

JOHN NELSON DARBY: BICENTENNIAL REFLECTIONS

1. IS DARBY STILL RELEVANT?

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It is a sobering experience to come to the realisation that the man you devoted many years of study to because you felt he had made a vital contribution to the Church is not known by the majority of Christian believers today. This was my experience in regard to John Nelson Darby.

I was raised in an Exclusive Brethren context and was convinced of the rightness of the Brethren position over against other Christian groups. I felt Brethren teachings and viewpoints to be the most obviously biblical ones. Then I woke up to reality. A modern comparison could be made to Jim Carrey and his role as Truman in the movie ‘The Truman Show’ (1998) when he comes to the realisation that he has been living in an artificial world created by a huge television studio and leaves its safety and security for the adventure of the unknown world outside. Within the Brethren world there were certain ‘givens’. Everything made sense and fitted together. Yes, there were restrictions, but also things you could depend upon. The Christian world outside was chaotic, unpredictable, and... exciting. I had grown up in an atmosphere where John Nelson Darby was regarded as Christ’s greatest gift to His Church since the Apostle Paul, only to discover that he was not known by the majority of Christians I became acquainted with world-wide—even Christians of a dispensationalist persuasion. I came to know and understand Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Anglicans, Seventh Day Adventists and others, not from the ‘Brethren’ side of things, but from their own standpoints and convictions. I discovered that much which I had heard about other Christians was wrong, or at least one-sided. My self-assurance as to the rightness of Brethren teaching had been based on not really knowing what others thought and why.

As a ‘brother’ I had been taught that other Christians were in wrong ‘positions’. That, even if they themselves were devoted and holy, their connection with ‘man-made systems’ defiled them—and me if I fellowshipped with them. What is ironic is that what led me to question this position was not dissatisfaction or a looking for alternatives. It was determined by my simply getting to know other believers.

It is a well known fact among students of Brethren history that the Protestant section of the Church accepted Darby’s prophetic views—especially in the Scofield and Hal Lindsey versions—but not his ecclesiastical ones. A major theme in Darby’s theology was the ruin of the Church in her outward display and responsibility. An irreparable ruin. This view apparently did not sit well with other believers. Looking more closely at Darby’s early life the realisation came to me that, actually, the majority of the people he had to do with were devout Christians—Christians seeking to bring the Church

back into more conformity to God's word. Something else became clear to me as well, something I had never considered before until I myself began studies in Orthodox Theology—Darby never really referred to the Eastern Church. The many countries he visited were all within Western Roman Catholic/Protestant spheres! It seems as if Darby's views were based on a very limited field of experience at the time he formulated them.

How does this confined view fit into our present world situation where globalisation is written large? Darby's ideas on Christian unity and ministry, whether his own or those he received and modified from others, were revolutionary in his time when one considers his background. There was a time when being Anglican in England was law and Protestant dissenters could not solemnise marriages, baptise and register infants or bury the dead, and were not allowed civil or military posts or admission to universities.

But today? Today when Church boundaries seem to play no role at all and Christians change their relationships and responsibilities as fast and easy as changing a shirt? Today, after Willow Creek and similar movements, what does Darby have to say?

You are nothing, nobody, but Christians, and the moment you cease to be an available mount for communion for any consistent Christian, you will go to pieces or help the evil.¹

Those were strong and revolutionary words back in 30th April 1833. But today? Today they almost seem commonplace.

I do not know if Darby's thoughts on Christian unity and ministry were/are such a strong influence among evangelicals as some would have us believe. Would a better understanding of our all really being one in Christ have taken place without Darby and the Brethren? In any case, Darby was not the only one thinking thoughts on Christian unity in his day.

Some might say: John Henry Newman was a brilliant and devoted man, but he went to Rome. Or: Edward Irving was a brilliant and devoted man, but he had error as to Christ. Well, what stops us from saying: John Nelson Darby was a brilliant and devoted man, but he...?

Naturally what comes after is subjective and would vary from person to person assessing Darby's life. I would say: but he was incorrect as to the Lord's coming and the view of two people of God, earthly and heavenly. Many, to the contrary, view exactly these as his greatest contributions. A lasting contribution surviving his views on the expression of Christian unity and the Church and leading to such things as the Scofield Bible (1909) and Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). I would say it is ironic that what has remained of Darby's legacy is the error and not the 'good stuff'.

Darby's views on Christian liberty and fellowship may have been superseded in our day, but I still feel that an occupation with Darby's teaching on the matter can be of great help. Not in the sense of finding novel or new ideas, but Darby warns us of the dangers of superficiality. In a day where the emphasis is on the individual a realisation of our being a part of the whole, of the Church, and this defining us and our responsibility is of vital importance. Darby's voice should be heard. I still find the Brethren manner of worship as a pleasant alternative to the entertainment kind of Church service so prevalent today.

Darby had lofty ideas on what the Church is and what Christian unity

1. [J. N. Darby], *Letters of J.N.D.*, 1 (Kingston-on-Thames, n.d.), p.18.

entails. He attempted to live according to them, to put them into practice. For a short time it worked. But the Lord did not come as soon as Darby had hoped and believed. Generations have passed. Keeping the movement going required structures and offices and institutions. Not official ones, but real ones nevertheless. The high standard of spirituality could not be carried on indefinitely. It is similar to the euphoria after an evangelisation meeting where everybody feels high and close to heaven—the next day at work pulls you down to reality. The effect does not last. Renewal is always necessary. This is what we can still learn from Darby and the Brethren movement: a movement is not an end in itself (even if the followers believe it is an ‘end time’ thing). It is a process which requires new impulses over time.

Reflecting on Darby and his ministry I am always reminded of the words the novelist George MacDonald put into the mouth of one of his characters in his book *Weighed and Wanting* (1882):

The ruin of a man’s teaching comes of his followers, such as having never touched the foundation he has laid, build upon it wood, hay, and stubble, fit only to be burnt. Therefore, if only to avoid his worst foes, his admirers, a man should avoid system. The more correct a system the worse will it be misunderstood; its professed admirers will take both its errors and their misconceptions of its truths, and hold them forth as its essence.²

This has sadly happened among many of Darby’s followers. They have frozen a certain time of Church history as ideal and seek to live only according to that rule—often wilfully oblivious to the working of God’s Spirit today.

Early in his ministry Darby made some remarks which sound very modern:

In order to understand any prophecy, it is of the utmost importance that we should study it with a disposition to believe, joined with a strict trial of the evidence in favour of any given meaning. That is to say, we should be ready, on sufficient testimony, to accommodate our understandings and perceptions to ideas not analogous to those of our ordinary experience...³

If only more of the Brethren, in the past and today, would have heeded the wisdom in this attitude and applied it more—not only to questions of prophecy.

What continues to impress me in John Nelson Darby is his devotion to Christ and his high level of personal holiness—without his ever preaching perfectionism. Where ‘cheap grace’ has become popular in so many circles his life has a lot to teach us.

So, yes, Darby is still relevant because it only in his appeal to live God honouring lives and to respect and obey God’s written word—the Bible. Is not that the main thing?

2. Rolland Hein (ed.), *The World of George MacDonald* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1978), pp. 9-10.

3. William Kelly (ed.), *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, 2 (Lancing, Sussex, n.d.), p. 32.