

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

John Nelson Darby and the Rapture

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INTRODUCTION

1

Supporters of pretribulationism generally believe that John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) revived this lost New Testament teaching through intense Bible study during convalescence from a riding accident in December 1827 and January 1828. Evangelical opponents of pretribulationism often put forth theories that cast Darby in a bad light. For example, some say Darby got it from Edward Irving (1792–1834), while others say it originated from the prophetic utterance of a fifteen-year-old Scottish lassie Margaret Macdonald (1815–1840). Both sources are understood to be tainted since Irving was considered exocentric and heretical and Macdonald’s prophetic utterance is thought to be demonic. What is the evidence that Darby developed his view from his own personal study?

EARLY LIFE OF JOHN NELSON DARBY

John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) was born in his parents’ London house in Westminster, November 18, 1800. W. G. Turner writes, “He was the youngest son of John Darby, of Markley, Sussex, and of Leap Castle, King’s County, Ireland,”¹ the eighth of nine children, six boys and three girls.² Darby’s father was a wealthy merchant who had married the daughter of an even wealthier merchant, Anne Vaughan, in 1784.³ In Darby’s lineage there is a mixture of service to the Crown, landed aristocracy, and business. Thus, Stunt correctly observes, “Darby was descended from gentry.”⁴

Fifteen weeks after his birth, J. N. Darby was baptized on March 3, 1801, at St. Margaret’s Anglican Church. His godfather was Lord Nelson, who was not present at the event. J.

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¹ W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (London: C. A. Hammond, 1926), 14.

² Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992), 199. Weremchuk has written the most comprehensive biography on Darby, and his writing contributed heavily in the subsequent section.

³ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 19.

⁴ Timothy C. F. Stunt, “Influences in the Early Development of J. N. Darby,” in *Prisoners of Hope? Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1880*, ed. Crawford Gribben and Timothy C.F. Stunt (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster P, 2004), 49.

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N. Darby clearly received his first name from his father and his middle name from his godfather, Lord Nelson.

On February 17, 1812, J. N. Darby entered The Royal College of St. Peter in Westminster, more commonly known as Westminster School in London. Even though young John lived only a few blocks from the school, he was a boarder there. All of J. N. Darby's brothers had attended this school since it was considered one of the finest public schools in London. It was a school attended mainly by sons of the wealthy since its fees were too high for the poor. Weremchuk describes the school: "The instruction was given by clergymen, and the subject matter consisted almost exclusively of Latin and Greek, with some English composition."⁵ Records do not show Darby's academic status, but in 1815 he graduated from Westminster and was sent by his father to Ireland for the first time in his life to attend Trinity College, where he commenced studies on July 3, 1815.⁶

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Trinity College Dublin was an Anglican college founded in 1592 as a divinity school. Trinity was the leading academic institution in Ireland and on par with England's premier universities, Oxford and Cambridge.⁷ Darby took many classes in science and classics and graduated on July 10, 1819, as a gold medal winner in classics.⁸ At that time, such an award at Trinity meant that a student was the top student in his class in that academic field.

Darby did not take courses in theology, but was required to study Bible. In 1808, "Richard Graves (1763–1829) moved the college to include instruction in Bible for all students as part of the academic education."⁹ Bible lectures were held on Saturdays, often given by Graves. Further, Graves was a popular tutor in classics and Darby studied under his oversight. Elmore argues that Graves likely influenced Darby in the realm of interpretation as a futuristic postmillennialist, who "expected a future literal kingdom of Christ universally extended over the earth."¹⁰ Darby also adopted Graves's philo-Semitic view of the Jews, their future conversion, and reestablishment in their homeland.¹¹ However, Darby did not adopt Graves's Arminianism, even though Darby may have

⁵ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷ Floyd Sanders Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby," (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990), 52–54.

⁸ Elmore provides a copy of Darby's academic record broken down by semester in Appendix A, "Two Peoples of God," 318.

