

The History of Dispensationalism
from Its English Origins
to Its Early Influence in America
by Grover Gunn

<http://grovergunn.net/andrew/andrew.htm>

A Lecture given at the Bridwell Heights Presbyterian Church
in Kingsport, TN, on October 18, 2008

My lecture is on the history of dispensationalism from its English origins to its early influence in America. I want to begin by describing the overall prophetic landscape in nineteenth century England. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, English premillennialism was "at a very low ebb."¹ Historicist postmillennialism was the dominate view among English evangelicals at that time and had been for some time. Back in the seventeenth century, the English Puritans had a postmillennial optimism about the church age. Postmillennialists are optimists about the long term success of the church age. They believe that the preaching of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit has the power to deliver not only individuals but cultures and peoples and nations. They believe that the nations will be discipled in this age in a glorious fulfillment of the Great Commission, and that the result will be the ushering in of a golden age of peace and prosperity before the second coming of Christ. According to Peter Toon, we can trace this postmillennialism optimism all the way back to John Calvin and Geneva.²

¹Murray, Iain H. *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*, 187. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971.

²Toon, Peter. "The Latter-Day Glory." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 26,41. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.

In the 1640s, there was a revival of premillennialism among English Puritans.³ A minority of the Westminster divines adopted this view in a moderate form,⁴ and a party called the Fifth Monarchists developed an extreme and radical form of premillennialism.⁵ In all its forms, seventeenth century premillennialism was a short-lived phenomenon⁶ with no lasting influence of any real significance.⁷ According to Iain Murray, premillennialism "practically disappeared from the main-stream of evangelical thought in the century which followed,"⁸ which would be the eighteenth century.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the church in both Britain and America was overcome with worldliness and indifference.⁹ Then, to the surprise of many, there were by the grace of God the Great Awakening in America and the Wesleyan Revival in England. These revivals transformed society and confirmed and strengthened the Puritan hope for the bringing in of the millennium through the gospel. In 1793, the recently formed Baptist Missionary Society in England sent William Carey to India as the beginning of the modern missionary movement. By the time Carey died in 1834, thirteen

³Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 47–50; Clouse, R.G. "The Rebirth of Millenarianism." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 42–65. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.

⁴Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 48–55, 271 fn 21; A.R. Dallison. "Contemporary Criticism of Millenarianism." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 112–14. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.

⁵Capp, B.S. "Extreme Millenarianism." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 66–90. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 48.

⁶Toon, Peter. "Conclusion." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 128. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.

⁷Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 53; Sandeen, Ernest R. *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930*, 4. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1970.

⁸Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 187; Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, xxii,4–5.

⁹Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 112.

British mission societies had formed with a vision to reach the world for Christ.¹⁰ The early leaders of the modern missionary movement were strongly motivated by their optimistic belief that prophecy would be fulfilled through the discipling of the nations before the return of Christ.¹¹

Again, in the early nineteenth century, very few English Christians were premillennial and most were historicist postmillennialists. We have defined postmillennialism, and we also need to define what is meant by an historicist view of prophecy. The historicist view commonly identified the papacy as the Antichrist, an identification which was practically universal among Protestants for about three centuries after the Protestant Reformation.¹² The historicist view regarded the tribulation prophecies in the book of Revelation as a history of the church age up to the millennium written beforehand in apocalyptic symbols. For example, the vision of an invading horde numbering two myriads of myriads found in the latter half of Revelation chapter nine might be interpreted as the threat to Christian Europe from the Turkish empire, and the beast rising out of the sea in Revelation chapter thirteen might be interpreted as the papacy's rise to power.¹³ The historicist postmillennialists basically viewed the current history of their day as some particular stage in the tribulation described in the books of Daniel and Revelation.¹⁴

¹⁰Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 141–42.

¹¹Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 149–55.

¹²Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 41; Ladd, George Eldon. *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture*, 32. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 1956.

¹³Toon, Peter. "Introduction." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 19–21. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970; Toon, "The Latter-Day Glory," 25.

¹⁴Ladd, George Eldon. *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God: The Sixth Annual Mid-Year Lecutres of Western Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Portland, Oregon*, 32. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 1952.

Historicists also often used the day-year theory in their interpretations of Daniel and Revelation.¹⁵ This theory was based on Ezekiel 4:6 where God commanded Ezekiel to lay on his side for 40 days with each day representing a year in the history of the nation Judah,¹⁶ or on Numbers 14:34 where God judged Israel with forty years of wandering in the wilderness, one year for each day the twelve spies had spied out the land.¹⁷ The Rabbis had applied this theory to their interpretation of Daniel, and some Protestants applied it to the books of Daniel and Revelation. This sort of prophetic interpretation was very common among the English Puritans.¹⁸ According to this theory, the forty-two months of Revelation 13:5, which would be 1,260 days, would represent 1,260 years, and the 2,300 days of Daniel 8:14 would represent 2,300 years.

Now that we have defined historicist postmillennialism, the predominate view of the time, we need to look at the reasons for the revival of premillennialism in the nineteenth century.

Around the beginning of the nineteenth century, a series of events occurred which caused many to fear that the world was falling apart.¹⁹ There was first the French Revolution, then the French reign of terror, then the rise of Napoleon, and then the Napoleonic wars. Because of this political turmoil in Europe, some became pessimistic about the possibility of transforming the world through the preaching of the gospel. Instead of concluding that the age of gospel victory must be further in the

¹⁵Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 32.

¹⁶Toon, "The Latter-Day Glory," 24,34.

¹⁷Capp, "Extreme Millenarianism," 67.

¹⁸Toon, "The Latter-Day Glory," 24.

¹⁹Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 5; Weber, Timothy P. *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875–1982, Enlarged Edition*, 14. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1983; Dallimore, Arnold. *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement: The Life of Edward Irving*, 71–72. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1983.

future than once thought, some came to believe that the millennium could be ushered in only after Jesus returned to earth and began reigning from earth with a rod of iron. In the words of Ernest Sandeen, there was "a kind of a failure of nerve."²⁰ These early nineteenth century English premillennialists were generally all eschatological pessimists. They generally all believed that the gospel could save individuals but not society, and they were expecting things to get worse and worse until the return of Christ. Thus, there was in the early nineteenth century a modest revival of premillennialism. This premillennial minority came to believe that the next major event on the prophetic calendar was not the millennium but the second coming of Christ.

As historicists, these premillennialists did not believe in an any moment return of Christ, but they had come to believe the second coming was in the not too distant future. In 1798, the French General Louis Berthier occupied Rome, established a republic, and exiled the pope. With unusual unanimity, the historicist premillennialists interpreted this event as a fulfillment of prophecy found in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13. Revelation 13:5 says that the beast "was given authority to continue for forty-two months." Using the day-year theory in which forty-two months stands for 1,260 years and identifying the papacy as the beast of Revelation 13, the historicist premillennialists identified the year 1798 as the end of the 1,260 year rule of the beast. With their confident correlation of the year 1798 with Daniel 7 and Revelation 13, the historicist premillennialists were certain that the second coming was then imminent.²¹ To use

²⁰Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 13.

²¹Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 6–7; Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 14–15.

terminology popularized by Hal Lindsey, they believed that they were living in the "terminal generation."

