The Origin Of The Pretribulational Rapture Theory

By Ed Sanders (AKA Theologue)

1. Origins
There have been many articles, essays, and books written about the origin of the pretrib rapture teaching. The most prevalent theories among scholars are:

1. that the doctrine began within the Irviningite sect in England in the early 1800's.

2. that it originated in the Plymouth Brethren movement from the teachings of John Nelson Darby in the early 1800's.

3. that it originated with a Mr. Tweedy, who passed it on to Darby and the Plymouth Brethren.

4. that it originated with aberrant Catholic theologians (Jesuit priests) Ribera and Emmanuel Lucanza.

5. that it originated with a Baptist minister named Morgan Edwards in 1788.

6. The doctrine started in the early church with a writer called Pseudo-Ephraim. (The author of this work is unknown (hence, 'pseudo'), its conclusions uncertain, and the date written is in question. Of all the 'theories' this is the least credible).

One thing is clear from the available historical documents: Darby, called the 'father of dispensationalism', was responsible for the widespread dissemination of the new and novel pretrib doctrine beginning around 1830 through his ministry in the Plymouth Brethren movement. The doctrine soon spread to America and was widely popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible.

In my mind the final word on the origin of the pretrib teaching cannot be known with 100% certainty based on the documents available. I think that the best explanation is summarized by Timothy P. Weber (Memphis Theological Seminary) who wrote:

“...the pretribulation rapture......historians are still trying to determine how or where Darby got it... Possibly, we may have to settle for Darby’s own explanation. He claimed that the doctrine virtually jumped out of the pages of Scripture once he accepted and consistently maintained the distinction between Israel and the church”.


John Nelson Darby commenting on 2 Thess. 2:1-2 in 1850:

"It is this passage which, twenty years ago, made me understand the rapture of the saints before -- perhaps a considerable time before -- the day of the Lord, that is, before the judgment of the living.

So, according to Darby he held a different view until 1830 when he came to understand the pretrib rapture doctrine. Until further documentation turns up it seems then most likely that John Nelson Darby originated the pretrib teaching and was responsible for its wide distribution in the years that followed.

2. Quotes from early Plymouth Brethren: (contemporary with Darby)

"Dr. Tregelles further wrote: 'When the theory of a secret coming of Christ was first brought forward (about the year 1832), it was adopted with eagerness; it suited certain preconceived opinions, and it was accepted by some at that which harmonized contradictory thoughts, whether such thoughts, or any of them, rested on the sure warrant of God; written Word".

There follows the quotation given above by Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Fromow goes on to opine, "If the exact terms used by Dr. Tregelles are noted, allowance can be made, that suggestions of a 'secret coming' were put forth a few years earlier, some say at the first Asbury conference in 1826; but the precise date does not alter the fact that it was a novel doctrine".

3. More Quotes regarding the origin of the pretrib rapture theory:

Charles C. Ryrie: a dispensational theologian writes: "The distinction between Israel and the Church leads to the belief that the Church will be taken from the earth before the beginning of the tribulation (which in one major sense concerns Israel)." (Charles C. Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, pp. 158-160). (That seems to fit with the theory that Darby originated the teaching based on his dispensational hermeneutic. Ed.)

John Walvoord: thinks the pretrib rapture theory originated from Darby's understanding of ecclesiology: "any careful student of Darby soon discovers that he did not get his eschatological views from men, but rather from his doctrine of the church as the body of Christ, a concept no one claims was revealed supernaturally to Irving or Macdonald. Darby's views undoubtedly were gradually formed, but they were theologically and biblically based rather than derived from Irving's pre-Pentecostal group". (Walvoord, The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation, p. 47.)

F. F. Bruce: well known Plymouth Brethren historian and theologian says: "Where did he [Darby] get it? The reviewer's answer would be that it was in the air in the 1820s and 1830s among eager students of unfulfilled prophecy". (Book Review of The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin in The Evangelical Quarterly, (Vol. XLVII, No. 1).

Alexander Reese: "About 1830 a new school arose within the fold of Premillennialism that sought to overthrow what, since the Apostolic Age, have been considered by all premillennialist as established results, and to institute in their place a series of doctrines that had never been heard of before. The school I refer to is that of 'The Brethren' or 'Plymouth Brethren,' founded by J. N. Darby." (Alexander Reese, The Approaching Advent of Christ, page 18)

