

Interesting Reminiscences

OF THE
EARLY HISTORY OF
“BRETHREN:”

With Letter from
J. G. BELLETT to J. N. DARBY.



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of the

Early History of "Brethren."

J. G. B. TO J. M. (JAMES McALLISTER). EXTRACTS FROM A LETTER.

WHEN I call to mind some of the early facts connected with the history of the "Brethren," as for distinction I will call them, I am impressed with a sense of there having been at that time a very independent and original teaching of the Spirit of God [simultaneously in various places].

I do not doubt that however they may have aided one another afterwards or grown together in the understanding and enjoyment of much common truth, earlier impressions had been abroad upon the hearts of many without conference or suggestion, which, however, led them readily and necessarily to run together when once they did confer.

I believe the earliest times of our history, both in England and in this country (Ireland), might exhibit this.

[2] I may fail in accuracy of recollection, and, of course, I may mistake when I was not personally engaged, but I will follow just as my memory suggests to me, bethinking myself, of course, as I proceed, and praying the Lord to guide in all simplicity and truth.

It was in the year 1827 that the late Archbishop of Dublin, in a charge delivered to the clergy of his diocese, recommended that a petition should go up to the legislature seeking for increased protection for them in the discharge of their ministerial duties as the teachers of religion in these lands.

John Darby was then a curate in the county Wicklow, and often did I visit [him] in his mountain parish. This charge of his Diocesan greatly moved him; he could not understand the common Christianity of such a principle, as it assumed that the ministers in doing their business as witnesses against the world for a rejected Jesus should, on meeting the resistance of the enemy, turn round and seek security from the world. This greatly offended him. He printed his objections to such a principle in a pretty large pamphlet, and without publishing it or putting it on sale, sent copies of it to all the clergy in the diocese. All this had a very decided influence on his mind, for I remember him at one time as a very exact churchman, as I may speak, but it was evident that his mind had now received a shock, and it was [3] never again what it had been; however, he continued in his mountain curacy, at times as a clergyman visiting distant parts of the county, either to preach sermons or to speak at some meeting of the religious societies.

In the beginning of 1828 I had occasion to go to London, and then [there] I met in private and heard in public those who were warm and alive on prophetic truth, having had their minds freshly illuminated by it.

In my letters to J. N. D. at this time, I told him I had been hearing things that he and I had never yet talked of, and I further told him on my return to Dublin what they were. Full of this subject as I then was, I found him quite prepared for it also, and his mind and soul had travelled rapidly in the direction which had thus been given to it.

I continued, however, in Dublin, and he more generally in the county Wicklow, but he had introduced me to dear F. Hutchinson, whose memory is very dear to me and much honoured by me. He and I found [found] we had much in common, and dear Francis too. Dissatisfied as I was, we went occasionally to the dissenting chapels together, but we had not much sympathy with the tone prevalent. The sermons we heard had generally, perhaps, less of the sympathy [simplicity] of Christ in them than what we had in the pulpits of the Established Church, and the [4] things of God were dealt with more for the intellect and by the intellect, than, as we judged, suited the proper cravings of the renewed and spiritual mind. I believe I may say this for him as well as for myself, so we held on (loosely though it was) by the Established Church still. Mr Groves, who was a dentist of distinguished practice in Devonshire, some short time before this had offered himself to the Church Missionary Society, and in order to fit himself for its service had entered our college. I knew him soon after his first reaching Dublin, and he was occasionally staying with us in coming here to pass his quarterly examinations.

In a way perfectly independent of all that had been passing in the minds of others, he was taught to see that college education for the work of the ministry was not the thing, and that he was wasting much time in Dublin attending his examinations; and by the entrance of these thoughts the whole question was raised in his mind, so that he not only abandoned his connection with college, but viewed as he never before had done, the whole matter of the Established Church and the claims of Dissenting bodies. In the close of 1828 he visited Dublin, though he had seceded from the College. He preached in Poolbeg Street at the request of dear Dr. Egan, then in connection with the little company formed there, of whom Richard Pope, well known in Ireland at the time, was one. Walking one day with him, [5] as we were passing down Lower Pembroke Street, he said to me, "This, I doubt not, is the mind of God concerning us, that we should come together in all simplicity as disciples, not waiting on any pulpit or minister, but trusting that the Lord would edify us together, by ministering as He pleased and saw good from the midst of ourselves."

