



Dispensationalism & Independentism

The articles so far in this series have been intended to provide a historical introduction to dispensationalism. The first few articles provided an overview of some of the current teachings of the movement, showing how dispensationalists capitalized on current events to promote their system, and pointing out some of the foolish ideas that man comes to when he takes dispensational theology to its logical conclusion. Now I have been turning the focus more toward the origin of dispensationalism, in an effort to understand what dispensational theology was designed to accomplish.

Last time we considered how nineteenth-century dispensationalists developed their views partly in an effort to counter the then popular teaching that promises to Israel were going to be fulfilled in the history of America.¹ This time we consider how the original dispensationalists used their eschatology to persuade people to leave their churches and join a group known as the Brethren. Then, Lord willing, there will be one more introductory article on how dispensationalists used their so-called “literal interpretation of Scripture” to present themselves as leaders in the battle against the new forms of liberal theology that were on the rise.

But now we consider how the independent Brethren developed dispensationalism in an effort to persuade people to leave their churches and join them. Even though it is true that many dispensationalists today are members of some church, the churches where these people are found do not normally have biblical, Reformed church government. Rather, they are often characterized by independentism and congregationalism.² This is because independentism and dispensationalism go together, and the latter was used to promote the former³.

Dispensationalists started by rightly emphasizing the importance of separating from the established churches. But they went beyond this to insist upon “freedom” from sound ecclesiastical confessions and proper church government. By stressing that God’s judgment upon both the world and the church was immanent, dispensationalists were effective at persuading people to separate from the existing instituted churches and join their interdenominational network. Seeing as dispensationalism was designed in part to bring about such a separation, a consideration of this subject is important for obtaining a better understanding of the movement.

John Darby, the Brethren, & the Rejection of the Established Church

Although premillennialism is an ancient error that goes all the way back to the first few centuries after Christ, the dispensational form of this teaching is of relatively recent origin. The beginnings of dispensationalism are rightly associated with a man named John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Though some argue that a number of Darby’s central positions were taught by Edward Irving before him, Darby was certainly a chief founder of the movement, and contributed greatly to the rise of dispensationalism both in the British Isles and in America.

For a brief period John Darby was an ordained minister in the established Church of Ireland. An established church—sometimes referred to as a national church or state church—is one that is recognized and supported by the civil government as the official church of the nation. The name “Church of Ireland,” for example, indicates that it is the one church that is Ireland’s official church. Such a church has an unholy alliance with this world,

1. Some would have substituted Great Britain for America.

2. Independentism is a system of church government in which each church is independent of all other churches. Such churches refuse to enter a federation of churches in which all the churches agree to submit to the decisions of the broader assemblies. Congregationalism is a system of church government in which the authority to rule in the church is ascribed to all the members of a congregation collectively. If a church has a group of elders, those elders usually do not function as a ruling body in the church. For example, in many congregational churches, to remove a person from the membership rolls, all the members have to meet together and vote on the matter. Seeing as these two ideas often go together, the whole system could be referred to as congregational independentism.

3. James Patrick Callahan, *Primitivist Piety: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1996), 137–39.

which inevitably results in the corruption of the world entering the church.

From this church Darby withdrew himself at a relatively young age. He viewed many of the officebearers within it to be worldly, unconverted men who were willing to compromise with Roman Catholicism. This he blamed largely on the fact that ministers in the established church were ordained by bishops, and that these bishops were often corrupt themselves. Pointing to this corruption within the Church of Ireland, and despising state involvement in church affairs, Darby left the established church and encouraged others to do the same.

The Call to Leave All the Churches

But when people left the corrupt established church, where were they supposed to go? Darby himself had decided to join a relatively new sect known as the Brethren,⁴ and he desired others to join him. According to the Brethren, the people should not join any of the dissenting denominations that were already in existence.⁵ Denominationalism, they maintained, was always a cause of corruption in the church. The confessions of a denomination, the Brethren argued, frequently served to divide Christians, and were often only externally confessed. Furthermore, the democratic process that was often used when voting for officebearers in these denominations, frequently resulted in the same problem that plagued the established church—namely, that ministers were chosen who were not really converted believers. So Darby urged people to reject the various instituted churches, and to join the independent Brethren instead.

But why should people join the Brethren? According to Darby, the preachers among the Brethren received authority directly from God, rather than through bishops or the church institute. Although Darby rightly rejected ordination by a bishop, he actually fell into the error of supporting lay-preaching. He rejected the biblical principle that to be called by God to be a minister of the gospel one must be called by a true instituted church. Instead he insisted that anyone who was called directly by God had the authority to preach.

