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MYTHS OF THE ORIGIN OF PRETRIBULATIONISM

Part II
Thomas Ice

Last issue I began a look at myths of the origins of the pre-trib rapture. This issue I conclude that study.

THE BIG LIE

One of the things that facilitated the Nazi rise to power in Germany earlier this century was their propaganda approach called "The Big Lie." If you told a big enough lie often enough then the people would come to believe it. This the Nazis did well. This is what anti-pretribulationists like John Bray¹ and Dave MacPherson² have done over the last 25 years. Apparently the big lie about the origins of the pre-trib rapture has penetrated the thinking of the late Robert Van Kampen³ and Marvin Rosenthal to the extent that they have adopted such a falsehood as true. This is amazing in light of the fact that their own pre-wrath viewpoint is not much more than fifteen years old itself. Rosenthal must have changed his mind about pre-trib origins between the time he wrote his book *The Pre-wrath Rapture of the Church* (1990) and the recent article (Dec. 1994) since, in the former, he says that the pre-trib rapture "can be traced back to John Darby and the Plymouth Brethren in the year 1830."⁴ Rosenthal goes on to say, "Some scholars, seeking to prove error by association, have attempted (perhaps unfairly) to trace its origin back two years earlier to a charismatic, visionary woman named Margaret MacDonald."⁵ Even this statement is in error, since the Margaret Macdonald claim has always been related to 1830, not 1828. However, Rosenthal is correct in his original assessment that these charges are "unfair" and probably spring out of a motive to "prove error by association," known as the *ad hominem* argument.

Pretribulationists have sought to defend against "The Big Lie" through direct interaction against the charges.⁶ In a rebuttal to these charges I made in 1990, I gave

¹ John L. Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching* (Lakeland, FL.: John L. Bray Ministry, 1982).

² Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City: Heart of America Bible Society, 1973). *The Late Great Pre-Trib Rapture* (Kansas City: Heart of America Bible Society, 1974). *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, N.C.: New Puritan Library, 1983). *Rapture?* (Fletcher, N.C.: New Puritan Library, 1987). *The Rapture Plot* (Monticello, Utah: P.O.S.T. Inc., 1994).

³ Robert Van Kampen, *The Sign* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1992), pp. 445-47.

⁴ Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), p. 53.

⁵ Rosenthal, *Pre-Wrath Rapture*, pp. 53-54.

⁶ Some of the pre-trib responses include the following: R. A. Huebner, *The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered* (Millington, N.J.: Present Truth Publishers, 1976); *Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J. N. Darby*, Vol. 1 (Morganville, N. J.: Present Truth Publishers, 1991). Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept From The Hour*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956). John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979). Robert L. Sumner, "Looking For The Blessed Horrible Holocaust!" A book review of *The Late Great Pre-Trib Rapture* in *The Biblical Evangelist* (Vol. 10, Num. 1; May, 1975); "Hope? Or Hoax?" *The Biblical Evangelist* (Vol. 18, Num. 3; Feb., 1984). Hal Lindsey, *The Rapture: Truth Or Consequences* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983). Charles Ryrie, *What You Should Know About the Rapture* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981). Tim LaHaye, *No Fear of the Storm: Why Christians will Escape All the Tribulation* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1992). Thomas D. Ice, "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulation Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (1990), pp. 155-68; "The Origin of the Pre-Trib Rapture," Part I & II, *Biblical Perspectives*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan./Feb. 1989 & vol. 2, no. 2,

two major reasons why “The Big Lie” is not true. First, it is doubtful that Margaret Macdonald’s “prophecy” contains any elements related to the pre-trib rapture.⁷ Second, no one has ever demonstrated *from actual facts of history* that Darby was influenced by Macdonald’s “prophecy” even if it had (which it did not) contained pre-trib elements.⁸ John Walvoord has said,

The whole controversy as aroused by Dave MacPherson’s claims has so little supporting evidence, despite his careful research, that one wonders how he can write his book with a straight face. Pretribulationists should be indebted to Dave MacPherson for exposing the facts, namely, that there is no proof that MacDonald or Irving originated the pretribulation rapture teaching.⁹

There is a third reason why MacPherson’s theory is wrong, Darby clearly held to an early form of the pre-trib rapture by January 1827. This is a full three years before MacPherson’s claim of 1830.

