

The Origins of Dispensationalism

Most people assume that Dispensationalism started with J N Darby, one of the originators of the Brethren movement. Certainly Darby popularised this doctrine and, with the spread of Scofield's reference Bible, the teaching went world wide. However, Darby was not the first to develop these ideas. In fact, there is now conclusive evidence that there was a plan by William Kelly (another key Brethren leader, and follower of Darby) to discredit the real origins, because of their dubious pedigree, and inflate the place of Darby.¹

We should be very clear that Dispensationalism finds no place in the entire history of the church before 1830. No one has yet found any credible evidence that anybody believed or taught such a thing. This alone should cause alarm bells to ring in our spiritual ears. When we learn the true origin of the error, we can see even more reason to steer clear.

Key Distinctives of Dispensationalism

Before we proceed, we need to clarify exactly what this teaching is in connection with other eschatological theories. Dispensationalism is a variant of Historic Premillennialism, that is the teaching that Christ will return after the Great Tribulation and establish a 1000 year reign on the earth (millennium) before the final battle with Satan (Armageddon), which issues in final judgment and a new earth. Postmillennialism teaches that Christ returns after a golden age of 1000 years where the church rules the earth in righteousness; Amillennialism believes that there is no Biblical teaching about a literal millennium and that the only passage which mentions it (Rev 20) is symbolically speaking of the age of grace in which we now live.

Dispensationalism is very different and has become the predominant belief in America and versions of it are growing rapidly in Britain. One problem is that it has very many variations, so to simplify our approach we will keep to essential distinctives. These are:

- **Two comings of Christ.** One appearing for the saints in the air, the other a return with the saints. A period of 7 years separates these comings. In this time of tribulation, the Gospel is preached by a remnant of believing Jews and Christians not spiritual enough to be raptured.
- **A secret rapture** of some saints before the period of tribulation when the antichrist will arise. This is the key distinctive called the 'Pre-Tribulation Rapture', (henceforth: pretribulation). This is imminent and could happen at any time.
- **A dichotomy between the church and Israel.** Jews are God's true covenant people who will inherit the literal covenant promises, the church is God's stop-gap operation which benefits from Jewish promises. This distinction is seen as the most important Dispensational tenet by Dispensationalists Charles Ryrie and John Walvoord.
- **A rigid literal approach to interpretation, especially of prophetic books.** This divides the Bible into that which refers to the Kingdom (Israel) and that which speaks of the Church.
- **History is divided into specific dispensations where God deals with men in a certain way.** Each of these time periods ends in failure and judgment.

¹ This paper leans heavily upon, and is greatly indebted to: *The Rapture Plot* by Dave MacPherson.

The most important aspects in evaluating the origin are: the pretribulation rapture and the dichotomy of Israel/Church.

The Origins

Pre 19th century

Some isolated superficial 'dispensational' statements have appeared throughout history. Some 18th century writers began to systematise some of these ideas e.g: Pierre Poiret and Isaac Watts. No one, however, taught a pretribulation rapture. Everyone believed that the church would go through the Great Tribulation. Claims, of some, to find it in the early church fathers are false. There is some Premillennialism there, but none of the key distinctives of Dispensationalism: there is no separation of the church and Israel and no idea of Christians escaping the tribulation or antichrist by a rapture.

The earliest form of a 'secret' rapture was the idea of a partial rapture which separated some saints from others after the tribulation. This really was about prioritisation at the second coming, spiritual believers being given priority over less worthy ones. No one saw a place for Jews until the very end and there was no form of Church/Israel dichotomy.

19th century prophetic conferences

During the 18th century there was very little teaching on the Lord's return. As a result, a reaction began in the 1820's and 30's. Prophetic periodicals and conferences abounded. Most important were the Albury conferences established by Henry Drummond in 1826-30, but the Powerscourt Conferences, instituted by Lady Powerscourt, were also significant. Anglican S.R Maitland began to teach a future rise of Antichrist and a 3½ year great tribulation in 1826. His follower, James Todd, also wrote extensively on the subject. William Burgh converted to this 'futurist' view of Revelation and wrote systematically upon it in 1835.