At the moment he spoke these words I was assured my soul had got the right idea, and that moment – I remember it as if it was yesterday, and could point you out the place – it was the birth place [birthday?] of my mind, dear James, may I so speak as a brother.

Edward Cronin had been by profession an Independent, and a member of York Street, but his mind at the same time was under a like influence, I may say, with us all. In a private room he had the Lord's Supper with, I believe, three others, while I was going still to Sandford [Stamford?] Chapel and J. N. Darby was still in county Wicklow as a clergyman. In the summer of 1829 our family was at Kingstown, and dear F. Hutchinson at Bray. We saw each other occasionally, and spoke of the things of the Lord, but where he went on a Sunday at that time I cannot tell. I attended the Scotch Church at Kingstown, where all who were understood to be new-born were welcome. But on returning to Dublin in the November of that year, F. Hutchinson was quite prepared for communion in the name of the Lord with all, whosoever they might be, who loved Him in sincerity, [6] and proposed to have a room in his house in Fitzwilliam Square for that purpose. He did so, designing, however, so to have it that if any were disposed to attend the services in the Parish Church or Dissenting chapels they might not be hindered; and he also prescribed a certain line of things as to the services of prayer, singing and teaching that should be found among us each day. E. Cronin was prepared for this fully. I joined, but not, I think at all with the same liberty and decision of mind. Several others also were ready, and just at this time we first knew William Stokes.

Thus we continued from November, 1829. Some time before this I had become acquainted with J. Parnell (now Lord Congleton), and in that month (November, 1829) and through the spring of 1830, he was occasionally in Dublin and frequently amongst us. He became very familiar with Edward Cronin, and in the month of May, purposing to let the Lord's Table in the midst of us become somewhat more of a witness, he took a large room in Aungier Street belonging to a cabinet maker. There the meeting was transferred during that month. This tried me still more – the publicity of it was too much for me. I instinctively shrank. F. Hutchinson, as I remember, would also rather have continued in the private house, so that I believe I did not join them for one or two Sundays, and I am not sure that he did, but the others were there at once. J. Parnell, W. Stokes, [7] E. Cronin and a few sisters, and shortly several were added.

In the summer of 1831 [1830], the mission party to Bagdad was formed. Mr Groves had been there for some months previously, and E. Cronin and his sister and J. Parnell with two or three more were desirous of joining him.

It was in the month of September they left us, sailing to France, and purposing to reach Bagdad across the desert from Syria. J. Hamilton, whom some of us had known for two or three years, was also of the party. He had with many others become dissatisfied with the existing order of things, and was very much of one mind with us all, and giving up other occupation, was ready to be one of the Mission party to the East; and I rather think he was another witness of the independent energy of the Spirit of God which was abroad, as I have said, at this time. They sailed, and we continued [in] our room in Aungier Street. It was poor material we had, dear James, and we had one or two solemn and awful cases of backsliding. There was but little spiritual energy and much that was poor treasure for a living Temple, but we held together in the Lord's mercy and care, I believe advancing in the knowledge of His mind. The settled order of worship that we had in Fitzwilliam Square gave place gradually, teaching and exhorting were first made common duties and services, while prayer was restricted under the care of two [8] or three who were regarded as elders, but gradually all this yielded. In a little time no appointed or recognised eldership was understood to be in the midst of us, and all service was of a free character, the presence of God through the Spirit being more simply believed and used. In the year 1834 many more were added, and that year J. N. Darby being in Dublin, it was a question with him whether he should come and help us, as God might give him grace, in Aungier Street, or preach, as he had been invited, at the Asylum in Leeson Street, but he was all but detached from the Church of England. He visited different places either that year or the next, and amongst them *Oxford, Plymouth, Cork and Limerick, ministering wherever he might the truth which God had given him from His Word, and I doubt not, from what I remember, he found in all these places other evidences of the independent work of the Spirit of God on the hearts and consciences of the saints of which I have spoken. In Limerick and Cork occasionally preaching in the pulpits of the Established Church, he also met Christians in private houses, and the influence of his ministry was greatly blessed, light and refreshment visited many a soul, and that, too, of an order to which they had before been strangers; and by invitation going from Wexford [Oxford] to Plymouth, he found the same there, and that [9] in those distant places which had, perhaps, never been combined before in any one kindred influence, this grace

