

Our Approach: An Introduction to Theological Method
and the Theology of John Nelson Darby

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OUR APPROACH¹

The father of modern dispensationalism came on the scene of history at a salutary moment, and he read his Bible with rare devotional abandon just prior to and throughout a lifetime of writing. His vast and challenging written record presents volumes of meticulous theological correspondence, popular tract- and pamphlet-writing, and a body of argumentative discourse that would leave little doubt as to his opinion on theological matters from Greek grammatical structures in the New Testament to the application of biblical principles in 19th Century British political life. From this record one can distill a rigorous and thoroughly detailed system of theology, though the desirable task of cataloging and prioritizing said systematic theology was sadly one accomplishment Darby never undertook. Darby would probably remark that the Bible has its own system, and therefore the closest thing we have to his systematic theology is his *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*. This magnum opus, originally published in French, took him the better part of twenty years to complete, and in five volumes it presents a system that must be derived inductively.² Darby's priority of the Bible—illuminated to the believer by the Holy Spirit—over human reasoning was his constant appeal.³

¹This paper is a revision of a paper presented to Dr. Michael Stallard for his PhD seminar course on theological method in December, 2013 at Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, PA.

²Floyd Saunders Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby," (Ph.d. diss, Dallas Theological Seminary), 1991. Elmore's synthesis of Darby's theology relies on the *Synopsis* especially.

³J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 2d ed., 5 vols. (New York,: Loizeaux Bros., 1950), 10-11. "Nothing is proved by the system [of Rationalism] so denominated but the total absence of all divine intelligence, a poverty associated with intellectual pretension, an absence of moral judgment, a pettiness of observation on what is external, with a blindness to divine and infinite fulness in the substance, which would be

Reading the Bible with Darby will demonstrate some key features of his approach, which began always with a high view of inspiration. This perspective had as its consequence a desire to interpret biblical writings within their authors' intended and construed meaning and a respect for the sequential flow of revelation. It also led to the insistence that the Old Testament Scriptures be read on their own terms, and this priority supported the signal insight that Israel and the Church are distinct entities with distinct responsibilities in their respective and distinct eras. Darby's priority doctrine and "interpretive motif,"⁴ the doctrine of the Church, would ultimately direct him to make the great distinction between Israel from the Church, which would be the topical *sine qua non* of dispensationalists after Darby.⁵ From the beginning of his ministry to his death Darby's focus was the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Getting at what the Church is would enable Darby to synthesize the biblical material into the dispensational system found in the *Synopsis* and throughout his post-1833 writings.

contemptible through its false pretensions, if it were not a subject of pity, because of those in whom these pretensions are found. None but God can deliver from the pride of human pretension. But the haughtiness which excludes God, because it is incompetent to discover Him, and then talks of His work, and meddles with His weapons, according to the measure of its own strength, can prove nothing but its own contemptible folly. Ignorance is generally confident, because it is ignorant; and such is the mind of man in dealing with the things of God. The writer must be forgiven for speaking plainly in these days on this point. The pretensions of infidel reason infect even Christians.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1998), 81-3. Erickson's chapter on theological method is a starting point for the general concept, and here he develops the idea of a central interpretive motif. He uses the adjectives "interpretive" and "integrative" interchangeably, and it would seem that the topic of interpretation is significantly important in doing theology that *integrative* is a more desirable term.

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1965), 47. Ryrie's three elements which he called the *sine qua non* of dispensational theology have been generally embraced by dispensationalists as their self-definition. These three key undergirding principles of the dispensational approach certainly enable dispensationalists to evaluate deviations from their approach to reading the Bible. That the distinction between Israel and the Church is the topical *sine qua non* notices that of the three it alone is an actual feature or topic within the system of dispensationalism. Literal hermeneutics is a reference mainly to methodology, while the doxological purpose of history attempts to summarize all the features of the system.

Method of this study

This paper's aim is the demonstration of Darby's theological method in comparison to how dispensationalists today approach the theological endeavor. If ever there was a thinker whose life and works lent a detailed examination into his development and approach, it was Darby. This effort requires a discussion of his written corpus as well as his historical situation and a rough outline of his well-known dispensational system. This portrait of the man in his times will be followed by an analysis of several features of Darby's approach to systematic theology. Along the way Michael Stallard's modern-day hierarchy of theological tasks will provide a structural guide for assessing these inputs. Doing this shows that Darby's straightforward approach has stood the test of time. This man so focused on Christ and His Church has a great deal to teach the casual student of the history of evangelicalism because he has been ridiculed for his insights in some quarters⁶ and dismissed as simplistic in others. It may be that the insights gained from his theological method are more helpful for students of systematic theology than some of the products of that method, helpful as they themselves are.

A Portrait of the Man

Sources for Darby Theological Studies

The John Nelson Darby library is known to be vast and mostly overlooked. Indeed, it can all be gotten online as open source material today. What makes Darby's lifeworks unique besides sheer volume and abstruse writing style⁷ is the vast amount of dated personal correspondence contained therein. Studying Darby, then, easily becomes a historical theological investigation of 19th Century Western Evangelicalism through the eyes of the era's arguably

⁶ See Tony Campolo, *Letters to a Young Evangelical* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 106-108.

⁷ For a discussion of various appraisals of Darby's difficult writing style see Larry Vance Crutchfield, "The Doctrine of the Ages and Dispensations as Found in the Published Writings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)," (Ph.d. diss., Drew University, 1985), 16-17.

most important critical and devotional thinker. Such historical investigation is not the aim or within the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that Darby's works, having been meticulously dated and collated, along with his letters, lend insight into his theological development and the historical milieu in which served. These are just the primary sources.

As has been mentioned, the most important written work in Darby's library is his five-volume *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*. Today's readers might expect a project with this title to be a summary commentary on the Bible like the various single- or multi-volume whole-Bible commentaries available today. Actually, this was neither Darby's intention nor the result of his efforts. A mere examination of proportions will demonstrate as much: the Old Testament portion, Volumes 1 and 2, comprise 887 pages or 42% of the total, while the New Testament in Volumes 3-5 holds 1218 pages, the other 58%.⁸ This seems proportionally inverted, if Darby's intention was a Bible commentary, especially given his high view of all the Scriptures and his insistence that the Old Testament stand on its own. However, his goal was not a commentary but a delineation of the Bible's system of dispensational truth, demonstrating the continuity of God's eternal counsels and the discontinuity of His historical arrangements which reveal those eternal counsels. Darby's *Synopsis* presents a great deal of what we today call biblical theology because it indeed summarizes every book of the Bible, yet it is a masterpiece of whole-Bible integration because it shows how the messages of each book contribute to the entire presentation.

Darby's other works, including the 34 volumes of William Kelly's edited *Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, three volumes of letters, and several volumes of materials not included in the *Collected Writings* present a sequential development and sophistication of detail in Darby's theology. However, by his own admission, he rarely changed in his views after 1833 when he

⁸ John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, new ed. (London: G. Morrish, n.d.; reprint, London: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, 1965). Hereafter cited as *Synopsis*.

became a futurist premillennialist.⁹ In a letter originally written in French in 1850, Darby described his consistency thus:

It is my habit scarcely to put one foot before the other in the study of the word, and to give forth nothing until I am able, in measure, to say (while still liable to make mistakes, of course), This is *the* mind of God. This makes me go on very slowly, but I seldom have to retrace my steps—a few details I have adopted from others, without observing it, affecting sometimes, but rarely, the thoughts that I have received.¹⁰

The study of Darby's theological method really calls for the analysis of his entire body of written work. For the purposes of this investigation, however, only key selections of his works will be so analyzed, while a few helpful dissertations by subsequent scholars on various aspects of Darby's theology will help provide a broad base of understanding for the synthesis of the many inputs. Of course the scholarly literature on J. N. Darby's theology lacks a dissertation on his theological method, and further development of this presentation would include the reading of the entire Darby corpus for the firsthand synthesis of its insights.

⁹ Darby wrote in defense of the historicist school of premillennialism until the second Powerscourt Conference in 1832.

¹⁰ John Nelson Darby, *Letters of J. N. D.* (London: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, N.D.; reprint, Winschoten, Netherlands: H. J. Heijkoop, 1971), 3:259. This quote was pointed out by Elmore in *The Two Peoples*, p. 128 but bore repeating here. Located in the appendix of the collected letters, this statement was made in the midst of a lengthy explanation of Darby's differences theologically with this letter's recipient. The letter itself provides helpful insight into Darby's reasoning, theological priorities, and disciple-making practices. He concludes his letter with the characteristic gentle words after several pages of the "wounds of a friend" by writing, "Greet warmly our dear brethren, and after all my severe criticisms, receive, dearest brother, the assurance of my sincere affection." p. 261.

Historical Background

A Brief Biography of J. N. Darby

The life story of J. N. Darby is well-documented both by his own pen in his correspondence and in the works of historians and biographers.¹¹ He was born in 1800 to wealthy Irish parents and lived to be 82 years old. In a life that spanned most of the 19th Century, Darby rose to such a position of prominence in the evangelical movement of England and internationally that his influence is still felt today in American fundamentalism and everything that movement touches. While the Plymouth Brethren, the denomination in which he became the most important theologian, did not seriously challenge the state churches or main-line denominations in Great Britain, Europe, or North America, Darby's theology and its underlying approach to the Bible stretched far beyond even his international itinerant ministry. Dispensationalism has transcended the denominations and spawned more than one ecclesiastical movement. This writer contends that it improves biblical literacy everywhere it has found a home.

As may be no great surprise to the student of doctrinal history, Darby the pioneer of dispensational thought, did not attend a theological seminary. Rather he was a student of classical literature and mathematics, and at Trinity College in Dublin he earned the gold medal in classic Greek studies, apparently the highest honor one could receive as a student of that discipline.¹² Elmore has pointed out in some detail that the Irish Anglican church in general and

¹¹ *Letters*, 3:297-305. This letter is the most comprehensive autobiographical insight on Darby's life and ministry, including his conversion, the way he came to believe in the distinction between Israel and the Church, and the formation of the Plymouth Brethren. Also see W.G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby* (Hammond, 1944). Larry Vance Crutchfield, "The Doctrine of the Ages and Dispensations as Found in the Published Writings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)," (Ph.d diss., Drew University, 1985). Floyd Saunders Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby," (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary), 1991; Larry Edward Dixon, "The Pneumatology of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)," (Ph.d. diss., Drew University), 1985.

¹² Dixon, 4.

the instructors at Trinity College in particular were a likely influence on Darby's insipient thinking on the two peoples of God, which would eventuate into full-blown dispensationalism.¹³

Darby's formal education was completed with his admission to the bar in Dublin in 1822. Through this classics and legal training Darby had been cultivated as a critical thinker, and his lifetime of written argumentation would show how effective such training can be with the right pupil. Among Darby's life accomplishments are translations of the Old and New Testaments from their original languages into English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.¹⁴ In 1825, at the conclusion of a seven-year struggle with religious doubt and before really getting under way in his professional life, Darby renounced his promising career as a barrister to pursue Christian vocational ministry. As his brother-in-law, Sarjeant Pennefather, was the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland, Darby's family was shaken by his decision. His father even disowned him. Apparently unfazed by this rejection Darby took Deacon's Orders in the Church of Ireland, ordained by Archbishop William McGee. He became a curate for a large parish in the Wicklow Mountains and learned itinerant ministry among the Irish country folk in this sprawling rural area. His efforts are legendary, and his success was swift, with as many as 800 Catholics a week renouncing "popery."¹⁵ Within a year Darby was ordained the priest for the Calary parish in County Wicklow, and he devoted himself to the dictates of the Irish Church.