Edward Irving

Before we continue, we must explain the person of Edward Irving. Originally a Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) minister, he moved to London in 1822 and became a very famous preacher. He was such a powerful and stimulating speaker, who attracted great crowds, that in 1827 the large Regent Square church was erected for him. This was the first to adopt modern charismatic practices (including tongues) following Irving's belief that the gifts of the Spirit were about to be given again. Tongues first appeared in the west of Scotland in Spring 1830 but were soon present in Irving's church. Being expelled by the Church of Scotland in 1833 he helped establish the 'Catholic Apostolic Church' which was fully charismatic, including a belief in the vital role of prophets and apostles. Events soon took a turn for the worse with the gifts being abused and overruling common sense. Irving himself was ousted by men with gifts of supposed greater (apostolic) authority, and many serious doctrinal and ethical aberrations resulted. Irving himself taught a false Christology. As a result, Irving died a demoralised man and the whole movement was vilified.

In 1830, however, Irving was at the height of his fame, and spoke at the Albury conferences. His journal *The Morning Watch*, which had a high eschatological content, was widely distributed. We should note that this journal was susceptible to many weird teachings in its desire to undergird a new wave of spiritual gifts. Some examples follow.

- Human pre-existence, author: 'WL'. March 1830.
- The church will give birth to generations of new people in heaven to inhabit other worlds, author: 'C'. Sept 1830.

- The Jewish occult Cabbala rested on a 'stable' foundation, author not named. Sept 1830.
- Christ will multiply human beings, from the church in heaven, not by creation, but by mysterious generation in the same way that Christ was generated, author: Irving, March 1833.
- The Zodiac will bring out from secular science a conclusive demonstration of scripture chronology, author not named. March 1833.

These sorts of doctrinal aberrations were felt to be: '*mysteries heretofore unknown*' (Morning Watch June 1833). The same issue derided great theologians of the past, denigrated Christians that studied their writings as 'idolaters' and called the Evangelical World: 'modern Moabites'.

Like many other cults, it was deemed necessary that one must join them and be initiated to be safe. Irvingite historian Edward Miller explains that it was necessary to be sealed by the apostles of the Catholic Apostolic Church in order to escape the imminent Great Tribulation.² Each of the Irvingite apostles had to seal 12,000 before he died, but failed to do so in time (and insufficient volunteers). A helpful prophet declared that the sealing would thus be carried on in Paradise.³

Roman Catholic influence

The Irvingite church journal (*The Morning Watch*) carried an article in September 1830 that posited a two phased coming of Christ. This critical idea is originated from a Roman Catholic Jesuit Spanish writer, called Manuel Lacunza. His book, *The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, was translated by Irving in 1827 and studied at the Albury conference, and especially at the later Powerscourt meetings. This is important - one of the key spurs to the foundations of Dispensationalism was the study of the imaginations of a Roman Jesuit, the ideas of another Jesuit, Ribera, were also considered.

So, by about 1830 we have a high degree of eschatological speculation in conferences, books and journals; a futurist view of Revelation; a growing acceptance of extreme ideas including charismania; a Jesuit view of two second comings of Christ; ideas about the separation of the church and Israel; a parenthesis of the Jewish kingdom (see later); and the expected rise of antichrist and the Great tribulation. It is also interesting to note that Joseph Smith published the *Book of Mormon*, teaching a regathering of Israel, in 1830. In 1831 William Miller (the founder of Adventism) began teaching his 'findings'. Jehovah's Witnesses also started soon afterwards. Chiliasm (millennialism) was in the air in the mid 19th century. The missing ingredient, however, was a secret rapture.

