

William Kelly

by John Bjorlie

William Kelly was a devoted Bible teacher, scholar, and evangelist who persevered through challenges and controversies to leave a lasting legacy in the Brethren movement.

Scripture: John 14:6, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 4:7, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, 1 John 2:15, 1 John 5:8, Revelation 20:11

Topics: "Faithfulness", "Perseverance"

Description

John Bjorlie preaches about the life and legacy of William Kelly, a dedicated Bible teacher and controversialist who faced challenges and opposition within the assemblies he labored with. Despite being excommunicated for ecclesiastical 'independence,' Kelly continued to serve God faithfully, leaving a lasting impact through his written ministry and lectures. His unwavering faith and devotion to God, even in the face of personal loss and adversity, serve as an inspiration for believers to stand firm in their beliefs and trust in the love of God.

Transcript

William Kelly (1821-1906) was born into an Episcopalian family from Ulster, Northern Ireland. As a young boy he was left fatherless. This misfortune did not rob him of his buoyant sense of humor, but did spur him to diligence in all areas of life. A hard worker and a vigorous student, he graduated at the top of his class from Trinity College, Dublin, where he studied classics.

At age 20, on the isle of Sark, he was shaken out of a religious slumber by reading Revelation 20:11-12, "And I saw a great white throne, and Him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God..." Years later, Kelly commented on the verses that God used to give him assurance of salvation. "For three are those that bear witness, the Spirit, and the water and the blood, and the three agree in one"--three witnesses, but for one united testimony. 'If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater.' May I recall the divine relief and deliverance these words gave more than sixty years ago to a soul converted but harassed and deeply exercised through a sense of sin which clouded his soul's rest on Jesus?...It is not my seeing as I ought the efficacy of the blood, but resting by faith on God's seeing it, and God's valuing it as it deserves."

Soon after conversion, Kelly left the established church and threw in his lot with a small fellowship of believers. For the next thirty years, he lived in and near Guernsey, and for the last half of his pilgrimage he

lived at Blackheath. Kelly's first wife was a Miss Montgomery of Guernsey. His second wife was the daughter of a clergyman named Mr. Gipps of Hereford. She was a clever linguist with a scholarly bent, giving able assistance in her husband's work.

To measure the caliber of Kelly's learning, consider the massive contributions he made in written and spoken Bible teaching. His expertise was so expansive that when men listened to his lectures, they became convinced that he had actually read all of the 15,000 books in his library! At least he seemed to know what they were about. The titles of Kelly's own writings fill nearly ten pages in the British Museum catalog.

He aided Samuel P. Tregelles in his textual work. For two years he edited a magazine called *The Prospect*, and then, in 1856, Kelly became the editor of *The Bible Treasury* which he edited for fifty years. His work with *The Bible Treasury* brought him into correspondence with keen thinkers across the English speaking world, many of which dreaded what they branded "Plymouthism," or "Darbyism." But despite their prejudices, they admitted that if they wanted to read something which was free of the destructive "higher criticism" which attacked the inspiration of the Bible, and if they wanted ministry that dealt with the serious issues of the Word in a reverential way, *The Bible Treasury* was what they read. Kelly wrote commentaries on most of the books of the Bible. David Beattie says of Kelly, "His writings, largely in the form of expositions of Scripture, are especially helpful as being at once profound and simple." Some of Kelly's readers will contest the word "simple." Reading him does require some powers of concentration.

The Swiss medical doctor, Henri L. Rossier (1835-1928), was Darby's collaborator across the channel who prepared Darby's *Etudes Sur La Parole*, which Kelly in turn translated into English as *Darby's Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, a work every Bible student ought to have close by. Besides this, Kelly labored for years collecting, editing, and at times translating Darby's *Collected Writings*, in thirty-four volumes, most of which had appeared in *The Bible Treasury*.

Kelly saw a grandeur in Darby's works, but was also honest enough to admit that Darby could be unintelligible. Those who have been helped by reading Darby can thank God that there was ever a man named William Kelly to decipher the code. Right to the end of his long life, Kelly would exhort young Bible students to "read Darby!" He had; and it had done him good. Darby once teased Kelly, "Kelly, you write to be read and understood. I only think on paper."

William Kelly varied from Darby on the topics of baptism and some issues of assembly government, but agreed with Darby on most things, so much so that some called him "Darby interpreted." It was Kelly who gave a final defense of Darby's character when an American author tried to link Darby's prophetic teaching with Edward Irving and the prophetess, Margaret Macdonald. In Kelly's excellent article, *The Rapture of the Saints: Who Suggested It?* (p. 314 of vol. N 4, *The Bible Treasury*). Kelly draws a comparison from Acts 16, saying that the notion of John Darby deriving his views of future events from Margaret Macdonald's ecstatic utterance would be similar to saying Paul received his teaching of salvation from the slave girl who had a spirit of Python at Philippi. Did she not say, "These men are servants of the Most High God that announce to you the way of salvation"! If we follow the reasoning of contemporaries like Dave MacPherson, who have labored hard to resurrect this old slander, then Paul's doctrine of salvation might also be an "incredible cover-up."

The cultured linguist, textual critic, and expositor shunned the limelight. Often identifying the author of his articles as simply "W. K.," he hid behind Christ. When his nephew attended university, his Greek instructor

was impressed by the young man's facility in the language. When told about his reclusive uncle, the professor made his pilgrimage to Kelly's home bearing an offer to join the faculty in Dublin. Besides the prestigious position, he would "make a fortune."

Unhesitatingly, Kelly replied, "For which world?"

