



"The danger is not that a particular class is unfit to govern. *Every* class is unfit to govern."

—Lord Acton

**03-Jan-14**

## **Anarchy in God's Church? (Part One)**

To help in understanding one of the great controversies among those who have left the [Worldwide Church of God](#), consider the story and legacy of a man whose ideas have had more influence in Evangelical Protestantism than perhaps any other in the last 200 years: John Nelson Darby. Many know of his translation of the Bible, *The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation from the Original Languages*. Darby, born in 1800 to a well-connected family, was ordained at the age of 25 as a deacon in the Anglican church, and the following year, as a priest.

When still in his late 20s, Darby was badly injured in a horse-riding accident. Confined and alone throughout a long, miserable recovery, he went through a crisis of [faith](#). Mulling over his life and his experiences with the Anglican church, he concluded that his chief problems were relying on church organization and personal works. Rejecting these, he created a new lens for interpreting the Bible, one most Protestants still use today. The [true church](#) never subscribed to Darby's ideas, but one of his ideas appears to be gaining a foothold here and there.

Just as happens with many today, the spirit of the times existing while Darby experienced his personal reformation ensnared him and many others. To understand his ideas, we need to understand the sea of ideas Darby was floating in as he began to refine his faith.

*Anarchism*, a political theory based on *anarchy*, was a widespread movement in the early 1800s. The word "anarchy" begins with the prefix *an-*, meaning "without," and the root, *archos*, means "leader," "ruler," or "authority." Thus, *an-archos*, or *anarchy*, simply means "without rulers" or "without leaders." We commonly think of anarchy as being chaotic and lawless, which is partly correct, but the chaos and lawlessness are actually effects of an absence of leaders to give direction and establish parameters. Being without leaders results in every man doing what is right in his own eyes (see [Judges 21:25](#)).

As a political idea, anarchism rejects authority and governance in human affairs. It posits that man is essentially good, and if any sort of human oversight is removed, that inner [goodness](#) will automatically come out. Because man has a good nature—the theory goes—the best will be produced if he is left to his own devices. In anarchism, the enemy is human authority, because that authority is seen as inhibiting the natural growth of the supposed better nature that is inside.

The concept of anarchism spread throughout Europe, Russia, and America during the nineteenth century. At its height, tens of thousands considered themselves dedicated anarchists, and countless more thought that authority impedes man from reaching his potential.

As we know, anything prominent in the culture tends to find its way into religion as well, and anarchism is no exception. Religious anarchism appeared in Britain in the 1830s, when Darby was re-examining everything he believed. Darby founded a movement that became known as the Plymouth Brethren, which protested against anything that inclined toward rule by the establishment or codified law.

Among their defining tenets was that there should be no government in the church, taking particular exception to the idea of a paid ministry. In their churches, then, there were no ministers, no official leadership positions, and

essentially no rules for their meetings. Instead, the Brethren met together and stood up to speak as they felt moved by the Spirit.

The Plymouth Brethren recognized that there had to be some source for their instruction and growth, but because they had already rejected any sort of human leadership, they instead turned to private revelation of the Holy Spirit as their exclusive source of guidance. Like political anarchists, these religious anarchists believed that the Holy Spirit was all that they needed to guide them into goodness and that any sort of authority would interfere with that process.

Even a cursory reading shows the Bible to be filled with parameters of conduct, admonishments of good works, and God-given human authority. Simply put, anarchism is at complete odds with the Bible. To get around this, John Darby turned to—and began embellishing—the concept of *dispensationalism*.

As used in this teaching, *dispensation* is simply the system by which anything is administered. The idea advances that different dispensations have existed throughout history, so God's management and goals in one dispensation could be entirely different in another. While this holds a grain of truth, it also contains a major snare, allowing the dispensationalist to ignore any scripture he does not care for by saying that it applies to a different dispensation. This often happens in regard to the commandments, especially the [Sabbath](#). Evangelical Protestantism has a knee-jerk reaction, saying that [God](#) commanded the Sabbath *only* for ancient Israel, but now the church is under the dispensation of grace. Thus, to them, the Sabbath is irrelevant.

Once this lens is adopted, it becomes easy to divide the word of truth wrongly ([II Timothy 2:15](#)) because the whole counsel of God ([Acts 20:27](#)) suddenly becomes fractured and set against itself—and God Himself becomes changeable (however, see [Malachi 3:6](#); [Hebrews 13:8](#)). Dispensationalism is filled with numerous contradictions, but by it, Darby maintained his views while still maintaining that the Bible was true. He simply divided up the text according to what he believed was relevant, leaning heavily on his own experience. Having had a bad experience with church authority and having failed to produce sufficient fruit through his

own works, he concluded that authority and works were of no value in the present dispensation.

Many concepts that Darby began espousing grew from [Gnosticism](#), a Greek system of thought that can easily be worked into almost any religious tradition. Gnosticism promoted the notion of the [immortal soul](#), as well as the ideas that all humans possess a spark of the divine and that the soul ascends to heaven after death. The Gnostics believed that an enlightened person automatically understood how to be good without the need for laws, and his goodness would just well up from the divine nature within.

This thought led to the conclusion that, as spiritual beings, we already have a direct line to heaven, so we need nothing—or no one—to gain spiritual truth. Instead, the Holy Spirit whispers to us all that we need to lead a spiritual life, so if we have not heard from God on a particular subject, then it must not be important to our spirituality. In this way, a person can easily custom-tailor Christianity for himself. Is that what God wants?

- David C. Grabbe

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

Parents are responsible to instill in their children a deep, abiding sense of responsibility toward God, prepare them for life, and fashion them as responsible citizens in God's government. As parents, we need to analyze and learn the right principles of government as they apply to management; this is the chemistry of government. In governing the family (childrearing), understanding the simple makes the complex more achievable. Three elements - expectation of reward, fear of disadvantage, and charisma - constitute the chemistry of government and childrearing. In the right proportions, positive governmental and childrearing results can be produced,

but in the wrong proportions, the results can be explosive and deadly. Parents must learn to combine these elements artfully to prepare their children for a productive role in God's Kingdom.

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by John O. Reid

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