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*A Nineteenth-Century Nestorius**

Harold H. Rowdon, B.A.

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Heresy often begins as a subtle change of emphasis which may, or may not, include the introduction of novel ideas. Its detection and refutation are therefore delicate matters which may easily lead to an opposing emphasis which itself constitutes incipient heresy. This danger is enhanced when men discover heretical tendencies in the teaching of those whom they already oppose on other grounds. Judgment tends to become unbalanced and action is influenced more by prejudice than by mature conviction.¹

An ancient example is provided by the bitter controversy between Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, and Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, in the early fifth century. Nestorius was condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431, and his name has always been associated with that misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Two Natures in Christ which is still termed 'Nestorianism'. In recent years, however, the mature thought of Nestorius in his *Bazaar of Heracleides* has been recovered, and it has been argued that 'it is impossible to believe that Nestorius was "Nestorian"'.² His enemies appear to have distorted his views in order to secure the condemnation which they desired on other grounds. In his Bampton Lectures (1940), Canon Prestige describes Nestorius as 'a heresiarch who in the most explicit terms repudiated the heresy of which he was accused', and goes on to say that he was condemned 'not for his convictions but from two quite different causes'.³ These are detailed as theological misunderstanding and ecclesiastical rivalry.

There are such striking similarities between this assessment of Nestorius and the picture which emerges from a study of the life of Benjamin Wills Newton, one of the earliest of the 'Plymouth Brethren' in the early nineteenth century,⁴ that they are to be investigated in this article. Naturally, the setting is different. This is not only because of the later century but also because the size of the stage has contracted and the status of the actors has declined. No longer is it a question of Alexandria and Constantinople, but of Dublin and Plymouth;⁵ and instead of two Patriarchs at loggerheads we find two 'Brethren', J. N. Darby and B. W. Newton, going full tilt at each other. The hegemony of the Church in the East was at stake in the fifth century, but in the later controversy nothing more than domination over a handful of 'assemblies'⁶ was in the balance.

In spite of these superficial differences, there exist numerous parallels between the two controversies. There are certain similarities between the theological issues which were involved and which assumed such a central position in the debate. Again, it is evident that, in

* A Paper read at the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research, Cambridge, December 1957.

¹ Cf. A. Richardson, *Creeeds in the Making* (1935), 2nd edition, p. 125.

² J. F. Bethune-Baker, *Nestorius and his Teaching* (1908), p. 198. Cf. F. Loofs, *Nestorius and his Place in the History of the Christian Doctrine* (1914). Not all scholars are agreed, however. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (1958), pp. 316, 317 for a qualified acceptance of the view set out in the text.

³ G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics* (1954), p. 120.

⁴ The 'Plymouth Brethren' consisted of groups of Christians who renounced sectarianism and combined together in a simple fellowship for worship, prayer and Bible teaching, and the preaching of the Gospel. Various groups of their spiritual descendants are active today.

⁵ Darby was at first associated with Brethren at Dublin, whereas Newton settled in Plymouth.

⁶ Brethren call their fellowships 'assemblies'.

both cases, controversy raged over the interpretation of words and phrases, and sprang from what the mutual opponents felt to lie behind the statements they condemned. It seems clear, to outline further parallels, that both Nestorius and Newton returned to orthodoxy, if they had ever seriously departed from it, and that the views of their opponents led in the course of time to the expression of doctrinal ideas which were probably

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more heretical than those of the alleged heresiarchs. Yet again, there are similarities, in that, in both cases, those who were associated with the condemned party became well known for their missionary endeavour, whereas their opponents largely became absorbed in theological speculations of an almost mystical character.

There is equal similarity between those deep and fundamental divergencies which underlay the strife. Personal antagonisms and profound mistrust were generated by what we may describe as ecclesiastical hostility and competing theological systems. This ensured that, when one side made a mistake, the other party would seize upon it, magnify it out of all proportion, and use it for the destruction of a dangerous rival.

It is to a detailed consideration of these parallels that we must now turn, dealing first with matters which lay on the surface, and then with those issues, ecclesiastical and theological, which poisoned the atmosphere and made calm reasoning an impossibility.

THE CHARGE OF HERESY

The allegedly erroneous teaching of B. W. Newton came to light in the summer of 1847.⁷ Newton, who had been a Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, 1826-1832, came into contact with J. N. Darby and was associated with the assembly in Plymouth, almost from its beginning in 1831. He was a man of means and he settled in Plymouth where his teaching found a ready ear. Notes of his addresses were taken and circulated widely, not only in the West Country but also further afield. In the summer of 1847, notes of one of Newton's discourses came into the hands of one, J. L. Harris, who had formerly been a leading brother in the Plymouth assembly. Highly alarmed at what he read, Harris rushed into print with a pamphlet entitled *The Sufferings of Christ as set forth in a Lecture on Psalm VI*. Almost at once, J. N. Darby, the most influential of all the Brethren, joined in the fray on Harris's side and the heresy hunt had begun. It was prosecuted with the utmost rigour. At the end of 1847, Newton withdrew from Plymouth, renounced all fellowship with the Brethren and subsequently became pastor of a congregation in Bayswater. Another leading assembly, Bethesda, Bristol, became involved in the dispute and on its refusal to pronounce on the subject of Newton's alleged errors Darby declared, 'I shall neither go near Bethesda in its present state nor while in that state go where persons from it were knowingly admitted.'⁸ Those assemblies which refused to deny fellowship to anyone coming from Bethesda were stigmatized as 'loose', but though excommunicated by Darby and his followers, they preached the Word and many of them flourished. Their missionary endeavours continue to the present day, and, though this is not well known, their work has been an important element in

⁷ W. B. Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (1901), p. 130. C. B. Bass dates the incident 'in 1846', but does not indicate any authority for this date: *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (1960), p. 84. J. Grant, *The Plymouth Brethren* (new edition, 1876) quotes the date, 1846, from J. Cox, *An Earnest Expostulation*.