Most of these early nineteenth century premillennialists also believed that the Jews would return to the land of Palestine before the millennium.²² John Way, who is credited as the one most directly responsible for the renewal of interest in the Jewish people among the early nineteenth century premillennialists, was concerned both with Jewish evangelism and with the cause of Jewish resettlement in Palestine.²³

This early nineteenth century premillennial concern about the Jewish people was not unique to the premillennialists nor to the nineteenth century. In the sixteenth century, Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr and Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor at Geneva, all believed that the Bible teaches a future calling of the Jews to Christ.²⁴ In Romans 11, Paul had said that "all Israel will be saved," and later editions of the *Geneva Bible*, such as the 1599 edition, had a note on Romans 11 stating that the Old Testament predicted the future conversion of the Jews as a nation to Christ.²⁵ In the seventeenth century, this was a common expectation among English Puritans.²⁶ Not all Puritan interpreters expected a Jewish revival, and not all Puritan interpreters who expected a Jewish revival expected a Jewish restoration to the land of Palestine. Those who did expect a Jewish revival and restoration differed from the later

²²Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 11,39.

²³Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 9–12.

²⁴Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 41.

²⁵Toon, "The Latter-Day Glory," 24.

²⁶Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 43–44,49–50,52–53; Toon, "The Latter-Day Glory," 23–41; Toon, Peter. "The Question of Jewish Immigration." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 115. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970; Toon, "Conclusion," 126; A.R. Dallison, "Contemporary Criticism of Millenarianism," 107 footnote 4,113–114.

dispensational teaching in that they held 1) that the converted Jews will become a part of the Christian church, 2) that there will be no re-establishment of any Jewish ceremonial laws such as the Passover or burnt offerings, 3) that the Jewish temple in Jerusalem will not be rebuilt, and 4) that the converted Jews will not be given any special privileges such as ruling the Gentile nations from Jerusalem.²⁷

In this modest revival of premillennialism which occurred in the early nineteenth century, there was one man who more than any other served as an early catalyst for this new movement. That man was Edward Irving.²⁸ Edward Irving was born in Scotland in 1792 and was ordained a minister in the Church of Scotland in 1815. In 1822, a Church of Scotland congregation in London called Irving as pastor, and he became "an overnight sensation among London society."²⁹ Before Irving had accepted the call, "the congregation had dwindled to fifty" and there was little hope for its future.³⁰ This all changed soon after Irving began his ministry in London. Many came to view him as by far the greatest orator of that day.³¹ The sanctuary where he preached, the Caledonian Chapel, was designed for 500, but about six months into Irving's new ministry, two and three times that number would try to attend each Sunday. In 1827, the congregation moved into a new building, the National Scottish Church, a building which seated 1,800. In the early years, an

²⁷Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 77–79; a Brakel, Wilhelmus. *The Christian's Reasonable Service in Which Divine Truths Concerning the Covenant of Grace Are Expounded, Defended Against Opposing Parties and Their Practice Advocated as Well as the Administration of This Covenant in the Old and New Testaments*. Editor Joel R. Beeke. Translator Bartel Elshout. *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Vol. 4, pages 530–31. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 1995.

²⁸Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 188.

²⁹Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 14; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 188.

³⁰Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 45.

³¹Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 50; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 188.

unusual proportion of those attending were professional people, including members of the literary elite and members of parliament.³²

Then in 1824, Irving began devoting his ministry more and more to the interpretation of prophecy.³³ Irving had come under the influence of James Hatley Frere, a layman student of prophecy with premillennial convictions.³⁴ Frere, a historicist, believed that most Biblical prophecy had already been fulfilled, that the world was about to enter a time of the greatest suffering, and that Christ would return within the next few years.³⁵

In 1825, Henry Drummond asked Irving to speak at that year's rally for the Continental Society, a missionary organization working in Europe. In his address, Irving informed the gathering that their missionary work had no hope of success because God's cataclysmic judgment was about to fall upon all Christendom and especially upon that part of the world which was the old Roman Empire. Irving thought the coming of Christ, which would follow this time of judgment, was very near.³⁶ That meant that there was no time for long term mission efforts to come to fruition. We should contrast this discouraging word from Irving regarding missions with the message William Carey preached on May 31, 1792 before the Northampton Association of ministers. Taking as his text Isaiah 54:2-3, a passage which begins with the words, "Enlarge the place of your tent," Carey preached a

³²Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 46–47,90; Dallimore, Arnold. *The Life of Edward Irving: Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*., 74. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 189.

³³Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 74.

³⁴Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 189; Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 72–74; Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 8–9.

³⁵Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 72–73.

³⁶Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 76.

sermon which he summarized with the words, "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." The next morning, the association made plans to form the missionary society which would send Carey to India the next year.³⁷

After Irving began his new emphasis on prophecy in his preaching, the professional and literary people stopped attending his Sunday services. Overall attendance, however, did not fall because other less prominent people were attracted to the new subject and began attending.³⁸

Even though Irving had only begun learning Spanish a few months earlier, he spent the whole summer of 1826 on leave from his normal duties so he could translate into English a two volume Spanish work on prophecy by the Chilean Jesuit Manuel Lacunza. This impressive feat was a measure of Irving's interest in prophecy at the time. Though Irving probably did not agree with everything in the book, he appreciated its argumentation for premillennialism and its emphasis on the nearness of Christ's return. Irving sent his translation to the printers in January 1827, and its publication immediately stirred up wide-spread interest.³⁹ The most significant feature of the published work was not the translation but the 203 page preface in which Irving explained his own ideas on prophecy.⁴⁰ In this preface, he stated that when he began preaching his new views on unfulfilled prophecy, he "did not know of one brother in the ministry who held with [him] in these matters."⁴¹ He said that he was "resolved, though

³⁷Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 139–40.

³⁸Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 74–75.

³⁹Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 17–18, 37; Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 76; Fuller, Daniel Payton. "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism." Th.D. dissertation, 46–47. Chicago, Illinois: Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 189.

⁴⁰Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 76; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 190.

⁴¹Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 190.

alone and single-handed, to maintain" his new convictions "against all who should undertake to uphold the commonly-received notion, that the present Gentile dispensation was about to burst forth with great ... fruitfulness, and fill the whole earth with the millennial blessedness, ..." ⁴² Irving also explained in his preface that he was expecting not only a judgment upon Christendom but also a "latter rain" outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon both Jews and Gentiles to bring in the days of refreshing. ⁴³ This expectation of a coming special outpouring of the Spirit as a prophesied "latter rain" would prove very significant a few years later in Irving's life and career.

Before we consider more about Irving's views on the end-time work of the Holy Spirit, let's first examine another significant development which occurred a couple of years after Irving began his new emphasis on prophecy in his preaching back in 1824. Henry Drummond, a wealthy banker and a member of Parliament, responded to Irving's preaching on prophecy by sponsoring prophetic conferences at his Albury Park estates, located about thirty miles south of London, in the years 1826, 1827 and 1828. ⁴⁴ The view which dominated at these conferences was basically the pessimistic, historicist premillennialism of Frere, the laymen who had so influenced Irving a few years before. ⁴⁵ In 1829, Henry Drummond stated that his conferences had concluded that the second coming of Christ would be premillennial, that the second coming of Christ was imminent, that the Jews would be restored to Palestine, and

⁴²Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 190.

⁴³Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 76-77.

⁴⁴Wilson, Dwight. *Armageddon Now! the Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917*, 21. Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991; Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 77.

⁴⁵Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 77.

that the vials of wrath prophesied in Revelation 16 were then being poured out.⁴⁶ Their conclusion that Revelation 16 was at that time being fulfilled is consistent with the historicist view of prophecy. By imminency, they meant not that Christ could come at any moment but that He was coming in the near future after a few remaining prophecies were fulfilled.