⁹ Elmore, "Two Peoples of God," 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

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been a postmillennialist while in college. Elmore observes, “The atmosphere of millennial expectancy in which he was trained certainly had its effect on his eschatology. The postmillennialism of Graves dealt very literally with unfulfilled prophecy, and spawned an attitude of anticipation for an imminent change in dispensation.”¹² The influence of Graves upon Darby was significant and inculcated in him ideas and subject that would later become central is Darby’s thought and writings. Nebeker notes, “A key element of Graves’s eschatology was the literal interpretation of prophetic Scripture.”¹³

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“Graduates of Trinity College, Dublin,” notes Ernest Sandeen, “were among the earliest and most able defenders of futurism.”¹⁴ This appears to be the case because of a more literal hermeneutic taught by the faculty of the college. The more literal one’s interpretation of Scripture, the more likely he would be to arrive at futurist conclusions in the area of biblical prophecy. As Elmore notes, “The theological grist for Darby’s later synthesis was certainly present at Trinity College in his student days.”¹⁵

DARBY’S CONVERSION AND CALL INTO MINISTRY

Upon graduation from Trinity College, Darby began the study of law and was admitted to Lincoln’s Inn, Dublin, on November 9, 1819.¹⁶ Upon completion of the eight terms in preparation for a legal career, Darby, a newly-minted barrister, “was called to the Irish bar on January 21, 1822.”¹⁷ It was sometime during his law studies that Darby experienced personal conversion to Christ, around 1820 or 1821. Darby said, “I loved Christ, I have no doubt, sincerely and growingly since June or July 1820, or 21, I forgot which.”¹⁸

Becoming a believer in Christ as his Savior about age twenty, having finished college, and being well into law studies, would certainly have been the result of significant intellectual contemplation, as well as spiritual influences. Stunt sees Darby’s conversion as a possible result of the “unconscious rejection” of his family’s Enlightenment bent: “The attraction of the ‘vital’ and spiritual Christianity he had encountered at Trinity outweighed the self-confident and manifestly ‘human’ good works of his family.”¹⁹

¹² Ibid., 74–75.

¹³ Gary L. Nebeker, “John Nelson Darby and Trinity College, Dublin: A Study in Eschatological Contrasts,” *Fides et Historia*, 34, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 96.

¹⁴ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 38.

¹⁵ Elmore, “Two Peoples of God,” 73.

¹⁶ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 32.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Darby’s Marginal Notes, Next to 2 Timothy 3 in His Greek New Testament” in Weremchuk, *Darby*, Appendix C, 204.

¹⁹ Stunt, “Influences,” 52.

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Shortly after his conversion, while training for the law, Darby sensed a call to the ministry.

On January 21, 1822, Darby was called to the Irish bar. There is, however, no indication that he ever practiced law. Stunt argues that Darby likely engaged in a great deal of theological reading before his ordinations, which would have prepared and qualified him for a rapid ordination within the established church.²⁰ The career shift greatly displeased his father, who disinherited him at that point. However, Darby was given a considerable fortune by his uncle,²¹ as well as some financial resources upon his father's death in 1834.²²

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DARBY'S EARLY PARISH AND PASTORAL MINISTRY

Darby's career in the Church of Ireland began on August 7, 1825, when Bishop William Bissett ordained him as an Anglican deacon in Raphoe Cathedral. The Archbishop of Dublin, William Magee (1766–1831) ordained Darby as a priest on February 19, 1826, and appointed him curate over a large rural parish of Calary in County Wicklow, "one of the most impoverished regions in the Dublin diocese."²³ Of this assignment, Darby said, "As soon as I was ordained, I went amongst the poor Irish mountaineers, in a wild and uncultivated district, where I remained two years and three months, working as best I could."²⁴

Darby was looked upon with great reverence, not unlike that of a saint, by many of the Catholic poor. Archbishop Magee was working hard to generate an "Irish Reformation" to the greater Dublin area and Darby was seen as a key component in achieving this goal.

During Darby's ministry in 1826–27, it is estimated that about 600 to 800 people a week "were converting to Protestantism through the vigorous efforts of the evangelical clergy."²⁵ However, the conversion rate would soon drop to almost zero, as a result of Archbishop Magee's issuance of a petition by "imposing the oaths of allegiance [to the British Crown] and supremacy [acknowledging the King as the Supreme Head of the Church] on all converts from Romanism within his diocese."²⁶ This act by Magee retarded

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

²¹ Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2007), 68.

