

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Dayton, Ohio

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS PAPER

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Semester II

Mentor:

May 15, 2020

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Introduction

In my theological studies, no other person has impressed me more than John Nelson Darby. Darby is considered a very important person in the Local Church Movement (LCM), the church to which this project addresses and that I formerly subscribed to. Both founders of the LCM, Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, were influenced by Darby's writings. When Lee asked Nee for recommendations on books that may help him understand the Bible, Nee said the best book was Darby's *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*. Nee even encouraged him to read this set four or five times to understand it well. Eight years later, when Lee came to Shanghai to work with Nee, Nee gave this set of books to Lee as a gift.¹ This shows how much Nee valued Darby's insight.

Not only did Darby's writings and interpretations of the Bible have a great impact on Lee also, but Lee later even took distant learning classes with C. I. Scofield, an American theologian who succeeded Darby and advanced his teachings on pre-millennialism and futurism.² These experiences shaped Lee's view on certain issues such

¹ Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee-A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministries, 1991), 285.

² Matthew Austin Clarke, "A Critical Examination of the Ecclesiology of John Nelson Darby" (PhD Thesis, University of Gloucestershire, 2009), 204, accessed May 13, 2020, http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/3192/1/545745_Redacted.pdf.

as dispensationalism, which Darby and Scofield were most famous for. Darby is also known for helping start the Plymouth Brethren and is the founder of the Exclusive Brethren.³

Some accounts suggest that in the early stages of the Plymouth Brethren (PB) Movement, prophecy, healing, and other Pentecostal manifestations were present. However, due to a misunderstanding that the gifts were only available for the time period of the New Testament, PB leaders extinguished the fire of the Holy Spirit evidenced in these manifestations.⁴ At one point, the LCM tried to incorporate the Pentecostal Movement into its own movement, but it failed and eventually they closed itself off to the Pentecostal Movement.⁵ Subsequently, the LCM followed a path of embracing holiness as a Christian lifestyle just as Darby, and also eschewing the pursuit of the gifts of the Holy Spirit as Darby also did.

Since Darby had such a large influence on the LCM, this paper will examine the historical figure of John Nelson Darby and the two movements/groups to which he was involved: the Plymouth Brethren and Exclusive Brethren. Five aspects of Darby's life are outlined and discussed: (1) his personal life and ministerial accomplishments; (2) his endeavor toward pursuing and establishing holiness and purity within the body of Christ; (3) his belief and practice in *Sola Scriptura*; (4) his attitude and challenge toward

³ Doug Harris, "Exclusive Brethren," Reachout Trust, last modified September 1, 2009, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120226042253/http://www.reachouttrust.org/articlePDFView.php?id=288>.

⁴ Marion Field, *John Nelson Darby Prophetic Pioneer* (Godalming, England: Highland Books, 2008), 1238, Kindle.

⁵ Witness Lee, *The Spirit and the Body*, chap.16, sec. 5 (1976), in Living Stream Ministry, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n>.

hierarchical and organizational structures within the church; and (5) his view on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and case for dispensationalism.

Darby's life and work act as a historical foundation for this thesis because this project seeks to emphasize the necessity for holiness *and* the gifts of the Spirit in order to live the most biblically accurate and effective Christian life. Darby's influence on American church theology is profound and should also be considered since the context for this project includes LCM and Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in the United States. A discussion at the end is included in this paper and will address the attitude of the Plymouth Brethren against early Pentecostal manifestations; Darby's teachings and their effect on the LCM's pursuit toward holiness; and the history of Darby and the Plymouth Movement as it relates to the convergence of holiness and manifestations of power expressed through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The Life and Ministry of John Nelson Darby

A famous quote by John Nelson Darby is printed on the first page of Dr. Sunny Ezhumattoor's book, *A Portrait of John Nelson Darby*. It says,

O the joy of having nothing and being nothing, seeing nothing,
But a living Christ in glory,
And being careful for nothing but His interests down here.⁶

This quote has been put into a song in the LCM denomination and is commonly sung. It reminds the Christian that what is most important is a life hidden in Christ with one's eyes set on things above (Col. 3:2).

⁶ Sunny Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait of John Nelson Darby* (Dr Spring, TX: Thekkel Publications, 2016), 1, Kindle.

Right on the next page of Ezhumattoor's book, there is another quote by William Blair Neatby regarding the life of Darby. It says,

If Darby had occupied Abraham's position, he might have left behind hardly less than Abraham's fame. It is easy to picture him dwelling in the land of promise as in a strange country, the contented heir of the promises of the world to come; or communing with God in the night-watches, by the lonely tent and altar that mark the stages of his faithful pilgrimage; or despising the gifts of the King of Sodom, and extending a covenant of peace to Philistine Abimelech.⁷

These two quotes accurately summarize the values and principles of Darby. Darby has received both high praises and criticisms for his life and work. One thing is certain: he was noticed for the high value he placed on living a holy and pure life before God.

Darby was born of wealthy Irish parents on November 18, 1800. He was the youngest son in his family and his mother died when he was very young. Darby studied at both Westminster School and Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. Darby initially studied law but later gave up this career to serve God. This decision not only disappointed his father but also his brother-in-law who was the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. This did not change Darby's mind, however. Darby converted to Christianity at the age of twenty-one and became a deacon in the Church of England in 1825. According to him, "I longed for complete devotedness to the work of God."⁸

Darby was greatly concerned with the degradation and division of the church that he witnessed firsthand while serving the Church of England. He resigned from his position of deacon in protest to converts being forced to swear allegiance to the King of

⁷ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 2.