The clergy who attended the Albury conferences, many of whom were Anglican,⁴⁷ continued to spread and promote this new prophetic teaching. The number of premillennialists increased rapidly in the Church of England.⁴⁸ Yet Edward Irving was not among those who persevered in promoting the premillennial movement which he had so greatly helped to get started. He would soon become involved in such excesses that he became an embarrassment to the premillennial movement. Premillennialism would prosper in spite of him.⁴⁹

As stated earlier, Irving was expecting a "latter rain" outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the end-times. As a part of this expectation, Irving believed in a coming restoration of the apostolic gifts such as speaking in tongues, but he thought this would not occur until the beginning of the millennium after the return of Christ. On a preaching tour of Scotland in 1828, Irving met a Church of Scotland licentiate named A.J. Scott in the Gare Loch district of Scotland. Scott also believed in the coming restoration of the apostolic gifts, but he believed this would happen before the

⁴⁶Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 21–22.

⁴⁷Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 20.

⁴⁸Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 191.

⁴⁹Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 196–97.

second coming. Irving was so impressed with Scott that he asked him to come to London to be his new assistant.⁵⁰

During his 1828 tour of Scotland, Irving visited the Gare Loch district a second time.⁵¹ Irving's preaching there increased the hope which Scott had given the locals that apostolic gifts would be restored and also assured them that the second coming was near.⁵² In 1830, a girl named Mary Campbell claimed to have received the apostolic gift of tongues.⁵³ She was from one of the churches in the Gare Loch district where Irving had preached, and Scott had personally counseled her about the gifts of the Spirit.⁵⁴ Others in Scotland soon claimed to have received special gifts, including a girl named Margaret McDonald. She lived just a few miles from Mary Campbell, and their families were friends.⁵⁵ We will hear more about Margaret McDonald later.

Some in Irving's church in London, upon hearing reports about these events in Scotland, began praying for a similar manifestation. In April 1831, a member of Irving's church "spoke in tongues," and other members soon had similar experiences.⁵⁶ Then in the fall of 1831, Irving began allowing his parishioners to exercise their charismatic gifts during the Sunday worship service. This caused great controversy in the church, and the church trustees asked Irving to prohibit the use

⁵⁰Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 104,117–118; Warfield, Benjamin B. *Counterfeit Miracles*. 1918, 136. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972.

⁵¹Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 103,111.

⁵²Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 111.

⁵³Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 120–21.

⁵⁴Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 118,120; Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 138.

⁵⁵Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 121–22; Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 139–40.

⁵⁶Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 130; Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 26–27; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 193; Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 140–41.

of tongues during the Sunday worship service. When Irving refused to grant this modest request, the trustees brought charges against him before the London Presbytery. The London Presbytery in April 1832 responded to the charges by dissolving the pastoral relationship between Irving and the National Scottish Church in London.⁵⁷

Irving responded to the loss of his charge by starting his own church, and about 800 of his former parishioners joined with him.⁵⁸ This new church would eventually be called The Catholic Apostolic Church. It would not only allow speaking in tongues and but would also have its own orders of apostles and prophets. Henry Drummond, the man who had sponsored the Albury conferences, would be one of the apostles.⁵⁹ When in 1901, contrary to the church's expectations, the last of its twelve original apostles died without seeing the second coming, the sect started by Irving died out.⁶⁰

The dissolution of Irving's pastoral relationship in 1832 was not the last of Irving's problems. In March 1833, the Presbytery of Annan tried Irving for teaching that the Incarnate Christ in His state of humiliation had a sin nature. The city of Annan was where Irving had been born, and the Presbytery of Annan was the Presbytery which had ordained him as a minister. Irvin's home Presbytery in Scotland deposed him from the ministry of the Church of Scotland against his will.⁶¹ His deposition from

⁵⁷Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 162–64.

⁵⁸Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 164–65.

⁵⁹Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 181.

⁶⁰Boyer, Paul. *When Time Shall be no More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, 87. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992; Drummond, Andrew Landale. *Edward Irving and His Circle Including Some Consideration of the 'Tongues' Movement in the Light of Modern Psychology*, 233. James Clarke & Co. LTD., 1937; Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 131.

⁶¹Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 166–68.

the ministry was a severe blow to Irving, and he never totally recovered from it. Irving died less than two years later in December 1834 at the age of 42 in disgrace and with few friends.⁶² For decades, opponents of premillennialism would claim that the experience of Irving was proof that premillennialism led to "heresy and schism."⁶³

Edward Irving was a dominant figure at the Albury prophetic conferences,⁶⁴ which lasted from 1826 to 1828. After them, there were the Powerscourt prophetic conferences. These were held in Ireland starting in 1831, and John Nelson Darby was a dominant figure in these prophetic conferences.

Let's now backtrack a few years and consider the life of the man who was a significant influence at the Powerscourt prophetic conferences and also who is today generally considered to be the father of dispensationalism,⁶⁵ John Nelson Darby.

Darby was born of wealthy Irish parents in London, England, in 1800. He returned to Ireland in 1815, enrolled in Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, and graduated with a degree in law in the summer of 1819 at the age of eighteen. He became a lawyer, but he left the legal profession after only a year for religious ministry.⁶⁶ In 1825, he was ordained a deacon in the Church of

⁶²Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 181–89.

⁶³Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 29.

⁶⁴Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 135–36.

⁶⁵Bigalke Jr., Ron J., and Thomas D. Ice. "Introduction: History of Dispensationalism." In *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, editor Ron. J Bigalke Jr., xxv. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2005; Bass, Clarence B. *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications*, 64. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1960; Ladd, *Crucial Questions*, 48.

⁶⁶Bass, *Backgrounds*, 49; Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 31; Stokes, George T. "John Nelson Darby (from the Contemporary Review)." *Littell's Living Age* 52 (1885, 7 November 1885): 345; Elmore, Floyd S. "Darby, John Nelson." In *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, Mal Couch, 82. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1997.

England and was assigned to a wild and mountainous region in Ireland where he worked among the poor.⁶⁷ A self-sacrificing idealist, he devoted himself to his ministry and for a time had unusual success in converting Irish Roman Catholics to Anglicanism. In February 1826, Dr. Magee, Archbishop of Dublin, ordained Darby as an Anglican priest.⁶⁸ About that same time, Archbishop Magee began requiring that all converts from Romanism in his diocese swear allegiance to the king of England. This new church policy largely undermined Darby's ministry among Irish Roman Catholics.⁶⁹ Darby soon afterward reacted strongly to this Anglican mixture of politics and religion. Darby really over-reacted to these errors and abuses of his day, as we will soon see, in that he came to reject all organized churches as apostate.

Darby's ministry in Ireland as an ordained Anglican priest ended after two years and three months when a leg injury required surgery and an extended period of recovery.⁷⁰ In 1827, Darby went to Dublin for this surgery, and he stayed there afterward with a brother-in-law to recover. During this period of inactivity, Darby prayerfully meditated on the true nature of the church. In letters written years later, Darby revealed the conclusions he had reached during this time of convalescence and contemplation.⁷¹ These letters indicate that during this period of his life, Darby came to his radically new understandings of the church and prophecy.

⁶⁷Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 37.

⁶⁸Stokes, "JN Darby," 345.

⁶⁹Bass, *Backgrounds*, 50–51; Neatby, William Blair. *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 10–11. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901; Bigalke Jr., and Ice, "History of Dispensationalism," xxii.