Margaret Macdonald

The first person to speak about a pretribulation rapture was a young girl named Margaret Macdonald from Port Glasgow (15 miles from Glasgow) who was familiar with *The Morning Watch* and Edward Irving. The vehicle of this idea was a vision which was written down and read by Irving. In the early 1800's, some people were beginning to think of a future tribulation and Antichrist. Earlier, most had been historicists who saw the 1260 days of Revelation as years, viewing tribulation as present or past and seeing the Antichrist in the pope, or Napoleon, and the beast as Jews, pagans, Arians, Saracens etc. In 1829 *The Morning Watch* represented the most advanced prophetic ideas, including:

² Edward Miller, *The History and Doctrines of Irvingism*, vol 1, p251.

³ Ibid, p292.

- A future tribulation and Antichrist.
- A literal rapture
- A partial rapture (only those filled with the Spirit)
- However, the man-child of Rev 12 was not seen as a church symbol
- An emphasis upon the witnesses of Zech 4 tied in to the witnesses of Rev 11. [Historically, these witnesses had been seen as the Old and New Testaments, or alternatively as Enoch and Elijah (who had been raptured)].

Margaret saw these witnesses as a symbol of the church which introduced a completely new eschatological idea. Irving (as a historicist) had come close to this in seeing the Rev 11 witnesses as a succession of chosen men faithful to God. This is found in his introduction to the translation of Lacunza's: *The Coming of the Messiah*'. (Although he later in the same work states that they are a symbol of the scriptures.) Lacunza also saw them as two congregations of faithful ministers, but neither saw them as being secretly raptured before the Tribulation. Irving, like many others, believed he was already in the 1260 year Tribulation.⁴

Young Margaret Macdonald, who had such a critical influence in the formation of pretribulation was a poor foundation on which to rest. Her insight came in a lengthy vision after prolonged sickness which required bed-rest for 18 months. This was written down and passed to ministers, including Irving at a time when he was very susceptible to such charismatic revelation. Margaret had also only been a Christian for a year and was uneducated. It was probably these facts which led to the origin being obscured and publicised by more educated men.

Margaret was also particularly open to the occult. Robert Norton wrote of her and a friend, *'I have seen both her and Miss Margaret Macdonald stand like statues scarcely touching the ground, evidently supernaturally'*. Andrew Drummond tells us that Margaret's close friend Mary Campbell practised automatic writing and had intense psychical power and was a medium. Margaret also predicted that socialist Robert Owen was the Antichrist at the time she had her pretribulation vision.⁵ Margaret herself began to speak in tongues about four months after her vision in August 1830.

The Morning Watch

The Morning Watch did not credit Margaret Macdonald as its inspiration, although it does mention *'several young women'* having given deep revelation in a few broken sentences. Robert Baxter, a lawyer who became disillusioned with the Irvingites and left them wrote about Margaret in his *Narrative of Facts*. He states that: *'the delusion first appeared in Scotland'* but *'it was not until adopted and upheld by Mr Irving, that it began to challenge much attention.'* Margaret's (uncredited) vision appeared in 1840 in *the Memoirs of James & George Macdonald* of Port Glasgow written by Robert Norton. In 1861 he published her vision and named her specifically, identifying her as the source of the new doctrine. The fact that the Irvingites initiated the teaching of pretribulation is also asserted by several contemporaries, including eminent Brethren writers, such as: S. P. Tregelles, J. P. Lange,

⁴ As an aside, both Rev 11 and 12 speak of 1260 days. There is considerable confusion and argument about when the catching up of the witnesses occurs. 1) Those who believe that the Rev 11 & 12 speak of the same time period, that the two witnesses and the woman are on the earth together, see the witnesses raptured after the last 1260 days (e.g. Darby later in his career, John Walvoord). 2) If the two periods follow each other, the witnesses are raptured before the last 1260 days (e.g. Darby early in his career, Hal Lindsey). Later on the Irvingites and Darby chose not to emphasise this symbol in favour of the safer *man-child* of Rev 12.