⁸ Christianity Today, "John Nelson Darby: Father of Dispensationalism," *Christianity History*, August 2008, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/john-nelson-darby.html>.

Ireland. This is when Darby began to meet with other believers to break bread together and fellowship. This was the initiation of the Plymouth Brethren Movement. Like all other revivals in history, this can be summed up as another wave of the sea, but an important one.

Darby was not a perfect man, but he certainly strove to be Christlike. He was considered stubborn by some and he tended to deviate from the Scriptures in certain areas.⁹ Nonetheless, he had a pure heart toward God and a kind and loving disposition toward human beings. He is also considered a great Bible teacher. William Kelly, a friend of Darby and a famous biblical scholar who worked with Darby for about forty years, called Darby “a saint more true to Christ’s name and Word I never knew or heard of.”¹⁰

In the forward to Ezhumattoor’s book, Dr. Alexander Kurian Dallas said something similar: “...a saint and a servant with deeper insight into God’s mind in Scripture than any other I ever knew or heard of in any age since the apostles...”¹¹ Not only did Darby strive to maintain a holy life in practice, but holiness was a lens he wore when laboring for the Lord. His decisions, ministry for the Lord and quarrels with persons can be traced back to his allegiance to holiness.

Darby’s Endeavors: Pursuing Holiness and Purity in Christ

Darby once visited a Christian brother who was a rich businessman in Switzerland. This brother had a habit of treating visitors to special foods and a place to

⁹ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 27.

¹⁰ William Kelly, *John Nelson Darby As I Knew Him* (Jagdishpur, Bhagalpur, India: Rani Publications, 2017), 189, Kindle.

¹¹ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 63.

rest. Upon visiting him, Darby entered the house from the back door and was recognized by his friend's servant as a normal guest. Darby never disclosed his identity to the servant and happily stayed with the other guests who received ordinary treatment. Darby consistently tried not to exalt himself even as he was gaining great fame. Darby never married and devoted his whole life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Darby was also humble and sympathetic toward the poor and children, attending to the needs presented to him. He visited the United States (US) many times. One time he refused a famous brother's invitation and chose to visit a poor brother's house instead. Marion Field recollects Darby's heart to care for children in her biography of him. Field writes, "If he noticed that a child had gone to sleep in an uncomfortable position during a meeting, he would often roll up his coat and gently place it under the child's head as a pillow."¹² People would also see Darby play for hours with little children or see him carrying a baby at night to let the baby's tired mother sleep.

On the contrary, I once witnessed a very famous Pentecostal healing evangelist threaten to stop a meeting if the mother of a crying baby did not quiet the chaos in the room. The evangelist commented that the Holy Spirit loves quiet and that He, the Holy Spirit, would be disturbed by the crying baby. God the Father loves children. Jesus welcomed children (Matt. 19:13–14; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). Darby's character represented the Father's heart, a heart full of pure love.

In Darby's early life, he gave up a prominent career in law and did not rely on his family to support him financially. Besides his stipend from the church, Darby had inherited money. Instead of using it for a comfortable life, Darby used this money to

¹² Field, *John Nelson*, 2612.

build schools and help others. He thought Christians should live by faith in Christ. When many Irish Protestant ministers appealed to the government to protect them from Catholic influences, Darby was against it. He also thought Christians should share the suffering of Christ instead of seeking protection from the world. Darby was against ministers fighting the world with worldly means.

While Darby was also concerned with a lack of unity among the believers of Christ, he was perhaps most troubled that the church mixed itself with nationalism and the world. Darby wished to be a pure follower of Christ and to share in His suffering. This is one of reasons he later became the leader of the Exclusive Brethren. His intention was to remove the impurity of the church by not fellowshiping with those who were in sin or still living in communion with the world.

Purity of the individual and of the body of Christ were unnegotiable for Darby, especially after seeing the worldliness within the Church of England. In one of his hymns, "A Song of the Wilderness," Darby writes, "The world is a wilderness wide; I have nothing to seek nor to choose; I have no thought in the waste to abide; I have naught to regret nor to lose."¹³ Serving the Church of England produced in Darby a resolution of absoluteness to the Gospel and a wholeheartedness to separate from the world and pursue holiness.

Darby was not the only one who insisted on pursuing individual holiness. When revival came to Plymouth, many members followed the same pattern to abstain from worldly entertainment. Field writes, "As Plymouth boasted a theatre, audiences dwindled so much that it had to be closed. The manager, who had suffered great financial loss,

¹³ Field, *John Nelson*, 563.

showed no resentment, but in fact joined the Brethren himself.”¹⁴ Others also gave up their possessions. Field continues,

There was no distinction between rich and poor and all wore simple plain clothes and dispensed with many of their worldly good. In their “separation from the world” and while “waiting for the Lord’s return,” they felt they had no need of such things. As many of the brethren possessed great wealth, they owned many unnecessary items and it was decided that brothers and sisters should make a “freewill offering” of their unnecessary goods. So many books, items of clothing, ornaments and even furniture were contributed that an auction was held. It lasted three days and raised a great deal of money.¹⁵

Separating from the world was a noticeable characteristic of the Brethren Movement. This idea was initiated by Darby and it affected many. Some believers even also gave up their worldly positions/professions to follow Christ. While this movement gained a lot of adherents, Darby was criticized by some for having a distorted view. Critics claimed that Darby “was aware that believers were *in* the world but should not be *of* it.”¹⁶

Darby’s most famous work is the creation of the *Darby Bible*. It was translated into several languages including English, German, French, and Greek. It has profound insight into the Scriptures. Darby’s vast knowledge of languages enabled him, with the help of other scholars, to produce this and many other outstanding works. Darby says in the preface of his 1890 edition of the Old Testament, “In the issue of this translation, the

¹⁴ Field, *John Nelson*, 787.

