to join his sect. To determine precisely who these men were and how many of them were convinced by Darby has proved almost impossible.
- In the next study we will assess the impact of JND’s dispensationalism on the mainstream millenarian movement in the United States.

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