⁸ J. N. Darby, *The Bethesda Circular*, p. 253, quoted in C. B. Bass, *op. cit.*, pp. 89, 90.

the modern missionary movement. The breach between the two parties is the origin of the distinction between 'Exclusive' and 'Open' Brethren which remains to the present.⁹

What were the doctrinal errors which were alleged in 1847 and which led to such bitter dispute and schism? Like those of Nestorius they were Christological. In an attempt to explain the sufferings endured by Christ during His life, Newton evidently taught that, as man, He came under the federal headship

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of Adam and consequently partook of certain consequences of Adam's sin, such as the weakness of a non-paradisaical body which was mortal. In view of His deity Christ was sinless, but, as man, He was born under the curse of a broken Law and suffered the chastening of God's governmental dealings with men, like any other. Unlike others, however, Christ fulfilled all the righteousness of the Law and by this means, as also by His submission to requirements such as the baptism of John, He reached a position where God could look favourably upon Him as man. It was alleged that Newton taught that this position had not been reached until the very eve of the Cross, the conflict in the Garden of Gethsemane being the final battle won by our Lord as man. Only then was He able to proceed to the Cross where His sufferings were fully vicarious.

In November, 1847, after having published two tracts defining and defending his position, Newton withdrew the assertion that Christ had been born under the federal headship of Adam, and confessed it as sin. Instead, he sought to explain the sufferings of Christ during his life by the idea that they arose from His voluntary association with men. He declared that 'when the Eternal Word became flesh, He thereby voluntarily placed Himself in association with those on whom certain penalties, such as loss of Paradise—hunger,—thirst,—exhaustion,—and pain, had come, as consequence of the fall;—and that in virtue of such association He partook of these consequences—even all the consequences in which He could share unconnected with personal sin'.¹⁰ Newton was not yet willing to admit the vicarious nature of Christ's sufferings during His life. He did admit in 1848 that those sufferings were 'vicarious' in the sense of being 'exclusively on behalf of others', but he was not yet prepared to allow that they were 'vicarious in the strict sense of "instead of"'. The reason he gives is that 'if the Lord Jesus has suffered hunger, weariness instead of His people—in the same strict sense as He bore wrath in their stead on the cross—they never could have suffered hunger or weariness any more'.¹¹ Later, Newton disclosed his fear at that time that a full assertion of the vicarious nature of Christ's life sufferings would be seized upon by the Romanists as a justification for the doctrine of purgatory. He thought that it might be argued that if Christians could share in Christ's vicarious life sufferings why should they not also be required to endure in purgatory the wrath of God as He had endured on the Cross? Newton said that he had been anxious to distinguish between those sufferings in which Christ's people might share, and 'those other sufferings into the like of which His people never come'.¹² It was not until after he had been condemned that Newton was willing to see that all Christ's sufferings were vicarious in the

⁹ Numerous subdivisions and reconciliations have taken place, particularly among the Exclusive Brethren.

¹⁰ *A Statement and Acknowledgement*, p. 4. Cf. *Brief Statements* (1848), pp. 4 ff.

¹¹ *Brief Statements*, p. 7.

¹² *Christ our Suffering Surety* (1858), p. 32.

fullest sense, and thus fully to clear himself of the charge that he was placing Christ in the position of a sinner by virtue of His humanity.¹³

One alleged error Newton would not retract. He insisted that Christ's body was 'mortal'.¹⁴ Yet as early as 1848, Newton had carefully safeguarded this statement by adding that though He had voluntarily assumed a body capable of dying, 'it was as impossible for Christ to die in consequence of anything to which He might be thus exposed, as for God to be plucked from the throne of His government. If all nutriment had been withdrawn from Him from His birth, yet God, His Father, would have sustained Him by perpetual miracle, or He would have so sustained Himself, rather than that death should have fallen,

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in any way, except substitutionally—on the One who deserved only blessing and life.'¹⁵

Darby was quick to see that Newton's teaching in 1847 bore upon the question of the two natures in Christ. He alleged that 'The substance of Christ's holy Person is set aside',¹⁶ and objected to Newton's assertion that the consistent teaching of the Old Testament 'types' warns us not to 'mingle the thought of Divinity with the humanity of the Lord Jesus'.¹⁷ Newton was clearly a nineteenth-century Nestorius in this respect, that he sought to give due weight to the real humanity of Christ.

An examination of the origins of his thought on the Person of Christ provides confirmation of this. Newton himself says that his views overstepped the bounds of orthodoxy through his anxiety to counter the false teaching of Irvingism.¹⁸ In April, 1835, he had written an article in the first Brethren journal, *The Christian Witness*, against Edward Irving's alleged denial of the sinlessness of Christ's humanity. The Irvingites replied that Newton had in a sense deified the humanity of Jesus, and in order to meet these objections and as he says, 'to own as far as possible, the truth that might be entangled with the error [of Irvingite teaching], and to seek to disentangle it from its evil connection', Newton modified his paper bringing into it, in germ form at least, those very doctrines which were to be the focus of controversy in 1847. This revised paper was published first as a tract and then in a re-issue of the April, 1835, *Christian Witness*, in place of the original article. This latter was published in 1837 or 1838 and was thus in print for almost a decade before attention was drawn to its errors.¹⁹ In view of this fact, which was not overlooked by Newton and his defenders²⁰ it is hardly surprising that, though the article was drawn into the controversy, Newton's enemies concentrated their attack upon another matter—his exegesis of certain Psalms.

¹³ In *Ancient Truths respecting the Deity and True Humanity of the Lord Jesus* (2nd edition, 1893), Newton said, 'All His sufferings came to Him as the Redeemer; all were voluntary; throughout He was the object of the Father's love' (p. 4).

¹⁴ *Ancient Truths*, pp. 10, 15.