¹⁵ Field, *John Nelson*, 787.

¹⁶ Field, *John Nelson*, 875.

purpose is not to offer to the man of letters a learned work, but rather to provide the simple and unlearned reader with as exact a translation as possible.”¹⁷

His book set of the *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, while having influenced both Nee and Lee of the LCM, also influenced many Christian theologians and preachers in the West including George Müller and D. L. Moody. Many positive things may be said about Darby’s work, but Witness Lee’s statement sums it up. Lee comments,

In addition to translating the Bible into several languages, Darby also wrote many books. It is difficult to say how he found the time to produce so many books. Brother Nee said that if Darby had not become a servant of the Lord, he would have been famous in the world because he had a great soul. It is my conviction that all those living before God today with a proper knowledge of the Bible have been helped by Darby and the PB in some way. Even those who oppose the Brethren have received help from them perhaps unknowingly.¹⁸

Darby’s Challenge to the Establishment and Sola Scriptura

Darby’s reason for leaving the Church of England was profound. Darby says,

I find no such thing as a national church in Scripture. Is the Church of England—was it ever—God’s assembly in England? I say then that her constitution is worldly because she contemplates by her constitution—it is her boast—the population, nor the saints. The man, who would say that the Church of England is a gathering of saints, must be a very odd man, or a very bold one. All the parishioners are bound to attend by her principles. It was not the details of the sacramental and priestly system which drove me from the establishment, deadly as they are in their nature. It was that I was looking for the body of Christ (which

¹⁷ J. N. Darby, *The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation from the Original Languages* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1996).

¹⁸ Witness Lee, *Three Aspects of the Church, Book 2: The Course of the Church*, chap.15, sec. 1 (2006), in Living Stream Ministry, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?p>.

was not there but perhaps in the entire parish not one converted person); and collaterally, because I believed in a divinely appointed ministry. If Paul had come, he could not have preached (he had never been ordained); if a wicked ordained man, he had his title and must be recognized as a minister; the truest minister of Christ unordained could not. It was a system contrary to what I found in Scripture.¹⁹

From this statement, we can see Darby was very brave to challenge the establishment. This is the character of persons God uses in every generation to bring forth a new movement. In 1826, after stepping down from the Church of England, Darby had an accident while riding a horse. During his time of recovery, Darby began to meditate on the Scriptures deeply. He claims it was during this time that he received the revelation that the true church of God is composed of genuine believers of Christ who are united with the life Christ. To Darby, a true church of God was not one constructed from hierarchal structures. Darby stated,

I saw in Scripture that there were certain “gifts” which formed true ministry, in contrast to a clergy established upon another principle. Salvation, the Church, and ministry all were bound together, all were connected with Christ, the Head of the Church in heaven; with Christ, who had accomplished a perfect salvation, as well as the presence of the Spirit on earth uniting the members to the Head and to each other, so as to form “one body”, and He, acting in them, should characterize the Church and each one of the members.²⁰

Darby’s point is to say that members should be connected to one another on an equal playing field, and all henceforth joined to Christ, the Head. He also wished to say that the body of Christ is an organism and living entity instead of an organizational and dead structure. Darby criticized the nationalism that permeated the Church in England. Darby believed authority should remain with the Bible instead of being given to men or

¹⁹ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 290.

²⁰ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 343.

even kings. Likewise, members of the body of Christ and the gifts they held should be valued over the institutional clergy system that had emerged in England.

In addition to disagreeing with church establishment, Darby strongly advocated a viewpoint that placed high emphasis on the authority of Scripture. His conviction became a characteristic of the PB and was known as *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone). Their intention was to elevate the authority of the Bible above any man and/or religion or religious tradition. A crucial aspect of *Sola Scriptura* was that no religious institution or jurisdiction, including the Pope, could be considered superior to Scripture. The Brethren's promulgation of *Sola Scriptura* was a continuance of a tradition from Martin Luther and his reform movement.

Deinstitutionalization of the Church (so as to become holier) and the institutionalization of *Sola Scriptura* were dominant themes of Darby's life and work, so much so that Ezhumattoor commented (comparing Darby to John Wesley), "John Wesley never conscientiously brought himself to separate from the establishment. John Darby, on the other hand, could not conscientiously bring himself to remain within her pale."²¹

A review of the history of Christianity reminds us that the Church of England birthed from King Henry VIII's denied approval by the Pope for a marital divorce. Historian Justo L. Gonzalez says, "Henry VIII, earlier known for his defense of Catholicism against Luther, and in no way a supporter of Protestant doctrine, led the Church of England in its break with Rome."²² What followed was not the kind

²¹ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 396.

²² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume II, The Reformation to the Present Day, Revised and Updated* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), 89.

transformation for the Church of England that Darby would have hoped for, but a change in leadership from a pope to kings.