* J. N. D.'s first visit to Oxford and Plymouth was before this. – G. V. W.

was magnified, and happy promising little groups of saints, who sought relief from their heaviness, were found in these places.

Just about the same time, dear Lady Powerscourt had begun some prophetic meetings [in her house]. Her mind had also taken the same direction as that which was among us all. Some of us were invited by her, some also from England, and those occasions greatly helped us. It was then [there] I first knew G. Wigram, Percy Hall, and others. The meetings were truly precious to the soul, and night after night did I return to my room at Powerscourt House in the deep sense of how little a one I was in Christ in the presence of so much force and devotedness as I judged I had been seeing around me through the day.

Thus it was in those days, dear James, and in Aungier Street we were pursuing our way, many being added to us, some who are to this hour in Brunswick Street, among the many to be loved and cherished there. We were occasionally hearing from the party that went to Bagdad, and occasionally visited by brethren from Cork, Limerick and other places, where the same influence had by this time been known. But I might mention dear and honoured J. Mahon as another instance of the independent action of the Spirit of God of which I have spoken. I remember E. Cronin visiting him at Ennis, it might, [10] I think, be in 1828, and on his return to Dublin telling me about him. And I have reason to believe that before we had any table in F. H.'s house, there had been one in his, somewhere in the town of Ennis, by means of one of his family, if not by himself.

This was altogether independent of any doings amongst us, and so, I may add, was it in England, as I might prove to you.

Having occasion to visit Somersetshire in 1831 or 1832, and being at Sir E. Denny's, he asked me to give him an idea of the "Brethren." We were sitting round the fire, and the daughter of the clergyman was present. As I stated our thoughts, she said they had been her's for the last twelve months, and that she had no idea that any one had them but herself. So also being at — shortly afterwards, a dear brother now departed to the Lord, told me that he, his wife, and his wife's mother were meeting in the simplicity of the "Brethren's" way for some time before he ever heard of such people. This brother and the lady mentioned at Sir E. Denny's, as soon as occasion allowed, were in full communion with us, and she continues so to this day in the county Down. I like to trace these circumstances, for they help to assure us that the Lord's hand was independently at work designing to revive another testimony in the midst of His saints.

I feel that I have got evidence at command for the existence of this independent energy of His Spirit.

[11] Among other witnesses of this nearer home, I mention that dear Groves revisited Ireland after the absence of two or three years, and I remember well his telling us of a remarkable movement in the southern part of the Indian peninsula, which indicated a mind quite in harmony with that which had been leading us in our position in England and Ireland. The English brethren year after year visited Ireland, not only Dublin, but the country places. J. Harris, once a clergyman near Plymouth, was among them. G. Wigram for a long-continued time was in Cork, and all the time J. N. Darby was in the two countries by turns, occasionally with us in Dublin, but more frequently either in Plymouth or in Cork; and the gatherings multiplying in England to a very great number, became known by the name of "Plymouth Brethren," and in this country were called "Darbyites." I do not know that I need follow the history beyond this, dear James, as your enquiry was rather about our beginnings[.] I would not doubt but a fresh purpose of God and a fresh work of the Spirit were put

forth in the call of the Brethren. Such things have been from time to time under various characters, though with a kindred spirit, during the dispensation. The dispensation almost suggests such a thing, or makes it necessary, for it is not the ordered system of things linked with the earth or with flesh and blood, as was the former thing in Israel.