DARBY AND THE PRE-TRIB RAPTURE

Brethren writer, Roy A. Huebner claims and *documents* his belief that J.N. Darby first began to believe in the pre-trib rapture and develop his dispensational thinking while convalescing from a riding accident during December 1826 and January 1827.¹⁰ If this is true, then all of the origin-of-the-rapture-conspiracy-theories fall to the ground in a heap of speculative rubble. Darby would have at least a three-year jump on any who would have supposedly influenced his thought, making it impossible for all the “influence” theories to have any credibility.

Huebner provides clarification and evidence that Darby was not influenced by a fifteen-year-old girl (Margaret Macdonald), Lacunza, Edward Irving, or the Irvingites. These are all said by the detractors of Darby and the pre-trib rapture to be bridges which led to Darby’s thought. Instead, he demonstrates that Darby’s understanding of the pre-trib rapture was the product of the development of his personal interactive thought with the text of Scripture as he, his friends, and dispensationalists have long contended.

Darby’s pre-trib and dispensational thoughts, says Huebner, were developed from the following factors: **1) “he saw from Isaiah 32 that there was a different dispensation coming . . . that Israel and the Church were distinct.”¹¹ 2) “During his convalescence JND learned that he ought daily to expect his Lord’s return.”¹² 3) “In 1827 JND understood**

Mar./Apr. 1989; “Did J. N. Darby Believe in the Pretrib Rapture by 1827?” *Dispensational Distinctives*, vol. I, no. 6, Nov./Dec. 1991.

⁷ The following books are some of those which have the full text of Macdonald’s utterance: MacPherson’s *Cover-Up*, and *Hoax*. R. A. Huebner, *The Truth of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Recovered* (Millington, N.J.: Present Truth Publishers, 1976), pp. 67-69. Hal Lindsey, *The Rapture: Truth Or Consequences* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), pp. 169-172. William R. Kimball, *The Rapture: A Question of Timing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 44-47.

⁸ Ice, “Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulation Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret Macdonald,” pp. 158, 161.

⁹ Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 47.

¹⁰ R. A. Huebner, *Precious Truths Revived and Defended Through J. N. Darby*, Vol. 1 (Morganville, N. J.: Present Truth Publishers, 1991).

¹¹ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, p. 17.

¹² Huebner, *Precious Truths*, p. 19.

the fall of the church. . . ‘the ruin of the Church.’”¹³ 4) Darby also was beginning to see a gap of time between the rapture and the second coming by 1827.¹⁴ 5) Darby, himself, said in 1857 that he first started understanding things relating to the pre-trib Rapture “thirty years ago.” “With that fixed point of reference, Jan. 31, 1827,” declares Huebner, we can see that Darby “had already understood those truths upon which the pre-tribulation rapture hinges.”¹⁵

German author Max S. Weremchuk has produced a major new biography on Darby entitled *John Nelson Darby: A Biography*.¹⁶ He agrees with Huebner’s conclusions concerning the matter. “Having read MacPherson’s book . . .” says Weremchuk, “I find it impossible to make a just comparison between what Miss MacDonald ‘prophesied’ and what Darby taught. It appears that the wish was the father of the idea.”¹⁷

When reading Darby’s earliest published essay on biblical prophecy (1829), it is clear that while it still has elements of historicism, it also reflects the fact that for Darby, the rapture was to be the church’s focus and hope.¹⁸ Even in this earliest of essays, Darby expounds upon the rapture as the church’s hope.¹⁹

SCHOLARS REJECT THE BIG LIE

The various “rapture origin” theories espoused by opponents of pre-tribulationism are not accepted as historically valid by scholars who have examined the evidence. The only ones who appear to have accepted these theories are those who already are opposed to the pre-trib rapture. A look at various scholars and historians reveals that they think, in varying degrees, that *MacPherson has not proven his point*. Most, if not all who are quoted below do not hold to the pre-trib rapture teaching. Ernest R. Sandeen declares,