If the statement of Ezhumattoor is true—that Wesley did not manage to separate the Church and state—then perhaps God needed to raise up someone that could differentiate the Church from the establishment entirely. God used Darby to bring this conviction where it lacked. Although Darby considered the churches in his time to be hopeless and corrupted institutions, he understood that there still existed genuine believers in these institutions.

Darby never intended to create a new denomination. Darby simply wanted an authentic experience fellowshiping with other likeminded Christians. Eventually Darby’s fellowship with other brothers resulted in the Plymouth Brethren Movement. Gradually and reluctantly, this group accepted being called “brethren,” and in later years, Darby accepted the name “Plymouth Brethren” to differentiate them from other groups also known as the Brethren.

Darby, the Plymouth Brethren, and the Exclusive Brethren

Naturally, holiness and deinstitutionalization of the Church were two major characteristics that defined the PB. Massimo Introvigne, a historian of the Plymouth Brethren says about them, “many were attracted by their radical criticism of certain features of modernity, including individualism and materialism, in the name of Gospel.”²³ The leaders of the movement hoped to create a communion of saints where every believer

²³ Massimo Introvigne, *The Plymouth Brethren*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. 2018), 87, Kindle.

functioned in a position of priesthood. This is in accordance with 1 Peter 2:9 which labels all believers together as God's priesthood. For the PB, this meant to them that no one should have positions of authority in the format of an established hierarchy. As one can imagine, their idea failed to become what they anticipated.

Introvigne comments, "The Brethren were accused by some other Christians of being sectarian, short-minded, and even heretics."²⁴ Introvigne continues by commenting on the book, *The Churching of America*, written by American sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. He says,

The spirit of Protestantism, Stark and Finke claim, is in itself anti-institutional. Its protest is largely about the corruption it regards as inherent in large structures and instructional churches. Often in history, Protestants have proclaimed their desire to move 'outside of Babylon' and to return to the 'purity' of primitive Christianity. According to Finke and Stark's model, these 'good intentions' normally would not last long. Little by little, the second generation of each new Protestant wave will in turn start a journey toward institutionalization.²⁵

According to Introvigne and much of what we have seen in the history of Christianity, it is inevitable that the institutionalization of the Church would return. Regardless, Darby was adamant in defending the purity of the body of Christ and supremacy of the Scriptures. He was not looking for fame for himself or building a great work to his name. Darby wished to simply remain devoted to seeking the Lord and defending the Truth. Unfortunately, this sometimes resulted in harsh responses toward others who did not agree with Darby. Field comments on Darby's attitude,

Darby's authoritarian behavior did not have the result he expected. Although he had firmly rejected the 'Notion of a Clergyman,' some felt he was behaving more

²⁴ Introvigne, *The Plymouth*, 87.

²⁵ Introvigne, *The Plymouth*, 159.

like a pope. He obviously expected the rest of the Brethren to follow his lead without question.²⁶

Ironically, Darby opposed the clergy system, but this very system which boasts to authoritarianism was evident in some of his behaviors. One of the things Darby did not agree with was Newton's authoritative way to lead the church in Plymouth because he thought it hindered the Holy Spirit from speaking through every member of the meeting. Yet, Darby displayed a similar attitude to that which he opposed in Newton.

Throughout the ages, many Christian groups strove to be purist in nature, but they often mistakenly judged other Christians who held different or lesser standards. To Darby's detriment, he placed harsh standards on many and ignored that even the Lord Jesus himself said that the tares should grow together with the wheat until the harvest (Matt.13:30). Nevertheless, we should not despise what Darby did by separating himself and others from the religious establishment and worldly influences. After all, Jesus did teach that His followers are not of this world like He was not (John. 17:14-6).

If Darby had been focused on building a work for himself, he may have tried to avoid a conflict with Newton, and thus the Plymouth Brethren may have avoided a split. However, since Darby only cared about God and His interest, he did not fear conflict with others. Darby and Newton's disagreements became too many. Eventually, they split, and Darby became the leading figure of the Exclusive Brethren. The Exclusive Brethren later suffered several splits.

Despite the PB's failure to overcome institutionalization, their emphasis on preventing the degradation of the church was still valid. The PB promoted and advanced

²⁶ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 2341.

many positive things for the Church. Lee comments, “In the nineteenth century, the brothers of the so-called Brethren assemblies were raised up. This was one of God's great recoveries in the history of the church. This recovery was exceedingly strong and very rich.”²⁷

Taken from Lee’s publication is a condensed and paraphrased version of his notes below. The recovered items Lee references include the practices of forsaking the world; brotherly love; practical living; and adherence to the Truth. First, the Brethren upheld a total forsakenness to the world. Lee comments,

Within church history, it is rare to see a group break its ties with the world as cleanly as the Brethren did. They were much more advanced than the Moravian Brethren. The Moravian Brethren broke their ties with politics and religious organizations; the Brethren not only forsook politics and religious organization, but also the world.²⁸

Even today, there are some among the Brethren who have never had their photo taken in order that no traces of themselves are left behind for people to see. In fact, this is also the reason why it is difficult to find an accurate biography of Darby—because he did not allow people to write about him or publicize his work. Even some of the Brethren who had been given noble titles wrote letters respectfully to the English monarch renouncing their titles.

Next, the Brethren recovered the act of brotherly love. Although Lee does not name examples of this, he affirms the PB’s love for one another by making an analogy to

²⁷ Lee, *Three Aspects*, chap. 15, sec. 1.