Harry Ironside (4): In 1908 Ironside claimed Darby had rediscovered the apostolic teaching lost to the church: "Until brought to the fore through the writings and the preaching and teaching of the distinguished ex-clergyman, Mr. J. N. Darby, in the early part of the last century, [the pretribulational rapture] is scarcely to be found in a single book or sermon throughout a period of sixteen hundred years! If any doubt this statement, let them search, as the writer has in measure done, the remarks of the so-
Robert Cameron: "Now, be it remembered, that prior to that date, no hint of any approach to such belief can be found in any Christian literature from Polycarp down.... Surely, a doctrine that finds no exponent or advocate in the whole history and literature of Christendom, for eighteen hundred years after the founding of the Church - a doctrine that was never taught by a Father or Doctor of the Church in the past - that has no standard Commentator or Professor of the Greek language in any Theological School until the middle of the Nineteenth century, to give it approval, and that is without a friend, even to mention its name amongst the orthodox teachers or the heretical sects of Christendom - such a fatherless and motherless doctrine, when it rises to the front, demanding universal acceptance, ought to undergo careful scrutiny before it is admitted and tabulated as part of 'the faith once for all delivered unto the saints.'" (Robert Cameron, Scriptural Truth About The Lord's Return, page 72-73).

E. R. Sandeen: "Darby introduced into discussion at Powerscourt (1833) the ideas of a secret rapture of the church and of a parenthesis in prophetic fulfillment between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks of Daniel. These two concepts constituted the basic tenets of the system of theology since referred to as dispensationalism" (E.R. Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism 1800-1930, University of Chicago Press, 1970)

A. W. Tozer: “Here is a doctrine that was not known or taught until the beginning of this century and it is already causing splits in churches.”

Philip Mauro: "The entire system of 'dispensational teaching' is modernistic in the strictest sense; for it first came into existence within the memory of persons now living; and was altogether unknown even in their younger days; It is more recent than Darwinism.” “A system of doctrine that contradicts what has been held and taught by every Christian expositor and every minister of Christ from the very beginning of the Christian era—suddenly made its appearance in the later part of the nineteenth century”.

Edmund Shackleton: All who held the premillennial Coming of Christ were, till about sixty years ago, of one mind on the subject. About that time a new view was promulgated that the Coming of Christ was not one event, but that it was divided into stages, in fact, that Christ comes twice from heaven to earth, but the first time only as far as the air: This first descent, it is said, will be for the purpose of removing the Church from the world, and will occur before the Great Tribulation under Antichrist. This they call "The coming for His saints" or "Secret Rapture." The second part of the Coming is said to take place when Christ appears in glory and destroys the Antichrist. This they call "The coming with His saints."

Apart from the test of the Word, which is the only final one, there are certain reasons why this doctrine should be viewed with suspicion. It appears to be little more than sixty years old; and it seems highly improbable that if scriptural it could have escaped the scrutiny of the many devoted Bible students whose writings have been preserved to us from the past. More especially in the writings of the early Christian fathers would we expect to find some notice of this doctrine, if it had been taught by the Apostles; but those who have their works declare that they betray no knowledge of a theory that the Church would escape the Tribulation under Antichrist, or that there would be any "coming" except that spoken of in Matthew 24, as occurring in manifest glory "after the Tribulation." This is all the more significant, because these writers bestowed much attention upon the subject of the Antichrist and the
Great Tribulation. Augustine, referring to Daniel 7, wrote: "But he who reads this passage even half asleep cannot fail to see that the kingdom of Antichrist shall fiercely, though for a short time, assail the Church." (Edmund Shackleton, Will the Church Escape the Great Tribulation? pp. 31, 32, cited by Alexander Reese, The Approaching Advent of Christ, p. 231.)

4. Implications!
Sometimes overlooked are the implications of the pretrib rapture recent origins. In my book Outline Studies On The Rapture Question (1973) I wrote "Search the pages of Church history and literature, and you will not find one mention of the Lord coming before the Tribulation until after 1800. No one has ever cited any literature, writings, or quotes to the contrary! The implications of this truth are serious. If the Pre-Tribulation doctrine were true, it would mean that it was hidden from the church for 19 centuries. Not one of the brilliant theologians or Bible teachers before the 1800's were able to find a Pretrib rapture and coming of the Lord on the pages of Holy Scripture---an incredulous improbability to say the least!" (4)

Endnotes
(1). Some scholars like John L. Bray promote the theory that the pretrib teaching originated with a Baptist minister named Morgan Edwards in 1788. A close analysis of his writing Millennium, Last-Novelties clearly does not outline end-time events as found in the teachings of Darby, Scofield, Walvoord, etc.

(2) Cited by Wm Kelly in The Rapture of the Saints: Who Suggested It, Or Rather On What Scripture? The Bible Treasury, New Series, vol. 4, p. 314-318.(3) Harry Ironside (1876-1951) was an ardent pre-trib dispensationalist, prolific writer, and former pastor of Moody Memorial Church.

(4) This was written in 1973 before the various claims of a pre-Darby pretrib rapture were widely known. But even if Morgan Edwards or one of the Jesuit priests taught the pretrib rapture theory before the 1800's it would mean that the doctrine was hidden from the Church for more than 1600+ years!

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