The call of the Church is apart from the world, to [12] do service in the light and strength of the Holy Ghost, and to maintain in living spiritual grace, testimony to a rejected and heavenly Jesus. All within and around us is contrary to this. Such a call can be upheld, such a dispensation maintained, only in the direct grace of the Spirit, ministered to elect vessels and filling them with the freshness and apprehension of the truth. No ordered service or course of fleshly ordinances can at all answer this end; no transmitted or cessational [successional] office can at all fill out and discharge its duties; no such authority is owned by it. In man, there is ever a tendency to the mere ways of nature and to the course of the world, and in order to sustain a thing spiritual and living like the Church, the natural way, yea, necessary way (save that God is sovereign), is by a fresh putting forth of light and power to revive it again and again, that there may be still a testimony to the power of God and to the ways and services of a living house, so that the coal may not be quenched.

Such revivals may each of them have its peculiarity, each partaking of the kindred spirit or of the common witness that the same Holy Ghost is working. The Reformation, it is always acknowledged, was marked by a clear and fervent witness of justification by faith – the very truth then needed for the delivery of souls long held in deep captivity. Other energies and revivals had their character in like manner, and whether they have ever or not become [13] the subject of history, faith knew of them, and the souls of the elect were edified and thankful.

I do not doubt that the work of God by and with "Brethren" had its special purpose also. It seemed with certainty to present the separateness of the Church from the world, and a distinct witness of the heavenly calling and high peculiar dignity, as also to assert the precious truth that nothing else is worthy of the House of God, though the house be in ruins, as surely it was known and felt to be in a dispensational sense. And further, the "Brethren" aided the testimony, which was rising again, to the coming and kingdom of the Lord, with some heavenly apprehensions connected with that great mystery, which were consistent with their separate and heavenly position, and with that only. For there are prophetic truths which must be ever felt more or less at variance with any church system which links itself with the world.

Thus in simplicity, as my mind led me, I have done as you wished, dear James. I will not speak as to the result of this in the "Brethren." It would be painful, and it is needless. Each heart among us knows many and many a secret cause of humiliation, which the present distracted condition in which we are found tells of itself.

"When *He* giveth quietness, who then can make trouble?" May such experience be more deeply and richly felt by us and ours.

[14]

Believe me, dear James,

Ever your affectionate brother,

(Signed) J. G. BELLETT.

Note by Mr Darby.

All I have to remark is, that on their returning to Dublin, 1827 (1829?), I was laid up in Fitzwilliam Street with a hurt.

We had reading meetings, and these things came up among some others.

Five of us met at Fitzwilliam Square – Bellett, Cronin, Hutchinson, the present Master Brooke (who was frightened away by Hutchinson), and myself. As Hutchinson was willing, I proposed meeting next Sunday.

We did at H.'s house. Brooke did not come. I have read since that Cronin had already met with Wilson and some others, but they had broken up. Of that I knew nothing. I afterwards went down and worked at Limerick, where it began next, Tom Mansell living there. It was subsequently after July, 1830, I went to Oxford (where Wigram was at Queen's) and joined him and Jarratt, and thence went to Plymouth, where it soon began in England, and immediately afterwards, through Wigram, in London. I was not in Dublin when they went to Aungier Street, but I went there afterwards.

J. N. D[.]

[15]

Note by Mr Wigram.

Two or three or four of us had broken bread together when I was at Oxford, before E. Cronin went with others to the East, and from that time (1829 or 1830), or [on,] wherever I might be on Sunday, there I was wont to break bread, though it might be only I, and Snooke and my wife might join. This I did (1831) at Ridgway, when I left Ireland and went to Devonshire for the work's (chiefly in the Gospel) sake.

G. V. W.

Note by Dr Cronin.

Having a very definite remembrance of things which took place anterior to all that is written by our beloved brother, J. G. B., concerning the ways of God toward us in the beginning of this movement, I would add a few remarks. I had been sent from the South of Ireland to Dublin for my health, and as a Dissenter (Independent) and a visitor, was received to communion by all the Dissenting bodies there.

This liberty was continued till it was found that I became resident in Dublin; I was then informed I could no longer be allowed to break bread with any of them without *special membership* with some one. That was the starting-point with me.