²⁸ Lee, *Three Aspects*, chap. 15, sec. 1.

the Greek meaning of “brotherly love” behind the name “Philadelphia.” He states, “They had the reality of the brotherly love in Philadelphia.”²⁹

Third, the Brethren did not ignore living a practical Christian life. Lee comments that it is likely that no other Christian group in the history of the church has equaled the Brethren in the matter of practical living. The practical living of the Brethren meant living the Christian life as families helping one another. Supposedly, some of the best Christian families in the whole world were those of the Brethren.

Lastly, the Brethren upheld a sworn allegiance to the Truth. Lee thinks that most Christians acknowledge that the PB’s recovery of the truths from the Word of God and their revelation surpassed everything before it. This has a lot to do with the insights Darby and other authors of his kind brought to the movement. Lee considered Darby the “king of Bible exposition.”³⁰ Orthodox beliefs and practices taught in Protestantism today have been largely influenced by the teachings of the Brethren. Lee says that Moody once commented that if all the books in the entire world were burned, he would be satisfied to have a copy of two things: the Bible and *Notes on the Pentateuch* by the Brethren author, C. H. Mackintosh.

Furthermore, *The Scofield Reference Bible* may be indirectly credited to the PB. This is a reference Bible that many preachers cannot do without, according to Lee. Scofield also wrote the *Scofield's Bible Correspondence Course*. Lee states that almost ninety percent of Scofield’s writing in these two publications was adopted from PB teaching; Scofield compiled and edited Brethren material, passing it on.

²⁹ Lee, *Three Aspects*, chap. 15, sec. 1.

³⁰ Lee, *Three Aspects*, chap. 15, sec. 1.

Many basic truths concerning things such as the church, the Lord's return, prophecy, and the separation between the church and the world, were written about by the Brethren. Lee mentions that Luther is credited with recovering the truth of “justification by faith,” but Luther did not write and expound on this principle clearly. Rather, it was the PB who thoroughly advanced the meanings of sanctification and justification by faith. Darby also wrote hymns which are still sung in LCM congregations.³¹

Regarding the PB, Ezhumattoor quoted author Wilbur M. Smith who stated, “of all the groups of Christian believers that developed in the English speaking world in the nineteenth century, that one which produced the greatest number of gifted writers was the Brethren.”³² Ezhumattoor recognized though that despite Smith’s view, very few Christians with fundamental New Testament beliefs recognize how much they owe to this movement. Although people may condemn the PB today, their contributions are of enormous value and perhaps may only be justly measured in eternity.

Darby’s View on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Often throughout history, Christian movements have displayed a pattern. Either ministers belittled the gifts of the Holy Spirit or neglected the fruits of the Holy Spirit that produce holiness. Darby committed the former error. Darby recognized the importance of three gifts—evangelist, pastor, and teacher. He disregarded the gift manifestations of the

³¹ The first two stanzas of Darby’s hymn #47 are: Father, Thy name our souls would bless; as children taught by grace; lift up our hearts in righteousness, and joy before Thy face. Sweet is the confidence Thou giv’st; though high above our praise; our hearts resort to where Thou liv’st, in heaven’s unclouded rays. Brother Watchman Nee translated this hymn into Chinese and improved the original English version.

³² Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 63.

Spirit described in 1 Corinthians 12. Darby did, however, seek to understand these manifestations before he decided on their authenticity. Ezhumattoor writes about this in Darby's visit to Scotland:

The purpose of his visit to Scotland was to investigate what had been called the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by gifts of healing, and speaking in tongues. Darby's verdict was negative. He felt that in the early Church the sign gifts—including healing, miracles, and speaking in tongues—were given so that the world could see a demonstration of God's power and blessing upon Christianity (1 Corinthians 14:22). Miracles were linked to the original establishment of a new testimony of God and were meant to be temporary.³³

In Field's account, Darby's indifference toward the gifts resembles Cessationist arguments. Field writes,

He visited Oxford several times and also ventured north to Row in Scotland where the gifts of the Holy Spirit—speaking in tongues, healing and other miracles mentioned by St Paul – were in evidence. Darby was not impressed. He felt those gifts had been given specifically to the early Church to provide evidence of God's power. He did not consider them relevant today – a view still held by some brethren.³⁴

While Darby did not embrace the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, he did believe that God gifted persons for the ministry of the Gospel. Matthew Austin Clarke comments on Darby's attitude toward the gifts and his association with Edward Irving who practiced them. He says,

While Darby emphasized the use of gifts in ministry, he did not believe that Christians should seek such miraculous gifts as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healings. Darby did not spend long arguing for the cessation of miraculous gifts. Darby had encountered the advocacy of miraculous gifts in the followers of Edward Irving, later the Catholic Apostolic Church... Darby seems to have been more concerned with refuting the peculiar doctrines of the Irvingites than with challenging their expectancy of spiritual gifts. He believed the fact that the Irvingites were in error doctrinally showed the falseness of their charismatic

³³ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 767.

