

The GOSPEL TRUTH

A SUBSTITUTE FOR HOLINESS

OR

ANTINOMIANISM REVIVED

THE THEOLOGY OF THE SO-CALLED PLYMOUTH BRETHREN EXAMINED AND REFUTED.

BY

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CHAPTER III

THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN



John Nelson Darby 1800-1882

WHAT are the Plymouth Brethren? This is a question which many people are asking. An old lady at Hamilton camp-meeting last year, hearing the writer comment on one of their doctrines, indignantly left the audience, exclaiming, "I have heard enough of the Plymouth Brethren and Beecher, too!" She was thinking of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn.

The Plymouth Brethren originated in Dublin, Ireland, about the year 1830, and almost simultaneously in Plymouth, England. In the latter place they increased so rapidly that they once numbered 1,500. Hence they are called by outsiders Plymouth Brethren. Although they do not repudiate the word "Plymouth," they style themselves "The Brethren." Their leading mind, if not their original founder, who died a few years ago at an advanced age, is John Darby. Hence they are sometimes called Darbyites. The movement was at first a protest against ecclesiasticism, like that of George Fox, the first Quaker. Darby, a clergyman in the Church of England, renounced the Church, and assumed that all existing Church organizations are a detriment to Christianity, and obstructive of regeneration and the spiritual life. His little band of adherents claim to be a reproduction of the primitive disciples -- the only genuine specimens on earth. They refuse to take any distinctive name, and disavow that they are a sect. They call themselves the Brethren, as if they were the only persons in the bonds of Christian brotherhood. They are all priests and all laymen. They insist that in Christianity there is no specially called and ordained ministerial order. In this they resemble the Friends; but, unlike them, they lay great stress upon ordinances, especially the Lord's Supper. This they celebrate alone by themselves every Lord's day, and it constitutes the chief part of their worship. To find out whether they are a sect, i.e., a fragment cutting itself from the general Church of Christ, I once asked Mr. Darby whether I would be permitted to partake of the Lord's Supper with them if I should present myself. He replied that I would be allowed to partake, if I should correctly answer certain doctrinal questions. The other "Brethren" present strongly dissented from such liberality, and intimated close communion. Hence, while denouncing all schisms and sects, they are a sect of the straightest and most exclusive kind. They baptize by immersion only. Meetings for worship including only believers, are entirely different from meetings for preaching where the unregenerate are permitted to be present. They talk much about separation unto God, by which they mean abandonment of ecclesiastical organizations; and politics even, refraining from voting, insisting on deadness to the world and entire devotion to God, by going forth and preaching Christ wherever they can get a hearer. They make constant use of the Bible in private and in public, or, rather, of a certain line of texts, interpreted to sustain their peculiar tenets. Professing to rely only on the Word of God, you will find them all equipped with the commentaries of McIntosh, Darby, and others. To propagate their doctrines they scatter many tracts and small expository books.

Several years ago, D. L. Moody learned his method of Bible-study and Bible-readings from the English Plymouth Brethren. In his

eagerness to attain a knowledge of the Bible, he made his first voyage to Europe, attracted by the fame of these students of the Holy Scriptures. Hence they claim him as a product of their system. In his earnest exhortation to converts to join some church, he certainly repudiates Plymouth come-out-ism, and he emphatically disclaims some of the theological tenets of the Brethren. Just how far he accords with them we do not know. He adopts their millenarianism, and preaches the personal reign of Christ on the earth as a substitute for the present agency of the Spirit and of preaching, which are regarded as inadequate for the successful evangelization of the whole world, and the reconstruction of society on a Christian basis. His declaration that the world is like a ship so hopelessly wrecked that it cannot be gotten off the rocks, but must be left to perish, while Christians rescue as many of the passengers as possible, is a pessimistic Plymouth idea.

In England the Brethren are quite numerous and influential. Some, as Tregelles, are very scholarly. Such men as Varley, Lord Radrock, Blackstone, and Muller, are either professed Brethren, or are in strong sympathy with them. They have missionaries in India whose disorganizing influence has given our Methodist missionaries some trouble, and has caused one secession, and the loss of several promising missionary stations. The Wesleyan Methodist societies in Lausanne and Vevay, in Switzerland, at one time suffered great loss through the bewilderment caused by the preaching of Mr. Darby against their doctrine of Christian perfection, and their use of the Holy Scriptures. The leaven of their doctrines has already spread widely in America, and their theological tenets are preached by leading ministers in Boston, New York, St. Louis, and other cities, while their theories of Church organization are rejected.

The Brethren, having no written creed and no Church discipline, are exposed to constant schisms, so that there are several sorts in England, and two sets in Boston at the present time who repudiate each other quite cordially. The anti-Darby party aver that the Holy Spirit has drawn the portrait of John Darby in 3 John 9, 10. But in the worst of their theological tenets they are quite generally agreed--their antinomianism. We have heard Mr. Darby say that if any man had anything to do with the law of God, even to obey it, he was a sinner by that very act.