¹⁵ *Letter on the Lord's Humanity*, quoted in W. B. Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

¹⁶ *Observations on A Statement from the Christians in Ebrington Street, Plymouth*, quoted in N. Noel, *History of the Brethren* (1936), I. 158. Noel comments, 'Mr. J. N. Darby points out, further, that the doctrine of the tract under consideration involves the *Person of the Lord*, because, it is stated, that, as the *Eternal Son*, He had an unchangeable relation of favour; but, that as Man, not vicariously, He was obnoxious (exposed) to wrath. *This divides the Person entirely*' (*op. cit.*, I. 168).

¹⁷ Quoted in N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 163.

¹⁸ For Irving's teaching, see H. Johnson, *The Humanity of the Saviour* (1962), pp. 152-155.

¹⁹ B. W. Newton, *Statement and Acknowledgement*, pp. 1-3.

²⁰ S. P. Tregelles refers to it in his *Five Letters* (1863), 2nd Edition, p. 23.

Both Darby and Newton interpreted numerous Psalms Christologically. The problem they had to face was the combination of human sufferings and divine displeasure, which they interpreted as belonging to the non-vicarious sufferings of Christ's life. Darby developed an ultra-dispensational system in which the Psalmist speaks prophetically of the sufferings which Christ was to endure in prophetic association with a godly Jewish remnant of the end times which is to suffer divine displeasure. Newton rejected any such view and, temporarily, regarded the Psalms in question as referring to the life sufferings of Christ arising from His association with a fallen race.²¹

It is clear that Newton's interpretation of Messianic Psalms, as well as his attempt to do justice to those elements of truth which he thought lay concealed in the errors of Irving, caused him to adopt a position which bears striking resemblance to that of Nestorius. Both sought to give full weight to the human experiences of Christ; and, we may add, both were reacting against teaching which they regarded as unbalanced, for there is little doubt that Newton's errors arose in part out of his anxiety to combat the excessive emphasis of Darby and his school on the divine nature of Christ. It is true that this may not have proceeded very far by 1847, yet Tregelles alleged that 'Mr. Darby habitually wrote with as little accuracy as Mr. Newton did on that occasion [in 1835] (or with less)'.²²

The rôle of misunderstanding and suspicion in this phase of the controversy

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can hardly be overestimated. Herein may be seen a further parallel with the fifth-century controversy. Just as Cyril and Nestorius suspected what lay behind the statements of the other and refused to accept his safeguards,²³ so it was in the controversy between Darby and Newton and particularly in the case of the former. Thus, he refused to accept the qualifications by which Newton attempted to hedge about his teaching. As early as November, 1847, the latter had declared, 'I have invariably used the truth of His being the Son and the fact of His divine conception, as the reason of His necessary immunity from all taint, even though born of a woman...'.²⁴ But though this truth might serve as the springboard for Darbyite speculation, it would not do as a safeguard to Newtonian theory. Again, Newton carefully explained that by 'mortal' he meant no more than 'capable of dying', but this, as all his safeguards, was considered no more than a mask to conceal hidden error. In this particular instance, Newton replied by pointing to a verse in one of J. G. Deck's hymns²⁵ which had been sung by Darby and his followers since its composition in about 1837,

'Such was Thy grace, that for our sake
Thou didst from Heaven come down,

Our mortal flesh and blood partake
In all our misery one.'

²¹ N. Noel, *op. cit.*, 1. 156. B. W. Newton, *Christ our Suffering Surety*, p. 61, gives Newton's mature thought on this.

²² *Five Letters*, 2nd edition, p. 23. Cf. *infra*, p. 65.

²³ G. L. Prestige, *op. cit.*, 3rd edition, p. 127.

²⁴ *Statement and Acknowledgement*, p. 4.

²⁵ Deck was one of the numerous Brethren hymnwriters. Newton referred to the verse in his *Letter to a Friend regarding a Tract recently published at Cork* (1850), p. 5.

Deck replied in a pamphlet entitled, *Confession of a Verbal Error in a Hymn*, that by 'mortal flesh' he had meant no more than a body capable of dying. However, he acknowledged his error and offered an alternative line, 'Thou didst our flesh and blood partake.' Deck's confession was accepted, but when Newton had confessed the theory that Christ was born under the federal headship of Adam to be sinful and had withdrawn two tracts in which he had made other doubtful statements for reconsideration it was alleged that his confession was insincere and his contrition superficial. Darby's view of Newton is well expressed by himself in a statement made before Newton had confessed his error but after he had sought to qualify his earlier views, 'The author, as is his known custom, after making statements which subvert the faith, seeks by modifying, by making statements which are entirely different appear to be the same, or substituting one for the other, smothering up what was said by expatiating on recognised truths, to confound the minds of the simple and escape the discrediting detection of the doctrines he has taught.'²⁶

In spite of Darby's fears and suspicions, Newton returned to an orthodoxy that was fully recognized outside the ranks of the prejudiced. But Newton and his followers also entertained suspicions regarding statements made by their opponents, and their fears were not groundless. Tregelles gave examples of expressions, which, he says emphatically, 'I know to have been used: it was said that the Lord was man but not the Son of Adam, and that the name "Son of Man" was simply a title; that "His humanity was *something divine*", that "it was a spiritual humanity"; that "He did not become man *by birth*, but in some other way"; that "*made of a woman* (Gal. IV) does not mean born of a woman"; that "He was not man of the substance of His mother, but that He was of the substance of God His Father";²⁷ Newton made similar allegations, and added significant words, "This tendency will probably end in what was anciently

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called Eutychianism".²⁸ In his indictment, Tregelles outlined the implications of this doctrine of the 'heavenly humanity' of our Lord. 'It led, of course, to the denial of His real human nature, His real obedience to the law for us, and thus the result has been the definite rejection of the imputation of His righteousness to us and the denial of the relation of God's holy law eternally to human actions'.²⁹