³⁴ Field, *John Nelson*, 1238.

manifestations. Darby seems to have assumed that the miraculous gifts had ceased was an empirical fact that needed little defense.³⁵

Clarke continues,

This is Darby's most definite statement as to the cessation of miraculous gifts. Here he denied that the cessation of gifts was taught in Scripture. Rather, the present weak state of the church was not a subject of prophecy. The church, as was mentioned in the previous chapter is a parenthetical period in the history of the world and salvation. It is a 'timeless heavenly gap.' Signs and wonders had a role in confirming the new dispensation but were not needed now that it was in progress. One argument that Darby sometimes used against miraculous gifts being given today was appropriateness. He argued that it would be inconsistent with the character of God for new miracles to be given today.³⁶

While Darby helped shape the Cessationist view that many hold today, his concern was more regarding the fact that the gifts were inappropriate for the times. This conclusion stems from his theology of dispensationalism. Unlike Cessationists today, Darby did not spend his energy defending a theology of the gifts. He rather separated himself from those who practiced them, and he maintained a focus on purity. Darby instead promoted dispensationalist theology and the viewpoint that the gifts were only signs to confirm the new dispensation. Since the desolated church in his time was neither in a new dispensation or perfect, he thought God should not confirm her with signs and wonders. Clarke quotes Darby's own words to explain his viewpoint:

If God were to exhibit His power now in the church by giving it the gifts it once had, He would be acting inconsistently with His own righteousness in identifying Himself with that which has lost its moral character; for surely it is not now the exhibition of what Christ was in the world. But, on the other hand, if the Lord did not now minister the gifts mentioned in the Ephesians, He would fail in maintaining the blessedness of His character, and the steadfastness of His love to the church.³⁷

³⁵ Clarke, "A Critical Examination," 166.

³⁶ Clarke, "A Critical Examination," 167.

³⁷ Clarke, "A Critical Examination," 167.

Clarke continues,

Thus, God would not confer the miraculous power on churches in error, as that would have overlooked their faults, and God would not confer miraculous power on the Brethren, as that would not have increased their humility. It might be argued in reply that God conferred miraculous power on the Corinthian and Galatian churches, despite their faults. However, Darby would have countered this by arguing that the miracles in those churches did not confirm the local churches, but the new entity of Christianity.³⁸

Darby tied the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to the maturity of the church. He makes the argument that if the state of the Church was not perfect, which it was not, and God backed her up with gifts and powers anyway, it would make the Church to whom displayed the miraculous, look like the complete chosen and perfect Church. It would be also make that church or the Plymouth Brethren proud.

Darby had a point to say that the gifts of the Holy Spirit could make an immature person or immature church prideful. However, it could also be argued the opposite. Just as Darby tried to fight against institutionalization of the Church with an authoritarian upper hand, Darby could also be considered prideful himself for rejecting the gifts of the Holy Spirit instead of receiving them. In fact, receiving and being active in the gifts could actually mature the Church!

Dispensationalism and the Schism between Darby and Newton

Dispensationalism as promoted by Darby is still a very controversial topic among theologians and scholars. Dispensationalism, according to *Merriam–Webster Dictionary*, is the “adherence to or advocacy of a system of interpreting history in terms of a series of

³⁸ Clarke, “A Critical Examination,” 168-170.

God's dispensations."³⁹ While taking a New Testament prophetic class at Randy Clark's Global Awakening institution, my teacher, Adam Knapp, challenged my former views on dispensationalism. He commented on my assignment that Dispensational Eschatology is one of the most errant and inappropriate approaches to Scripture today. Among other things that Knapp explained to me, he mentioned that dispensationalism was developed by Darby based on a vision a girl received.

Supposedly, a girl from Scotland received a vision about the Church's rapture and that it would happen before the anti-Christ comes. This statement in itself is quite controversial. A number of scholars including Mal Couch⁴⁰ and Sunny Ezhumattoor⁴¹ attributed the source of this statement to Dave MacPherson, and they refuted MacPherson's claim. Ezhumattoor believes this statement is speculation from someone that is anti-rapture. Ezhumattoor states, the "most famous false claim is that supposedly given by a fifteen-year-old Scottish young woman named Margaret MacDonald in the spring to 1830."⁴²

Despite Ezhumattoor's conclusion, no one knows the origin for this theory. Another theory suggests that Darby developed dispensationalist viewpoints based on "one of the outbursts of tongues in Edward Irving's church."⁴³ Ezhumattoor comments

³⁹ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "dispensationalism," accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dispensationalism>.

⁴⁰ Mal Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997), 244.

⁴¹ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 1500.

⁴² Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 1500.

⁴³ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 1547.

that Edward Irving was teaching heresy regarding the sinfulness of Christ's humanity but denies that Darby's theory has anything to do with Irving.

Regardless of how Darby came to believe in, develop and father dispensationalism, Darby strongly believed in his viewpoint. He believed that Bible history unfolds in a large meta-narrative of dispensations, and that the Church will be taken from earth to be with Christ before a tribulation period. Field writes,

Dispensationalism certainly has powerful defenders to this day and by being solidly on the fundamentalist side of in the early twentieth century debate against modernism, dispensationalists increased their credibility with Bible-believing Christians in the USA and everywhere. Nevertheless, neither the Catholics nor the Anglicans nor the mainline Reformed denominations have incorporated the basic tenet of a Heavenly people / earthly people dualism. For them, the Old Covenant was fulfilled and rendered obsolete at Calvary and has been replaced with the New Covenant of Jew and Gentile alike.⁴⁴

One of the most controversial issues in Darby's life was his schism with his friend Benjamin Wills Newton. Ezhumattoor says,

Newton viewed with extreme disfavor any departure from Puritan theology, except along eschatological lines. For him, the Church included all the faithful from Abraham down. He considered Mr. Darby's dispensational teaching as the height of speculative nonsense. He was vehemently opposed to the idea of the Church being a special company of whose calling and destiny the Old Testament knows nothing—a line of things emphasized by Mr. Darby.⁴⁵

Newton also strongly insisted that the Church will go through a tribulation; he supported post-tribulation rapture theology. Newton later distanced himself from Darby who promoted a pre-tribulation rapture. Newton was later known for having taught heresy on the nature of Christ. Newton left the Plymouth Brethren.