Their primal error seems to be in their conception of the Atonement. They teach that sin, as a kind of personality, was condemned on the cross of Christ and put away forever. Whose sins? Those of the believer. All his sins past, present, and future, are "judged" and swept away forever in the Atonement, and the believer is to have no more concern for his past or future sins, since they were blotted out eighteen hundred years ago. Here is their most mischievous tenet respecting faith and its relation to the Atonement and to eternal life: The first momentary act of faith renders the Atonement eternally available, and without any further conditions infallibly secures everlasting life. Hence the younger Dr. Tyng, in a recent sermon odorous of Plymouth, declared that in that act of faith the believer's "responsibility ends." This must mean that his probation ceases, his eternal salvation having been absolutely secured.

The object grasped by faith is not so much Jesus Christ, a present Saviour, as His finished work of condemning and putting away sin on the cross. "Faith grasps only past and finished acts." Intellectual assent to these historical facts, the atonement of Christ judging my sin, and His resurrection as the proof thereof, constitutes saving faith.

Their view of the Atonement is the old and exploded commercial theory--so much suffering by Christ equals so much suffering by the sinners saved by Christ. With this theory of the Atonement, they cannot proclaim its universality without teaching Universalism. So they make a distinction between the death of Christ for all, and the blood of Christ shed only for those who are, through faith, sprinkled and cleansed thereby. By this means God saves believers, and presents "an aspect of mercy" toward all mankind.

Their idea of justification is not that it is a present act, taking place in the mind of God in favor of the penitent believer, but it is a past, completed, wholesale transaction on Calvary ages ago. Faith puts a man into the realization of the fact that all his foreseen sins were then cast behind God's back forever, and that he has a through ticket to heaven.

In regeneration, the new man is created in the believer, and the old man remains with all his powers unchanged. Mr. Darby asserted to the writer that after more than fifty years of Christian experience he found the old man in himself worse than he was at his regeneration. Says McIntosh: "It is no part of the work of the Holy Spirit to improve human nature,"-- that seems to be past praying for,--but to make a brand-new man to dwell in the same body with the old man till physical death luckily comes and kills the old Adam who had successfully defied all power in heaven and earth effectually to crucify him. Henceforth the new man has the entire possession of the disembodied soul. How different this from a holiness bearing its heavenly fruit this side of the grave (Luke i. 74, 75; Rom. vi. 6, 19, 22; 2 Cor. vii. 2; 1 Thess. iii. 13; iv. 7; ii. 10; Heb. xii. 10, 14; Col. ii. 11 (Rev. Ver.); 1 John iv. 17). The only Scripture cited for this doctrine of death sanctification is Rom. vi. 7: "He that is dead is free from sin." This evidently means (see verse 6), he who has died unto sin is freed or justified (Rev. Ver.) from sin. This text, found by the "Brethren," escaped the keen eyes of the whole Westminster Assembly, who could find nothing in proof of this point better than Heb. xii, 23: "the spirits of just men made perfect," assuming the point in proof that they were made perfect in death. The Greek scholar will note that the text reads, not "perfected spirits," but the "spirits of perfected just (men)," implying perfection in this life. Yet the old man is to be quite vigorously choked down and kept under till death comes to the rescue and brings that good riddance which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, could not bestow. He is to be reckoned dead by a kind of pious fiction, though he is as lusty and vigorous as ever. That Scripture which says "that the body of sin might be destroyed" is explained to signify, "be repressed" and "rendered inactive"; and those scriptures in which the old man, or the flesh, is to be crucified, mortified, or killed, are all understood to imply a life-long torture on the cross--a killing that continues through scores of years. Says J. Denham Smith, a conspicuous Plymouth theologian, in a standard theological tract: "The two natures remain in him unchanged. His old nature is not modified or ameliorated by the impartation of the new; nor, on the other hand, does the new nature become soiled or corrupted by reason of its co-existence in the same being with the old. They remain the same. There is no blending or amalgamation. They are essentially and eternally distinct. The old nature is unalterably and incurably corrupt, while the new nature is divinely pure in its essence."

This doctrine of the two natures is not completely stated till the fact is brought out that neither is regarded as responsible for the acts of the other. For they are conceived of as persons. If the flesh of the believer behaves badly, that is none of the believer's business. He does not live in that department of his being, and hence has no responsibility for its evil deeds. The "flesh was condemned on the cross

and is under sentence," why should I worry about it? This reminds us of the story of the English bishop and his servant, who reproved him for profanity. The bishop, who was a member of the house of lords, replied, that he swore as a lord, not as a bishop. "But," queried the servant, "when the devil gets the lord, what will become of the bishop?"