So how, then, does it become evident that one has been called directly by God to preach the gospel? According to Darby and the Brethren, God showed this by demonstrating to all that a certain person had the “gifts” needed to perform the task. The thinking was that if God gives a person the gifts needed to preach, that is sufficient proof that God has called him to preach.

Thus it is evident that even though Darby and the Brethren rightly rejected the idea of an established church, they fell into another error when they rejected the God-given authority of the church institute. Claiming to be separating from the world, they were actually keeping themselves separate from true churches of Jesus Christ.

This made it possible for Darby and the Brethren to start an interdenominational network that would gather together discontented people not only from the established church, but also from the various dissenting denominations. Many joined the Brethren to be “free” not only from the corruption in the churches, but also from the binding authority of ecclesiastical confessions and decisions of broader ecclesiastical assemblies.

By doing so the Brethren were effectively denying that the instituted church is a manifestation of the kingdom of God on this earth. This is what they wanted to do. And with this on their mind, they developed a view of eschatology that would help them accomplish this goal.

Dispensationalism Developed to Promote the Brethren

A number of works on Darby and the Brethren have noted the relationship between their views on eschatology and their rejection of the established church.

Darby’s study of unfulfilled prophecy played an important part in bringing about his full withdrawal from the established church. The growing conviction that the kingdom of God would be established on earth as a result, not of the exertions of men on its behalf, but of the direct intervention of Christ Himself—and that in judgement—combined with the belief that the Jew-

4. When the Brethren later split in the 1840’s, Darby became a leader of the stricter faction, which became known as the Plymouth Brethren.

5. In countries that have an established church, the denominations that are opposed to it are called “dissenting” denominations.

ish nation rather than the Christian Church was the instrument which God would use for the establishing of His kingdom on earth, to discredit the concept of an established church.⁶

The doctrine of the established church has often been based on the idea that the church and state in a given country are the New Testament counterparts to the priesthood and kingship in Old Testament Israel. According to this view, just as the priests and the king worked together in the days of David and Solomon to promote the worship of the true God, so the church and civil government today should be united in an effort to do the same thing.

Such a view amounts to teaching that a certain country today—whether one wants it to be the United States, England, Ireland, Scotland, the Netherlands, or whatever—is the counterpart to Old Testament Israel. Then the civil government and established church are two united witnesses, and to depart from the established church is to depart from the church of Christ. Over against this Darby argued that God promised earthly dominion not to any of the Gentile nations, but only to the earthly nation of Israel.

Darby was undoubtedly correct when he rejected the notion that the Old Testament promises concerning dominion were going to be fulfilled in the history of some Gentile nation in this age. But by developing dispensationalism with its central teaching that these Old Testament promises were going to be fulfilled in the earthly nation of Israel, he was denying that these promises are already now beginning to be fulfilled in the church of Jesus Christ.

Dispensationalism & the Popular Spirit of Independentism

It may take a moment to realize why someone would want to deny that the Old Testament promises concerning dominion on this earth are already now beginning to be fulfilled in federations of true instituted churches. The sinful nature of man does not want the instituted church to have authority on this earth. He does not want to have to submit to the binding authority of sound ecclesiastical confessions and the decisions of proper church assemblies. And if he has a desire to be a leader, he does not want to have to wait until he receives a call from an instituted church. Independentism is appealing to the carnal nature of man. Man by nature desires to do that which is right in his own eyes. Thus it is not surprising that many found Darby's ideas to be appealing.

This rejection of institutional authority was a very important element of dispensationalism, and one that is easy to overlook. Yet it is one of the reasons why dispensationalism was well received when Darby and others brought it from the British Isles to America in the mid to late 1800's, and why it has remained popular in this country, and in many others, to this day.

Independentism has been and continues to be popular, not only because it appeals to man's sinful nature, but also because it can appear at first glance to be a good alternative in days of religious apostasy. Dispensationalism became popular in days when the theory of evolution was becoming accepted and the denial of the inspiration of Scripture was becoming more common in the churches. And as dispensationalists pointed to prophecies that spoke of how corrupt the church would be in the last days, many agreed that independentism was the best way to remain free from all the corruption during the short period of time that was left before Christ returned.

Yet the dispensational call was not only a call to separation. As time went on it became a call to militant action as well. Dispensationalists went after the liberal trends in theology, insisting that the dispensational method of a "consistently literal" interpretation of Scripture was the only one that could combat these mighty foes. Seeing as this argument of the dispensationalists is one of the key ones that many have found appealing, we will turn to it, Lord willing, next time.

6. Harold H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren: 1825–1850* (London: Pickering & Inglis Ltd., 1967), 53.