⁷⁰Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 37.

⁷¹Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 32–34; Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 36–40.

Regarding the church, Darby and others were dissatisfied with both the Erastian nationalism of the established church and the sectarian isolation of the dissenting churches.⁷² Darby decided that the resolution of this dilemma was not to be found in any organized church. Darby concluded instead that the solution was simply for him to meet for Bible study and prayer on the Lord's Day with a few other genuine Christians and to claim Christ's promise in Matthew 18 that where two or three are gathered together in His name, there will He be in the midst of them.⁷³ Darby would later teach that every organized church is apostate, that every Christian in an organized church should renounce his membership and leave, and that all Christians should meet for worship on the Lord's Day not as members of any organized church but as assembled members of the Body of Christ. Darby had reacted to the abuses of the visible aspect of the church in his day and had gone to an opposite extreme which abused the invisible aspect of the church.

Darby also at this time came to a new understanding of the people of God through the ages. He came to believe that there were not one people of God through the ages but two, the earthly people and the heavenly people. This new concept drastically affected his understanding of prophecy. Darby had earlier been a historicist premillennialist. Over the period of time from his convalescence meditations in 1827 to the third Powerscourt conference in 1833, he would become the first futuristic pretribulational dispensational premillennialist.⁷⁴

⁷²Neatby, *A History*, 17; Kraus, C. Norman. *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development*, 27. Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1958.

⁷³Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 38-39.

⁷⁴Bigalke Jr., and Ice, "History of Dispensationalism," xxiii.

Darby meditated on Paul's teaching in Ephesians chapter two about the Christian's position in Christ, who is now in heaven. He also considered some verses near the end of Isaiah chapter thirty-two which promise blessings in the land in a prophecy given to the old covenant Jews. Darby considered this Biblical statement about the new covenant Christian's position in heaven and this Biblical promise about a time of earthly blessings for God's people. From this Darby concluded that God has two peoples in redemptive history who are as different as heaven and earth. The heavenly people, who are as numerous as the stars in the heavens, will spend eternity in heaven. The earthly people, who are as numerous as the dust of the earth, will spend eternity on a new earth.⁷⁵

Daniel Fuller states that these letters which explain Darby's thinking during his period of convalescence in the late 1820s are "the record of the birth of Dispensationalism."⁷⁶ I think this is true. Yet, at the same time, we must be careful not to read back into Darby's language the more systematized and consistent dispensational of some later dispensationalists. It is difficult to define the details of Darby's system with exactness even though he wrote extensively. Craig Blaising notes that Darby's "writings are notoriously difficult to understand."⁷⁷ Regardless, we see here in its earliest form the dispensational hermeneutical principle that there are two peoples of God in redemptive history.

⁷⁵Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 40–46.

⁷⁶Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 40.

⁷⁷Blaising, Craig. "Developing Dispensationalism, Part 2: Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, no. 145 (July 1988): 264; Bass, *Backgrounds*, 60–61; Crutchfield, Larry V. *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor*, 1,6,8–9. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1992.

There is continuity and discontinuity in redemptive history. Darby explained this tension between continuity and discontinuity with his platonic dualism between an earthly people and a heavenly people. Darby also explained the new covenant church age as a disrupting parenthesis in God's plan for the earthly people. God's plan for the earthly people was postponed as a temporary judgment upon national Israel in punishment for their rejecting God's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Into this vacated interim, God interjected the church age, which began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter two and which will end with the rapture of all living saints sometime in the future. This interim age functioned not as a fulfillment of prophecy but as a parenthesis in the fulfillment of prophecy. According to Darby, all prophecies have to do with the earth and therefore cannot be fulfilled by the heavenly people in this parenthetical age. During this parenthetical age not foreseen by the prophets, God has put his relationship with earthly Israel on hold and is calling out a heavenly people consisting of both Jew and Gentile. All unfulfilled prophecy will therefore find its fulfillment on the other side of this parenthetical age when God's earthly program is continued.

This explanation of redemptive history next leads to Darby's doctrine of the secret pretribulation rapture doctrine. If there are unfulfilled earthly prophecies about an Antichrist and a coming tribulation, then these prophecies must be fulfilled after the end of the parenthetical age and after the continuation of the earthly program but prior to the return of Christ to earth in judgment on all His enemies. The heavenly people must therefore be removed from earth through the secret rapture before these prophecies can be fulfilled. The removal of the heavenly people from earth

at the rapture will be the start of the last seven years of God's program for the earthly people before the return of Christ. Darby identified this end-time seven year tribulation with the seventieth week of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy,⁷⁸ and Darby identified the church age as a parenthesis after the end of the sixty-ninth week and before the beginning of the seventieth week. At the end of the seven year tribulation period, all unfulfilled prophecy about a future tribulation will have been fulfilled, and Jesus will return in flaming judgment in the second coming.

Darby defended his pretribulation rapture theory based strictly on the heavenly nature of the church in his system. Here are Darby's own words on this issue:

It is this conviction, that the Church is properly heavenly, in its calling and relationship with Christ, forming no part of the course of events of the earth, which makes the rapture so simple and clear; and on the other hand, it shows how the denial of its rapture brings down the Church to an earthly position, and destroys its whole spiritual character and position.⁷⁹

Darby's theories about the dual identities of God's people and the disruption in God's program and the parenthetical nature of the church age are all contrary to the view found in the seventeenth century Westminster standards. According to Westminster theology, old covenant Israel and the new covenant church are analogous to two stages of life in a single individual.

⁷⁸Bigalke Jr., and Ice, "History of Dispensationalism," xxiii.

⁷⁹Bass, *Backgrounds*, 39.

Old covenant Israel was the new covenant church in its childhood, and the new covenant church is old covenant Israel come to maturity. The Westminster Confession of Faith refers to old covenant Israel as "a church under age" (19.3). Westminster theology sees a progressive development of the covenant people through redemptive history with a definitive elevation to dispensational adulthood in Acts chapter two. The church age is a progressive development as opposed to a parenthesis, and many prophecies are fulfilled in it.

Darby's new views were contrary not only to seventeenth century Westminster theology but were also contrary to the general trajectory of the teaching of the church over the centuries. Darby knew this. His assumption was that the teaching of the church since the days of the apostles had been marked by apostasy. He as an individual was trying to recover apostolic truth.⁸⁰ The Roman church had erred at Trent when it proclaimed that some of its teaching, such as its doctrine of justification, were irreformable and thus forever beyond questioning. The opposite error is when the isolated individual proclaims that his novel interpretations, which are diametrically contrary to the general trajectory of the church's understanding of Scripture's teaching since its earliest days, are a recovery of apostolic truth. The Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* recognizes that Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Yet the Reformers in their interpretation of Scripture took into account the teaching of the church through the ages as a fallible but useful guide. The theologian should work not in isolation from but in community with the church. He should not

⁸⁰Blaising, Craig, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalisms," 254; Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 67.

regard himself as the first and only person to whom the Holy Spirit has granted significant illumination into the meaning of Scripture since the age of the apostles.