The favorite method of exegesis of 1 John iii.9, is to substitute "whatsoever" for "whosoever," and to say, "that part of our nature that is born of God does not commit sin," the unregenerate part will continue to sin. This is the style of exegesis: "We have a right read the text thus: 'Whatsoever is born of God doth not sin.' We are double creatures all the way through. That part of us that is born of God does not sin. Sin is decreasing; righteousness is growing. So we need not feel discouraged if we find ourselves going astray, the purpose of our heart is toward God. We are confident of constant progression --sure of being better in the other life than here. It is always first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. The Apostle tells us that religion brings us great assurance. We know we shall be like Him--how little like Him now! We are a long way from the perfect pattern of Christ, of being like Him in character, with not a stain upon the soul's whiteness. Feed your soul on the thought of better things to come. Look for the hour when He shall appear and we shall be like Him."

At this point the following questions are pertinent: --

1. Have we any right to lower the standard of character required in the Scriptures to suit the state of "those who are called Christians"? Is not such an expounder guilty of a perversion of the Holy Scriptures?
2. How high a rank is that theology entitled to which discrowns man in order to save him; which changes him from a "who" to a "what" from a person to a thing, in order to keep him from sinning? Does such a theology emphasize the sacredness and dignity of man? Does it honor the Holy Spirit to teach that He begets impersonal "whatsoevers," instead of personal "whomsoevers"?
3. In the light of this exposition, what be comes of St. John's sharply defined line separating "the children of God" and "the children of the devil"? For in the very next verse to the text he says: "In this" --the fact of not sinning--"the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil" in the fact of their sinning. This exposition not only "tears down the fence between the Lord's garden and the devil's common," but it actually binds up the child of God and the child of the devil in a single personality, impossible to be classified either with the righteous or the wicked.
4. Is the human being of such a double nature that a part of him may be holy, and a part commit sin?
5. Is not the action of the free will an element of every moral act, and can the will at one and the same time sin and abstain from sin?
6. If such a moral philosophy is good in the pulpit, would it not be good at the bar? Could not the lawyer plead that the part of him accused which is born of God is innocent of the crime, and that it is only the unregenerate part that has done the mischief, and therefore the regenerate part should be acquitted?

Would not any judge, endowed with average common sense, sentence the unregenerate part to the gallows, and tell the regenerate part to look out for itself? The soul that sinneth--the undivided soul--it shall die.

7. Is there any analogy in the natural world for a partial birth--a part being born at one time and a part forty or fifty years afterward? A hearer of this exposition very properly asks me the question: "What if a person should die before he gets wholly born?"
8. Is the expounder right in his interpretation of assurance, that it does not relate to present knowledge of forgiveness and of entire sanctification, but to the final perseverance of the saints? Does it not always relate to a knowledge of our present acceptance with God, except this one expression, "the assurance of hope"?
9. Is freedom from sin ever presented as an object of hope in the future? Is entire sanctification ever classified with the good things to come, such as the second coming of Christ, the resurrection and glorification of the body, and the rewards of Heaven?
10. Does not St. John, in this very epistle, declare, that as Jesus is, so are Christians in this world? Does the likeness of Christ which believers shall have when they shall see Him, consist in the fact of their being then sanctified, or rather in the fact of both soul and body then glorified ?
11. Our last question is this: Is Antinomianism getting up out of its grave in New England? For the innermost essence of this error is, that it destroys human responsibility for sin, by saddling it all upon the flesh, "the old man," who turns out at last a mere mythical person who cannot be found in the Day of Judgment.

We are impressed, in reading the Plymouth writings, with the perpetual confusion of the term, "sinful flesh," with the body, as though sin could be predicated of the material part of man. Some even speak of the hand and the foot as committing sin. Thus the old error of Oriental philosophy and of Gnosticism, that inherent and unconquerable evil lurks in matter, lies at the bottom of the Plymouth theology.

Of course they strenuously antagonize inwrought and personal holiness as an utter impossibility, since the old man has a lease of the soul which does not expire till death. Yet they insist that they are perfectly holy in Christ "up there," while perfectly carnal and corrupt "down here" in their moral state. They dwell ad nauseam upon the distinction between the standing in Christ and the state. The standing in Christ attained by a single act of faith is the great and decisive thing; the moral state is a small affair, having not the least power to damage the standing. David in Uriah's bed, and with hands red with his blood, was in a sad moral predicament indeed, so far as his moral state was concerned, but his judicial standing in Christ was not in the least impaired. All that he lost was his communion with God; all that he sought for was restored joy--"Restore Thou unto me the joy of Thy salvation." God did not see his adultery and