Let me be forgiven speaking for a moment of myself, as what I say has a bearing on these points. I know the system. I knew it and walked in it years before Dr. Newman (as I learn from this book) thought on the subject; and when Dr. Pusey was not heard of. I fasted in Lent so as to be weak in body at the end of it; ate no meat on week days-nothing till evening on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, then a little bread or nothing; observed strictly the weekly fasts, too. I went to my clergyman

¹³ Elmore, 64ff.

¹⁴ Dixon, 2. The 1890 Darby translation was completed by editors who used his translations of some OT material in the French and Italian to complete part of the OT material in English.

¹⁵ Francis W. Newman, *Phases of Faith* (London: Trubner and Company, 1881), 20-21.

always if I wished to take the sacrament, that he might judge of the matter. I held apostolic succession fully, and the channels of grace to be there only. I held thus Luther and Calvin and their followers to be outside. I was not their judge, but I left them to the uncovenanted mercies of God. I searched with earnest diligence into the evidences of apostolic succession in England, and just saved their validity for myself and my conscience. The union of church and state I held to be Babylonish, that the church ought to govern itself, and that she was in bondage but was the church¹⁶

Devotee to sacramentalism or not, Darby's curacy and priesthood in the Anglican Church saw the effectiveness of a responsive devotion which would characterize him throughout his ministry. The oft-quoted remark bears repeating:

I was a lawyer; but feeling that, if the Son of God gave Himself for me I owed myself entirely to Him, and that the so-called christian [sic] world was characterized by deep ingratitude towards Him, I longed for complete devotedness to the work of the Lord; my chief thought was to get round amongst the poor Catholics of Ireland.¹⁷

This devoted vocational ministry grew out of the conclusion of Darby's seven-year period of darkness during which he struggled with his faith between the ages of 18 and 25. It may be that we see the devotional key to Darby's theological methodology in his personal gratitude for the work of Christ which motivated him to reciprocally and completely devote himself to Christ's work. To do so Darby had to renounce his connection to social "society" and the comforts of his earthly inheritance to "get amongst the poor Catholics" for the Gospel of Christ. Of course this "devotional key" is the normative "first love" of all Christians, and so Darby would be of the mainstream of evangelicalism for this feature of his person. However, few who profess this devotional center act on it in as radical and sacrificial a manner as Darby the aristocrat. Few indeed have ever had the opportunity to forsake so much of this world for the cause of Christ.

¹⁶ *CW*, 18:221-378. This remark highlights Darby's biographical correspondence with the Reformers who themselves were Roman Catholic priests before they advocated *sola scriptura*.

¹⁷ *Letters*, 3:297.

Any criticism of Darby's career or system of theology should also account for the genuine walk he had with the Lord.

Darby's effective itinerancy of two and a half years was apparently shortened by a violent fall from his horse in 1826. The injuries sustained from this event required surgery in Dublin and a long period of convalescence, which would mark the turning point in his theological understanding and methodology. During this convalescence the young priest, still in his twenties, read his Bible and in reflection discovered the touchstone of the dispensational system, the two peoples of Christ.¹⁸ He was then a posttribulational or historicist premillennialist,¹⁹ as were many Irish Anglicans of his day, but the groundwork was laid here for his system.

While Darby has been accused of having been influenced by certain teachers and even a child of his era, his own testimony demonstrates that the key issues that distinguish dispensational eschatology from the eschatology of Reformed theology were the result of a synthetic reading of the Bible.²⁰ With a slight adjustment at the first two Powerscourt Conferences in 1831-32, Darby would abandon the day-year theory of Revelation 12 and 13 that was popular in historicism and become an adherent to the pretribulational rapture. This adjustment would eventually take the Bible-believing West by storm. The next fifty-five years would see the dissemination and evaluation of Darby's ideas beginning with the Powerscourt Conference of 1833 near Dublin, the formation and expansion of the Plymouth Brethren, an extensive traveling ministry in Europe and the United States, and the great aforementioned library of written works numbering in many thousands of pages. Once his system was

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Elmore, 74.

²⁰ Ice, Thomas, "John Nelson Darby and the Pre-Trib Rapture" accessed <http://pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-JohnNelsonDarbyandTh1.pdf>

developed, as early as 1833, Darby was amazingly consistent, holding solidly to his devotional center of gratitude to Christ, his insistence on the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures, and his interpretive motif of the doctrine of the Church.

The greater theological context of Darby's life

The theological trends of Darby's day may shed some light on his influences and his various distinctive positions. He grew up in the Church of England in the upper-class of London, tragedy coming early to him in the loss of his mother when he was child of six. Though being of Irish aristocracy he grew up in London until he was fifteen years of age and ready for Trinity College of Dublin. He therefore grew up seeing the lethargy and decadence of the Anglican Church in the early 1800s. Turner's dismal portrait of those days gives some context:

[The clergy of Darby's day] were careless of dispensing the bread of life to their flocks, preaching at best but a carnal and soul-benumbing morality, and trafficking in the souls of men by receiving money for discharging the pastoral offices in parishes where they did not so much as look on the faces of the people more than once a year' and of a typical clergyman, further remarks, "He really had no very lofty aim, no theological enthusiasm."²¹

Moving into Ireland as an adolescent, Darby was ensconced in the millenarian fervor of the Irish Anglican faculty of Trinity College. What effect his being in Ireland had on him, given the majority Roman Catholic population is unclear until he became a missionary to them. Nevertheless, the pressure that must exist in that kind of environment, illustrated later by Pusey and the Oxford movement, may well have influenced the young man to look for answers beyond tradition or even human teachers. If the Church of England's *Via Media* seemed to be the answer for England in the 17th and 18th Centuries, new pressures from the Continent in the form of the German liberalism of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and what Darby referred to as "the

²¹ Turner, 10.

German system”²² would reveal the weakness of the compromise position. Would the answers come from the Anglican Church dogma or the Spirit-given Scriptures? Darby’s seven-year crisis delivered him to a need for God’s word as a sound basis for faith and practice.

Pressures from without and clerical corruption and organizational hypocrisy within tend to bring out the reformers who have been reading their Bibles. It was in this ecclesiastical milieu that Darby matured as a leader of dissent against the status quo of his day. So radically independent of anyone but the Spirit and anything but the Bible, Darby was even a dissenter against the Dissenter denominations of his day. It can be no surprise, then, that Darby’s most distinctive views treat on ecclesiology and eschatology. For him the two categories were linked in that the Church was an eschatological people, and the distinction that must obtain between Israel and the Church has eschatological implications. A young, intelligent man trained in critical thinking and wholly-committed to the Bible as God’s authoritative self-disclosure to mankind saw a state Church incapable of carrying out the Church’s responsibility, and the problem was a failure to “rightly handle the Word of truth.”

A Brief Summary of Major Events in Darby’s Public Life

Controversy has often been the context in which theological understanding and clarification have arisen in Church history. Darby falls right in line with the theologians of church history on this score; his adult ministry was often distracted and characterized by controversy. His vocational Christian life was brought forth through the fire of the seven years of inner-struggle already mentioned above. Strife apparently never left him, though his struggle was no longer an internal crisis of conscience. He found himself at odds with almost everyone at one point or another in his life, such that even his closest friend and strongest ally, William

²² CW, 9:16.

Kelly, found himself outside Darby's graces for a time near the end of his life. Indeed one may trace Darby's public life through its sequence of public theological disputes.

Darby's first theological dispute was his taking on the local authority of the Anglican Church in Ireland in the person of Archbishop William Magee, who had ordained him. The historical circumstance was that in the midst of his successful evangelism of the Irishmen in County Wicklow, Magee issued a requirement for the newly-converted members of the Church of Ireland to swear allegiance to the King of England. Darby took great exception to this confusion of matters of eternal union with Christ and His body with temporal political allegiance. Darby's concern was first devotional, regarding the centrality of one's allegiance to Christ. Then as a consequence Darby was motivated by pastoral concerns, for how could he make disciples only of Christ if allegiance to the King was to be concomitant with faith in the Savior? During this period Darby later remarked that his conscience was bothering him about the ecclesiological disconnect he perceived between his Anglican ordination and the portrait of leadership he found in the book of *Acts*.²³

Young Father Darby wrote a career-defining letter to the Archbishop Magee entitled "Considerations Addressed to the Archbishop of Dublin and the Clergy Who Signed the Petition to the House of Commons for Protection."²⁴ This treatise outlines Darby's key emphases in biblical ecclesiology, and while the letter was private, he sent it not only to the Archbishop but his associates, "the Clergy." The Church of Ireland was apparently nonplussed by Darby's rhetorical tour de force, but in the document one sees handily Darby's emphasis on ecclesiology. This event was likely the key nexus between Darby's experience as a pastor and his principle as

²³ *Letters*, 3:301.

²⁴ *CW*, 1:1-29. This 1827 document is the first in Kelly's edited 34 volumes.

a theologian, the former motivating the investigation of the latter.²⁵ Decades later, in an editorial remark on the fateful letter we have Darby's own oft-quoted statement that his effective ministry among the Irish Catholics saw 600 to 800 converts a week. In that editorial context, Darby also points out that the Archbishop's requirement instantly halted the successful mission, and he hints, perhaps hyperbolically, that possibly all of Ireland would have been converted had MaGee not interposed with the stifling edict. Almost two hundred years of Irish history later, one cannot help but contemplate the international impact—politically, as well as theologically—of a Protestant Ireland.

Not many years of Bible reading and correlation later, Darby found himself again in a leadership capacity in the midst of controversy. English and Irish Millenarianism was on the rise in Darby's early ministry, and conferences were being held in cities throughout Great Britain, the most significant being the Albury Conference in 1826-28.²⁶ These conferences were opportunities for various theological motifs or emphases to be expressed, and the ferment of the times was the reclamation of a biblical eschatology. Perhaps the most important such conference for today's fundamentalism was the series of conferences held near Dublin by a wealthy widow, Lady Theodosia Powerscourt, beginning in Darby's thirty-second year. Within millenarianism there is a great diversity of opinions on certain features, like the timing of Christ's return or the timing of the Tribulation. The first conference apparently adjusted Darby's historicist views, and it would seem that he was pre-tribulational after the second Powerscourt Conference. Inevitably, Darby's stance took into account details from a vast array of biblical

²⁵ Elmore, 11, points out the consistency of Darby's positions over his career in ministry, making the case that these early, formative experiences are rightly contributing factors to his overall theological scheme. "Therefore, formative ideas and forces which may have influenced Darby's thinking concerning Israel and the church must be sought for quite early in his life."

