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THE WORLD, THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL

by Anthony J. Weston

"Jesus, I my cross have taken
All to leave and follow Thee"

One has seen the inside of bad Italian inns, - but only long enough to shudder. We prefer clean plates and clean bedclothes, - yes, and a decently servile boots to carry our case up staircases with respectably thick carpets. Perhaps as we are bowed into dinner we may hum the lines of the hymn with which this paper opened; and if it does not stick in one's throat, we may perhaps catch the haunting echo of the voice of a greater man than you or I, who once placed his head between his hands and repeated them in the bare hovel of an Italian Boardinghouse. J.N. Darby was old at the time, or perhaps even this vague trace of self pity would not have escaped him. I wonder if perhaps for a flash he saw a tempting vision of all "the world the flesh and the devil" had to offer. Did he see in his mind's eye "Markley", the large English country house in Sussex where he was born? I went to see it not long ago and wished I lived there. "The Darbys are such nice people to know". Then there was his father's place in Ireland - Leap Castle. He might have thought of school days at Westminster and the even more subtly tempting promise offered to the Trinity College Classical Gold Medalist and the prospect of a glittering career at the Irish Chancery Bar.

Sometimes when we find that "this world's glory is costing me too dear" we would do well to think of that old man in his filthy lodgings. "Jesus I my cross have taken...." Or listen again:

"This world is a wilderness wide;
I have nothing to seek or to choose;
With no thought in thy ways to abide,
I have nought to regret nor to lose."

This is a hymn sung on occasions at the morning meetings of some Assemblies. I personally cannot sing it with a vestige of sincerity, but I believe that of the tiny band of ascetics who could have sung it without hypocrisy - Darby, who wrote those lines, was one. The theme is constant in his verse:

"In the desert God will teach thee...."

"Though thy way be long and dreary...."

In painting a picture of J.N.D. as an ascetic conqueror of the world, the flesh and the devil, I must inevitably cite at some length the famous description of the "Irish Clergymen", "A fallen cheek, a bloodshot eye, crippled limbs resting on crutches, a seldom shaved beard, a shabby coat, a shabby suit of clothes and a generally neglected person. It was

currently reported that a person in Limerick offered him a halfpenny, mistaking him for a beggar!.....

This young man had taken high honours at Dublin University and had studied for the Bar, where under the auspices of his eminent kinsman he had excellent prospects, but his conscience would not allow him to take a brief. In no other way could he gain access to the lowest orders.....

"He was moved by a self abandonment fruitful of consequences. He made me more and more ashamed of political economy and moral philosophy and of science, all of which ought to be counted dross, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord.

"For the first time I saw a man earnestly turning into reality the principles which others professed with their lips alone....."

In expressing his renunciation of the world, the flesh and the devil by an asceticism which cultivated the severest austerity of life, Darby was by now no means alone among the early Brethren. They were characterised by this trait.

Thus: G.H. Lang on Anthony Norris Groves - "He was well educated, had mastered his own profession of dentistry so as in a very few years to have an income of £1,500 per year (worth then very much more). When only twenty years of age he devoted himself to scientific objects and was a leading member of the Atheneum Literary Society." A little later Lang writes of the step taken by Groves and his wife in "dedication of all their substance to Christ as a complete surrender involving as a natural consequence that when they went out in faith they did so without personal resources."

Of William Kelly the 'Christian' wrote on his death: "He was the son of an Ulster Squire. He was educated at Dublin University, where the highest honours in Classics were his. He deeply deplored the flimsiness of faith today compared with the former robustness of character, the increasing worldliness of believers and growing lack of devotedness."

J.G. Bellett was called to the Irish Bar, like Darby, and like Darby renounced his career. Captain Percy Hall similarly resigned his commission.

Of Chapman who gave up for Christ his career as a rising Solicitor, it was commonly said that a brilliant future lay before him. "He was constantly invited to select parties in the West End. Few of those who had dealings with R.C. Chapman guessed in later years that this man who often had to look directly to the Lord for his next meal, could look back to a childhood whose earliest memories were of a great and richly furnished house, a staff of servants and a coach bearing the family Coat of Arms."

