

When Did J. N. Darby Discover the Rapture?

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Did key elements of the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture originate with either Edward Irving (1792–1834) or the broader Irvingite movement and then stealthily incorporated into the theology of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) and the Brethren? Dave MacPherson is convinced “that the popular Pre-Trib Rapture teaching of today was really instigated by a teenager in Scotland who lived in the early 1800’s,”¹ who was connected with the broader Irvingite movement. This is the general thesis put forth in dozens of books and articles for many years. However, I do not believe that there is merit to such a position since Irving and his movement never taught pretribulationism and both come from very different eschatological systems. In fact, I believe it can be established that Darby first came to believe in both dispensational truth and pretribulationism by December 1826 or January 1827, before these other alleged sources even surfaced.

DARBY’S CONVALESCENCE

Anyone who has seriously studied the life of Darby is aware of the pivotal nature of a riding accident that probably took place in October 1826 in Ireland. Darby says, “An accident happened which laid me aside for a time; my horse was frightened and had thrown me against a door-post.”² Darby’s older sister Susan Pennefather, whose husband Edward eventually became Chief Justice of Ireland’s Supreme Court,³ took care of her injured brother in their Dublin home.⁴ It was during this time of “convalescence” for Darby that he came to a great realization as a result of Bible study, prayer, and time alone with the Lord. Darby tells us what happened in his own words:

During my solitude, conflicting thoughts increased; but much exercise of soul had the effect of causing the scriptures to gain complete ascendancy over me. I had always owned them to be the word of God.

When I came to understand that I was united to Christ in heaven, and that, consequently, my place before God was represented by His own, I was forced to the conclusion that it was no longer a question with God of this wretched “I” which had wearied me during six or seven years, in presence of the requirements of the law. It then became clear to me that the church of God, as He considers it, was composed only of those who were so united to Christ, whereas Christendom, as seen externally, was really the world, and could not be considered as “the church,” save as regards the responsibility attaching to the position which it professed to occupy—a very important thing in its place. 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.” . . . 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.

What was to be done? I saw in that word the coming of Christ to take the church to Himself in glory. I saw there the cross, the divine basis of salvation, which should impress its own character on the Christian and on the church in view of the Lord's coming; and also that meanwhile the Holy Spirit was given to be the source of the unity of the church, as well as the spring of its activity, and indeed of all christian energy.⁵

Darby also refers to his discovery of the rapture and other truths during his convalescence of December 1826 through January 1827 in a letter he wrote in 1879:

But these are the two truths brought out in these days, throwing light on the truth of the first coming. They have been consciously my theme these fifty years and more. They started me in my path of service; the assurance of salvation came with them, and the christian character as of the new creation, . . . When man entered into the glory of God consequent on accomplished redemption, the Holy Ghost came down, till He comes to take us up. This connects the hope and the power of life and heavenly calling with accomplished redemption: Christ, Man at the right hand of God, is the central point. What set me free in 1827 is still the theme on which my soul dwells, with, I trust, much deeper sense of its importance—something much nearer to me, but the same truths. And blessed truths they are; and the hope, what a hope!⁶

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Thus, in these two extended citations by Darby concerning what he discovered from his study of Scripture during his convalescence, we learn that he saw himself positionally seated with Christ at the Father's right hand, that a Christian has nothing to wait for except the coming of Christ, and as a result of his study of Isaiah 32 he saw that after Christ's second coming there would be a change in economy, in other words, a premillennial return of the Lord.

It means that Darby's view of Christ's return without intervening events—the pre-trib rapture—came to him as a result of arriving at an understanding of the uniqueness of the church, as opposed to Israel. As is true of pretribulationists today, their pretribulationism is built upon a view of the church (ecclesiology), which when applied to eschatology produces this view. It means that from day one (December 1826 and January 1827) that Darby had the theological rationale, whose basics never changed, that further support the notion that pretribulationism, along with dispensationalism, were a product of his own thought based upon Bible study.

DARBY PRE-DATES OTHERS

The dates of December 1826 and January 1827 as the point in which Darby discovers these doctrines means that even if others developed a pre-trib rapture viewpoint, which they did not, but for the sake of argument we will consider their dates compared with Darby's. The earliest suggestion is that Darby was influenced by Manuel de Lacunza's (1731–1801) book that was translated from Spanish into English by Edward Irving (1792–1834) and was published in the Spring of 1827. First of all, no pre-trib rapture was taught in that book.⁷ Thus, Darby would have already developed his views months

before it would have been possible for him to have been influenced by de Lacunza's writings.

Along the same line, some have suggested that Darby was influenced by the 194-page introduction penned by Edward Irving that appeared in de Lacunza's book. The same point made above would be that it came out months after Darby's discovery and could not be the source. Further Irving never held to pretribulationism, instead, he believed a form of historicism that was similar to de Lacunza. After all, Irving was so impressed with de Lacunza that he learned Spanish and translated his book.

Dave MacPherson has made the claim "that the popular Pre-Trib Rapture teaching of today was really instigated by a teenager in Scotland who lived in the early 1800's,"⁸ April 1830 is when fifteen-year old Margaret Macdonald (1815–1840) is alleged to have come up with the idea in a prophecy she gave that was written down and circulated.⁹ Once again the problem arises, how can a source that anti-dates by almost three and a half years Darby's pretribulationism be his source? Like the other suggestions, Macdonald's prophecy does not come close to even teaching a pre-trib rapture.

In 1864 Samuel P. Tregelles (1813–1875) said that Darby's view of the rapture was "given forth as an "utterance" in Mr. Irving's church." He also claimed that this occurred "about the year 1832."¹⁰ This would be different than the Margaret Macdonald claim since Miss Macdonald was in Scotland and Irving's church was in London. Tregelles' claim also falls short since it would have been a full five years after Darby became pretribulationist from his own Bible study and meditation.

CONCLUSION

Many people down through the years have believed these false claims from those who dislike Darby or the pre-trib rapture doctrine and have spread these myths far and wide. These pseudo-sources of pretribulationism are intended to cast a cloud upon its origin as coming from occultic or demonic sources. Instead, I have been able to show that in reality pretribulationism was a product of Darby's own Holy Spirit guided Bible study. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Dave MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1983), p. 7.

MacPherson's most recent offering is *The Rapture Plot* (Muskogee, OK: Artisan Publishers, 2007).

² J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby, Volume Three 1879–1882* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), p. 298.

³ Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815–35* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 391.

⁴ Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992), pp. 47–48.

⁵ Darby, *Letters of Darby*, vol. 3, pp. 298–99.

⁶ J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby, Volume Two 1868–1879* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), p. 499.

⁷ Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, 2 vols, translated by Edward Irving (London: L. B. Seeley and son, 1827). Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra was a pseudonym that Manuel de Lacunza published under.

⁸ MacPherson, *Rapture Hoax*, p. 7.

⁹ Robert Norton, who later married Miss Macdonald, provides her prophecy in two different books. There are differences between the accounts. *Memoirs of James & George Macdonald, of Port Glasgow* (London: John F. Shaw, 1840), pp. 171–76; *The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets; In the Catholic Apostolic Church* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1861), pp. 15–18.

¹⁰ S. P. Tregelles, *The Hope of Christ's Second Coming: How is it Taught in Scripture? And Why?* (Chelmsford, England: The Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, 1886), p. 35.