²⁶ A helpful outline of this conference movement in the British Isles in the 19th Century from a critical perspective is found in Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 18-19, 34-39.

data, like Revelation, Daniel, and the rest of the Old Testament Prophets. This position, which was fairly consistent for the rest of his career eventually won out most of the theologians who came to the conference, and thus Darby and the Plymouth Brethren dominated the Irvingites. It is significant in view of the question of Darby's methodology, that by 1834 he was a solid futurist due to correlation of Daniel with Revelation.

While Darby was gaining ascendancy at Powerscourt Castle, he was also engaged in the startup of his life's work in the denomination known popularly as the Plymouth Brethren. It is often stated in this connection that Darby did not found the Plymouth Brethren. Neither did George Washington found the United States single-handedly, but he was present from its beginning as one of the founders. In truth, the analogy is inadequate because Darby was the theological anchor of the movement from its beginning to the tragic falling-out with the head of the Plymouth assembly Benjamin Wills Newton theologically as early as 1834 and formally in 1844-45 through a book-long review of Newton's *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*. For Darby, though, the Brethren movement began in the year 1828 when he and four other men assembled on Sunday, "the Lord's day" to pray and "remember Christ in communion" in Dublin.²⁷ Darby would travel throughout the British Isles, Europe, and the United States establishing assemblies like that which met in Ebrington Street in Plymouth, England. This Matthew 18 application of "two or three gathered" for prayer, communion and the reading of the Word was the ultimate dissent against both the state churches and the various Protestant and Dissenter denominations of his day. The Plymouth Brethren, it may be said, were controversial in their inception, though they did not desire conflict with those outside their denomination.²⁸

²⁷ *Letters*, 3:301

²⁸ *CW*, 31:372, "Correspondence on Recent Matters." In 1875 Darby instructed a brethren congregation on their necessary conduct regarding those outside of "Brethrenism" by saying, "[The Brethren's] place is to remain in obscurity and devotedness, not to think of Brethren (it is always wrong to think of ourselves),

Within the fledgling movement Darby's particular views about independence of the individual assembly and the "presidency" of the Holy Spirit over the various congregations were generally welcomed. He went farther, though, in his polity within the local assembly than many would embrace. For Darby, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit in the Church Age was the sin of "clericalism" or ordaining men for special service as elders or "presidents" with particular authority over the assembly.²⁹ One may certainly relate this stance to the problems of abuse Darby witnessed in the Anglican Church, and it proved to be one of the most important issues to Darby's practical ecclesiology. This central issue for his praxis was apparently a problem for a number of those who otherwise subscribed to his system, for it was on the question of having a leader in the Plymouth assembly whose responsibility it was to teach and lead that church that caused Darby's separation from them in 1845. This tragic break with the assembly which had become the home for many of Darby's insights was only worsened by the fact that B.W. Newton, the man to whom the congregation there subscribed as a legitimate teacher and leader, committed theological suicide by advocating a heterodox view of the Person of Christ not long after the falling-out with Darby.

Like other aspects of Darby's public life, his various controversies are well-documented in his own writings and those of his contemporaries. Darby wrote a book in response to Newton's *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*, and the clarification of the futurist position of Revelation in Darby's response shows the great value of controversy for theological clarification. In another case, a disciple of Darby's is worthy of note on the topic of public controversy because the interaction between the two sheds a great deal of light on Darby's theological thinking. Francis William Newman wrote a book, *Phases of Faith*, published in 1851 in which

but of souls, in Christ's name and love, and of His glory and truth only, not to press Brethrenism, but to deal with each soul according to its need for Christ's sake."

²⁹ CW, 1:54-77 "The Notion of a Clergyman Dispensationally the Sin Against the Holy Spirit"

he rejected most of what Darby had taught him. It told Newman's odyssey from instruction in the Bible to rejection of the Bible in 212 pages. Darby's book in response briefly treated of the errors he perceived in Newman's thinking point-by-point. *The Irrationality of Infidelity*, published in 1852 was 384 pages. This behavior was apparently characteristic of Darby's public ministry. He did not shy away from controversy but sought to provide an answer when he thought the Scriptures were misread.

While Darby attacked the erroneous teachings or pronouncements of leaders or scholars, like the Bishop of Dublin, Newton, or Newman, W.G. Turner points out how Darby was well-known to be patient with common folk as he explained theology to them.³⁰ He took great pains to repeat the concepts and was a very gentle shepherd with those he considered sheep. Those who had arisen as wolves received rocks from his sling. One can only assume after reading him extensively that his efforts at communication with the sheep differed in their simplicity from his written statements.

Paul R. Wilkinson has concluded that Darby's public reputation for being a controversialist has been mischaracterized by his theological opponents.³¹ Darby was, at least doctrinally, committed to the concept of the unity of the Body of Christ. Indeed, it was one of the key theological themes that motivated his writing and interaction, with the Church likely being Darby's "central interpretive motif." According to Wilkinson, Darby's commitment to unity was required by his prior commitment to fidelity to the God of the Bible. A brief catalog of his disputations will demonstrate at least as much argumentation for the fundamental doctrines

³⁰ Turner, Accessed at <http://bibletruthpublishers.com/in-labors-abundant-chapter-3/w-g-turner/john-nelson-darby/w-g-turner/1a90180>. Turner reports: "Mr. Darby, however, had the greatest patience with the poor, unlettered, simple believers, and at Bible Readings was frequently known to help an uneducated brother out with his questions, and to go patiently over the same ground again and again until the difficulty was cleared up. Occasionally, but rarely, his stock of patience ran out with those of another class whom he thought were inclined to temporize with the truth under consideration."

³¹ Paul R. Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby*, (Paternoster: Milton Keynes, 2007), 86-91.

of the historic Christian faith, like the Deity of Christ or the Trinity as for a futurist interpretation of the book of *Revelation*.

Major Theological Emphases of Darby’s Public Ministry

Ecclesiology and eschatology intertwined biblically and in Darby’s thinking occupied the most significant aspects of his categorical development. This is in part, according to Darby himself, because the Reformation did not deal with either topic at the same level of development as soteriology.³² This connection to the reformation is important because Darby held unflinchingly to the Calvinistic “doctrines of Grace” so ardently that he divided from Dwight L. Moody over that topic.³³ While he held to the Dortian reasoning and found himself arguing for the Deity of Christ and the penal substitution view of the Atonement, Darby was most effective and characterized by his universal church ecclesiology and his distinct view of a Jewish Kingdom of Christ over all the earth that was still future and not related primarily to the heaven-oriented Church.

Perhaps because of the times in which he lived, and perhaps because of the particular factors of his individual journey, Darby was a thoroughgoing reformer. In the issue of balance between “conservative” and “liberal” often the idea of the status quo is considered the conservative view, while the liberal is the person looking to make changes to that status quo. In that discussion there is rarely the idea of improvement against an absolute—even divine—standard. Both sides think they have improvement in mind because they assess either the status quo or their “progressive” improvement of it to be more desirable. Enter the reformer.

³² *CW*, 14:138-52.

³³ Turner, accessed <http://bibletruthpublishers.com/in-labors-abundant-chapter-3/w-g-turner/john-nelson-darby/w-g-turner/la90180>.

The reformer looks at the status quo and says that it is far from the divine standard. Change means moving along the line of conservative thought beyond the status quo on which even the conservatives are insisting. Darby did not want to undo the legitimate expressions of Christian fellowship in the state churches; he wanted them all to adjust to the biblical pattern for visible assembly as he understood it. This view made him a radical. Darby advocated something that had not been experienced in most of Christendom in two thousand years, if ever. His new idea of the universal church faithful to the text of Scripture and disconnected from the structures of the world, with the Holy Spirit as “president” over the local assemblies of this universal body was partly a reaction to his times of Anglican decay and German pressure to liberalize. But it was also something more. Darby got to this lifetime emphasis for which he traveled so extensively by reading his Bible, and from it he discerned an internal system of theology that we call dispensationalism today.

A Summary of Darby’s System

Darby’s innovations did not affect the basic frame of the historic Christian faith regarding theology proper or soteriology. Darby argued for orthodox Trinitarianism and the hypostatic union, but he did not develop anything distinctive in these areas. It is important to note that in soteriology John Nelson Darby did not deviate from the Calvinistic “doctrines of grace,” but he did not address them in detail either, with the exception of total depravity. Specifically, Darby totally rejected the concept of a post-Genesis 3 free-will that could choose God, and while he did not use the phrase “total depravity” in his writings³⁴ he considered the

³⁴ *Letters*, 1:315. The concept of total depravity is developed in this letter, but he does not use the phrase. In some editions of the Letters, editorial headings have been supplied, and only here do we find the term “total depravity” in his writings. “This fresh breaking out of the doctrine of freewill ministers to the pretension of the natural man not to be entirely lost, for that is just what it amounts to. All who have ever been deeply convicted of sin, all those with whom this conviction is based on gross and outwards ins, believe more or less in free-will. You know that it is the dogma of the Wesleyans, of all reasoners, of all philosophers; but it completely changes the whole idea of Christianity, and entirely perverts it.”

concept one of the unifying features of the whole dispensational scheme.³⁵ His unification of the entire Bible by showing the distinctions across the ages and especially the distinction between Israel and the Church did not contradict Reformed soteriology, in the main. It is true, however, that Darby did not like the term “Calvinism,” but he used the phrase “sovereign grace” hundreds of times in his writings. Nevertheless, Darby seemingly plugged the orthodox theological and Reformed soteriological rationales into his overall understanding of the two features in his biblical system: the eternal or *heavenly* counsels of God and the government of God through successive stages of *earthly* history. The latter reveals the former, according to Elmore’s synthesis.³⁶ The key to Darby’s system is not how one counts the dispensations but the uniqueness of the Church and its unrelatedness to the prophetic flow of human history.

In what must be an oversimplification for purposes of space in this current writing, Darby’s distinctive system may be seen as the relationship of three key actors in God’s overall program of bringing about His glory progressively through history and with a focus on the Millennium and Eternal State. The first actor is of course God Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ, the last Adam and the Melchizadechian king-priest. As “possessor of heaven and earth” Jesus stands within human history as its focus, and the two main categories of human beings who

³⁵ CW, 1:124ff “The Apostasy of the Successive Dispensations.” This tract from 1836 may be Darby’s earliest articulation of the dispensational scheme of successive ages. “The detail of the history connected with these dispensations brings out many most interesting displays, both of the principles and patience of God’s dealings with the evil and failure of man; and of the workings by which He formed faith on His own thus developed perfections. But the dispensations themselves all declare some leading principle or interference of God, some condition in which He has placed man, principles which in themselves are everlastingly sanctioned of God, but in the course of those dispensations placed responsibly in the hands of man for the display and discovery of what he was, and the bringing in their infallible establishment in Him to whom the glory of them all rightly belonged. It is not my intention to enter into any great detail, but to show simply how, in every instance, there was total and immediate failure as regarded man, however the patience of God might tolerate and carry on by grace the dispensation in which man has thus failed in the outset; and further, that there is no instance of the restoration of a dispensation afforded us, though there might be partial revivals of it through faith.”