Of Captain the Hon. W.H.G. Wellesley it was recorded "one great feature of this revival is that God raised up men of affluence and influence to receive these poor labourers into their dwellings who have in this world neither one nor the other to recommend them. One honourable gentleman, Captain Wellesley, had forsaken this world's wisdom and greatness.....

Sir Edward Denny, 5th Baronet, with an income of £13,000 a year, lived in a cottage in Islington.

Thus it is with good reason that J.B. Neatby in his 'History of the Plymouth Brethren' records what I have sought to stress, that such asceticism was for long a leading feature of all early Brethrenism and postulates the desuetude of the early pattern, with, I feel, regrettably much justification.

I do not deny that there are genuine examples of self-denial among contemporary Brethren, but I do maintain that we should be hard put to it to find in this country many men who practice the kind of heroic self-abnegation I have instanced.

Having come so far, I prefer to draw no conclusions, but merely to proffer a handful of comments (first of all as something of an advocatus diaboli) of a more or less discursive character.

First, the early asceticism was born largely of a conviction not merely that Christ might return to earth in the 19th century, but that he would do so. Most of us today believe that He may come in the 20th century; few would commit themselves to the conviction that He will.

Secondly, I think I may without impropriety suggest that though the intensity of our self denial has undoubtedly diminished, I remain convinced that it is my Christian friends (inevitably largely Brethren) that are the more characterised by self sacrificial giving.

Thirdly, I am sure that many 20th century Brethren give quite as sacrificially of their time, not in that they give more of it, but in that the hours they do devote to Christian things constitutes a far higher proportion of their leisure. Many of the men to whom I have referred were gentlemen of independent means.

Fourthly, I think we must beware of measuring our spiritual power solely by our physical self denial. "I gave to my Assembly the 6d that I might have spent on an ice-cream, therefore my Sunday School lesson will be more effective" is a simple non sequitur. If it were not, St. Simon Stylites sitting on his solitary pole would have been a more dynamic Christian than John Wesley; as it is, he is a figure of fun.

Fifthly, there is an inherent danger in extreme self abnegation

that it may fail to avoid the temptation besetting the Pharisee who fasts with his head unshaven and unwashed. Dare one mention that even Darby's simplicity of life was stigmatised as "affection" by the contemporary Professor Newman?

On the other hand it must be admitted that it is difficult not to read the history of 1825/35 as the history of men of a spiritual power and stature very difficult to match today. It is impossible to believe that it was wholly coincidental that they were also monumentally ascetic.

I would shudder to commit that rank hypocrisy of advocating a return to a close following of their traits. I know that I for one am not prepared for it. Let me but advocate this as an acknowledgement (however insubstantial) of the heroism of their inspiration to us; that we would do well as Christians to allow our lives to become more and more disciplined with the increase of our spiritual maturity; that our money (even if spent on ourselves) be not frittered away in impulse buying; that our leisure time (even if not spent in tract distribution) be given - as our tastes dictate - to reading modern biography, listening to Bartok or even writing magazine articles, rather than to Coronation Street, and that we so control our bodies as to indicate that we appreciate that our New Testament expressly states that bodily exercise profiteth - albeit for little.

In doing so we will not conquer the unholy trinity by which this article is inspired, but we may perhaps stop them making any further advance.

Of course we will retain our indulgencies. On this again let the aged J.N.D. have the last word: "I have not been ill but knocked up and over-worked..... I work morning and afternoon as far as I can and in the evening let the strain go and indulge in the Word and feed on His love."

"Oh God, to us may grace be given....."

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Many who bear the Christian name in our day conceive of salvation as something to be enjoyed. They suppose that it brings them deliverance from the penalties of sin and a guarantee of immortal bliss, a peace and poise of spirit amidst all the vicissitudes of life, and an assurance of their continued existence beyond the grave. And they have no conception of a salvation which lifts them into the will of God, and makes them living centres of divine influence.

H.H. Rowley.