⁵ Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot*, Millennium III Pub. (1994) p52-3

Thomas Croskery, Edward Miller (Irvingite historian), William Reid, George Stokes and J. S. Teulon.

Subsequent to receiving a copy of Margaret's vision, *The Morning Watch* went into overdrive in explaining their modification of eschatology. The 'caught up' of 1 Thess 4 is now separated from the 'gather' of Matt 24. An article by 'Fidus' in June 1830 clearly states that 'Philadelphia' (spiritual believers) will be raptured and 'Laodicea' (non-spiritual Christians, and Jews who follow Antichrist) will be left on earth to endure the Great tribulation. Margaret had rested on the 'two witnesses' symbol, Fidus on the 7 churches. Later, others (especially Darby) would rest upon the 'man-child' symbol. Pretribulation must lean upon these symbols from Revelation because there is absolutely no clear, non-symbolic statement in the Bible to defend it.

The pretribulation rapture became known as 'the secret rapture'. This has tendencies of developing an elitist, arcane society of adherents, those who are privileged to know about the secret or are especially spiritual in order to take part in it. In June 1832, it was stated that the Lord's coming was only a joy for those prepared and looking for it. Only they would see the Lord, the rest of the church would only see this first appearance as a meteor or cloud.

Other ideas began to emerge. In June 1832 an article on the feast of Tabernacles saw the seven days of the feast as seven years, the thirteen bullocks slain indicated a confederacy of thirteen hostile powers, during the rise of Antichrist, Gog and Magog etc. This appears to be the first mention of a seven-year tribulation period. Out of interest, Darby was teaching a tribulation of three and a half years as late as 1868.

Because the symbolism of types can be interpreted according to other influences, once sound Biblical hermeneutics are ignored, the interpretation of the feasts varied significantly from year to year. Irvingites shifted the rapture from feast 6 (of Lev 23's 7 feasts) to feast 5, then feast 4 and even feast 3 within the first few years. Modern Dispensationalists have the same problems. Scofield based his pretribulation rapture on feast 3 (firstfruits). Hal Lindsey has a rapture somewhere between feast 3 and 7. Edgar Whisenant based it upon feast 5, stating that it would occur in 1988. Another recent author stated that it would occur in May 1997.

Irving's 'man-child' ideas began to emerge in June 1831; repeated by Darby in 1839. He took Paul's teaching on the union of believers with Christ and transferred it to the interpretation of OT prophecy and Revelation symbolism. References to 'Christ' became corporate, especially the veiled reference of the man-child in Rev 12. With appalling exegesis he sees a first company gathered (rapture of the singular child) before the others of the church who suffer in the Great Tribulation (a remnant of the woman's seed). Questions raised by this nonsense include:

- Part of the symbol is literal ('caught up'), and part is taken spiritually ('man-child').
- If the man-child literally referred to Christ as claimed, why did the disciples not accompany Christ into heaven at his ascension?
- If the man-child symbolises a pretribulation rapture at Rev 12:5, the head needs to be on earth for the whole body and members to be caught up together.
- If the church is already mysteriously (spiritually) joined to the head, why does the church need to be with him in person at Rev 12:5?

Development by Darby

Dave MacPherson has catalogued Darby's main eschatological beliefs in 21 tenets. He then demonstrates that all of these are present, using the same wording, in Edward Irving's preliminary discourse to Lacunza's work published in 1827. In 1829, Darby himself was only voicing 6 of the 21 items. For instance, in 1829 Darby had a Post-tribulation outlook and only saw a distinction, not a dichotomy (separation) between Israel and the church. Darby also quoted Irving, Lacunza and *The Morning Watch* in 1830.⁶

Furthermore, Darby's idea of the 'parenthesis' (where the Jewish kingdom is put on hold while the Gentile church is developed) appeared in 1830; but the same thought in very similar wording appeared in *The Millennium* by W C Davis of South Carolina in 1811.⁷ Lacunza also frequently mentioned this word in explaining prophetic scripture.