murder. These were covered with the blood of atonement shed in the Divine purpose before the foundation of the world, and put away forever before David was born. A favorite proof text for this abominable dogma, which lays the axe at the root of the whole system of Christian morals, is Num. xxiii. 21: "He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel" correctly rendered by Rosenmüller: "God cannot endure to behold iniquity cast upon Jacob, nor can He bear to see affliction, vexation, trouble, wrought against Israel." Some such must be the meaning of this text. The Plymouth exegesis makes it positively deny the omniscience of God, and flatly contradict His declaration: "Because all these men which have seen My glory, and My miracles which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, have tempted Me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it" (Num. xiv. 22, 23). God not only saw the sins of Israel, but He kept accurate account of their number, and so indignant was He that He purposed to smite and disinherit the whole nation, and raise up a better one from Moses (Num. xiv. 12).

The doctrine that the believer is seen only in Christ, and is regarded as pure as Christ Himself, is founded on his incorporation into the glorified human and Divine Person in heaven. The first act of faith is the occasion on which the Holy Spirit eternally incorporates the believer into the risen and glorified body of Jesus Christ. "Since," as Mr. Darby said to the writer, "Jesus does not walk about in heaven dropping off fingers and toes," it follows that every believer once incorporated into Christ is absolutely sure of ultimate salvation. The certainty is forever beyond contingencies. No act of sin, even murder, can remove us from our standing in Christ. Sin may obstruct communion, and leave the soul in sadness and darkness for a season; but since, as Shakespeare says, "All is well that ends well" sin in a believer is well since it ends in eternal life. For a proof of this doctrine, Eph. v. 30 is quoted: "For we are members of His body." The clause, "of His flesh and of His bones," which is rejected by the Revised Version as spurious, is strongly emphasized as a proof of a literal incorporation into the person of Christ. A little attention to the context will show that literal embodiment in Christ cannot be meant without implying the actual incorporation of the husband and wife in "one flesh." If it be said, this is just what marriage produces, we reply, that the "one flesh" of wedlock becomes two through infidelity to the marriage vow (Matt. v. 32). Sin destroys the soul's marriage with Christ, and brings about a divorce which may become eternal (James iv. 4-6, Rev. Ver). Another favorite proof-text is Eph. ii. 6, which is understood as teaching that all believers are, in their judicial standing, literally "sitting together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Another proof-text is found in the oft-recurring words, "in Christ."

It may be safely said that the Plymouth doctrines find their basis in a literalizing of figures, ingenious allegorizing of facts, and a straining of types. The best specimens of typology run wild, are found in the Plymouth commentaries. For instance: In order to prove that it was not the mission of the Comforter to sanctify the pentecostal Church, and to destroy sin in the hearts of full believers, this is the line of argument which is thought to be unanswerable: Leaven always stands for sin. In Lev. xxiii. 16, 17, is the command to put leaven into the bread for Pentecost. Therefore there was sin in the Pentecostal Church after it was filled with the Holy Spirit, whose office is not to cleanse believers from all sin, but to incorporate them into Christ up in the sky. This is the argument of their greatest annotator, M'Intosh, whose exegetical skill and spiritual insight are by some of "the Brethren" attributed to an inspiration almost plenary. Says another writer, J. R. C.: "We know that Moses in the law spake of Christ. These ancient enactments are shadows, in many, if not in all, cases, of good things to come." Then from the Mosaic requirement that "the man who hath taken a wife shall not go out to war, but shall be free at home one year to cheer his wife," he gravely argues that this signifies that Christ will not go forth to battle until He has remained with the saints a certain period at home in a kind of honeymoon. Here is a specimen of Major Whittle's typology, whose doctrines are all drawn from the Plymouth Brethren: First, he assumes, without a particle of proof, that the ark is a type of Christ. Secondly, all who went into the ark in the old world came out in the new; none died, none were lost. Hence all who are once in Christ will be infallibly saved! Admit the premises, and the demonstration is irresistible.

These are only a few specimens of the logic of types when handled by an ingenious man, eager to find biblical proofs for un-Scriptural doctrines. The great master of this fallacious treatment of God's Word, the wizzard who can give a Scriptural flavor to tenets most repugnant to the sacred oracles, is Andrew Jukes. Whether one of the "Brethren," I know not; but he is unexcelled in their typological sleight of hand, even going beyond his teachers and demonstrating the ultimate restoration of all the wicked in hell to holiness and heaven. Evangelical minds should be on their guard against this subtle method of instilling dangerous theological errors. There is a large class of minds which are easily captivated by types which are purely fanciful, the cunning inventions of men.

[Return to ANTINOMIANISM Table of Contents](#)

[HOME](#) | [FINNEY LIFE](#) | [FINNEY WORKS](#) | [TEXT INDEX](#) | [SUBJECT INDEX](#) | [GLOSSARY](#) | [BOOKS STORE](#)