Let's now continue looking at Darby's life. If you will remember, he went to Dublin in 1827 for surgery on a leg injury. During the winter of 1827-1828, Darby began meeting with a small group of men in Dublin for prayer and Bible study. These friends were part of "an unorganized collection of societies"⁸¹ which would over time and under Darby's leadership become the Plymouth Brethren.⁸² By late 1828 or early 1829, Darby had resigned his charge as an ordained priest in the Church of England. Within a few years after that, Darby had left the organized church altogether.⁸³ He had come to see his sole responsibility regarding the church as separating himself from the organized church or Christendom and gathering with individual Christians on the Lord's Day for prayer, Bible study and the Lord's Supper apart from the organized church and without any ordained clergy.

The next significant events in Darby's life as the father of dispensationalism were the yearly Powerscourt prophecy conferences. This second series of prophetic conferences were held under the sponsorship of Lady Theodosia Powerscourt, who was widowed, young, wealthy, beautiful and pious.⁸⁴ Darby was at one point engaged to her, though Darby never married.⁸⁵ The Powerscourt conferences were held in the same Irish county

⁸¹Stokes, "JN Darby," 345.

⁸²Bass, *Backgrounds*, 51.

⁸³Bass, *Backgrounds*, 68; Neatby, *A History*, 11.

⁸⁴Sandein, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 34-35.

⁸⁵Bigalke Jr., and Ice, "History of Dispensationalism," xxiii.

and parish where Darby had served as an Anglican priest some years before.⁸⁶

Edward Irving had been a dominant figure at the Albury prophetic conferences, which lasted from 1826 to 1828 and which were located near London. Darby was a dominant figure in the Powerscourt conferences, which began in 1831 and which were located in Ireland.⁸⁷ Some forty-four individuals had attended one or more of the Albury conferences. About four hundred were in attendance at the first Powerscourt conference in 1831.⁸⁸ The Albury prophetic conferences had focused on historicist premillennialism. The Powerscourt prophetic conferences introduced futurist dispensational premillennialism.

The first Powerscourt conference occurred in October 1831,⁸⁹ a number of months after Irving's church in London had become involved with speaking in tongues. Leaders of the first Powerscourt conference had condemned Irving's followers before the conference, and "the subject was excluded from the agenda" of that year's conference. The discussions at the first Powerscourt conference focussed on "the interpretation of the 1,260 days, the corrupt state of contemporary Christianity, the imminent return of Christ, and clues by which the Antichrist might be identified."⁹⁰ There is evidence that at the second Powerscourt conference in 1832, Darby argued for his view that all organized churches are apostate and for a futurist interpretation of the tribulation prophecies.⁹¹ During this period,

⁸⁶Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 199; Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 31,34; Bass, *Backgrounds*, 49.

⁸⁷Hannah, John. *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 334. Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPres, 2001.

⁸⁸Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 191,199.

⁸⁹Darby, J.N. *Letters of J.N.D.*, 5. London, n.d.

⁹⁰Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 35.

⁹¹Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 36.

Darby appears to be making his transition from the historicist interpretation of the tribulation which was common at that time to a futurist interpretation. At the third conference in 1833, Darby revealed his secret pretribulation rapture doctrine and his theory about a parenthesis between weeks sixty-nine and seventy in Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy.⁹² According to Harry Ironside, "It was in these meetings that the precious truth of the rapture of the Church was brought to light."⁹³ Although Darby would not put forth his ideas as an organized system until a series of lectures he gave in Switzerland in 1840, he did boldly share his thinking at the Powerscourt conferences.⁹⁴

There is some disagreement as to whether the doctrine of the secret, any moment rapture was first publicly proposed at the Powerscourt conferences or at the earlier Albury conferences or even earlier in Irving's preaching on prophecy. Some claim this to be the case.⁹⁵ Others say that this is not possible because Irving had a historicist view of the prophesied tribulation, which is not consistent with an any moment view of the rapture.⁹⁶ Yet the Spanish work on prophecy which Irving translated in 1826 had a futurist outlook on prophecy.⁹⁷ It is possible that the idea of a futurist tribulation combined with an any moment rapture was at least mentioned at the Albury conferences. It is also possible that Irving was not always consistent in his statements about imminency and unfulfilled prophecy. We may never know for sure. Irving was an impressionable and impulsive person

⁹²Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 38.

⁹³Bass, *Backgrounds*, 41.

⁹⁴Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 62.

⁹⁵Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 200.

⁹⁶Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 64–65.

⁹⁷Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 37.

whose views changed often and sometimes without his being aware of it.⁹⁸

Before leaving these two prophetic conferences, I want to comment on a significant difference in them. The Albury conference entertained mostly a historicist premillennialism, and the Powerscourt conference under Darby's influence gravitated toward a futurist premillennialism. A futurist is not necessarily a dispensationalist, but all dispensationalists are futurists. I want to discuss the difference between historicism and futurism and also to discuss the growing acceptance of futurism.

These are different ways of interpreting the prophecies about the tribulation and the Antichrist. As I have already explained, according to the historicist view, these tribulation prophecies are being fulfilled right now during the church age. According to the futurist view, none of the prophecies in the book of Revelation about a tribulation and an Antichrist will be fulfilled until in the future shortly before the bodily return of Christ.

The futurist position was developed by sixteenth-century Roman Catholics who were arguing against the Protestant claims that the papacy is the Antichrist.⁹⁹ Among early nineteenth century English premillennialists, futurism was, to use an expression, the new kid on the block. Over time, the premillennial support for the historicist position weakened, and the premillennial support for the futurist position strengthened. Historicism eventually got into trouble by using Biblical prophecy as a guide for setting dates and predicting European history. There was the

⁹⁸Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*, 74.

⁹⁹Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, 37–38.

embarrassing Millerite debacle in America when, contrary to the certain expectation of the Millerites, Christ did not return on October 22, 1844. Then in the years 1867 through 1870, there was the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the exile of Napoleon III and the collapse of the French Empire, events completely contrary to confident historicist pronouncements that Napoleon III was the Antichrist.¹⁰⁰ As historicism became weaker among English premillennialists, futurism became stronger.

After the Powerscourt conferences, Darby continued to promote his dispensational theories among the Plymouth Brethren in England. This resulted in controversy and division within the Brethren movement.¹⁰¹ We don't need to go into all the controversy with Darby in the Brethren movement, but I should mention one charge which one Brethren opponent made against Darby. His name was Samuel Tregelles, and he claimed that the real origin of the secret pretribulational rapture doctrine was an ecstatic utterance in Edward Irving's church in 1832.¹⁰² Another more recent claim is that the origin was an alleged prophetic vision by Margaret McDonald in Scotland.

Ironically Darby had used a similar accusation in his public tract battles with B.W. Newton, a Plymouth Brethren leader who rejected Darby's teaching on a secret rapture. In one of his tracts in the late 1840s, Darby made this accusation: "Mr. Newton received his prophetic system by direct inspiration from Satan, analogous to the Irvingite delusion."¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 60, 98.

¹⁰¹Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 61.

¹⁰²Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 64, 218.

¹⁰³Bass, *Backgrounds*, 85.

As to the source of Darby's distinctive theology, there is no definitive proof that it was an ecstatic utterance or an alleged prophetic vision¹⁰⁴ instead of Darby's own meditation while convalescing in Dublin in 1827. What is more significant is that this teaching was at the time an entirely new idea in the history of doctrine which contradicts long established teaching. Any new teaching, especially a new teaching which contradicts the long established general trajectory of the teaching of the church, should not be accepted quickly and should be carefully tested through the study of the infallible Word of God.