²² Weremchuk, *Darby*, 38.

²³ Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake*, 68.

²⁴ J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), III, 297.

²⁵ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 45. Stunt notes that this conversion rate was documented in the monthly issues of the *Christian Examiner* from November 1826 to August 1827 in Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815–35* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 167.

²⁶ Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 169.

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the evangelistic momentum and deeply discouraged Darby. It seemed to reinforce all of the negative aspects of the state church that Darby had already developed, and now they were driven home hard by the archbishop's actions.

Darby had been on a search both doctrinally and experientially for the true church that he believed was not to be found in either Roman Catholicism or in the Church of Ireland. He believed neither could be the true church because their head was not Christ, but, either the state or the Bishop of Rome, whom he saw as beholden to the state. "Recalling Jesus' words to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36), Darby was convinced that Magee's actions compromised the divine calling of the church in a manner not dissimilar to those of Henry VIII, when he asserted civil authority over Rome," observes Paul Wilkinson. Wilkinson continues, "Since spiritual supremacy belonged to Christ, whose dominion was of a *heavenly* rather than earthly nature, Darby argued that Christ's ministers should not concern themselves with civil affairs."²⁷ This view of non-involvement in political affairs became a strong social and civil position of Darby's followers and the Brethren movement.

Grayson Carter notes that two events throughout 1826 and early 1827 led to the "rapid development of Darby's anti-Erastianism" shortly after his ordination.²⁸ The first was Archbishop Magee's staunch words and deeds in defense of a state church under the jurisdiction of the state, including a "petition to the House of Commons for protection against the 'hostility and calumny with which they and their religion have been, for a length of time, systematically assailed.'"²⁹ The second event was Darby's response and strong objection to "Magee's decision in 1826, to require all new converts from Roman Catholicism to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy to the English sovereign."³⁰

A PROVIDENTIAL ACCIDENT

At this time, Darby was experiencing a disappointment from a failed spiritual and physical austerity phase in his life, the reality of an Erastian³¹ church that he believed was

²⁷ Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake*, 75.

²⁸ Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions From The Via Media, c. 1800–1850* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2001), 211.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 212. On Magee and his alienation of clergy within the Church of Ireland due to his views and policies, see Peter Nockles, "Church or Protestant Sect? The Church of Ireland, High Churchmanship, and the Oxford Movement, 1822–1869," *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 2 (June 1998): 457–93. For information on the Church of Ireland in Darby's era, see, Alan Acheson, *A History of the Church of Ireland, 1691–200*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Columbia P., 2003).

³¹ Erastian refers to a proponent of the views of the Swiss theologian Thomas Erastus (1524–1583), who argued that the sins of Christians should be punished by the state and not the church in the withholding of the sacraments.

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in ruins and differed little from the unbelieving world, and his search for an assurance of salvation in his conscience. “Darby’s Christian understanding and experience were about to change radically,”³² notes Brethren historian Tim Grass. As one who began his ministry as a high churchman, Darby was on the verge of becoming an evangelical dissenter when he experienced a riding accident. Darby describes it as follows:

As soon as I was ordained, I went amongst the poor Irish mountaineers, in a wild and uncultivated district, where I remained two years and three months, working as best I could. I felt, however, that the style of work was not in agreement with what I read in the Bible concerning the church and Christianity; nor did it correspond with the effects of the action of the Spirit of God. These considerations pressed upon me from a scriptural and practical point of view; while seeking assiduously to fulfil the duties of the ministry confided to me, working day and night amongst the people, who were almost as wild as the mountains they inhabited. An accident happened which laid me aside for a time; my horse was frightened and had thrown me against a door-post.³³

This period of Darby’s life is known among Darby scholars as “The Convalescence” during which he experienced “The Deliverance.”³⁴ After the accident, Darby was taken to the home of Susannah Pennefather (1785–1862), his older sister, in Dublin in order to recover. Darby’s convalescence was a time when “the questions in his mind began to resolve themselves.”³⁵ He wrote, “I was troubled in the same way when a clergyman, but never had the smallest shadow of it since.” He declared, “I judge it as Satan: but going

³² Tim Grass, *Gathering to his Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britain & Ireland* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2006), 17.