It was only in 1870 that Darby's development led to the position now held by modern Dispensationalists. He ceased to emphasise the 'man-child' symbol in favour of the 'Philadelphia' symbol, or even the apostle John who heard 'Come up hither'.⁸ All these had been previously stated by Irvingites, even using John as a church symbol.⁹

Darby's later reminiscences show signs of misrepresentation and plagiarism. For example, his observations of an 1830's Scottish prayer meeting conducted by the Macdonalds, and which included tongue speaking,¹⁰ is almost identical to the report given by John B. Cardale printed in *The Morning Watch*, Dec 1830, except for one item. Darby omits Margaret's utterances regarding a pretribulation deliverance. Other writers noted this. F. Roy Coad called it, '*disingenuous tactics*' and '*descended to the disreputable*'.¹¹ Benjamin Newton wrote that Darby was most subtle (i.e. sly). Darby can be claimed as a populariser of other's thoughts on pretribulation Dispensationalism, but not the originator - as is everywhere claimed.

Earlier historians and theologians were not in the dark on this. George Stokes wrote: '*Darby ... imbibed the Irvingite theories about prophecy, which coincided with his natural turn of mind.*'¹² Samuel Tregelles, one of the ablest 19th century scholars and a Brethren leader, said that the Secret Rapture doctrine was developed by Irvingites, that Darbyites wrote heterodox tracts, misrepresented historic writings to suit their ideas, and added unsound thoughts to quotes of existing writers, all excused as being done for the honour of God.¹³ In editing Darby's works, William Kelly deliberately revised them to give the impression that Darby originated the key doctrines and used editing techniques to misrepresent the Irvingite position.¹⁴ Modern Dispensationalists have continued this error, by accident or design.¹⁵

After being taken on board by the Brethren leader, John Darby, some Brethren leaders (like B. W. Newton, George Muller) rejected it. S. P. Tregelles added that the idea came

⁶ In Darby's *First paper on Prophecy or Prophetic No. 1* in Darby's collected writings.

⁷ MacPherson p100.

⁸ Darby, *Notes on Revelation*, (1839) Prophetic No. 1, p174-5.

⁹ John Tudor, *The Morning Watch*, Sept 1829, p294.

¹⁰ Darby, *The Irrationalism of Infidelity*, London 1853, p283-5.

¹¹ Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement*, p136, 143, 145.

¹² Stokes, *John Nelson Darby*, *The Contemporary Review*, July-Dec 1885, p537-552.

¹³ MacPherson, p140ff.

¹⁴ MacPherson, p147ff.

¹⁵ MacPherson, p187ff.

from a false spirit prompting a vision in Irving's church. Other contemporary leaders, like Charles Spurgeon and William Booth also condemned the teaching.

The ideas were exported by several visits of Darby to the USA (between 1859-74) and a series of prophetic conferences (1878-1901) presenting Dispensationalism to Americans. Delegates included Hudson Taylor, A.T. Pierson, A.J. Gordon, S.H. Kellogg and W.J. Erdman.

The Scofield Bible and other writings

Dispensationalism was internationally popularised by the *Scofield Reference Bible* (arising out of these conferences and published in 1909 with over 3 million sold by 1960),¹⁶ J.N. Darby's writings, William Kelly's books, E.W. Bullinger's *The Companion Bible*, W.E. Blackstone's *Jesus is Coming* (hundreds of thousands sent free to Christian workers in USA) and many other Brethren writings. Many of these works denigrated existing commentaries, and even the church Fathers and the Reformers, and boasted a special revelation, only their works truly understood God's mysteries.