As I have said, there was controversy over Darby's distinctive doctrines within the Plymouth Brethren movement. Also, many evangelicals in England outside of the Plymouth Brethren movement strongly opposed Darby because of his condemnation of all established churches as apostate and because of his strong opposition to the concept of an ordained ministry. At the same time, there was a growing acceptance of some of Darby's views on prophecy. By the 1870s, some non-Brethren premillennialists in England were adopting Darby's eschatology in spite of its association with Darby.¹⁰⁵

I think this is all we need to say about Darby in England. We need next to consider Darby's influence on America. A significant element in Darby's system was a new and different understanding of the imminency of the second coming. By the time Darby first visited America, many in America who were open to premillennialism had reason also to be open to Darby's

¹⁰⁴Bruce, F.F. *Answers to Questions*, 199–200. Exeter, England: The Paternoster Press, 1972.

¹⁰⁵Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 89–90.

new view of imminency. To understand this, we need to look a little closer into the Millerite debacle.

There was also a revival of premillennialism in early nineteenth century America. Even though the two movements had developed somewhat independently, they were very similar.¹⁰⁶ The movement on both sides of the Atlantic expected Christ to return soon. The leading premillennialist in America in the early nineteenth century was the Baptist minister William Miller.

When a person wrongly teaches that Christ is coming soon in a general sense, people tend to be rather patient. A person takes a much greater risk when he sets a specific date for the return of Jesus. This is the risk which William Miller took. At first he said that Christ would return sometime in 1843. He based his prediction on the statement in Daniel 8:14: "For two thousand three hundred days; then the sanctuary shall be cleansed."¹⁰⁷ Many today interpret this as a prophecy of the limited time when the temple remained defiled under the Selucid persecution during the time of the Maccabees. Miller understood this to be a prophecy of the time from the decree of Artaxerxes recorded in Ezra 12 regarding the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem to the second coming of Christ. Using the day-age theory, he interpreted the 2,300 days as a reference to 2,300 years. He dated Artaxerxes' decree in 458 B.C., and concluded that the return of Christ would be 2,300 years later in 1843. When Christ did not return in 1843, some Millerites calculated the more specific date of October 22, 1844. Of course, Christ did not return on that date either.

¹⁰⁶Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 50.

¹⁰⁷Boyer, *When Time Shall be no More*, 81.

Just as Edward Irving had embarrassed premillennialism in England, William Miller embarrassed premillennialism in America. Ernest Sandeen summed up the effect this way: "The failure of his predictions disillusioned most of his followers and marked the whole millenarian cause, rightly or wrongly, with the stigma of fanaticism and quackery."¹⁰⁸

That generation of Americans was now wary of any prophetic teacher who tried to set dates. When the American premillennial movement was recovering from this debacle, Darby came with a new definition of imminency which was supposedly immune to date setting. The key was Darby's teaching of a futurist pretribulation secret rapture doctrine. In Darby's system, there supposedly could be no date setting because in Darby's system no prophecy refers to the parenthetical church age. The next event on the prophetic calendar is the secret rapture. Because there are no unfulfilled prophecies which have to be fulfilled before the rapture, the rapture can occur at any moment. Irving had said that the second coming was soon but a few things had to happen first. Miller had said that the second coming was soon and on a specific date. Darby said that the second coming could occur any moment, but it could also be years away. Darby had come up with a form of imminency which had the excitement of expectancy without the risk of disappointment.¹⁰⁹

Darby's avoidance of date setting and newspaper exegesis may seem surprising to us today because dispensationalists in more recent days have taken that risk. Hal Lindsey stated that Christ

¹⁰⁸Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 58.

¹⁰⁹Hannah, *Our Legacy*, 335.

would return within a generation of 1948, the date of the founding of the modern state of Israel. Edgar Whisenant published a booklet giving 88 reasons why the rapture would occur in 1988.¹¹⁰ According to dispensationalism, there is no prophecy about anything which happens in the church age before the rapture, but there are many prophecies about what will happen after the rapture. To use a metaphor, some dispensationalists observe the preparation of the Jewish stage and then speculate as to when the curtain will rise on the end-time drama. The curtain in this metaphor is the secret rapture. Yet sometimes dispensationalists return to Darby's reservations about date setting and newspaper exegesis. I remember one time in class at Dallas Theological Seminary when Dr. Charles Ryrie warned that the current state of Israel could be destroyed and that there could be another regathering of Jews in Palestine in the distant future. Today some progressive dispensationalists want to disassociate dispensationalism from date setting¹¹¹ and the "popular apocalypticism of Hal Lindsey."¹¹²

Again, early nineteenth century America had been burned by premillennial date setting, and Darby offered a premillennialism without any date setting or without any identification of current events as fulfilled prophecy.

Darby spent a good deal of time in America promoting his views.¹¹³ Dispensational authors Ron Bigalke and Thomas Ice give the following summary of Darby's visits to America:

¹¹⁰Wilson, *Armageddon Now!* xxvii; Whisenant, Edgar C. *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could be in 1988: The Feast of Trump (Rash-Hash-Ana): September 11-12-13*, 1-69. Nashville, Tennessee: World Bible Society, 1988.

¹¹¹Blaising, Craig A. "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition." In *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, editor Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, 13. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.

¹¹²Blaising, Craig A., "The Search for Definition," 14-15, footnote 3.

¹¹³Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 68-75.

Darby made seven trips to the United States and Canada between 1862 and 1877 (spending a total of seven of those sixteen years in America). Most of that time was in Canada and four American cities: New York, Boston, Chicago, and St. Louis, where many early leaders of American dispensationalism lived. Pastors James Hall Brookes (1830-1897) of Walnut Street Presbyterian Church, St. Louis and A.J. Gordon (1836-1895) of Clarendon Street Baptist Church, Boston, were patriarchs of American dispensationalism who came under Darby's influence. It was through the ministry of such men (more so than Darby) that dispensationalism spread throughout America.¹¹⁴

As Bigalke and Ice say, American ministers Brookes and Gordon came under the influence of Darby, but it is difficult to document whether or not these men actually met Darby during his visits to America. Brookes introduced dispensationalism to C.I. Scofield, the man who edited the Scofield Reference Bible. Within fifty years of its publishing in 1909, about three million copies were printed in America, and a proportionate number in England.¹¹⁵ Scofield disciplined Lewis Sperry Chafer, and Chafer founded Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924. A.J. Gordon introduced dispensationalism to D.L. Moody.

Darby and his contemporary Plymouth Brethren associates also influenced a lot of people, including evangelicals in America, through their published writings.¹¹⁶ One American minister so

¹¹⁴Bigalke Jr., and Ice, "History of Dispensationalism," xxv.

¹¹⁵Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 198; Boyer, *When Time Shall be no More*, 97-98.

¹¹⁶Blaising, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 10. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bridgepoint Books, 1993; Bass, *Backgrounds*, 17-18; Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 66-68; Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism*, 12-16.

influenced was J.R. Graves, a Southern Baptist minister and the long time editor of the respected and widely read church newspaper *Tennessee Baptist*.¹¹⁷ Graves was perhaps the first prominent premillennialist minister in the nineteenth century Southern Baptist convention, which was in earlier days dominated by postmillennialists.¹¹⁸ He used his weekly newspaper with a large circulation to teach dispensationalism, including the secret rapture.¹¹⁹

Graves was also the chief promoter of Landmarkism in nineteenth century Baptist circles. The Baptist Church in which I was raised was a member of one of the small Baptist denominations which teach Landmarkism. This is the doctrine that the only true church is the local church which teaches Baptist doctrine and which can trace its water baptism back to John the Baptist. Also, Landmarkists are very emphatic that there is no such thing as an invisible, universal church. To my surprise, I found statements in Darby's writings in which he also emphatically denies the invisible and universal aspects of the church. In one place, Darby referred to the idea of "a visible and invisible church" as "Satan's lie."¹²⁰ In another place, Darby referred to the idea of a universal church as "a system of sin."¹²¹ In volume four of his collected writings, Darby said this about the beliefs of the Evangelical Church of Geneva:

¹¹⁷Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 166; Blaising, and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 10.