C. H. Spurgeon said Kelly was a man "who, born for the universe, narrowed his mind" by Darbyism. It is hard seeing how such a large-hearted brother as Spurgeon could write such jarring things about men like Darby, C. H. MacIntosh and Kelly. Spurgeon reviewed thirteen of Kelly's books in his book, *Commenting on the Commentaries* so one has to wonder, if Kelly was so tainted, why did Spurgeon bother to read so many of his books? It is amusing to us today to read Spurgeon's remarks about Kelly's *Lectures on the Minor Prophets*. "Mr. Kelly finds in the *Minor Prophets* a great many things which we cannot see a trace of. For instance, he here discovers that we shall lose India. It is a pity that a man of such excellence should allow a very superior mind to be so warped." We can only suppose that Spurgeon thought it was not only warped, but also unpatriotic to tell an Englishman that Britain would lose India. Shocking indeed.

Unlike so many prophetic teachers, Kelly was a Bible student, not a news commentator. This fact enabled Kelly to make many statements about Israel and the nations which were unimaginable at the time of their writing, but have since been proven correct.

Besides exposition, Kelly was enough of an Irishman to engage in the controversial. He even answered the Pope's Encyclical with a forceful rebuttal. Thereafter, H. W. Pontis reported that a number of "interesting cases of converted priests, monks, and others of education and high place have come before him [Kelly] both at home and in France."

When running the marathon, a grueling race of more than twenty-six miles, experienced runners talk about "the wall." Somewhere after the twentieth mile it will hit them. They began to hurt miles ago, and yet they ran on in spite of the pain, through the pain, and beyond the pain. But then they came to "the wall." For instance, in the annual Boston Marathon, toward the end of the course, the runners take a turn and as they do they see an incline rising before them. It has been dubbed "heartbreak hill." Those who make it beyond to the finish line have said it was as though they were not the ones running anymore. They could not run. Their legs refused to cooperate. It was as though something or someone else took over.

How many of God's choice saints met "the wall" as they neared the finish line. And our brother William Kelly was not exempted. All his Christian career he had been a controversialist of the first order. Critiquing the work of the most brilliant scholars of that period. Kelly took on all comers. But would he expect to be attacked by the ones that should have been his closest allies? Yet, in 1881, while John Darby's health slipped away, some of Darby's loyalists took Kelly in hand.

Kelly foresaw this misery. He was increasingly alarmed by an attachment to external forms and practices among the assemblies that he and Darby labored with. A kind of uniformity was being insisted on that tolerated no diversity. Then a disciplinary action was taken at the Park Street assembly in London, and Kelly objected to the action. Explaining his position, Kelly wrote, "Surely our Lord has said, when the preliminaries are done in obedience, 'Hear the church;' but is this His voice when they were not? Has He not also called him that has an ear 'to hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches'?' To idolize assembly judgments as necessarily right is condemned by His Word" (from *Why Many Saints Were Outside the Park Street of 1881*).

When Darby realized that his own devotees had given Kelly an ultimatum, either to bow to the Park Street decision, or be excommunicated, he was mortified. Darby's last letter ended: "I do add, Let not John's ministry be forgotten in insisting on Paul's. One gives the dispensations in which the display is; the other that which is displayed. I should particularly object to any attack being made on William Kelly."

But that plea was not heeded. Kelly was excommunicated from the fellowship of so many assemblies which themselves owed a huge debt to him. He was not being shunned because of any serious doctrinal error or moral problem. Rather, he was put out because of ecclesiastical "independence." Perhaps the finest and most able Bible teacher then living heard a host of doors slamming shut against him.

Sorrow upon sorrow came when, in 1884, his beloved wife and collaborator was taken from him. But even then, as he attended her sickbed, he took time to write brother Heyman Wreford, to encourage him in his evangelistic work. Himself suffering from insomnia, Kelly did not allow himself the luxury of wallowing in discouragement. Others would have assumed that it was time to convalesce. But it was during these turbulent years that Kelly's most fruitful work was beginning. After doing and enduring so much, he was not ready to hang up his shield and sword. In the last fifteen years of his life, most of his written ministry streamed out.

With brother Wreford's help, an energetic work was in progress in Exeter. Wreford preached the gospel in Victoria Hall where throngs came to hear him. David Beattie, in *Brethren: the Story of a Great Recovery*, tells how in "those stirring times, it was not unusual to see an audience of one thousand people at the Sunday evening service. The work was abundantly owned of God, and it is no exaggeration to state that hundreds were led to the Saviour through his preaching."

For twenty-two years, Kelly gave annual series of lectures in the Queen Street Meeting Room and in the Victoria Hall. These lectures were taken down in shorthand and eventually went into *The Bible Treasury* and are now available in individual volumes.

The man with the small spectacles, an occasional shrug of the shoulders, and a steady smile that seemed engraved into the lines of his sunny face, stood at the door of the doctor's home in Exeter. His barbed witticisms and outgoing ways were still the same, but the spring was lacking from his step. Weary from sleeplessness, a drawn-looking man stepped into Dr. Wreford's home in 1906. Heyman Wreford would take care of brother Kelly till he died. In his last days, as two of his daughters attended his bedside, his conversation was an outpouring of worship and praise to God. It could be said that in his last days he prayed without ceasing. Looking up from his bed at Mrs. Wreford, he said, "The light of my heart is Christ."

Brother Wreford stepped up to the bed and said, "How do you feel, dear Mr. Kelly?"

"Weak enough to go to heaven," he replied.

One of his last expressions became the outline of one of the messages preached at his funeral. "There are three things real--the Cross, the enmity of the world, the love of God."

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