These are the words of men estranged from Darby, and it might be alleged that they need not be taken at face value. Yet confirmation comes from two other sources. A very bitter attack on Brethren principles published in the *British Quarterly Review* in October, 1873, affirms that 'Twenty years ago, Mr. J. L. Harris [the very one who uncovered Newton's heresy] expressed himself thus: "I am greatly alarmed at this mysticism. How easy would be the next step, that atonement was in the inward experience of Christ and not really in his actual death on the cross"'.³⁰ A modern chronicler who writes as a supporter of Darby, Napoleon Noel, acknowledges that Darby and his supporters maintained on the subject of the mortality of our Lord's body that His miraculous conception 'removed, not only the sinfulness of nature, but

²⁶ *Plain Statement of the Doctrine on the Sufferings of our Blessed Lord*, quoted in W. B. Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 133; Cf. pp. 150, 151, for a striking example of Darby's own casuistry.

²⁷ *Three Letters*, pp. 32, 33.

²⁸ *Letter to a Friend*, pp. 17, 18, 21, cf. *Propositions for the Solemn Consideration of Christians* (1864), 2nd edition, pp. 7, 8.

²⁹ *Five Letters*, 2nd edition, pp. 21, 22.

³⁰ Reprinted under the title, *Plymouth Brethrenism* (1874), p. 27.

the seed of physical corruption and decay which exists in all others'.³¹ Enough has been said to show that the tendency of Darby's thought was opposed to the trend of Newton's thinking in a way that is strikingly reminiscent of the ancient controversy.³²

But has sufficient been said to explain the relentlessness with which Darby pursued his enemy and the bitterness with which he attacked him? It is hard to resist the conclusion that this controversy, like that over Nestorius, could hardly have taken the course it did without some deeper and more fundamental areas of disagreement.

It is no doubt true that there were grounds for alarm in the details of Newton's teaching. Even one so opposed to Darby and so sympathetic towards Newton as George Müller admitted that Newton's tracts contained 'fearful error'.³³ Nevertheless, Neatby quotes a well-informed writer as saying that J. G. Bellett, probably the saintliest and one of the best of the early Brethren, saw nothing wrong in the tracts until it was pointed out to him. Bellett was an able man, trained as a lawyer, but undoubtedly he looked only on the surface and certainly he had no axe to grind.

It is a fact not always recognized and sometimes obscured by writers favourable to Darby that attention was drawn to Newton's errors after Darby had parted company with his former friend.³⁴ The seamless garment had been rent before the slightest shadow of doubt had been cast on Newton's orthodoxy. Darby had 'left the Assembly' in Plymouth and begun to 'break bread' separately, some eighteen months before Harris drew attention to the doctrinal issue. He had ceased to recognize the assembly at Ebrington Street where Newton was. He says in his *Narrative of Facts*, 'I do not speak of a second table as regards Ebrington Street, more than I should say a fifth or sixth, if I began to break bread where there were four or five dissenting bodies already established in a place.'³⁵ Thus, Newton's foes were not of his own household. They were embittered opponents who had other grievances. Newton's ill-advised statements, like those of Nestorius, were a convenient stick with which to belabour a dangerous rival.

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Nestorius's errors were investigated by Cyril of Alexandria, who, in addition to any personal antipathy, was already opposed to him both on ecclesiastical grounds, upstart Constantinople being a formidable rival to Alexandria, and also on general theological grounds, for the school of Antioch whose teaching had been taken up by Nestorius had developed along lines dissimilar from those of Alexandria. In a similar way, Newton's errors were scrutinized by Darby who was already out of sympathy with him on personal, ecclesiastical and general theological grounds.

PERSONAL RIVALRY

The existence of a growing personal antipathy is fairly obvious in the case of the nineteenth-century controversy. Until 1847, there seemed to be no possibility of alleging heresy, and yet

³¹ *Op. cit.*, I. 177.

³² *Cf.* the arguments between Severians and Julianists on the subject of the sufferability of Christ.

³³ In a letter to J. G. Deck, quoted in N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 151-152

³⁴ E.g., N. Noel commences a section on the differences between Darby and Newton with an account of Newton's heresy.

³⁵ Quoted in N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 210.

there was evidently a growing disharmony between the two men which was at least partly due to personal factors. This seems to be reflected in Darby's own words when he says, 'this is one of the saddest circumstances, as it strikes me, in Ebrington Street—not exactly unorthodox teaching, but important truths dealt with in so rash and daring a manner; and the authority of the teacher leaned upon for them; and his wildest notions put upon the level of certainty with justification by faith; so that, were his authority once shaken, there would be danger that no one would know what was certain'.³⁶ These are extraordinary words. In order fully to appreciate them we must remember that the two men were forceful characters and able scholars in their way. They had been closely associated from the early days of the movement and both were influential at Plymouth. But, whereas Darby travelled widely, Newton remained in Plymouth and district, establishing his position as an honoured teacher in the West Country and undoubtedly dominating the large assembly in Plymouth itself. Moreover, their thinking developed along divergent lines and they became the focus of party as well as personal strife.

ECCLESIASTICAL ISSUES

As in the case of Nestorius and Cyril, ecclesiastical issues were involved. Darby and his party were convinced that Newton had departed from the original principles of the Brethren. G. V. Wigram, a staunch supporter of Darby who withdrew with him from the fellowship of Newton's assembly averred that 'my act of withdrawal took place solely and simply because a new and a human church system had been introduced.... The hinge of all this is a new ecclesiastical polity having been introduced, and acted upon and avowed in Ebrington Street, new, and opposed to what I had known there from the beginning'.³⁷ Wherein was it alleged to be different?