³³ Darby, *Letters*, III, 297–98.

³⁴ R. A. Huebner argues that Darby’s convalescence took place December 1826–January 1827, while Timothy Stunt claims it was December 1827–January 1828. Huebner cites a date on a letter between the Bellett brothers as his dating source (Huebner, *John Nelson Darby: Precious Truths Revived and Defended, Volume One, Revival of Truth 1826–1845*, 2nd ed., augmented [Jackson, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 2004], 8–9). However, Stunt’s position appears more feasible because of the letter from Darby’s friend John Bellett to his brother George at the end of January 1828 in which John said, “I hope on Friday to see John Darby. You will be grieved to hear that he has been laid up for nearly two months from a hurt in his knee. His poor people in Calary miss him sadly” (*Recollections of the Late J. G. Bellett*, [1895], 27). Stunt says, “The letter was apparently received when George was at Bandon. It is dated 31 Jan. 1827, but Bellett had probably written the previous year’s date, as one does, at the end of January. The year must be 1828 for several reasons. First, George moved to Bandon in 1827 and probably after 31 January (D. Bellett, *Memoir of G. Bellett*, 64). Secondly, the evidence for Darby’s 1827–1828 convalescence is overwhelming. His references to ‘two years and three months’ after his ordination (*Letters*, iii: 297) and ‘1827–8’ (*Letters*, i: 185) are explicit. Lastly, F. W. Newman saw him on crutches in late 1827 (see below, ch. 8. p. 206; Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 169).

³⁵ Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 171.

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from cabin to cabin to speak of Christ, and with souls, these thoughts sprang up, and if I sought to quote a text to myself it seemed a shadow and not real. I ought never to have been there, but do not think that this was the cause, but simply that I was not set free according to Romans 8. As I have said, I have never had it at all since.”³⁶

The three or more months Darby spent recuperating from his accident were undoubtedly the most formative period in his life and remarked upon it. In one account he states,

I am daily more struck with the connection of the great principles on which my mind was exercised by and with God, when I found salvation and peace, and the questions agitated and agitating the world at the present day: the absolute, divine authority and certainty of the Word, as a divine link between us and God, if everything (church and world) went; personal assurance of salvation in a new condition by being in Christ; the church as His body; Christ coming to receive us to Himself; and collaterally with that, the setting up of a new earthly dispensation, from Isaiah 32 (more particularly the end); all this was when laid aside at E. P.’s in 1827; the house character of the assembly on earth (not the fact of the presence of the Spirit) was subsequently. It was a vague fact which received form in my mind long after, that there must be a wholly new order of things, if God was to have His way, and the craving of the heart after it I had felt long before; but the church and redemption I did not know till the time I have spoken of; but eight years before, universal sorrow and sin pressed upon my spirit. I did not think to say so much of myself; but it is all well. The truth remains the truth, and it *is* on that we have to go; but the Lord’s dealings with the soul, connected with the use of truth, have to be noted.³⁷

Further identification of the date and what Darby believed happened to him spiritually during that time is seen in another statement by Darby in a letter in which he wrote, “I believe at my deliverance from bondage in 1827–8, God opened up certain truths needed for the church.”³⁸ What did Darby claim he realized during his convalescence during December 1827 and January 1828? He enumerates five things.

First, Darby says that he realized “the absolute, divine authority and certainty of the Word, as a divine link between us and God,”³⁹ which caused “the scriptures to gain

³⁶ Darby, *Letters*, III, 453–54.

³⁷ Darby, *Letters*, I, 344–45.

³⁸ Darby, *Letters*, I, 185.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 344.