³⁶ Elmore, 200. “Darby’s hermeneutical methodology begins with the face-value, literal, grammatical-historical approach to the meaning of the text. By going beyond this with symbols, types, and analogies, however, Darby sought to harmonize the diversity of God’s historical ways with the unity of His eternal counsels.”

can rightly claim to be distinct “peoples of God” have Him as their head and heart’s desire. The second actor is one of those distinct peoples, Israel. Without specifying too closely how Darby would define Israel in past history, besides the national and genetic offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the destiny of Israel has especial eschatological significance. The Remnant of Israel will receive the promises of God to Israel, and these are seen as earthly. All the promises of prophecy still await ultimate fulfillment, with King Jesus ruling on earth in a future Jewish Kingdom of God over all the nations. This Kingdom rule will be on earth in human history.

The third major actor in Darby’s scheme was the motivation for his theologizing and the central interpretive motif that unlocks all his writings. It is of course the Church, the Bride and Body of Christ. This people is unrelated to the Old Testament prophetic expectations of Israel and is a heavenly people with Jesus as its head. Eschatologically, while the mortal Remnant of Israel in the future will enjoy the blessings of the Millennial Kingdom in perfect environment on earth, the Church will rule with Jesus in a resurrected state. Elmore discusses the question of the difference between geographical locations of Israel and the Church in the Millennium and concludes that for Darby this is a secondary concern.³⁷

In addition to the primary parties active in Darby’s system of biblical integration, he identifies the progressive development of God’s self-disclosure through the historical epochs or dispensations—stewardships during discrete periods of time—noting that the Church did not exist during the Age of Israel, and that for the current era Israel has been temporarily set aside. In addition Darby observed and emphasized the distinction of responsibilities in the different stewardships. A major concern for Darby regarding God’s eternal counsels presented through the successive ages or dispensations is the failure of the human race at the conclusion of each

³⁷ Ibid, 203.

age, a consequence of man's depravity. Israel, the Church, and the Millennium all end in failure on man's part despite God's perfect execution of His responsibilities.

That feature most commonly referred to as Darby's distinctive doctrine is a Church-specific phenomenon, the pre-tribulation rapture. This doctrine, which of Darby's entire system has probably gained the most popular assent, is actually a needed puzzle piece that explains the transition from the parenthetical age of the Church to the promised Millennial reign of Christ over a mortal remnant of Israel. Theological reasoning may well have resulted in Darby's conjecture of the pre-tribulation rapture, but it is evidently the consequence of a plain-sense reading of the Text to which Darby constantly submitted himself. That most distinctive Darbyite doctrine by no means characterizes the system or the man in any comprehensive way.

Having introduced the written material, the life and times of J. N. Darby, and a summary of his distinctive system of theology, an analysis of his method requires some technical definition and an acknowledgment of evangelical norms regarding authority. While the tasks involved in doing systematic theology are dynamic and at times overlapping, they may be observed in an isolated way to further our understanding of a theologian's methodology.

A Needed Rubric for Evaluating Theological Methodology

Without a set of instruments with which to measure any aspect of the physical world it is difficult to recognize patterns or to evaluate systemic consistency with any precision. The more precise and technical our instrumentation, the more certain we can be about what we measure. Therefore, it is proposed that in the theological realm of investigation we need some well-defined "tools" that can be used to help "measure" the decisions and rationalizations that produce a theologian's system. The tool proposed here is Michael Stallard's hierarchical array

of the tasks of systematic theology.³⁸ The tasks themselves must be defined for the purposes of this argument, and their arrangement must be seen to follow naturally from a very few theological presuppositions about the nature of the Bible and reality. The presuppositions are what makes this rubric or hierarchical array of tasks evangelical, for the primary assumption is that the Text of Scripture is inspired and therefore authoritative. The tasks will be defined below as the rubric is described.

Any two-dimensional diagram will be insufficient to thoroughly describe all the dynamic interactions between the tasks that comprise the endeavor of systematic theology, but in this case, an archery target of ever-widening concentric circles will illustrate the two key features to this rubric of tasks: hierarchical authority and logical sequence deriving from that authority. In the center of the concentric circles is of course the most important and most authoritative of the theologian's tasks, and that is exegesis of the Bible. For the purposes of this investigation *exegesis* will be simply and somewhat etymologically defined as the practice of "leading out" the meaning of a biblical passage by employing the principles of hermeneutics in order to understand the passage's meaning. Exegesis of a passage produces certain conclusions that can be categorized and integrated with the rest of the Bible and all of reality. *Hermeneutics* will be defined as the principles that govern the interpretation of a passage. The validity of one's exegesis and hence his doctrinal categorization may depend most importantly on his hermeneutics. The inherent evangelical presuppositions for the level of exegesis is the perspicuity of Scripture. It is here assumed that as a divine work of self-disclosure to mankind, God intends for the Bible to be understood and therefore interpretable.

Armed with the exegetical conclusions of the given passage it is possible to start the categorization of various doctrines at a local level. On the archery target this is the ring right

³⁸ Michael Stallard, "Some Notes on the Definition of Systematic Theology," unpublished course notes for *TH1: Advanced Theological Method* at Baptist Bible Seminary, Fall, 2013.

outside the bull's eye. This local categorization, restricted for this discussion to a single author or time period, is commonly called *biblical theology*. At this level, the interpreter is integrating the raw products of exegesis with the other exegetical conclusions from the same author or historical setting to gain a rudimentary idea of categories that the writer informs. The assumption at this level of the rubric is that of consistency of theology within the biblical author's writing or time period. Again, this assumption flows from the presuppositions of inspiration of the Bible and the veracious nature of God. This level, as a primary level of integration, serves as a contextual control on the exercise of integration across the whole Bible, which is the next task in theology.³⁹

Radiating out from the tasks of exegesis and biblical theology is that task of integrating concepts across the entirety of Scripture. This level, which correlates all the Bible's statements to one another, will be called *biblical integration*. This concept has been called systematic theology, and indeed it is articulation of the biblical system. The vast divergence one sees in theological systems is most evident at this task of systematic theology, but the rubric proposed argues for causation at a prior level, i.e. hermeneutics, exegesis, or biblical theology. For the purposes of this discussion *systematic theology* will encompass more than the biblical "system" of correlations that produce biblical categories. Once the theologian has an idea of how the Bible's passages interact topically at the level of biblical integration, it is necessary to form biblical categories. This task may be called *biblical categorization*. It is possible to see a great overlap between this step and the prior one; however the distinction is necessary because of authority. For an theologian who considers the Bible to be inspired, the correlation of the inspired passages is one step higher in authority than the reasoned categories developed from that correlation process.

³⁹ In Stallard's parlance, "level one" in doing theology is "biblical theology." This encompasses exegesis according to one's hermeneutics and the local analysis of an author or time period on the given topic.

So far the proposed rubric has developed a biblical perspective from exegesis to integration to categorization. In his theological writings, Darby wrote a great deal about his insights regarding these specific tasks of theology. Nevertheless, he also interacted a great deal with extra-biblical sources. This task, *extra-biblical validation*, takes into account inputs from sources outside the Bible and filters them through the doctrinal system of biblical categories at all levels, from exegesis to categorization. These inputs might include the insights of historical theology, philosophy, the sciences, or counter-claims from other theologians. As a man whose life was characterized by controversy, Darby's biblical understanding enabled him to interact with extra-biblical counter-claims, and many of his most helpful writings are answers to those claims. Allowing the reasoned grid of biblically-integrated categories to interact with extra-biblical material may be distinguished but slightly from application. *Application*, the final task of systematic theology, is distinct from extra-biblical validation in that the "system" or worldview composed of biblical- and extra-biblical integration is not impacted by outside questions upon which application is performed. Whereas extra-biblical integration will allow for general revelation to impact and adjust certain features of the biblically-integrated scheme, application holds the system as a control and the question under investigation as variable. Application must not change theology, all of reality will be addressed by it.

For the purposes of this introductory analysis of Darby's theology it has been necessary to state these glosses for the theological tasks. To make an evangelical appraisal of Darby's theology, it has been necessary to rank the tasks in order of decreasing authority. The farther one moves in these tasks from the inspired text, the less will be the authority or perhaps even "theological certainty" of the conclusions derived from them. The more biblical is one's "system" of biblically-integrated categories the greater his systematic approach to these tasks will at least recognize this rank-ordered structure. That is to say that this sequence or rank-ordering of theological tasks is not necessarily the sequence of the theologian's reasoning

processes but that the task of validation of a doctrine should recognize this sequence. Before one can begin a synthetic understanding of the theologian's execution of these tasks, one must examine the underlying philosophical framework which will have the greatest impact on his overall synthesis, namely hermeneutics.

Darby's Hermeneutical Approach

Today dispensationalists are very precise in their definition of "literal" hermeneutics by glossing literal as "historical-grammatical." This means that, contrary to the mythological theories of the Bible's narratives, they take historical prose to be a divinely-inspired record of actual events. They take Old Testament prophecy to be a historical record of an actual revelation from God—the record itself being special revelation—with the expectation of literal fulfillment of predictive features of said prophecy. In contradistinction to historical criticism, this system of literal interpretation views historical details as historical facts. Furthermore, dispensationalists look for an author's intended meaning in the grammatical statements they make in their writings. The only meaning in the text is that intended by the author, and the only way one can know that meaning is to look at what he said and how he said it.

This approach has also been "plain-sense" interpretation, and perhaps the best statement to summarize this approach has been given by David L. Cooper's so-called "Golden Rule of Interpretation: "If the plain sense makes common sense seek no other sense."⁴⁰ This plain sense requires a consistency of an individual interpretation with the overall context of the literary work in view. This "literal" sense of the Text as the Holy Spirit inspired it was Darby's primary assumption, especially when it came to Old Testament predictive prophecy. In exposition and integration he went beyond the contextual meaning of a passage especially in his

⁴⁰ From David L. Cooper's articles in *Biblical Research Monthly*, 1947, 1949, accessed at <http://www.biblicalresearch.info/page47.html> 11/20/2013.

use of Old Testament typology, but he always did so while assuming the historical-grammatical meaning of the text that the author had intended.

It is perhaps Darby's radical insistence on the text's inspiration and man's responsibility to receive it as the author/Author has stated it that has made him so impactful for the fundamentalist movement which would define the conservative-liberal divide in 20th Century North America.⁴¹ While all his interpretations and correlations were not accepted in all quarters, his prior commitment to the literal meaning of a passage regardless of where the interpretation might lead in theological correlation aligned with the hearts of those who wanted to submit to God as He stated the case in the Bible. As has been shown in his biographical sketch, Darby went through that process first, moving from Irish Anglican historicist premillennialism to his own system of futurist, premillennial dispensationalism.

Darby's Direct Statements about Hermeneutics

In his *Collected Writings and Letters*, Darby never used the word *hermeneutics*. Nevertheless he did provide a number of remarks about his approach to interpretation. Regarding biblical prophecy he remarked thus:

In order to understand any prophecy, it is of the utmost importance that we should study it with a disposition to believe, joined with a strict trial of the evidence in favor of any given meaning. That is to say, we should be ready, on sufficient testimony, to accommodate our understandings and perceptions to ideas not analogous to those of our ordinary experience...assumption without evidence is the opening an admission to falsehood.⁴²

⁴¹ Sandeen, 61.

⁴² *CW*, 2:32: "On Days Signifying Years in Prophetic Language." It is important to note that this was written in 1830, while Darby was still a historicist. So much of his ideas were in place, but some key details were still wanting.