In the first place, Newton was charged with having compromised the original emphasis on the unity of all Christian believers meeting in assembly fellowship by introducing the idea of the independence of the local assembly and by refusing to listen to the counsel of brethren from other assemblies. In the words of W. Trotter, a staunch defender of Darby, Newton denied 'the unity of the church as the one body indwelt and governed by the Holy Ghost' and substituted for it the doctrine 'of a kind of independent churches—so independent

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indeed, that when division took place at Plymouth, and godly experienced brethren from Exeter, London and elsewhere went down to aid by their prayers and counsel, Mr. N. and his party peremptorily rejected their aid on the ground that they were not of Plymouth and had no right to interfere'.³⁸

Newton strenuously denied that he held any such view. In a reply to a hostile review by Darby of his *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*, he stated that 'The very thought of the seven candlesticks standing together, and forming one catholic body—one in manifestation as well as actually one, would destroy the whole system of independency.... The real fact is, that on this point there is no question between the author [Darby] and myself, nor, I believe ever has been. I

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1. 189, cf. I. 190.

³⁷ Reasons for withdrawing from Ebrington St., quoted in H. Groves, *Darbyism: Its Rise and Development* (1866), p. 16 n.

³⁸ *Origin of (so-called) Open Brethrenism* (1849), p. 10.

turn therefore to another question.³⁹ With considerable astuteness this weapon was later turned against the party which had first wielded it. The saints⁴⁰ meeting in Rawstorne Street, London, where Darby found his strongest support, had occasion to declare in a letter to the saints at Ebrington Street, Plymouth, that they would be compelled to exclude Mr. Newton from the Lord's table if he presented himself—a rather unlikely eventuality. Into the circumstances of this unusual excommunication we need not enter, except to observe that it was declared that this decision had been reached by the saints in Rawstorne Street, with other brethren present and concurring. The brethren in Plymouth seized upon this and retorted, 'we feel compelled to call your attention to a sentence in your letter, which to us discloses the very serious unsoundness of the position you have assumed, involving to our minds a practical denial of the unity of the body. Your words are "the saints in Rawstorne Street, *with other brethren present and concurring*". 'When any Christian brother,' they continued, 'sits down with us to the Table of the Lord, we consider him as much as ourselves interested and involved in all that passes—we do not look upon him as concurring with us, but as one of ourselves, and manifestly so in the solemn act of excluding any from the Table.'⁴¹ However much, or little, truth there is in charge and counter-charge it is evident that we have not yet penetrated to the root of the matter.

Of more substance was the allegation that the conduct of affairs within the assembly at Plymouth constituted a departure from the original ideals. These had emphasized the simplicity and spontaneity of the meetings for worship held around the Lord's table, and had tried to avoid anything which savoured of 'clericalism'. Yet, according to Darby, the ministry of the Word at Plymouth came to be shared between Newton and his then supporter, Harris. He says that there was a 'regulation of two, and, if absent, a sort of manager left; for so it really was'. He alleged that people knew whose turn it was, and 'took their measures for going accordingly'. Furthermore, according to Darby, the discourse was prepared beforehand, and in all this, 'that dependence on the Spirit which characterized the profession of the brethren' was destroyed. Those who had become known as 'teachers' were monopolizing not merely the ministry of the Word, but also the leading of worship in prayer and the announcing of hymns. Darby cited incidents when old, poor and young brethren had been restrained from taking part in the open meetings by which he set such store.⁴²

Not only were such things said to be practised at Plymouth: Newtonian teaching was being spread throughout the West Country. Thus at Devonport, it was alleged, the following statements had been made, about the year 1843:

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'That there had been, indeed, the fisherman system; and that Christ had, previous to His resurrection, chosen poor men to be His instruments: but, that, after His resurrection, this was all changed; the Paul system was then set up, and the Lord chose educated gentlemen, as Paul was. This had been the case at the Reformation, as Luther and Calvin proved; and at the modern revival as Wesley and Whitfield showed; and now recently, as Mr. Darby and I know not who else, proved. The result of this was, that one poor man who had preached among the

³⁹ *A Second Letter to the Brethren and Sisters in Christ, meeting for Communion at Ebrington Street* (n.d.), pp. 60, 61.

⁴⁰ The Brethren delighted to call each other 'saints'.

⁴¹ *Remonstrance addressed to the Saints at Rawstorne Street, London* (1846), p. 7.

⁴² Quoted in N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 189, 197, cf. W. Trotter, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Methodists, and still did at times, went out of his mind.⁴³ Despite the irony, it appears that Darby was genuinely grieved. He seems to have so highly estimated the work of the Holy Spirit as to discount the importance of the human element in the work of the ministry, perhaps forgetting his own great natural gifts.⁴⁴

The charge was not accepted. Even W. B. Dyer, one of the Plymouth 'teachers' who made an abject *Confession of Doctrinal and Practical Errors* would not admit that there was 'any effort to elevate those who ministered in the word, *as such*, (which', he says, 'I suppose would properly be "clericalism")'.⁴⁵ S. P. Tregelles carried war into the enemy camp by asserting that Newton's ideas on the subject were essentially those which had obtained from the first days of the movement and that it was therefore Darby and his party who were the innovators. According to Tregelles, Darby himself had, in the early days, requested Newton 'to sit where he could conveniently take the oversight of ministry, and that he would hinder that which was manifestly unprofitable and unedifying'.⁴⁶ On one occasion, he alleged, Mr. Newton had occasion to put a stop to unedifying ministry, 'with Mr. J. N. Darby's and Mr. G. V. Wigram's presence and *full concurrence*'.⁴⁷ Moreover, Darby had once addressed a letter from Dublin to 'B. Newton, Esq., Elder of the Saints meeting in Raleigh Street, Plymouth'. As Elder, an office which, said Tregelles, Newton voluntarily laid aside before 1835, he was expected to exercise a special oversight over ministry in the open meeting. Indeed, Darby had been displeased in 1836 at the weak position of those who took the oversight of order and ministry in Plymouth. Finally, we may note that Tregelles stated that control had been exercised in other places, such as Exeter and London, and in this latter city, he added, unprofitable ministry was stopped 'repeatedly—far oftener, to my knowledge, than ever in Plymouth.'⁴⁸