⁴⁴ Field, *John Nelson*, 3570.

⁴⁵ Ezhumattoor, *A Portrait*, 792.

Field points out that many people who hold to a Dispensationalist view may not even know Darby. Field writes, “On Darby’s tombstone are the words ‘unknown and well known.’ Certainly ‘well known’ to his Lord, Darby’s name is ‘unknown’ to many committed Christians today.”⁴⁶ Darby would most likely not have it any other way. As he himself professed when he decided to resign from law school, “I owed myself entirely to [God].⁴⁷ Darby was not interested in appeasing humans.

Plymouth Brethren and the LCM

Sometime in his eighties, Darby traveled to a small inn. While there, he said to the Lord, “I still love you.” Lee mentions that this story had a tremendous impact on his life. Even until the end of Lee’s life, Lee referred to this story with much affection.⁴⁸ Darby’s pursuit of holiness and Christlike character left a strong footprint on the LCM. Lee admired and promoted Darby’s holiness and encouraged the LCM to follow him in his pursuit of a righteous character, even over the gifts and one’s Christian works for God.

When Watchman Nee started the LCM in China in the 1920s, a group of Exclusive Brethren believers came to visit Nee and his church. Although nowadays, the LCM embraces the values set forth by the PB, Nee, being aware of the splits that occurred in the past, was hesitant to receive them. Nee made it clear that his church would not accept the view of the Exclusive Brethren and he refused to receive funding

⁴⁶ Field, *John Nelson*, 3597.

⁴⁷ Christianity Today, “John Nelson Darby: Father of Dispensationalism,” *Christianity History*, August 2008, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/pastorsandpreachers/john-nelson-darby.html>.

⁴⁸ Witness Lee, *Life-Study of Psalms*, chap. 20, sec. 3 (1984), in Living Stream Ministry, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=084C0C6A25>.

from them. Under these conditions, Nee agreed to their visit but indeed refused their funding offer when it was presented.⁴⁹

From this story, we can gather that the original motivations and intentions of the Plymouth Brethren to build unity and promote purity shifted over the years. The Plymouth Brethren Movement, which started in the 1820s, had a sole purpose of uniting Protestant churches to create a community that was holy and set apart for Christ and the Kingdom. Unfortunately, their vision one hundred years later did not yield all the lasting fruit they hoped it would. Introvigne says,

To this end, they gathered to break bread with all those willing to accept the Gospel of Christ and separate from evil. As so often in the history of Christianity, this utopian vision failed to unite the Protestant Church and instead gave rise to long-lasting new independent groups within Christianity.⁵⁰

Despite Nee's refusal to submit to the control of Exclusive Brethren in the early stage of their movement, the LCM still inherited a lot from Plymouth Brethren practices. First, Darby and the PB's view on the gifts of the Spirit influenced the LCM. The LCM at one time tried to incorporate the Pentecostal Movement into their own movement. However, just as Darby and the PB had been presented with this opportunity and closed their door to it, so also did the LCM. Instead they focused on producing the fruits of the Spirit in persons.

Next, the LCM ended up following the same path as the Plymouth Brethren by not intending to start a new denomination as its original purpose. While the Plymouth Brethren failed to achieve their goal of deinstitutionalizing the Church, their efforts were

⁴⁹ Witness Lee, *The History of the Church and the Local Churches*, chap. 5, sec. 4 (1973), in Living Stream Ministry, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=1CF2C02D4B>.

⁵⁰ Introvigne, *The Plymouth*, 99.

not in vain. The LCM may be thought of nowadays as an example of renewal instigated by the Plymouth Brethren in the early nineteenth century. In fact, witnessing the PB divide helped Nee to form his own critique for the betterment of the LCM. He came to understand that a focus on oneness for the sake of leaving behind the establishment of the church usually ended in division. Rather, love is the fulfillment of true oneness. It became Nee's goal to promote loving one another.

Two other PB principles are ingrained in the function of the LCM even until today. That is, they followed the model of the Plymouth Brethren to (1) encourage all Christians to be their own priesthood of believers by eliminating pastors in the church; and (2) *Sola Scriptura*: embracing the authority of Scripture which meant several things.

Both Nee and Lee valued giving a voice to all the members of the body of Christ. As a priesthood of believers, they embraced the PB's practice of eliminating clergy and hierarchal structures. Until today, the LCM does not ordain pastors to lead churches. Rather, they have elders who lead the church and it functions in a similar form to that of the PB. All the members of the congregation take turns giving messages during meetings; together they comprise and build up the church.