Here two principles stand out, even if the article in which they were written espoused what Darby would later denounce as the historicist error of reading the 1260 days of Revelation 11 and 12 as years. First is the essentiality of faith for “understanding.” Although Darby does not say “interpretation,” it is doubtless what he means. This insight is the key to studying Darby’s hermeneutics. He described what we today think of as the task of interpretation as the believer’s understanding the divine message. This inherent understanding defines modern “literal” hermeneutics, today articulated as the interpreter’s goal of determining the author’s intended meaning. The second principle, which is a critical control on the first, is for validation of one’s interpretation. This duality characterizes the heart of Darby’s interpretive approach, and dispensationalists have been refining an articulation of this hermeneutics which Darby plied without necessarily defining it explicitly.⁴³ Interestingly, his method was in place long before his system, for the former produced the latter.

Probably the best place to read Darby’s own thoughts about his approach to special revelation is in a protracted dialog between “H” and “W” about the writings of Benjamin Jowett. “H” must certainly refer to Darby. “Inspiration and Interpretation”⁴⁴ is a polemic defense of the supernatural in Scripture. Darby’s main issue with Jowett’s approach is not mere anti-supernaturalism but an anti-supernaturalist view of understanding holy writ:

The mere literal facts, read as any other history, cannot bring the mind at all into the apprehension of what is here spoken of. If I take the commonest words-as Son, the Son of God, the Son of the Father-a mere literal apprehension affords me nothing, or error; or the Word made flesh. I shall be told, these are mysteries; but the language is simple, and what I am chewing is that, with the simplest language, there must be divine

⁴³ See Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990). This monograph is an argument for literal interpretation as the determination of an author’s intended meaning and a demonstration of the need for validation of one’s interpretations.

⁴⁴ *CW*, 9: 223-359.

apprehensions in the soul to understand scripture; and that understanding it as Thucydides or Sophocles is just simple nonsense.⁴⁵

Notice that Darby's pneumatology and bibliology are showing here as presuppositions to the task of biblical interpretation. This tendency is similar to the approach of modern dispensationalist interpretation, as in Zuck's two axioms for the approach to the Bible. Zuck suggests that the only presuppositions a faithful student of the text brings to its inductive study are that the Bible is a book (bibliology) and that it is inspired (pneumatology).⁴⁶ Darby's presuppositions go beyond these two, however, in that he is discussing perspicacity or even epistemology, which are more about anthropology than bibliology. Objectively looking at the text as Spirit-breathed to interpret it according to authorial intent is different from the subjective work of the Spirit in the reader illuminating his heart to the meaning of the material. It seems that illumination may well be Darby's first principle of interpretation.

A Summary of Darby's Hermeneutics

On the outset, before demonstrating Darby's literal hermeneutical approach it should be noted that Darby did not write with the contemporary question Dispensationalists like to ask, vis, "What does the author mean by what he is saying?" Darby assumed a plain-sense of what authors wrote, and unless there was some ambiguity or exegetical problem he would not really argue for the plain sense of most passages because the plain-sense was self-evident to him. Accordingly when he treats an Old Testament narrative section in his exposition, it is difficult for the reader at times to distinguish between what today we would say was an interpretation, what part was the result of integration, and what part was an application. These features, which we are seeking to parse, are all presented matter-of-factly in Darby's expositions. The difficulty of

⁴⁵ Ibid, 244-245.

⁴⁶ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books), 61-76.

getting at the constituent features of Darby's method is no doubt a matter of the difference between Darby's presentation method and his actual theological method.

At least four key principles of interpretation describe Darby's overall approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures as a consequence of the bibliological commitments mentioned above: 1) Literal interpretation of the Bible; 2) literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy; 3) non-contradiction of all of Scripture; and 4) the typological meaning of the Old Testament narratives and poetry in light of New Testament revelation. First it must be said that he considered all the Scriptures to have at least a literal meaning. He followed the Reformers in this perspective regarding the New Testament, and he agreed with their fruit of this hermeneutical approach in soteriology. Secondly, on the other hand, he differed with the Augustinian Reformers when it came to the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy because he interpreted these literally also. This insistence yields special emphasis to Darby's theological distinctives and explains, at the hermeneutical level, why dispensationalism is so compelling. This move was the movement-maker: Darby insisted on a literal, historical fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, though his primary theological interest was the Church, as will be shown. The third principle one may distill from Darby's discussions is developed thus: inspiration of the Scriptures implies authority, of course, but it also implies unity and non-contradiction. There is no reasoning theologically if God is self-contradictory. At the fourth point it is difficult to see Darby distinguish between interpretation and correlation or integration across the Bible when it came to Old Testament narrative. Darby's typological interpretation will be addressed below under integration.

Elmore has helpfully isolated the features of Darby's "hermeneutical methodology" into three key categories: foundational, diversifying, and typological factors.⁴⁷ Under the

⁴⁷ Elmore, 124-200.

concept of foundational factors he demonstrates Darby's insistence that Biblical *understanding* requires the reader's regeneration and his consistent post-conversion encounter with the Spirit's illumination.⁴⁸ Literal interpretation is the other element in "foundational factors," and Darby is seen to qualify "literal" with a sophisticated nuance which requires adherence to the controls of the language of Scripture as well as an emphasis on the plain-sense of that language.⁴⁹ The tendency to emphasize the subjective leading of the Spirit in illumination was tempered by the objective data in the Bible as presented through their various literary forms.

Elmore categorizes as Darby's hermeneutical diversifying factors the purpose of a book, the historical progress of revelation, the perspective of Biblical theology, the government of God, and the dispensational importance of "right bearing".⁵⁰ Most of these features would fall, for this discussion, under the various post-hermeneutic tasks of systematic theology, like biblical theology, biblical integration, and biblical categorization. These are included as parts of Darby's hermeneutics because they seem to provide the contextual bases for his local interpretations at times. This follows from Darby's tendency to exposit large concepts using local texts because his primary goal was usually not the exposition of the passage at hand but the doctrine with which its contents could be correlated. This fact, which recognizes the ever-expanding circles of context, does not invalidate Darby's interpretive toolset but shows the dynamic interaction between the levels of the theological tasks. Where Darby brought a feature of categorization or biblical integration into a local passage to understand it, he thought he was

⁴⁸ Ibid. 126

⁴⁹ Ibid. 129. "In his early writings from 1829 and 1830, Darby came as close as he ever would to delineating hermeneutical principles. These suggest that literal interpretation was necessary if the mind of the interpreter was to perceive God's original meaning in the words and not import a meaning derived from his own imaginations."

⁵⁰ Ibid, 141-163. Hermeneutically all of these elements fall under the category of context.

unlocking or expressing the Spirit's intended meaning of that passage as it relates to the whole. The way Elmore has framed the discussion of "hermeneutical methodology" also demonstrates the need for further detailed analysis which this present writing attempts to supply. Many of the items Elmore lists under Darby's hermeneutics could helpfully be considered items of Darby's biblical theology, biblical integration, or biblical categorization.

Darby's Expositions Reveal Literal Interpretation

There are several points at which one might examine Darby's consistent use of literal hermeneutics. At first glance it seems he was a Bible expositor more than a systematic theologian, since his greatest work is his *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, but that work is really an argument for his understanding of the Bible's system of theology. The examination of Old Testament and New Testament narrative is helpful for showcasing consistent literal approach to interpretation but also a difference in emphasis in his overall scheme. The difference can be shown by contrasting Darby's treatment of Genesis and John in his expositional writings. The former, Old Testament historical narrative, is highly typological, and Darby does not spend much time developing the literal sense of the text. He simply assumes the literal sense and uses it for the purpose of typological integration with the doctrines of the New Testament. In his treatment of John, however, he seems to be less theological and more exegetical. This tendency demonstrates Darby's priority and highlights one of the most important integrative features in his overall understanding of the Bible: progressive revelation. The purpose of this investigation, though, is to show how literal interpretation is the foundation upon which the entire superstructure is erected.

In the investigation of one's hermeneutics, it is often helpful to examine those places which come under the greatest assault by those who reject the inspiration or literal interpretation of the Bible. By looking to Darby's treatment of Old Testament historical narrative in Genesis,

we can assess his hermeneutics and his priority for special revelation over extra-biblical sources for integration.

Darby's literal interpretation of Genesis: Creation and Flood

Darby thought the events described in Genesis were historic facts. Today this is a very significant issue because even some who claim to hold to inerrancy of the text or the need to read it on its own terms will deny the historicity of Genesis or Mosaic Authorship. Darby would say we have been laid hold of by the "German school."

In his exposition of Genesis 1-2 in the *Synopsis* Darby assumes a literal creation.⁵¹ Elsewhere in remarking on Genesis he tangentially mentions the "gap" theory but within a frame of literally dealing with the words of Genesis 1 and not historical geology.⁵² His focus in the exposition, however, is not the creation of the material universe but of man, and so Darby teaches Christology and human responsibility to God in his "exposition" of Genesis 1. Regarding the universal Genesis flood, Darby simply states, "The flood is brought upon the world of the ungodly."⁵³ His theological presentation focuses on the major themes of doctrine, like judgment and redemption. He therefore says very little about the geological facts of the flood and presents his understanding of the anthropological and theological message underlying the event. Thus while presupposing a literal Genesis 1-11, his literal hermeneutic enabled Darby to present his integrative conclusions about the framework of whole-Bible revelation for the presentation of categorical or dispensational truth.

⁵¹ *Synopsis*, 1:7-12.

⁵² *CW*, 19:55-56, "Hints on the Book of Genesis." This pamphlet, published in 1873 as the "Remarks at a Scripture Reading" demonstrates Darby's assumptions of historicity and pedagogical view of history. It presents in some exegetical detail Darby's thinking of the meaning of the Text, though he cannot help but develop the theology via typological integration through his exposition. The *Synopsis* treatment of Genesis is not as exegetically detailed while heavily emphasizing the typological teaching of the Spirit regarding things we see clearly in the New Testament. For Darby to have his types he must have a literal Genesis.

⁵³ *Synopsis*, 1:13.

Typology and hermeneutics: A Kind of Double “Meaning” Based on Literal Meaning

To do the kind of typological interpretive integration which Darby dogmatically stated without much validation he had to assume a historical-grammatical meaning of the text of Genesis itself. He did not think the historic features to be the central message of the narratives; getting at that message required Spirit-directed typological understanding. The two seemingly disconnected ideas—literal history and typological significance—are united by Darby’s view of history. He thought the historical events themselves were directed by God’s providence for pedagogical purposes. It is not just that the Adam and Abraham narratives in the book are types; the historic figures themselves are types to which the Spirit refers in the Bible for the purpose of teaching the doctrine in view. Thus understanding Genesis can be accomplished within the Genesis narrative itself, but a dispensational understanding of God’s purposes in history from Genesis requires the progress of revelation.