This gave these ideas an attractive and popular 'novelty' to the Christian public. It should also be noted that there was widespread corruption in the church at large in this period with a poor level of teaching (despite some notable exceptions). As a result, many people jumped on to Darby's bandwagon which promoted a return to exegetical teaching of the Bible. *'He (Darby) was able to do what he did because there was a great need ... the church was corrupt, the clergy unlearned. Liberalism had all but taken over. Prophetic teachings ... were almost unheard of. Multitudes were spiritually starved'*.¹⁷

The current situation

Today, the most popular systematic defenders are Americans (alive & dead) like: Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Arno Gaebelein, J. Dwight Pentecost and Ernest Pickering. At a popular level, there are numerous melodramatic paperbacks (like Hal Lindsey's: *The Late Great Planet Earth*) or films.

We can identify the following varieties:

- **Classical Dispensationalism** - (Scofield, Chafer), Israel is on the earth, the church is in heaven and the two never meet in the new world. There are two ways of salvation: works in the OT and faith in the NT. Chafer holds to two covenants. This view dominated 1900-1950's.
- **Hyper Dispensationalism** - Instead of finding the usual Dispensationalist origin of the church in Acts 2, these see it in Acts 13 (as Charles Baker, author of *A Dispensational Theology* and associated with Grand Rapids Grace Bible College!).
- **Ultra Dispensationalism** - The church begins in Acts 28 (as E.W. Bullinger, hence sometimes called *Bullingerism*). Therefore, only a few of Paul's letters apply to the church, the rest of the NT is Jewish.

¹⁶ Problems with the notes of Scofield's reference Bible include: pushing Darby's ideas, and his seeming additions to the text. Rev 22:19 warns not to add to John's prophecy, yet here as elsewhere, Scofield prises apart verses and adds notes between the sentences. It was not uncommon for people to equate these notes with scripture. This outweighs the benefit of other conservative comments.

¹⁷ Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism*, p11. This is referring to the institutional churches.

- **Neo Dispensationalism** - (Ryrie, Walvoord, Dwight Pentecost). Israel and the church will be together after the millennium; there is only one way to salvation in both testaments (faith); there is only one new covenant. Dallas seminary promotes this view.
- **Progressive Dispensationalism** - In recent years some have realised that even some of the Neo Dispensational views are untenable and have sought to further ameliorate its teaching (e.g: Robert Saucy, Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock). They state that:
 - The church is not a parenthesis but the first step towards establishing the kingdom of God.
 - God does not have two purposes (i.e. Israel and the church), there is only one purpose, but both of them share in it.
 - There is no distinction between Israel and the church in the future state.
 - The church will reign (with Jews) in glorified bodies on earth during the millennium.
 - But - they still insist that OT prophecies regarding Israel will be fulfilled in the millennium by ethnic Jews. They do not see the church as the new Israel or believe that OT prophecies are fulfilled in the church.

One can begin to see how complex and varied this scheme is. There is, also, hopeless disagreement among its teachers. Is it really conceivable that the greatest saints in the history of the church could have not known of this 'vital' truth for 1900 years? Also consider that the foundation was laid by: a Roman Catholic Jesuit, a discredited, charismatic heretic and a young girl influenced by hallucinations and connected with occult practices.

Conclusion

The Dispensational version of eschatology is possibly the predominant end-time view today. Theologians and exegetes (Bible interpreters) have long challenged its main tenets as unsound and unscriptural. However, the origins of the viewpoint cast great light on the doctrine itself. It is now clear that it was not the Bible teacher and church leader John Darby that initiated the predominant ideas, rather, it was an occult influenced, young Christian girl who provided the first spark as a result of a vision. This was fanned into a flame by an aberrant charismatic 'Christian' cult, originally led by Edward Irving, which added a pretribulation secret rapture to a host of other unorthodox teachings and practises, later to scandalise 19th century Evangelicals.

The roots of a movement or teaching are as important as the fruits of it. Analysis of the roots of a thing enable us to determine the course it will take before the fruits become evident. In the case of Dispensationalism, we can now see the unbiblical nature of both.

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