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complete ascendancy over me.”⁴⁰ Darby confirms an evangelical view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

Second, he states, “I came to understand that I was united to Christ in heaven, and that consequently, my place before God was represented by His own.”⁴¹ Again he wrote, “Personal assurance of salvation in a new condition by being in Christ; the church as His body.”⁴²

Third, Darby understood more fully his present standing with Christ in heaven. Such a heavenly standing becomes the basis for much of Darby’s theology that sees the believer already positioned with Christ in heaven: “I was in Christ, accepted in the Beloved, and sitting in heavenly places in Him. This led me directly to the apprehension of what the true church of God was, those that were united to Christ in heaven.”⁴³

Fourth, he says that he realized that he should daily expect the Lord’s return: “At the same time, I saw that the Christian, having his place in Christ in heaven, *has nothing to wait for save the coming of the Saviour*, in order to be set, in fact, in the glory which is already his portion ‘in Christ.’ ”⁴⁴ Further he says, “I saw in that word the coming of Christ to take the church to Himself in glory.”⁴⁵ Darby speaks of “being in Christ; the church as His body; *Christ coming to receive us to Himself*; ... all this was when laid aside at E. P.’s in 1827.”⁴⁶ Again Darby says of his convalescence discovery, “The coming of the Lord was the other truth which was brought to my mind from the word, as that which, if sitting in heavenly places *in Christ*, was alone to be waited for, that I might sit in heavenly places *with Him*.”⁴⁷ Such a cluster of beliefs that were formulated at this time provides the rationale for a pretribulational rapture. Darby had seen the importance of an imminent return of Christ for his bride.

Fifth, Darby saw a change in dispensation. This could mean that it was at this time that shifted in his eschatology from postmillennialism to premillennialism: “Christ coming to receive us to Himself; and collaterally with that, the setting up of a new earthly dispensation, from Isaiah 32 (more particularly the end); all this was when laid aside at E. P.’s in 1827.”⁴⁸ He writes of his studies in Isaiah: “Isaiah 32 brought me to the earthly

⁴⁰ Darby, *Letters*, III, 298.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Darby, *Letters*, I, 344.

⁴³ Ibid., 515.

⁴⁴ Darby, *Letters*, III, 298 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 299.

⁴⁶ Darby, *Letters*, I, 344 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 516.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 344.

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consequences of the same truth, though other passages might seem perhaps more striking to me now; but I saw an evident change of dispensation in that chapter, when the Spirit would be poured out on the Jewish nation, and a king reign in righteousness.”⁴⁹ Isaiah was a very influential part of his studies and change of views during this time. He notes:

In my retreat, the 32nd chapter of Isaiah taught me clearly, on God’s behalf, that there was still an economy to come, of His ordering; a state of things in no way established as yet. The consciousness of my union with Christ had given me the present heavenly portion of the glory, whereas this chapter clearly sets forth the corresponding earthly part. I was not able to put these things in their respective places or arrange them in order, as I can now; but the truths themselves were then revealed of God, through the action of His Spirit, by reading His word.⁵⁰

Darby summarized his views that he discovered during his convalescence retreat in Dublin in an issue of *The Bible Treasury* writing:

Isaiah 32 it was that taught me about the new dispensation. I saw there would be a David reign, and did not know whether the church might not be removed before forty years’ time. At that time I was ill with my knee. It gave me peace to see what the church was. I saw that I, poor, wretched, and sinful J. N. D., knowing too much yet not enough about myself, was left behind, and let go, but I was united to Christ in heaven. Then what was I waiting for? J. G. B. came up and said they were teaching some new thing in England. “I have it!” I said.⁵¹

Francis Newman, who served as a tutor for the Pennefather children for fifteen months during 1827 and 1828, confirms the timing of Darby’s textual and doctrinal discoveries. As a tutor in the household daily, he would have been at the Pennefather residence during Darby’s convalescence.⁵² Newman speaks of Darby’s influence upon him while at the Pennefathers, during Darby’s three-month convalescence. “Darby’s realization in 1827–28 that earthly Jewish promises should not be appropriated by the Christian church is circumstantially corroborated in Frank Newman’s letter to B. W. Newton (17 April

⁴⁹ Ibid., 516.

⁵⁰ Darby, *Letters*, III, 298–99.