With the strong impression on my soul, though with little intelligence about it, that the Church of [16] God was one, and that all that believed were members of that one Body, I firmly refused special membership. Thus left in separation from their tables for several months, and then feeling unable to attend their meetings from the growing feeling of opposition to one man ministry, I was left to the charge of irreligion and antinomianism. This affected me to such an extent, that it was a season of deep exercise of heart and separation from many that that [sic] I loved in the Lord; and to avoid the appearance of evil,

I spent many a Lord's-day morning under a tree or under a haystack during the time of service.

My name having been publicly denounced from one of their pulpits (Rev. W. Cooper's), one of their deacons, Edward Wilson (Assistant Secretary to the Bible Society in Sackville Street, where he resided), was constrained to protest against this step, which led ultimately to his leaving also.

Thus separated, we two met for breaking of bread and prayer in one of his rooms, until his departure for England. I was not alone. The two Miss Drurys, my cousins, were led in the same path, and also left Mr C.'s chapel, where they were members (as also Mr Tims, bookseller, in Grafton Street), and met with us in the back parlour of my house in Lower Pembroke Street.

It then became noised abroad, and one and another became affected by the same truth, which really was [17] the Oneness of the Body and the presence of the Holy Spirit, also seen by us very clearly. Here F. Hutchinson found us, and as we were becoming numerous, offered us the use of his large room in Fitzwilliam Square. At this time, dear J. G. B. and J. N. D. were more or less affected by the general state of things in the religious world, but were unprepared to come out into entire separation, and looked suspiciously at our movements, feeling still able to attend and minister in the Church of England as well as to come occasionally to our little assembly.

We soon began to feel, as humbler brethren were added to us, that the house in Fitzwilliam Square was unsuited, which led us to take a large auction room in Aungier Street for our use on Sundays. And oh! the blessed seasons to my soul with J. Parnell, W. Stokes, and others, while moving the furniture aside and laying the simple table with its bread and wine, on Saturday evenings – seasons of joy never to be forgotten – for surely we had the Master's smile and sanction in the beginning of such a movement as this was!

About this time G. V. W. paid us a visit from England, having some intention of joining the Mission party proposing to go to Bagdad. From that to my leaving Dublin (1830) there were continual additions of Evangelical Christians – all of us with very little intelligence as to the real character of God's movement amongst us. Special membership, as [18] it is called amongst Dissenters, was the primary and most offensive condition of things to all our minds, so that our first assembling was really marked as a small company of Evangelical malcontents. We felt free up to this time and long afterwards to make arrangements amongst ourselves as to who should distribute the bread and wine and take other ministries in the assembly. We were also, from ignorance or indifference, careless as to conscience or godly care one for another. I am led the more to make the observation owing to the frequent way in which some of the early brethren, who are now in separation from us, accuse us of departure from first principles in our present meetings.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that even at that time we should no more have tolerated false doctrine, through God's grace, than now.

The comfort of the many who loved us, but were not with us, was our staunch orthodoxy as regards the mystery of the Godhead and the doctrine of grace and godliness.

I would remark here a feature in the ways of God in the beginning of this movement, on and through obscure individuals, and how in distant places and divers positions the substance of His grace and truth dwelt in us, and though, as I have said before, with little intelligence, led us in paths more or less agreeable to the mind of God. It is striking that those [19] able and honoured brethren, J. G. B., J. N. D. and G. V. W. did not constitute the

embryo of it, while God has used and continued to use them in Divine intelligence and developing principles as to His Church, &c.

I have repeated somewhat as to this point, owing to the Church [charge] alluded to above, where as God's ways with us were and still are a gradual unfolding of His truth discovered to us in various practical details. So that which in the beginning was, as it were, no bigger than a man's hand when we were few in number and weak and defective in understanding, has expanded itself to meet the necessities of thousands gathered on the same principles, and to the praise of glory of His grace.

EDWARD CRONIN.

July, 1871.

Remarks by Mr Stoney.