Darby’s treatment of the Old Testament narratives can therefore be considered a kind of double-meaning of the text, but only by holding to the historical, grammatical sense of a given passage at the level of the text. This is in contrast to modern tendencies to reject historicity in favor of allegorized or spiritual meaning in the Genesis narratives. We may carefully consider and sometimes question his “interpreting” types (an exercise that tends to blend interpretation and integration), but then we may also ask what is to be done with all the symbolism and figures after the narrative sections in Exodus 25-40 or the system presented in Leviticus? If Jesus is the veil of the Tabernacle (Hebrews 10:20) and the Lamb of God (John 1:29) as our ultimate Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7), then can we not discuss the typological Christology of the Mosaic cult as the prophetic *meaning* instilled by the divine Author beforehand? The answer, of course, is yes, but only by starting with the New Testament. The question comes down to an implicit bibliological conviction that Darby carried with him to every passage: the Spirit is teaching doctrine through history. Notice the helpful summing up of Bible themes in Genesis:

But whether it be the creation, man and his fall, sin, the power of Satan, the promises, the call of God, His judgment of the world, redemption, the covenants, the separation of the people of God, their condition of strangers on the earth, the resurrection, the establishment of Israel in the land of Canaan, the blessing of the nations, the seed of promise, the exaltation of a rejected Lord to the throne of the world, all are found here in fact or in figure—in figure, now that we have the key, even the Church itself.⁵⁴

In defense of Darby’s literalism, nothing that he read with a dispensational-typological interpretation could stand or make sense if he had not considered the Text to be historically accurate. He just thought that the Holy Spirit was teaching lessons with history for Church Age believers to learn by reading the Old Testament. Elmore concludes that typology should be considered part of Darby’s hermeneutics.⁵⁵ Typology will be discussed under biblical integration because it was the way Darby connected the Scriptures together.

When it comes to prophetic statements in the Old Testament Scripture, however Darby takes these at face value. When dealing in 2 Samuel 7 with God’s promises to David regarding the future blessing to Israel through the eternal dynasty of David, Darby just assumes the straightforward meaning of David as genetic ancestor to Messiah who will rule forever.⁵⁶ Interestingly, Darby’s interest in this portion of the Text is more the typology of David than the literal fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, but he shows how the two concepts converge in this passage. It may be that the most important aspect of Darby’s literal hermeneutic is what separates his dispensational scheme from Reformed theology regarding eschatology: he took Old Testament statements to be true in their original sense. This watershed interpretive decision meant a future Jewish Kingdom for the “earthly people,” consistent with some aspects of the

⁵⁴ *Synopsis* 1:7.

⁵⁵ Elmore, 200. About Darby’s typological integration he says “The interpreter who is led by the Spirit and takes heed to the paradigms built by God into the biblical text can know much more through God’s revelation than he would by just adhering to the ‘letter’ of the grammatical-historical meaning.”

⁵⁶ *Synopsis* 1:361.

historicist premillennialism from which Darby came. While this was the general consensus of the millenarians of Darby's day, whether they be historicist or futurist, according to Sandeen,⁵⁷ Darby's dispensationalism would be a consistent biblical system with a focus on the Church as his interpretive motif.

Darby's New Testament Exposition: John

Taking the Upper Room Discourse⁵⁸ as a sample of Darby's New Testament exposition in the *Synopsis*, reveals a different tone. The exposition slows down a great deal, for this is Church truth about what would happen after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. One gets the sense that this is the primary source material, and the Old Testament narrative information was an amelioration of it. Whereas Darby brings out future implications of the Old Testament stories in his treatment of Genesis, here he remarks about each statement and its implications. It reads as more of a collection of theological implications of the passage at hand, and as in the theology-by-type exposition in the Old Testament commentary, the exposition here assumes literal interpretation.

John 13:5-17 provides an example of this straightforward theological exposition. Of course the *Synopsis* is written as a summary, and so there are no grammatical details in Darby's treatment of the passage. Since the reader of the *Synopsis* is supposed to read the Bible passage first⁵⁹ and then move to Darby's commentary, he applies the teaching directly to "us":

They were all supping together here at the same table. But He quits this position, as He did His personal association with His disciples by ascending to

⁵⁷ Sandeen, 34. Cited in Crutchfield, 247.

⁵⁸ *Synopsis*, 3:356-397.

⁵⁹ *Synopsis* 1:v.

heaven, by going to God. But, if He does, He still girds Himself for their service, and takes water to wash their feet. Although in heaven, He is still serving us. The effect of this service is, that the Holy Ghost takes away practically by the word all the defilement that we gather in walking through this world of sin.⁶⁰

Darby moves from application back to exposition and even exegesis by drawing the comparison between the Levitical priesthood's ritual purification requirements and the believer in the Church age and by pointing out and explaining the difference between the two words for washing in the passage. His presentation is a blend between explanation of the passage in a very broad brush exegesis and application of the passage to the believer's experience today. All this presupposes face-value literal interpretation.

Darby's Integrative Motif: The Church as Distinct from Israel

Millard Erickson coined the term "central interpretive motif" for the theme or categorical matter which unites a theologian's system into an actual system.⁶¹ By Erickson's definition the central interpretive motif must be sufficiently broad to encompass the entire breadth of the theology. It must not merely be present throughout the system but must unite the system. This writer proposes a needed emendation Erickson's helpful terminology, but only a slight one. Given the specificity of categorization of theological tasks within this framework, would it not be better to describe the unifying theme of a systematic theology the central *integrative* motif? In attempting to distinguish *interpretation* or hermeneutics from *integration* or what happens whenever we move from an interpretation in a given passage to relate that interpretation to something else, it seems that the motif that unifies is an instrument of integration and not interpretation. Interpretation of an individual passage produces an understanding of authorial meaning. This meaning is taken from its passage to compare with the

⁶⁰ Ibid, 3:356-357

⁶¹ Millard C. Erickson, *Christian Theology* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 77-78.

meanings of other related passages, and the composite consequence is a theological category or doctrine. If by “central interpretive motif” Erickson is suggesting the “one [doctrine] to rule them all,” then he is certainly speaking of integration. If, on the other hand, the central interpretive motif is primarily an instrument to enable those who come after to understand the system thus integrated, the term is helpful. By a theologian’s central interpretive motif we may interpret him. In either case, one can readily identify the integrative doctrine which unites Darby’s system. Indeed, this doctrine enables the reader of Darby to understand his framework.

There are really two key categorical conclusions that Darby held which explain how he went from interpretation of a passage’s contents to correlation of that passage with others to feed a theological category. Both are aspects of his bibliology: the progressive revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ and the distinction between the Church and Israel. The former may be included, perhaps, in the latter, while the latter probably explains more of Darby’s theology, so I will conclude that the Church in its distinctive character is Darby’s central interpretive motif.

Many integrating themes may be suggested to explain J. N. Darby, and certainly the case can be made for each of them. From the beginning of his theological journey to the end of his life, Darby’s heart fixated on the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was ever looking for the Church, and this early-won perspective dominated his methodology.⁶² This category is the primary motivation by which he arrived at dispensational theology, historically.⁶³ It was his priority for the Church that led him to the distinction between Israel and the Church, and so it is not proper to say that the “two peoples” is the central motif; the Church doctrine led to the “two

⁶² The earliest writing in the Collected Works is his letter to Archbishop Magee mentioned above, which presents a fairly well-developed ecclesiology.

⁶³ *Letters*, 3:297-305. Darby’s most helpful autobiographical writing is this letter, which explained that his convalescence was the time during which he really committed himself to the sufficiency of Scripture, and that during his reading of Isaiah 32 he saw the distinction between what the Church expects in Christ and what Israel still expects in earthly inheritance.

peoples” doctrine.⁶⁴ It may be suggested that dispensationalism is about eschatology! Old Testament prophecy and New Testament ecclesiology are, in Darby’s system eschatological, so the central theme of ecclesiology touches and indeed integrates the Scriptural testimony concerning eschatology. Again ecclesiology is prior.⁶⁵ Theologically, behind bibliology, prophecy, and ecclesiology is the work of the Holy Spirit. Dixon notes that pneumatology is a major unifying feature of Darby’s overall system, but it cannot be the organizing feature on its own. Finally, as mentioned above, Darby’s devotional center of life was gratitude for the work of Christ on his behalf. Christology must have a place in his central motif. In the sense that Christ is the Head of the Church—the only Head—one can see the connection between ecclesiology and the centrality of Christ.

Darby’s theological system and international impact on the history of fundamentalism are not just a product of ecclesiology, though. When people think of him, they probably think of eschatology, partially due to the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine or even Bible prophecy through the later dispensationalists’ emphasis and popularization of prophecy studies. Ecclesiology may be said to be his central motif but it is not the primary legacy; neither are the popularizing

⁶⁴ Elmore, 202ff develops a very insightful synthesis of Darby’s “Two Peoples” theological motif, and the conclusions are surprising in light of later dispensational refinement. Elmore concludes that the “Two peoples” is about more than “Israel and the Church.” The “earthly” would include the mortal remnant of Israel which will survive the Tribulation and enter the Millennial Kingdom, and the heavenly refers to the resurrected saints who will rule with Christ after the Rapture. For Darby that latter category, Elmore suggests, includes more than the Church, so that the Heavenly-Earthly divide is not necessarily Church and Israel. A full appraisal of this synthetic conclusion and its implications is necessarily beyond the scope of this evaluation, but the problem presented by Elmore seems to be an overemphasis on the eschatological versus historical aspects of Darby’s Two-People system. The question is whether Darby believed that the heavenly people were all Old Testament and Church Saints because of their resurrected status in the Millennial Kingdom. This is why the present argument opts for Darby’s central interpretive motif as the Church instead of the “two peoples.”

⁶⁵ Dixon, 264 presents a helpful discussion of what Erickson calls “central interpretive motif” in Darby. He concludes that Darby’s central them must be a combination of ecclesiology, eschatology, and pneumatology. The present writer suggests it must be ecclesiology because of that category’s priority in Darby’s historical development and the dominance it held throughout his ministry. Ecclesiology can be shown to be the theme around which the system was built.

features of eschatology or prophecy studies. Darby's legacy, inherent in all three elements in Ryrie's *sine qua non* of dispensationalism must be his willingness to submit to the Text before any theological tradition. Perhaps this theological legacy may be described as methodological-bibliological. As a consequence of his dependence on the Scriptures Darby saw that the prophetic revelation of the promises to Israel would have literal fulfillment, and this insight and insistence undergirds much of dispensationalism. So much of prophetic scripture anticipates this fulfillment, including the New Testament prophetic material. Nevertheless, there was always the prior category of Church against which the Old Testament would be contrasted.

Darby's Theological Method through the Steps in the Rubric

Having demonstrated something of the hermeneutical and thus exegetical approach of J. N. Darby, as well as the Church as the central theological category by which he developed his systematic arrangement, an evaluation of Darby's work within the proposed theological rubric is needed. Darby had great respect for the Text, faithfully insisting that it holds together as a unified body of knowledge by divine design.

While Darby was certainly a practitioner of exegesis through a literal hermeneutic, most of his expositions function at the level of biblical integration. However, Darby was also a practitioner of biblical theology generations before the theological fad of modern biblical theology. To him this was a matter of respect for the context of any given passage of Scripture. Darby apparently loved the task of biblical integration more than the previous two concepts, and his writings are replete with his tendency to sew the Scriptures into a metanarrative of Christological doxology. Darby thought categorically, but his work in this task has a few very broad components. The task of extra-biblical integration and application occupied a great deal of Darby's public life in his various interactions with contemporary theologians and writers. It

seems evident that Darby's theology was thoroughly evangelical in that he held to the authority of Scripture, and validated his assertions within the rubric here proposed.