⁵¹ J. N. Darby, “Thoughts on Revelation XIV., XV., XVI,” *The Bible Treasury* 12, no. 281, October 1879, 352.

⁵² “... in 1827 I went to Ireland... In the Autumn of 1828 I returned to Oxford ...” (F. W. Newman, *Contributions Chiefly to the Early History of the Late Cardinal Newman*, 21 and 24). “In Dublin (1827–8) ...,” (ibid., p. 62). Cited from Huebner, *John Nelson Darby*, 12, n60. In *Phases of Faith*, Newman says the following, “After taking my degree, I became a Fellow of Balliol College; and the next year I accepted an invitation to Ireland, and there became private tutor for fifteen months in the house of one now deceased” (17).

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1828),” notes Stunt, “written after Darby’s deliverance experience, where he makes a similar distinction between the promises made to Israel and those made to the Church.”⁵³

It is helpful to have a witness by another party that basically supports the information provided by Darby during such a formative moment in his life. Such a testimony supports Darby’s overall credibility in addition to bolstering these specific claims.

Benjamin Wills Newton (1807–99), writes of his Oxford tutor and friend Frank Newman, “While I was at Oxford and we were friends, F. Newman went to Ireland (1827) and there made the acquaintance of John Darby.”⁵⁴ Thus, Newton says that Newman returned from his stay in Ireland, having been influenced by Darby in relation to prophecy, and that Newman wanted Darby to share this prophetic information with his friends at Oxford. This is a second source that confirms Darby’s doctrinal discoveries occurred during his convalescence during December 1827 and January 1828.

A third source, John Gifford Bellett (1795–1864), also had interaction with Darby during his convalescence. He wrote the following about Darby:

In the beginning of 1828 I had occasion to go to London, and then I met in private and heard in public those who were warm and alive on prophetic truth, having had their minds freshly illumined by it.

In my letters to J. N. D. at this time, I told him I had been hearing things that he and I had never yet talked of, and I further told him on my return to Dublin what they were. Full of this subject as I then was, I found him quite prepared for it also, and his mind and soul had traveled rapidly in the direction which had thus been given to it.⁵⁵

Bellett stated that he discussed “prophetic truth” with Darby. It was noted earlier in a footnote that in addition to a letter J. G. Bellett wrote to Darby, he also penned one to his brother George and spoke of his impending visit with Darby. The Bellett letter was dated

⁵³ Stunt, “Influences,” 59, n56.

⁵⁴ Benjamin Wills Newton, *The Fry Collection*, 61. Newton makes a similar statement about Newman visiting Darby in 1827 on page 235. Timothy Stunt describes *The Fry Collection* as the collection of handwritten “expositions, recollections and conversations” of Newton by one “who greatly valued his teaching,” Frederick W. Wyatt. “On Wyatt’s death the collection came into the possession of Alfred C. Fry” who assembled the various collections into a single volume and in 1982 Fry “presented his collection to the Christian Brethren Archive (CBA) in the John Rylands University Library in Manchester” (Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 313–14). This writer has a photocopy of the manuscript which contains a total of 444 pages. See also *Fry Collection*, 240–41.

⁵⁵ John Gifford Bellett, *Interesting Reminiscences of the Early History of “Brethren:” With Letter from J. G. Bellett to J. N. Darby* (London: Alfred Holness, n.d.), 4.

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January 31, 1828. John wrote to George saying, “I hope on Friday to see John Darby. You will be grieved to hear that he has been laid up for nearly two months from a hurt in his knee. His poor people in Calary miss him sadly.”⁵⁶ Bellett’s statement that Darby was “quite prepared for it also” is a reference to prophetic discussions during his visit with Darby while Darby was recuperating from his injury. Very likely the phrase, “his mind and soul had traveled rapidly in the direction which had thus been given to it” is a reference to the discoveries that Darby learned through his personal Bible study.