Second, embracing *Sola Scriptura* practically meant that the LCM put high value on memorizing, reading, and knowing the Scriptures. Theologically and theoretically, the Scriptures were considered infallible, believed in a literal sense, and used as a measuring stick for everything. In one of Nee's early publications, *The Christians*, which is a periodical that helps promote the LCM, Nee said,

We believe that the Bible is God's Word, word-for-word. We believe in a literal interpretation of all the major truths of the Bible... The Bible is our only standard. We are not afraid to preach the pure Word of the Bible, even if men oppose; but if

it is not the Word of the Bible, we could never agree even if everyone approved of it.⁵¹

Sola Scriptura not only influenced the LCM but also many Protestant churches in America. The Pentecostal Movement disregarded many of the doctrines of the Protestant church, but by no means would God want the church to deviate from *Sola Scriptura*. Concluding, the LCM would probably not be the same movement if it had not been for Darby and the PB. Although many critiques exist as to the lasting effect of the Plymouth Brethren, one thing is certain: they influenced the LCM so much that the idea of paying the price to become holy as Christ is and was remains in the LCM's very fabric.

Application and Conclusion

Constant tension in the church nowadays lies in the fact that people who pursue and focus on obtaining holiness usually eventually extinguish the gifts of the Holy Spirit by neglect of or lack of belief in them. Conversely, people who operate powerfully in the gifts often fail to pursue or see the value of personal holiness. The Pentecostal Movement started when members of the Holiness Movement, who originated from the Methodist church started by Wesley, began to experience manifestations of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The intriguing and ironic thing is that this occurred while pursuing holiness. Sadly, the Pentecostal Movement, which birthed from the Holiness Movement (which followed the PB), is no longer known for having a focus on holiness.

⁵¹ Watchman Nee, *Collected Works of Watchman Nee, The (set 1) Vol. 07: The Christian (5)* (1992), in Living Stream Ministry, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=11EFE607C1>.

However, the birth of the Pentecostal Movement proved God's desire to dispense His spirit on the Church, independent of whether it commits moral sin. Darby's view on the gifts of the Holy Spirit was not correct. In fact, in churches where the gifts of the Holy Spirit are promoted, we may see more lay members actively involved and participating as the priesthood than in traditional churches or churches who remove clergy positions. This is because these power-filled believers are encouraged to practice healing and prophesy everywhere they go. Existing as a priesthood of believers should be about liberating the power of each believer and equipping them with both the truth of the Bible and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, God does ordain people to serve Him in distinct roles of leadership to help others become mature. For example, Paul was given the role of laying the foundation for God's church (1 Cor. 3:9), but his role included being an example for others so that many builders of God together could continue to build God's house on the foundation he laid. His calling was never meant to replace the other members within the body of Christ. One of the reasons why the healing revival in the 1950s lost momentum was because some healing evangelists were supposed to teach others to do healings, but instead they only held tent meetings to draw crowds to themselves. According to Anna Rountree, author of *Heaven Awaits the Bride*, an angel told her the following in a prophetic experience:

No, only a few on earth were given the gift of healing in great measure. These believers were meant to train the many; instead, most of them erected tents and held the gift for themselves. The gift was used, but since they did not train others, it was corrupted and became a means of enriching themselves personally.⁵²

⁵² Anna Rountree, *Heaven Awaits the Bride: A Breathtaking Glimpse of Eternity* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2013), 675, Kindle.

Nowadays, ministries like Global Awakening and the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry focus exactly on this—moving in the gifts and equipping the body of believers to do the same. The challenge is not whether we can abolish the organizational structures within the body of Christ, but rather whether we can foster a dynamic relationship between clergy and laity. God never meant to take away clergy entirely. The correct way is neither to deny the gifted person nor the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Equipping the body of Christ to reach its full potential as the priesthood of God means teaching believers both to live holy lives and enabling them to become active in the gifts. Darby and other Cessationists who extinguished the fire of the Holy Spirit did not realize that holiness is not our only goal. Our goal is to become holy vessels so that the Lord can pour out his anointing on and through us to help others. If we seek holiness for the sake of holiness, we will eventually become dry and die. Eventually, the PB's quest for holiness became their idol.

However, Darby's efforts in pursuing personal holiness and daring to challenge institutionalized religion is still valuable for today. His conviction that the body of Christ should unite with the life Christ and thus separate from the world is still relevant, especially for churches in the West. We should not take the extreme to not vote, for example (like Darby taught), but actively engage in transforming the world around us. We need to be both separate from the world, but in it enough that we can stand on a hill and illuminate the dark around us.

The history of the Church and its movements may be likened to the waves of the sea. One wave or movement may not change the landscape of the shore. Many waves,

however, can leave a lasting impact that produces a mature and complete Church. Previous movements of God could not have been complete without the faithful ones who went before them. Those before us like Darby did not receive the promise of the better things God has planned for the Church. This is so that only together with us will these things be made perfect (Heb.11:39–40). We should not ignore past movements of God. As George Santayana says, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”⁵³ The biggest thing we can learn from the Plymouth Brethren is that it is worth it to remain in the fight for purity and another wave of the Holy Spirit; this time with power too.

This paper shows the connection of the history of the Plymouth Brethren Movement with the Local Church Movement and the Pentecostal Movement. Both Darby and the LCM failed to recognize God’s heart to rekindle the flame of the Holy Spirit. Even though Darby had flaws and there existed controversies in his teachings, he is still an inspiration to many Christians today due to his holy, Christlike character and his love for Jesus Christ.

⁵³ Nicholas Clairmont, “Those Who Do Not Learn History Are Doomed To Repeat It. Really?”, Big Think, last modified July 31, 2013, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://bigthink.com/the-proverbial-skeptic/those-who-do-not-learn-history-doomed-to-repeat-it-really>.

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