Statements of this nature must have been damaging, but it might be, and apparently was said that such early arrangements were tentative and provisional and did not represent the mature thought and real genius of the movement. J. G. Bellett, in a MS. narrative of the first days at Dublin said that in the very beginning a kind of eldership was recognized. 'But', he continued, 'gradually all this yielded. In a little time, no appointed or recognized 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.'⁴⁹ As an answer to this we may take Tregelles's allusions to a short tract of G. V. Wigram's, published, he thought, as recently as 1844. In this pamphlet Wigram opposed certain 'very democratic views of ministry', to use Tregelles's phrase, and admitted that 'in every assembly those who are gifted of GOD to speak to edification, will be both limited in number and known to the rest'. Wigram described this as 'stated ministry' which would not exclude others

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being added to the number. Tregelles concluded by saying, 'Until Mr. J. N. Darby came to Plymouth in March, 1845.... I do not know that he raised objections to Mr. Newton on any point connected with *ministry*'.⁵⁰

⁴³ J. N. Darby, *Narrative of Facts*, quoted in N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 187.

⁴⁴ This is another instance of Darby's 'Alexandrian' approach.

⁴⁵ Quoted in W. B. Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

⁴⁶ *Three Letters* (1849), 2nd edition, p. 7 n.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9, cf. F. Holmes, *Brother Indeed* (1956), p. 52.

⁴⁹ Quoted in G. H. Lang, *A. N. Groves* (1939), 2nd edition, p. 153.

⁵⁰ *Three Letters*, pp. 11-13.

Again, as in the case of the first ecclesiastical charge, it is difficult to determine the rights and wrongs of the matter. Perhaps the best way of summing up is to suggest that Newton's position was more justifiable in theory than in practice and that Darby's practice was better than his theory. That this is true in the case of Newton is borne out by a letter written by Lord Congleton, one who had personal knowledge of the controversy, to the brethren of Welbeck Hall, London, in 1864. Congleton said, 'At the time of the division in 1849 we were smarting from elders from whose tyrannical abuse of power we had just escaped.'⁵¹ Newton was a masterful man of strong convictions and Darby's complaints of the dictatorial attitude which he seems to have adopted may well have been justified.

This is supported by the nature of the third complaint of an ecclesiastical order which Darby preferred against Newton, and which is linked with the second. It concerns church discipline.

The issue arose from the failure of Darby to secure an investigation by the saints at Ebrington Street, Plymouth, of certain charges of a moral nature. Darby accused Newton of untruthfulness in respect of an account he gave of a meeting with himself and others, and of deceit in republishing one of his tracts with alterations which completely changed its arguments, without indicating that this was the intention of the revision.⁵² Newton blocked every attempt of Darby to ventilate the charges, but this furnished ground for a more serious allegation which is best expressed in Trotter's words: 'For the presence and sovereign rule of the Holy Ghost in the church was substituted the authority of teachers and the authority claimed *for them* and *by them* was so absolute, that when Mr. Newton was charged with untruthfulness, and it was sought by one and another that the charge should be investigated before the whole body of believers, this was steadily refused on the ground that he could not be tried but by those who with him were the teachers and rulers there, and as they acquitted him there was no further appeal, and no remedy.'⁵³ Darby wished the matter to be decided by the assembly as a whole. He denied the validity of the objection that young and inexperienced persons could not be expected to exercise mature judgment by asserting that 'there are many things a young saint would, in these days, judge better than many an old one'.⁵⁴ He clinches the matter, to his own satisfaction at least, by invoking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, declaring, '*Individuals* are not called on to judge, as such. The objection brings out a further point,—the denial of the Holy Ghost acting in the body so as to guide it in a common act. And this is *the real root of the whole matter*.'⁵⁵ Darby bent all his energies to reviving a 'Friday night meeting', open to any brethren who desired to attend, which had been the organ of church discipline, but which had been suppressed by those whom Darby called the 'teachers and rulers'. Upon his failure to bring Newton to justice and to restore the 'Friday night meeting' Darby declared, 'Here, then, I get at the broad principle of the congregation, meeting in Ebrington: THE CHURCH CANNOT JUDGE EVIL.'

Darby was probably justified in his analysis of the situation in Plymouth regarding discipline. Whether his charges against Newton were justified is

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⁵¹ MS. Minute Book of Welbeck Hall, under the date, June 11th, 1864.

⁵² This is not a reference to the revision of Newton's article in the *Christian Witness*, but to a paper on the central issue in the whole dispute.

⁵³ *Origin ...*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Quoted in N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 212.

⁵⁵ *Loc. cit.*

another matter. They are somewhat petty, and, like the ecclesiastical charges themselves, seem insufficient to account for the violence of the controversy.

INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY

Just as the hostility between Nestorius and Cyril was primarily due, not to theological inexactitude or ecclesiastical rivalry, important as these were, but to the fundamental cleavage between Antiochene and Alexandrian theology, so the breach between Newton and Darby was the result not so much of Newton's Christological errors (as we have seen, these came after the breach had occurred) nor of his views and practice of church order (it was Newton's dominant position and immunity from disciplinary action that was the real bone of contention here) but of a divergent understanding of Scripture on issues which were regarded as of supreme importance and fundamental in nature. Time and again, Newton was accused of forming a party, of holding himself aloof, and of disseminating his teaching at first surreptitiously and then openly. Darby alleged that his enemy sent out letters in an unending stream, that sisters were employed in copying and despatching them and that ultimately the tract shop at Plymouth had become what he calls 'a violent party sectarian instrument'. Darby asserted that one of these tracts set out to show 'how the universal consent of the Church was against those who differed from Mr. Newton; and that it could easily be shown that those who did, were "subverting the first elements of Christianity"'.⁵⁶

What was the content of these letters and tracts? According to Darby it was '*an elaborate argument on Mr. Newton's prophetic views; denouncing all who held the views of the rapture of the church before the end*'. Discord between the two men on the subject of the interpretation of prophecy and indeed in the wider field of hermeneutics had come before 1840 and had led to a temporary breach of friendship. Darby alleged that when he remonstrated with Newton the latter declared that 'all friendship between us was at an end', and that it was with difficulty that the breach was healed.⁵⁷ This was long before suspicion had been cast on Newton's doctrinal orthodoxy as it also antedated the full manifestation of disagreement on church order.