DARBY’S NEW THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

These five biblical discoveries noted above are the basis upon which Darby builds his new theological paradigm that includes dispensationalism and pretribulationism. From the beginning of Darby’s dissent from the established church, these items were core essentials upon which he began to build his unique theology. Stunt concludes, “It was in these months that finally the questions in his mind began to resolve themselves. Central to his faith from now on was the belief that he and all Christians were ‘united to Christ in heaven’, and delivered ‘by the power of His resurrection.’”⁵⁷ Carter sees “its radical distinction between the Jewish and Gentile dispensations—‘the hinge’, as Darby referred to it, ... the distinction between these two dispensations forms the basis for Darby’s understanding of both ecclesiology and eschatology.”⁵⁸ These items are important since pretribulationism is built upon first one’s view of ecclesiology that is set within a certain eschatological framework. Darby perceives a clear distinction between Israel and the church. “It is important to notice here that Darby came to the realization of these points alone, without the influence of other men,”⁵⁹ surmised Weremchuk. “Darby’s views, when fully developed later, would prove to be in many points contrary to the ones normally accepted by the church at large.”⁶⁰ It was during Darby’s convalescence that the original spark of his ideas burst forth from his personal Bible study and fanned into the flames of his theology during the next decade and beyond.

It has been long recognized that pretribulationism is built upon one’s view of ecclesiology as much or more than upon one’s eschatology. The greatest pretribulationist scholar of the twentieth century was the late John F. Walvoord of Dallas Theological Seminary, who

⁵⁶ Bellett, *Recollections*, 27.

⁵⁷ Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 171.

⁵⁸ Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, 224.

⁵⁹ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 63.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Weremchuk continues to explain, “Darby, as we noted had been greatly occupied with the early church as described in Acts. What he saw around him he did not like. His views which then developed were ‘new’—that is, different from those of his contemporaries. He defended his views as being the ‘original’ ones that the church very early in her history had lost sight of” (Weremchuk, *Darby*, 63–64).

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recognized the central place of ecclesiology in support of pretribulationism. Walvoord writes,

What is essential to premillennialism becomes an indispensable foundation in the study of pretribulationism. It is safe to say that pretribulationism depends on a particular definition of the church, and any consideration of pretribulationism that does not take this major factor into consideration will be largely beside the point.⁶¹

The point that should not be missed regarding Darby's convalescence discoveries is that they centered on ecclesiology. Darby was concerned about what was happening to the church in which he was involved in Ireland and searched the Bible for answers to his concerns. Stunt notes that one of the assurances Darby received "was the assurance that he (together with all Christians as opposed to Christendom) was risen and spiritually united with Christ in heaven."⁶² This ecclesiastical realization forms the heart of Darby's theology and spiritual hope that extended throughout the rest of his life.

The first two essays written by Darby were both about ecclesiastical issues, which further demonstrates his focus upon understanding the church. The first, though not published until much later, was the one expressing his disagreement with Archbishop Magee's petition and the second, from Dublin in 1828, was "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ."⁶³

Darby did not just develop an ecclesiology that was isolated from interaction with other areas of theology. Rather, he clearly set it against God's plan for Israel. In one of his convalescence statements he said,

Isaiah 32. It was that taught me about the new dispensation. I saw there would be a Davidic reign, and did not know whether the church might not be removed before forty years' time. At that time I was ill with my knee. It gave me peace to see what the church was. I saw that I, poor, wretched, and sinful J. N. D., knowing too much yet not enough about myself, was left behind, and let go, but I was united to Christ in heaven.⁶⁴

⁶¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question, Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 37.

⁶² Stunt, "Influences," 58.

⁶³ Darby, "Considerations Addressed to the Archbishop of Dublin and the Clergy Who signed the Petition to The House of Commons for Protection," *Collected Writings*, I, 1–19, and "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ," *Collected Writings*, I, 20–35.

⁶⁴ Darby, "Thoughts on Revelation," 352.