I first knew the Brethren in 1833. I had, in anxiety to serve the Lord, given up going to the Bar in order to take orders, thinking it the only true way of doing so. I at first very reluctantly went to hear at Aungier Street, but my "chum" in college, a Mr Clarke, was a constant attendant (since gone over to Irvingism).

I was eventually much interested in the teaching there. I partially [particularly?] remember Mr Darby on being "Accepted in the beloved," and Mr Bellett on Mark [20] v.; but I did not think of joining them – I was expecting great things from Mr Irving. Mr Bellett brought Mr Benjamin Newton to see me in my rooms in college, in order to disabuse my mind of Irvingism. I was constantly hearing of J. N. D., and at length heard him on Joshua vii.: "Wherefore liest thou upon the ground? Up, sanctify the people." Get rid of the evil first, God cannot be with us until we are separated from the evil. I was broken down. I felt for the first time the immense step of leaving the Established order for the unsightly few in Aungier Street. This was in June, 1834.

I asked Mr Darby to let me come until I saw something better, for he [I?] was not quite sure he was right; but I was convinced the Church of England was wrong.

At that time Mr Stokes used to read regularly some portions of Scripture every Lord's day, and at Plymouth, where I was in 1838, it used to be arranged beforehand who should break the bread and do official acts.

I was at the meeting at Lady Powerscourt's in September, 183—. Mr John Synge was in the chair. He called on each to speak on a given subject. Mr Darby spoke last, and for hours, touching on all that had been previously said. Mr Wigram sat next to him. Captain Hall, Mr George Curzon [Carson?], Sir Alex. Campbell, Mr Bellett, Mr Thomas Mansell, Mr Mahon, [21] Mr Edward Syne [Synge?] were there. There were clergymen present and Irvingites.

The prayer meetings in the mornings at seven o'clock were particularly striking to me, every one praying that the Lord would give them light, and grace to act on it.

There was great feeling against J. N. D. when I came out, because of the secessions at Oxford about that time, so much so, that it was notified to me that both Dr Saddler and Dr Singer had conferred on the propriety of taking my rooms from me, because I had asked Mr Darby to lecture in them.

Those with Irvingite tendencies gradually drew away from us and their society was avoided.

J. B. STONEY.

July 12th, 1871.

Copy of a Letter from J. G. Bellett to J. N. Darby.

1st September, 1864.

MY DEAREST JOHN, – It seems to myself that I am quietly sinking under the effects of pleuro-pneumonia, as the faculty speak.

I may never see you again, my dearest Brother, but I would tell you as from a dying bed how deeply from my heart and soul I bless the Lord that He ever revealed to me the truth which Brethren have received from Him. I was quickened – it was a feeble operation – in the year 1817, as I was reading a book [22] for my next examination; but how did my soul battle on for years!

I came to know you, not slightly as before, but in an apprehension that instinctively bound me to you, and this now for forty years has never abated. What do I owe the God of my eternal life for feeding and strengthening that life, and enlarging its capacities through your ministry, in secret and in public! I have loved you as I suppose, in a certain sense, I have loved no other, and now, after so long a time, we are found together, still in the dear fellowship of the same confession.

I need not tell you of the love of the Brethren, and of the care I get at home from the servants, and my dear, dear, child. So as to that I am in a wealthy place: nor will I speak much of myself, but I cannot say less than this – I never had the same peaceful, happy rest in Christ. To depart and be with Him indeed I count to be far better. I am happier than I ever was.

I have reviewed my ministry, and surely have detected vanity and self-pleasing. But oh! He has told me He has forgiven it all. But it is a poor thing to have no fruit of service to take to Him – at least, so I speak.

I told a Church of England saint how I still held to the truth as most precious which I learnt some thirty years ago: and, dearest John, only think, in contrast [23] with it, of offices and ordinances and prayers and clergy!

The Lord be with thee, my dearest Brother, while you assert and adorn the doctrine.

I was sorry at your reference in that very edifying word "Law and Righteousness," to Mr Simeon. People will say it was stabbing in the dark, but I know you judged in the fear of God that His Spirit guided you.

J. G. B.