That the prophetic controversy lay behind the breach was widely acknowledged. Writers hostile to the whole movement, those who supported Newton, and those who opposed him lend their support, almost unanimously, to this view. In a pamphlet entitled, *Novel Doctrines... tested by the Word of God*, the anonymous author said with reference to a work entitled *Heretical Opinions of the Plymouth Brethren, showing their Identity with the Manichees; by One unknown yet well known*, 'I think the writer, in his account of "The rise and fall of the Brethren" clearly proves that the untiring persecution which they have carried on for several years against Mr. Newton, had its rise, chiefly, in a difference of opinion on the subject of prophecy.'⁵⁸ This was also the view of one who, while remaining in fellowship with the Brethren, raised his voice against the persecution (for so it really was) of Newton. C.S., published a leaflet with the significant title, *Acts XXII. I*. He described the process of his own enlightenment as to the true nature of the case in words which must be quoted in full. He said of Newton, 'I was told that he held erroneous doctrine. I believed

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⁵⁶ N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 192.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, I. 185-187.

⁵⁸ *Op. Cit.*, p. 22 n.

this to be the case, until I procured and read his own statements, when I found to my surprise that he repudiated, and with abhorrence, every error with which he was charged. I was told "to throw these statements into the fire, as they were only written *to explain away his real sentiments*". This I did not do, considering that it would be inconsistent with common honesty, and out of harmony with that charity which "thinketh no evil". C.S. then concluded by saying, 'I am not a disciple either to Mr. Newton's or Mr. Darby's prophetic or dispensational "SYSTEMS", neither of which I have studied; and the non-agreement between which is the KEY, I believe, to the interdict put upon Mr. Newton and all those who in any way sympathize with, or refuse to join in the cry of "heresy" raised against him.'⁵⁹ That sturdy defender of Newton, S. P. Tregelles, made precisely the same point, but even more forcibly: 'Had he accorded with Mr. Darby on Prophecy, we should never have heard his voice raised against him as to Ministry or Church Order; his writings would not then have been scrutinized with severity, in order to gain matter of accusation.'⁶⁰ Did the opponents of Newton admit this? Evidence is not lacking that they did. W. Trotter said that 'the present question arises out of others which have exercised the souls of brethren for years'.⁶¹ Darby himself alleged that 'what has been the instrument of ripening this terrible doctrine as to Christ [Newton's heresy]... is really the *prophetic system* of the writer'.⁶² G. V. Wigram, however, one of Darby's staunchest supporters, was not prepared to admit that any ulterior motive lay behind the breach. He said, 'The cause of withdrawal was not difference of judgement upon the prophetic question, neither was it a question of doctrine; my act of withdrawal took place solely and simply because a *new and a human church system* had been introduced, and one which appeared to screen guilt'.⁶³

Why was there need for Wigram to deny something which seems to have been widely recognized? The unpublished reminiscences of B. W. Newton, taken down in his old age and faithfully preserved unto this day, may provide the answer.⁶⁴ Prophecy was evidently an embarrassing subject for Wigram. When the views which Darby espoused had been introduced to Plymouth, Wigram had evidently opposed them. He had since accepted the Darbyite interpretation, but it may well have been that he was anxious to dissociate his withdrawal from Ebrington Street from so controversial and embarrassing a subject.

Even Darby himself was reluctant to introduce the prophetic question into the discussion. He admitted quite frankly that he was not prepared to discuss the issues between Newton and his followers as a doctrinal thing, for '*it was a moral question to me*'.⁶⁵ Precisely what this means is not clear, but it is apparent that Darby was no more anxious than Wigram to make the prophetic issue central. Why was this?

He may well have welcomed other issues, first on church order, then on the moral issue of Newton's deceit, and later Newton's doctrinal aberrations, as ways of discrediting his rival easier than the protracted controversy on those prophetic matters which were, in fact the central issue. For a number of years Newton had been arguing strongly against Darby's view of Biblical interpretation in general and prophecy in particular. In his *Thoughts on the*

⁵⁹ *Op. Cit.*, pp. 1, 2.

⁶⁰ *Three Letters*, 2nd edition, p. 71.

⁶¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁶² Quoted in N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 156.

⁶³ Quoted in H. Groves, *Darbyism...*, p. 16 n.

⁶⁴ The MS. is in the care of Mr. A. C. Fry of Newport, I.O.W.

⁶⁵ Quoted in N. Noel, *op. cit.*, I. 195.

Apocalypse, first published in 1842, in tracts and letters before and after that year, as in his oral

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teaching, he had strenuously resisted his rival's influence. Darby replied in kind, but the very length of his answers (490 pages in reply to *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*) suggests the extent of Darby's alarm as well as the complexity of the matters involved. For these reasons, therefore, he would have welcomed the opportunity to short-circuit the controversy by discrediting Newton on other grounds.