¹¹⁸Patterson, Paige, David Dockery, and Millard Erickson. "FORUM: Eschatology." In *The Baptist Start Page*. [Http://www.baptiststart.com/print/eschatology_panel.html](http://www.baptiststart.com/print/eschatology_panel.html).

¹¹⁹Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 166.

¹²⁰Darby, J.N. "The Public Ruin of the Church: Notes on a Meeting in London in September, 1847: 1 Timothy 3:15,16, 2 Timothy 2:19-22." In *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 32, miscellaneous no. 1, editor William Kelly, 397, cf. 401.

¹²¹Darby, J.N. "The Church and Its Friendly Subdivisions: In Reply to Mr. R.W. Monsell." In *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 4, ecclesiastical no. 2, editor William Kelly, 158.

"it believes ... that over and beyond all those particular churches, which have been, are, and shall be, there exists before God a holy universal church, composed of all the regenerate, and forming a single invisible body of which Jesus Christ is the Head, and of which the members shall be manifested only at the last day."

Darby then commented on this view. He said,

"Here are ideas sufficiently precise. There are particular churches, and there is an invisible universal Church. Now I say that the idea of the Church, such as the word of God presents it, is entirely lost here."¹²²

One wonders if J.R. Graves got his denial of the concept of a universal, invisible aspect of the church, a denial which became such a foundational doctrine of Landmarkism, from his reading of Darby. Yet there are other areas where Darby's convictions are clearly contrary to Landmarkism. Here are some quotations from Darby which I think Graves would disagree with:

"I do not admit that the word of God recognizes members of a local church. ... We are members of the body of Christ, which is a perfectly different idea."¹²³

"There is no such thing as members of a local church or not local in scripture, but members of Christ, a totally different idea; ..."¹²⁴

¹²²Darby, J.N. "Considerations on the Character of the Religious Movement of the Day and on the Truths by Which the Holy Ghost Acts for the Good of the Church." In *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 4, ecclesiastical no. 2, editor William Kelly, 99.

¹²³Darby, "The Church and Its Friendly Subdivisions," 159.

¹²⁴Darby, J.N. *Letters of J.N.D.* Vol. 2, 1868–1879. Editor William Kelly, 224.

"By the very fact that I am a Christian, I have all the claims of a member of the body, wherever I may be found. It is not a right which I acquire by joining any particular body; it is a right which I possess as any member of the body of Christ.

"... in many localities, if a person did not declare himself member of a church, he was not admitted among brethren to partake of the Lord's supper. It was not enough to be a member of the body of Christ, a faithful Christian, owned of all."¹²⁵

Even though Darby in places denied the concept of the universal and invisible aspects of the church, in these quotations he sounds as if he was overemphasizing those very aspects of the church to the detriment of the local and visible aspects of the church. In contrast, Grave's Landmarkism overemphasizes the local and visible aspects of the church to the detriment of the universal and invisible aspects. It is interesting and surprising to learn that J.R. Graves, the father of Southern Baptist Landmarkism, is also probably the father of Southern Baptist dispensationalism.

One can find traces of Darby's anti-establishment view of the church in some later dispensational teachings. For example, take the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven hidden in the meal. Postmillennialists interpret these two

¹²⁵Darby, J.N. "Remarks on the State of the Church in Answer to the Pamphlet of Mr. Rochat, Entitled, 'A Thread to Help the Simple Find Their Way'." In *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 1, ecclesiastical no.12, editor William Kelly, 241.

parables optimistically to refer to the destined success of Christianity. Dispensationalist J. Dwight Pentecost offers a pessimistic interpretation of these two parables in his influential dispensationalist tome **Things to Come**.

Pentecost says that the parable of the mustard seed teaches that "the age is characterized by an abnormal external growth. That which was to be an herb has become a tree -- it has developed into a monstrosity." He says that the birds which rest in the branches of the mature mustard plant represent "that which was antagonistic to the program of God." The parable teaches that opposition is now "working from within," that "the enlarged sphere of profession has become inwardly corrupt," and that "this is the characteristic of the age."¹²⁶

Pentecost says that the parable of the leaven hidden in the meal teaches that "there will be the rise of false religious systems which claim to be in the kingdom." The meal represents the person of Christ and the leaven represents that which is evil. Therefore this parable reveals "that there will rise a religious system that will introduce a corrupting element into the doctrines of the person of Christ."¹²⁷

In summary, "the mustard seed refers to the perversion of God's purpose in this age" and "the leaven refers to a corruption of the divine agency, the Word, through which this purpose is realized."¹²⁸

¹²⁶Pentecost, J. Dwight. *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, 147. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958.

¹²⁷Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 147-48.

¹²⁸Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 147-48.

Again, this interpretation is consistent with Darby's totally negative assessment of the institutional church with no hope of restoration. The natural result of such a despondent and hopeless understanding of the organized church and its future is a de-emphasis on the organized local church and its ordinances and authority. Iain Murray made this relevant observation:

In our own day piety is too often thought of in a purely personal way and the Church is spiritualized into some vague concept of the communion of all believers each of whom is individually related to Christ; the Christian's duty towards the Church is something which comes well down in the scale of priorities and is separable – in the common way of thinking – from loyalty to Christ.¹²⁹

When Darby visited America, American Christians largely ignored Darby's call for all Christians to leave the organized church and to start worshiping in a Plymouth Brethren assembly. What was more common among Americans influenced by Darby's ideas was to adapt Darby's anti-establishment ecclesiology to the American church context. The result was an emphasis on non-denominational organizations and inter-denominational cooperation¹³⁰ while retaining one's membership in a local church with denominational affiliations. One example of this adaptation was the Niagara Bible Conference.

The Niagara Bible Conferences started in 1875.¹³¹ From 1883 to 1897, they met at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. The

¹²⁹Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 95–96.

¹³⁰Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America*, 56; Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 136.

¹³¹Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 16.

dispensationalist Presbyterian minister James Brookes was the "founding father and controlling spirit of the conference."¹³² In 1878, the conference continued to allow those who were not premillennial to attend, but they were no longer "welcome to express their views."¹³³ The Niagara Conference became known as a premillennial conference.¹³⁴

In the 1880s, some men on the executive board came to disagree with Darby's teaching about a secret pretribulation rapture. They were concerned that this error had been taught at the past conferences.¹³⁵ Then Brookes, the minister who had been so essential to the conferences, died in 1897. After Brookes death, the conference was no longer held at Niagara-on-the-Lake, and some talked of disbanding the conference. The last conference was held in 1901.¹³⁶

One of the emphases at these conferences was the principle that the dispensational interpretation of the Bible is superior because it is scientific.¹³⁷ Higher criticism was rooted in Hegel's philosophy, but dispensationalism was allegedly an application of the empiricism of Francis Bacon. To appreciate this fully, one has to remember how elevated a view people had of empirical science in the late nineteenth century. After the Napoleonic Wars, England was able to focus on domestic progress, and the Industrial Revolution began there. The transformation of life in a few decades through this application of science to life was phenomenal. As a result, there was a tendency to view science

¹³²Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 134.