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Thus, Darby sees the church as distinct from Israel, God's earthly people, since there would be a Davidic reign for Israel in the millennium. On the other hand, Darby saw that he was positionally united with Christ in heaven, a heavenly destiny. Dispensationalists today see such a distinction as their *sine qua non*. Leading dispensational spokesman Charles Ryrie says, "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct." Ryrie explains:

This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will.⁶⁵

Non-dispensational, covenant theologians recognize this essential about dispensationalists as noted by Michael Williams:

The Darbyist church/Israel distinction constitutes the one great organizing principle of classical dispensationalism. The metaphysical and historical distinction between the church and Israel is the axle upon which the theology of Darby, Scofield, and Chafer rides. It is the one great absolutely necessary or essential element of the system. The Darbyist metaphysical distinction between Israel and the church is the *sine qua non* of classical dispensational theology.⁶⁶

Whether dispensationalists or non-dispensationalists, all recognize for dispensationalism the importance of the distinction between God's rule for Israel and his rule for the church.

From the time of his convalescence, Darby developed a theology that taught and supported a dispensational, premillennial, pretribulationism. Essentially Darby came to understand that his place or position was the same as that of Christ, which is in heaven. Thus, the church is a heavenly people, not an earthly people like the established church, in which he was a clergyman. Juxtaposed to the heavenly and spiritual church was Israel, who are composed of a spiritual, ethnic, and national people on earth who have a future in God's plan after the church age.

Darby came to understand that the church could be taken to heaven at any moment without signs preceding that event, in what would later be known as the pretribulation rapture of the church. Darby's realization of a change in dispensations laid the groundwork for the development of dispensationalism, since he saw a distinction between God's plan for the church and His plan for Israel. By this time, Darby also

⁶⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 46.

⁶⁶ Michael Williams, *This World is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 90.

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developed a pessimistic view of the visible church, Christendom, and came to believe that it was in utter ruins.

By January 1828, February at the latest, John Nelson Darby had not only come to an understanding of the idea of pretribulationism, but, he had also come to see other components, along with a rationale to support this view. This does not mean that his ideas relating to pretribulationism came out of the womb fully developed along with no internal contradictions.⁶⁷ There was still developmental work to be done. Stunt surmises, “In fact for some years after his experience of deliverance there was something decidedly ambivalent about some of the positions adopted by Darby.”⁶⁸ It would take at least another decade for Darby to develop full confidence in his new views and their implications. The basics were in place by early 1828. This was too early to have received seminal influence from others regarding things Darby strongly contends he came to understand from personal Bible study alone during his Dublin convalescence.

CONCLUSION

J. N. Darby’s pretribulationism appeared as a seminal idea from his own Bible study during a convalescence period of December 1827 through January 1828 while staying at his sister’s house in Dublin. Darby was in distress about issues relating to the true nature and purpose of the church during his convalescence, which led to his ideas of the rapture of the church, an ecclesiastical and eschatological issue. Stunt concludes, “We must emphasize that Darby was a very complex person whose understanding of scripture and theology was continually evolving.”⁶⁹ Darby possessed the intellect, education, and capability needed for original thinking, and the discipline to develop ideas into a system. There is nothing in the record that indicates that this is not what he in fact did do. Through Darby’s own personal testimony on multiple occasions, he provided the

⁶⁷ Darby’s first published article on eschatology (1829) has some items that do contradict a fully systematized view of pretribulationism (Darby, “Reflections Upon The Prophetic Inquiry and the Views Advanced in it,” *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, 34 vols. [n.d.; repr., Winschoten, Netherlands: H. L. Heijkoop, 1971], 2:31). Darby appears to still harbor elements of historicism, but at the same time Darby displays elements of his new discoveries. He speaks of “two comings” and “to be caught up into the air” (16). He spends a couple of pages describing the rapture and key rapture passages like 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 (16–18). He criticizes his opponent for “a confusion of the Jewish and Gentile dispensations” (18). He speaks of how the church is “to look to the coming of Christ as the prominent object of faith” (26). Even though it will take some time to work out the implications of his new views and to gain full confidence in their implications, they are clearly evident in his earliest writings.

⁶⁸ Stunt, “Influences,” 59.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

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theological rationale to support pretribulationism, something that would be unlikely if it was just an idea stolen from another source.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Ice, T. (2013). "John Nelson Darby and the Rapture." *Journal of Ministry and Theology*, 17(1), 99–119.