It must also be added that the nature of Darby's distinctive views involved him in considerable embarrassment. From his study of the Scriptures, so he assures us, he had come to see the importance of distinguishing between the various 'dispensations' in God's dealings with men. The Church, he asserts, is composed of those who believe the Gospel during the period which began at Pentecost and will terminate with the 'Secret Rapture' of believers both living and dead which will take place a short time before the return of Christ with His Church to resume God's dealings with the nation of Israel and fulfil His promises to her in the Millennium prior to the final judgment of the nations. Darby's embarrassment lay in the fact that his view of the Rapture of the Church, which was admittedly novel, was being taught in Irvingite circles at about the same time. Robert Baxter, a lawyer who was for a short while an enthusiastic follower of Irving and who had received 'revelations', recorded the fact that on 14th January, 1832, he preached 'in the Spirit', declaring that at the end of 1260 days 'the saints of the Lord should go up to meet the Lord in the air, and evermore be with the Lord'.⁶⁶ Evidently, he had previously accepted the opinion 'advanced in some of Mr. Irving's writings, that before the second coming of Christ, and before the setting in upon the world of the day of vengeance, emphatically so called in the Scriptures, the saints would be caught up to heaven like Enoch and Elijah; and would be thus saved from the destruction of this world, as Noah was saved in the ark, and as Lot was saved from Sodom'.⁶⁷ Irving attended some of the Powerscourt Conferences on the study of prophecy⁶⁸ where Darby was a prominent figure, and it is not surprising that the assertion was made, for example, by Tregelles,⁶⁹ that Darby derived his idea of the Secret Rapture from an Irvingite source. In his reminiscences Newton affirmed that this was the case. He was fair in pointing out that Darby hesitated longer than some others and explained that it was not until he had constructed his scheme of dispensational interpretation that he was willing fully to embrace the idea.

This goes a long way towards explaining the reluctance of Darby and his supporters to discuss the prophetic issue when other grounds became available. It also throws light on statements such as the following: 'I have not the slightest doubt, from circumstances I have heard lately, of the authenticity of which I have not the slightest question, that Mr. Newton received his prophetic system by direct inspiration from Satan, analogous to the Irvingite delusion.'⁷⁰

⁶⁶ R. Baxter, *Narrative of Facts characterizing the supernatural manifestations in members of Mr. Irving's congregation... and formerly in the writer himself* (1833), p. 17. For the date, see p. 18. Irving refers to the revelation given to Baxter in a letter to a Mr. Story written on January 27th, 1832. In it he clearly distinguishes the taking up of the saints from the return of Christ to the earth, which, he says, 'is some time after His saints are with Him' (M. O. H. Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving*, 6th edition (n.d.), p. 343.

⁶⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁶⁸ LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers* (1946-54) IV. 422, 1223.

⁶⁹ *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming*, quoted in Froom, *op. cit.*, IV. 1223.

⁷⁰ *A Plain Statement of the Doctrine on the Sufferings of our Blessed Lord*, quoted in W. B. Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 133, cf. *The Present Testimony*, Vol. I (1849), p. 198.

It remains to show that the dispensational scheme of Biblical interpretation which lay behind Darby's acceptance of the idea of the Secret Rapture was basic also to his idea of the Church and was connected with the Christological issue.

Hostile critics, supporters of Newton and Darbyists again unite in their witness.⁷¹ Whereas Newton maintained the traditional view that the Church is composed of all faithful believers, Darby argued that the distinctive blessing

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given to believers in the dispensation extending from Pentecost to the Rapture is membership of the Body of Christ, the Church. Others before—and after—may be ordained to eternal life, but such have no share in membership of the Church. Prophecy and ecclesiology were regarded as allied subjects, hence the anonymous author of the article *on The Difficulties and Dangers of Prophetic Study* in the first volume of *The Present Testimony*, an occasional magazine edited by G. V. Wigram, claimed that 'if the soul has not entered into the idea of the Church... prophetic study must be attended with danger', and again, 'when under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, the study of prophecy which He Himself dictated will never disturb our apprehension of His special relation to the Church, or of those blessings which are special and peculiar to the Church'.⁷² The system which Newton set out to discredit was not only concerned with the interpretation of God's purposes in the future: it had something to say about His purposes in the present in the Church. The *Propositions* of April, 1845, in which Newton denounced the views of his opponents condemned the idea that only those who believe in this dispensation (i.e. between Pentecost and the Rapture) have a place in the Church as well as views which are more narrowly eschatological.⁷³

It is true that Darby's hermeneutics do not explain all the minutiae of the ecclesiastical controversy, but enough has been said to show that there is a link. Similarly, there is a link with the Christological controversy. The anonymous writer in *The Present Testimony* asserted this when he wrote, 'I fully believe that the past and future history of the nations, the past history of Israel, as well as its future destiny, may become subjects of deep and interesting study to Christians, apart from any just appreciation of what the Church of God really is. And if such a study becomes absorbing, I can well understand that it might lead to a depreciating view of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ; because these things appear to be more immediately connected with Him in his human and earthly relationships.'⁷⁴

This is more than a debating point. It sums up the whole matter. The 'Alexandrian' Darby started from the heavenly nature of God's purposes, His Church and His Christ, postponing to a future 'dispensation' the manifestation of Christ on earth and the fulfilment of God's earthly promises to His earthly people, the Jews. The 'Antiochene' Newton, on the other hand, while accepting the 'divine' side, attempted to give due weight to the 'human' side without resort to the subtle distinctions of a system which he regarded as 'so pernicious in its consequences,

⁷¹ *Plymouth Brethrenism*, p. 31; *The Novel Doctrines*, p. 2, where the author, probably John Cox, says, regarding Darby's views of the Church and the Second Coming of Christ, 'I may just observe, that both these novel doctrines are intimately connected, that one has originated the other, this being necessary to make the new system hold together'; *The Present Testimony*, Vol. I.

⁷² *Op. cit.*, p. 204.

⁷³ See S. P. Tregelles, *Three Letters*, pp. 64-66.

⁷⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 204, 205.

that much as I value the light of prophecy, I would rather that the Church should go back into ignorance about it all, than that such a system should take the place of its former deficiency in knowledge'.⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ *A Letter...*, p. 27.