¹³³Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 140.

¹³⁴Blaising, Craig A., "The Search for Definition," 19.

¹³⁵Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 210–11.

¹³⁶Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, 211–13.

¹³⁷Blaising, Craig A., "The Search for Definition," 18–19.

as the ultimate objectivity and the most dependable measure of truth.

At these Bible conferences, Bible readings were conducted. According to Craig Blaising, this

"was a practice of stringing texts together dealing with a common word, phrase, or theme. These texts were then read one after another, sometimes without much regard for context. Implications were then drawn from the exercise."¹³⁸

This method of interpretation was regarded as good Baconian empirical science.¹³⁹

In reality, dispensational interpretation is not truly Baconian empiricism. In Baconian empiricism, the scientist collects the facts, theorizes a hypothesis to explain the facts, and then tests the hypothesis by experimentation. This method does not fit Biblical interpretation.¹⁴⁰ The Bible provides its own divinely inspired interpretation of the facts it records. An interpretation is not a hypothesis that one can test through some experiment. Biblical words are not fixed facts which have the same meaning in every usage throughout the Bible.¹⁴¹

In reality, the interpretive method of classic dispensationalism is to interpret Scripture using dualistic preunderstandings. This is

¹³⁸Blaising, and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 28.

¹³⁹Blaising, Craig A., "The Search for Definition," 18–19; Marsden, George M. *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925*, 55. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

¹⁴⁰Bavinck, Herman. *Prolegomena*. General Editor John Bolt. Translator John Vriend. Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 1, page 94. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003.

¹⁴¹Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America*, 132.

what Darby did when he concluded that God has two peoples, a heavenly people and an earthly people, and then began interpreting Scripture in terms of that preunderstanding. Dispensationalists have a tendency to multiply these dualistic categories: Israel and the church, law and grace, unconditional covenants and conditional covenant, secret rapture and visible second coming.

Late nineteenth century Americans were perhaps more open to accepting this new method of interpretation based on imposing predetermined categories upon Scripture because it appeared somewhat scientific. Yet the truly most ultimate authenticating standard is not science but God and His revealed Word.

"The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."

Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.4

The key to interpreting Scripture is not scientific method. The Bible itself is its only infallible interpreter

"The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself. ..."

Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.9

The last Niagara Conference was held in 1901. The Scofield Reference Bible was first published in 1909. In the years following this, America's churches were increasingly assaulted

by liberal theology imported from the institutions of higher learning in Germany. This new liberal theology claimed to interpret the Bible with modern, scientific methods such as higher criticism. The fundamentalist movement developed in reaction to liberalism. It increasingly adopted dispensationalism, a method of Bible interpretation imported from England which claimed to be even more scientific.

Bibliography

- A.R. Dallison. "Contemporary Criticism of Millenarianism." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 104–14. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.
- Bass, Clarence B. *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1960.
- Bavinck, Herman. *Prolegomena*. General Editor John Bolt. Translator John Vriend. Reformed Dogmatics. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Bigalke Jr., Ron J., and Thomas D. Ice. "Introduction: History of Dispensationalism." In *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, editor Ron. J Bigalke Jr., xvii-xlii. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2005.
- Blaising, Craig A. "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition." In *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*:

- The Search for Definition*, editor Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, 13–36. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.
- Blaising, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bridgepoint Books, 1993.
- Blaising, Craig. “Developing Dispensationalism, Part 2: Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, no. 145 (July 1988): 254–80.
- Boyer, Paul. *When Time Shall be no More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992.
- a Brakel, Wilhelmus. *The Christian’s Reasonable Service in Which Divine Truths Concerning the Covenant of Grace Are Expounded, Defended Against Opposing Parties and Their Practice Advocated as Well as the Administration of This Covenant in the Old and New Testaments*. Editor Joel R. Beeke. Translator Bartel Elshout. *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 1995.
- Bruce, F.F. *Answers to Questions*. Exeter, England: The Paternoster Press, 1972.
- Capp, B.S. “Extreme Millenarianism.” In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 66–90. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.
- Clouse, R.G. “The Rebirth of Millenarianism.” In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 42–65. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.

- Crutchfield, Larry V. *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1992.
- Dallimore, Arnold. *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement: The Life of Edward Irving*. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1983.
- _____. *The Life of Edward Irving: Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983.
- Darby, J.N. "The Church and Its Friendly Subdivisions: In Reply to Mr. R.W. Monsell." In *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 4, ecclesiastical no. 2, editor William Kelly, 133–82.
- _____. "Considerations on the Character of the Religious Movement of the Day and on the Truths by Which the Holy Ghost Acts for the Good of the Church." In *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 4, ecclesiastical no. 2, editor William Kelly, 81–132.
- _____. *Letters of J.N.D.* Vol. 2, 1868–1879. Editor William Kelly.
- _____. *Letters of J.N.D.* London, n.d.
- _____. "The Public Ruin of the Church: Notes on a Meeting in London in September, 1847: 1 Timothy 3:15,16, 2 Timothy 2:19–22." In *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 32, miscellaneous no. 1, editor William Kelly, 392–410.
- _____. "Remarks on the State of the Church in Answer to the Pamphlet of Mr. Rochat, Entitled, 'A Thread to Help the Simple Find Their Way'." In *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 1, ecclesiastical no.12, editor William Kelly, 233–77.

- Drummond, Andrew Landale. *Edward Irving and His Circle Including Some Consideration of the 'Tongues' Movement in the Light of Modern Psychology*. James Clarke & Co. LTD., 1937.
- Elmore, Floyd S. "Darby, John Nelson." In *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, Mal Couch, 82–85. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1997.
- Fuller, Daniel Payton. "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism." Th.D. dissertation. Chicago, Illinois: Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957.
- Hannah, John. *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*. Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPres, 2001.
- Kraus, C. Norman. *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development*. Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1958.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 1956.
- _____. *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God: The Sixth Annual Mid-Year Lectures of Western Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Portland, Oregon*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 1952.
- Marsden, George M. *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Murray, Iain H. *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*, 57–86. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971.
- Neatby, William Blair. *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901.

- Patterson, Paige, David Dockery, and Millard Erickson. "FORUM: Eschatology." In *The Baptist Start Page*. [Http://www.baptiststart.com/print/eschatology_panel.html](http://www.baptiststart.com/print/eschatology_panel.html).
- Pentecost, J. Dwight. *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958.
- Sandeen, Ernest R. *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1970.
- Stokes, George T. "John Nelson Darby (from the Contemporary Review)." *Littell's Living Age* 52 (1885, 7 November 1885): 345–54.
- Toon, Peter. "Conclusion." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 126–29. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.
- _____. "Introduction." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 8–22. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.
- _____. "The Latter-Day Glory." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 23–41. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.
- _____. "The Question of Jewish Immigration." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 115–25. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.
- Warfield, Benjamin B. *Counterfeit Miracles*. 1918. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972.
- Weber, Timothy P. *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming; American Premillennialism 1875–1982, Enlarged Edition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1983.

Whisenant, Edgar C. *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could be in 1988: The Feast of Trump (Rash-Hash-Ana): September 11–12–13*. Nashville, Tennessee: World Bible Society, 1988.

Wilson, Dwight. *Armageddon Now! the Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917*. Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991.