Darby's Biblical Theology

Elmore describes Biblical theology as one of the key "diversifying factors" in Darby's "hermeneutical method."⁶⁶ However he is describing biblical integration under that heading, thus demonstrating the need for clear definitions of the technical tasks of theology. Nevertheless, Elmore does isolate key elements of what we mean by Biblical theology. Darby took each book of the Bible as a standalone work that also integrated with the rest of the canon. In doing so he also collected the works of a particular author, like Paul, in order to point out that author's major emphases and leanings.

The "Bearing" of a book

The key term Darby used to describe the isolation of a book in the Bible or portion of a book as its own near context for integration and categorization is *bearing*. Darby used this word this way dozens of times in his collected writings, the idea stemming from the concept of a person's mental bearing or direction. Elmore helpfully summarizes, "Darby believed that different themes in biblical books, purposes for writing the books, and historical contexts of the recipients of the books contribute to the formation of the bearing or orientation of a book."⁶⁷ It would seem that the remarkable consistency evident throughout Darby's vast collection of written materials spanning five decades of ministry must in some part be attributed to his

⁶⁶ Elmore, 148-152.

⁶⁷ Elmore, 142. He also helpfully states, "The thematic or purpose approach to books not only distinguishes among them, for Darby it provides clues to the relative importance of one book over another for the believer," 144. And regarding the impact of bearing or book argument and context on exegesis, "Disputes over details with more than one possible meaning lexically or theologically are resolved by opting for the meaning which conforms most closely to the bearing, or argument, of the book," 145.

reliance on near-context analysis of an individual book or author on the one hand, while assuming an overall message of the entire composite on the other hand. Darby's biblical theological approach provided a contextual control on integration and categorization that produced a system of integrated theology which was remarkably consistent between the parts and the whole.

The Distinctiveness of Various Writers

“Mid-Acts” or “Ultra” or “Hyper” Dispensationalists, who see the current age as something distinct from that which began at Pentecost, claim Darby as an adherent in part because he insisted on a progress of revelation discernible even in the development of the New Testament. Thus Paul, who was given the special revelation from Christ of the “mystery” is an advance on even the General Epistles. Ephesians may be the most important single portion of Scripture to explain Darby's system, which is not surprising given Darby's integrating motif of ecclesiology. In his opening remarks on this epistle he says, “The epistle to the Ephesians gives us the richest exposition of the blessings of the saints individually, and of the assembly, setting forth at the same time the counsels of God with regard to the glory of Christ.” No doubt the hyper-dispensationalist goes too far in suggesting Darby aligned with his dispensational scheme, but there is in Darby a hierarchy of New Testament revelation. The *Synopsis* is an exercise, book-by-book, in biblical theology and biblical integration because in it Darby teaches his view of the unity of Scripture while pointing out the distinctive features of the individual literary components that comprise the overall synthetic theological product. Thus he summarizes in his introduction to the New Testament,

“This pure and living water [i.e. God's special revelation of truth] has been in no wise corrupted, but in each communication [i.e. Bible book] it has been limited by the purpose of God, in the instrument used by Him [i.e. the human author

of the Bible book] to dispense it, while still in connection with the whole, according to the perfect wisdom of Him who has communicated all truth.”⁶⁸

Darby's Biblical Integration

Darby's constant assumption was that within the Scriptures one can isolate two features of God's overall self-disclosure: His eternal “counsels,” or the actions and attitudes which reveal theology proper, and His government of earth. Perhaps this twofold message of the Bible corresponds to his summary view that the Bible reveals the heavenly Church and earthly people Israel. The Church corresponds to the “counsels,” having its identity, position, and expectation in Heaven with the exalted and seated Christ. The governmental motif closely aligns with the earthly history, inheritance, and destiny of Israel because Israel will be governed by the God-Man in the Kingdom, an eternal fulfillment of God's covenants with that earthly people. In terms of how Darby related the parts to the whole there can be seen really two major thrusts to his integrative methodology. He had Christology as a priority and Typology as a primary means of connecting especially the Old Testament's shadowed portions to the New Testament's clear revelation.

The Priority: Christology

In order to do biblical integration, one must have a view of unity of the Scriptures. Of course the unity arises from the common divine authorship, which Darby seized upon by emphasizing the personal communication act between God and man in the Scriptures.

The Scriptures have a living source, and living power has pervaded their composition: hence their infiniteness of bearing, and the impossibility of separating any one part from its connection with the whole, because one God is the living center from which all flows; one Christ, the living center around which all its truth circles, and to which it refers, though in various glory; and one Spirit, the divine sap which carries its power from its source in God to the minutest branches of the all-united truth, testifying of the glory, the grace, and the truth of Him

⁶⁸ *Synopsis*, 3:2-3.

whom God sets forth as the object and center and head of all that is in connection with Himself, of Him who is, withal, God over all, blessed forevermore.⁶⁹

Darby's theory went farther than identifying the common source of the Scriptures. He believed that the Text is unified by the "key" which is Jesus Christ.

Passages of scripture (the connection of which with the whole scope of the divine mind, as revealed in the word, is brought out when Christ is applied as a key to them) are here quoted in a connection which, when the link of thought is given in Him, has a beauty and evidence which leaves no doubt of the divine hand that has been at work—a connection which shows, when given, that that alone could be their full bearing, and yet, without that blessed key, they remained locked up to the human mind, the connection when thus made plain affording a complete testimony to Christ, and, at the same time, by Him, not only establishing inspiration, but giving a divine fullness to the word itself, and such a combination of it as proves the unity of mind in the whole book, and that mind to be God's, who alone could conceive or unfold such a plan.⁷⁰

This priority for Darby's integration explains almost his entire system. The Church has Christ as its head, and Darby's devotional center was always gratitude for Christ's work. The entirety of the Bible points to the revelation of God's glory in the saving work of Christ. Yet Christ is not revealed in the Old Testament with the clarity we see in the Gospels and Epistles. Therefore, while Darby placed a premium on the literal meaning of the Old Testament Text, his starting point was the New Testament with its clarity. This enabled him to see things in the Old Testament narratives that one cannot see without New Testament revelation. In Darby's scheme of whole-Bible integration the old saying has a comfortable residence: "In the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed. In the New Testament is the Old Testament Revealed."

⁶⁹ *Synopsis* 1:v.

⁷⁰ *CW*, 6:212-13.

The Vehicle: Typology

The tendency to say that dispensationalists' typological schemes are part of their hermeneutic stems from a lack of precision in the analysis of method. To actually integrate the entire Scriptures together into a rational message which is faithful to the literal meaning of its component parts, Darby was comfortable with a great deal of typological interpretation. He would not, however, claim that typology was visible in the passage itself, studied inductively, but only after reading it in light of the direct statements in the New Testament. It is important to see this integration method as a kind of interpretation because Darby and his successors considered the typological scheme to be the divine author's intended meaning. One could not get to this meaning from the inductive examination of the passage but must make a second sweep of the material from the perspective of New Testament revelation. This tendency must be seen as key to dispensational integration, and it must be differentiated from the Reformed allegorical method.

The allegorical method of spiritualizing the Old Testament material rejects the literal sense of the promises and prophecies regarding future Israel in light of the New Testament revelation. It does so by beginning with the New Testament revelation in Christ and then conjecturing that the Old Testament's prophecies are fulfilled spiritually in the Church. Darby's integration is similar in that it has a New Testament priority. Having a Christological focus must make it so. Nevertheless, Darby's integrated system is vastly different from the Reformed approach because he does not make the conjecture of spiritual fulfillment. There will be literal fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, and there is in the Incarnation and Church Age literal fulfillment of the types throughout the Old Testament historical material. A close examination of his typological scheme⁷¹ reveals that Darby thought the Spirit *meant* the typological correlations he saw in the Old Testament to Christ and the Church. An example is Darby's

⁷¹ See Elmore, 164-198, where he breaks down Darby's treatment of symbols, types, and what he calls historical analogies. Darby did not provide technical definitions of these things and sometimes his reference to "types" can mean any one of these items.

consistent treatment of marriage in Genesis 2 as a type the Christ and the Church. Believing, as Darby did, that the Church did not exist until after Christ ascended, he also believed that the Spirit was teaching Church truth through typology in Genesis 2.

So prominent is Darby's typological integration of one passage with another in his expositions that one must read very closely to see what he thinks about the passage itself. For Darby, dispensational truth, the realm of doctrine revealed in the Scriptures, seems to be the goal of God's revelation itself and thus the goal of Bible exposition. His *Synopsis* demonstrates this priority at every turn. Darby's key vehicle for scriptural integration is typology, which he does not define strictly but which he emphasized constantly, especially in the Old Testament narratives.⁷² Thus it must be acknowledged that Darby's expositions of Scripture are probably more an exercise in the integrative use of the analogy of the faith than what we today might call exposition of a passage.

By emphasizing types Darby readily left the contexts of the Old Testament narratives to focus on doctrines as the product of progressive revelation rather than focusing on the message in the text at hand.⁷³ He did this, no doubt, assuming literal historicity of the events, but he also assumed a divine historiography which cast the events' inscripturation in a typological mold. The question arises, regarding his methodology, how he could determine the typology as the Spirit had intended. Elmore asks, "What clues does the interpreter have to determine the mind of the Spirit in the text? Darby would answer that symbolic statements are a language 'modified by the context.'"⁷⁴ The use of context to determine the meaning of symbols or types is

⁷² Ibid, 171.

⁷³ Darby states in his exposition of Deuteronomy: "After Genesis and the earlier chapters of Exodus, there is very little of which the object is historical in the previous books of Moses. And even in Genesis and the beginning of Exodus principles and types are the most important aspect of what is related. As to the history of Israel, the apostle tells us this expressly in 1 Corinthians 10:11. *Synopsis*, 1:307, footnote (brought to my attention by Elmore, 169).

⁷⁴ Elmore, 174.

familiar methodology in literal hermeneutics. Elmore also points out how Darby would interpret symbolic language by leaving the passage and consulting a concordance. This was not strictly a lexical exercise as in today's exegetical word studies, but a theological examination of how *God* used the word he was studying.

Darby, again, is difficult in distinguishing the interpretation of an individual passage from the need to appeal to the analogy of the faith for the meaning of types which he saw and considered to be the central thrust of the inspired message in a passage. For him, it is not going too far to say that integration via the whole sweep of the Bible was necessary for interpretation of a given passage, just as much as an individual passage's interpretation was necessary to understand the whole of Scripture. He could only integratively interpret by use of the key themes or motifs that guided his integration. These were, regarding the thrust of history, a Christological unfolding of progressive revelation, and regarding the bulk of biblical revelation, the distinction between Israel and the Church in that progression.

The Controls: Non-Contradiction and Progressive Revelation

It is possible to discern two salient features of Darby's approach to the task of integration of the Scriptures, and these flow in general from his prior conviction that the text is inspired by the Spirit of God. If the Holy Spirit is the ultimate Author of the Bible, then we should be able to detect a unified message from beginning to end; this means an assumption of non-contradiction. This unified system, historically developed, is the consequence of the progress of the revelation of God in Christ. Therefore, taking the Bible on God's terms and letting, as Darby would say, the Holy Spirit unfold it to the reader will result in this unified but developmental story. Darby's introduction to his Genesis exposition in the Synopsis helps immensely in seeing how Darby thought the Bible was self-integrated.

Genesis has a character of its own; and, as the beginning of the Holy Book, presents to us all the great elementary principles which find their development in the history of the relationships of God with man, which is recorded in the following books.⁷⁵

Those who would accuse Darby of denying unity of the Bible must contend with Darby's typological interpretation of Genesis 2, which, wherever he expositis that passage in his collected writings and *Synopsis* he discusses Adam and Eve as types of Jesus and the Church!

Darby thought that the principles of God's self-disclosure in the history of salvation were progressively developed but they demonstrated a divinely-communicated unity across the flow of special revelation.⁷⁶ Today we call this theme progressive revelation, and this categorical view within Darby's bibliology explains a great deal of how he did integration. An interesting example of how he did this is the concept of marriage.⁷⁷ Perhaps it is right to say that he began his thinking on marriage with the revelation in the New Testament that the Church is the Bride of Christ. That being the ultimate marriage in the theological categorization of the institution, he correlated the concept of the Church's eternal union with Christ—and not Israel's—back into his understanding of the events of Genesis 2 so that his expositions of Genesis 2 are full of “dispensational truth” about the Church and Christ. In today's categories of interpretation vs. application it is likely that Darby would say that his treatment there of Genesis 2 is not a mere application or illustration of the ultimate theological category of marriage but a divinely-intended type which God embedded in the Old Testament to be understood by those who had received Ephesians thousands of years later.

One must notice the categories involved with this integrative exposition. First there is Darby's “central interpretive motif” or central integrative motif of the Church as distinct from Israel. This categorical understanding is central to how he read the Bible; therefore, he found a

⁷⁵*Synopsis* 1:v.

⁷⁶CW, 5:587-600 for his discussion of this progressive development.

⁷⁷CW, 2:310, 19:143, 194.

reference to it in Genesis 2. He did not think that the Old Testament motif of marriage between God and Israel something that should be correlated with the marriage of the first parents in Genesis 2 but saw the Church as the Spirit's intended focus of that typology. This was no doubt a consequence of his Christological emphasis in typology. Israel was not the bride of Christ but of Yahweh. The only way he could say "Genesis 2 is about the Christ and the Church" was by taking the Bible as a whole and tracing the category of marriage through it to the ultimate theological concept. This was certainly a reading of the New Testament back into the Old Testament, but he did it with historical narrative, and that only after affirming the actual historicity of the first parents.

Conclusion on biblical integration

Darby as a theologian was most helpful in this task of biblical integration. He did not often explain in much detail his exegetical decisions or the principles of his hermeneutics. He was an able exegete, as his remarks on Greek grammar demonstrate occasionally in his various writings,⁷⁸ but he did not write to explain or demonstrate exegesis or even hermeneutics. He wrote to demonstrate the unity of the Scriptures in the diversity of God's dealings with man for his unified eternal counsels. Accordingly, he was not a systematic theologian in the modern sense of the discipline because he did not focus on the task of biblical categorization.

Darby's Biblical Categorization

A very little must be said at this point because Darby's apparent focus was not the systematization of biblical categories as much as the systematization of the biblical text in biblical integration. Nevertheless, a brief outline of the major categories in Darby's thinking can be discerned as distinctive to his system. Regarding Theology Proper, Christology,

⁷⁸ CW 13 has several technical grammatical writings that demonstrate Darby to be an able Greek technician.

Pneumatology, Soteriology, and Bibliology Darby may be said in general to be Reformed. Regarding his stratification in these areas, it seems that Theology Proper is subsumed under the common reference to “divine counsels,” and this would be for Darby the ultimate issue in the Bible. Regarding methodology, Darby had a two-fold priority for the practical workings of the Spirit in the heart of the believer and the objective revelation of the Spirit-inspired Bible as the ultimate control. Therefore, most of his writing addresses Bibliology with the constant reference back to Pneumatology. Darby as the theological innovator in the task of biblical categorization is most distinctive in his views of ecclesiology and eschatology. These categorical distinctives, however, are the results of his consistent perspective of the prior matters. The category that enabled his integration by driving his investigation and practice, was of course ecclesiology, and it was through his ecclesiological priority that he developed his distinctive eschatology, including the prophetic timeline with the Church as a parenthesis, the pre-tribulation Rapture, the Tribulation, the Millennium, and the Eternal State. This timeline of Darby’s eschatology may be the most well-known of Darby’s categorical distinctives, but it is really the consequence of his sequential priorities of Theology Proper, Pneumatological bibliology, and Ecclesiology. Early on, as he convalesced in 1827, Darby discovered his interpretive motif and made many of the connections that would integrate his system. The categorical truth of the believer’s position in Christ gave him a distinct position as a Church saint, whereas the plain statements in Isaiah 32 at the exegetical level forced the conclusion of a distinction between Israel’s destiny and that of the Church.

Darby’s Extra-biblical Integration

The tendency in post-modernity and post-post-modernity is to place human reason, observation, personal experience, or even intuition in a higher position than faith in special revelation for the assessment of truth claims. This tendency had no place in Darby’s

methodology. His interaction with extra-biblical material can be discerned in his interaction with theologians by whom the Church has reasoned together its orthodox fundamentals of the Faith or the Reformers' views on soteriology. Darby did not inductively derive these doctrines through exegetical rigor and the analogy of the faith; he learned them as a body of truth in his educational development, and he validated these claims in exegetical investigation, much as every theologian has done through the history of the Church with the development of doctrine. Therefore, we find Darby interacting with Calvin, Luther, Anselm, Aquinas, Augustine, and many of the doctors of the Church within the vast Darby library.

Darby's method of extra-biblical interaction, though, is more about validation of truth claims through his integrated biblical perspective than absorption of them. The most that can be said from Darby's writings about his theological influences is that when he interacted with prior theologians, their statements or questions directed his investigation to see how they compared with the Bible. As an innovator, he blazed a trail which dispensationalists have tended to follow in terms of scrutinizing the claims of others in comparison to the "bearing" of the Bible before incorporating their ideas into his own framework.

Darby's Application

As has been shown in his biographical material, Darby's life was characterized by theological conflict. It may be that as a bachelor he had time to engage in minute detail with theologians of opposing views. Indeed, a great deal of his collected works is composed of these written interactions. For the most part Darby's application took the form of a defense of the Biblical system as he understood it, whether in terms of the orthodox fundamentals of the faith or the futurist approach to Revelation. A change in Darby's biblical scheme is not evident in these interactions but an application of it in order to refute the outside notions.

B.W. Newton

The most public of Darby's controversies was with the leader of the Plymouth assembly. They differed on theological matters like the timing of the events in Revelation, but they divided ultimately over matters of practical ecclesiology. In both topics, Darby's extra-biblical integration is evident. He not only considered the counter claims of the opponent, but he demonstrated how they would not comport with the integrated Biblical system as he understood it. Ultimately Darby's tracts and pamphlets outlining the arguments against Newton's ecclesiology and eschatology would result in the division of the Brethren into two camps, and this would permanently limit the denomination's growth.

F.W. Newman

One observes Darby's interaction with Newman⁷⁹ as a detailed refutation, point-by-point, of the "irrational" insights of the latter. This integration or application is thorough, and at each point the reasoning takes into account the ideas of his interlocutor, but Darby gains nothing from his opponent.

Darwin, Lyell, and Contemporary Philosophy

Darby interacted with the ideas of the Victorian lions of skepticism in his generation, Lyell having published his uniformitarian theory of geology in 1833 and Darwin his celebrated biological theory in 1859. Darby's interactions with the contemporary ideas that drove the science, philosophy, and theology are contained in *Collected Works* Volume 9, "Dialogues on the Essays and Reviews." His tendency in these interactions was to compare the implications of the Bible from his integrated system with the claims of these extra-biblical sources. The latter never changed his view of the former, though he dealt in great detail with the evidences proposed and spent some time on occasion refuting them.

⁷⁹ CW 6 is Darby's book refuting Newman's *Phases of Faith*.

But there are more serious objections. It is alleged that for certain sandstones some twenty thousand years must have passed to have a bed of such thickness deposited; but at Craighleith, near Edinburgh, a tree some sixty feet long, lies slanting at an angle of 40° across the strata in its whole length. Now that a tree remained twenty thousand years slanting thus, while the sea deposited this strata, is not to be believed.⁸⁰

Conclusion on Biblical Categorization, Extra-Biblical Integration and Application

The reason Darby is not generally regarded as a systematic theologian is that his writings, even in apologetics, drive the reader back to his understanding of the Bible as an integrated system which must be read and meditated upon rather than to a body of truth in categories. The reason Darby is rightly considered a systematic theologian is he had an integrated view of the Biblical materials which was remarkably consistent in its implications and applications. For Darby the system is the Bible. Integration with outside sources may help us read the Bible, which Darby would no doubt consider the proper use of his *Synopsis*, but helps are not revelation. His approach was very simple and devotional, assuming that “God [was] true though every man a liar.”

Conclusion

John Nelson Darby had a vast intellect and a consuming devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ in gratitude for His expiatory work at Calvary. The vastness of his mind was not matched by an aptitude for clear written communications, but it nevertheless delivered a comprehensive body of argumentative literature that bears witness to a life with a single aim. He did not want to develop a body of categorical truth from the implications of the Scriptures, as modern theologians have sought to do. He did not like the idea of “systematic theology” for that reason. He did not want to start a school of thought that would later be called “dispensationalism” or

⁸⁰ *CW*, 9:101-3.

really dominate a new evangelical denomination called “Brethrenism.” He did not want to lead a movement which rejected local church ordination of pastors and instead adopted him as an almost apostolic interpreter of the Bible. Darby wanted to synthesize the Scriptures in order to present the thinking of God.

The resulting theological synthesis would be used and abused by both its friends and enemies. Darby’s Bible synthesis would do battle with the infidelity of liberalism far beyond the reach of his legendary travels or his long life. His synthesis would produce a prophetic timeline to give novices in the Bible a handhold for analyzing and categorizing biblical prophetic statements and passages. That timeline and its most dramatic feature, the Pre-tribulation Rapture, would be used by sensationalists and popularizers to harness the imaginations of believers in the Great Britain, Europe, and the United States without knowing much of Darby’s system itself. The tragic neglect of Darby’s method would bring about unreflective scorn and at times dogmatic slander of the man and his system. Later dispensationalists would reject his system without really learning his indispensable methods.

Were there such a thing as “Darbyism” it would be the overall synthesis of the Bible produced by a few key assumptions about the unity and sufficiency of Scripture and reading the Text with a distinctive place for the Church and fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel. The second-order factors, like the dispensational scheme of ages or the prophetic timeline or even the Rapture are derivative of these prior methodological and doctrinal distinctives. At the center of it all would be Darby’s insistence on the Biblical primacy of Christ, the priority of His revelation in the New Testament, the consistency of the Spirit’s disclosures about Him throughout the Bible, and the distinct people who as Body and Bride will share Christ’s destiny, the Church.

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