This seems to be a groundless and pernicious charge. Neither Irving nor any member of the Albury group advocated any doctrine resembling the secret rapture. . . . Since the clear intention of this charge is to discredit the doctrine by attributing its origin to fanaticism rather than Scripture, there seems little ground for giving it any credence.²⁰

Historian Timothy P. Weber’s evaluation is as follows:

The pretribulation rapture was a neat solution to a thorny problem and historians are still trying to determine how or where Darby got it. . . .

A newer though still not totally convincing view contends that the doctrine initially appeared in a prophetic vision of Margaret Macdonald, . . .

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

¹³ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, p. 18.

¹⁴ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, p. 24.

¹⁶ Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, N. J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992).

¹⁷ Weremchuk, *Darby: A Biography*, p. 242.

¹⁸ J. N. Darby, “Reflections upon the Prophetic Inquiry and the Views Advanced in it” *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, vol. 2 (Winschoten, Netherlands: H. L. Heijkoop, reprint 1971), pp. 1-31.

¹⁹ Darby, “Reflections,” pp. 16-18, 25, 30.

²⁰ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 64.

accepted and consistently maintained the distinction between Israel and the church.²¹

American historian Richard R. Reiter informs us that,

[Robert] Cameron probably traced this important but apparently erroneous view back to S. P. Tregelles, . . . Recently more detailed study on this view as the origin of pretribulationism appeared in works by Dave McPherson, . . . historian Ian S. Rennie . . . regarded McPherson's case as interesting but not conclusive.²²

Posttribulationist William E. Bell asserts that,

It seems only fair, however, in the absence of eyewitnesses to settle the argument conclusively, that the benefit of the doubt should be given to Darby, and that the charge made by Tregelles be regarded as a possibility but with insufficient support to merit its acceptance. . . . On the whole, however, it seems that Darby is perhaps the most likely choice—with help from Tweedy. This conclusion is greatly strengthened by Darby's own claim to have arrived at the doctrine through his study of II Thessalonians 2:1-2.²³

Pre-trib rapture opponent John Bray does not accept the MacPherson thesis either.

He [Darby] rejected those practices, and he already had his new view of the Lord coming FOR THE SAINTS (as contrasted to the later coming to the earth) which he had believed since 1827, . . . It was the coupling of this "70th week of Daniel" prophecy and its futuristic interpretation, with the teaching of the "secret rapture," that gave to us the completed "Pre-tribulation Secret Rapture" teaching as it has now been taught for many years. . . . makes it impossible for me to believe that Darby got his Pre-Tribulation Rapture teaching from Margaret MacDonald's vision in 1830. He was already a believer in it since 1827, as he plainly said.²⁴

Huebner considers MacPherson's charges as "using slander that J. N. Darby took the (truth of the) pretribulation rapture from those very opposing, demon-inspired utterances."²⁵ He goes on to conclude that MacPherson

did not profit by reading the utterances allegedly by Miss M. M. Instead of apprehending the plain import of her statements, as given by R. Norton, which has some affinity to the post-tribulation scheme and no real

²¹ Timothy P. Weber, *Living In The Shadow Of The Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), pp. 21-22.

²² Richard R. Reiter, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publication, 1984), p. 236.

²³ William E. Bell, *A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1967), pp. 60-61, 64-65.

²⁴ Bray, *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching*, pp. 24-25, 28.

²⁵ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, p. 13.

resemblance to the pretribulation rapture and dispensational truth, he has read into it what he appears so anxious to find.²⁶

IRVINGITES AND THE RAPTURE

One of Dave McPherson's strangest claims is that Edward Irving and the Irvingites taught a pre-trib rapture. The Irvingites, are said by McPherson to be the source from which Darby clandestinely stole the doctrine and then claimed it as his own discovery.²⁷ More recently, two British theologians have also cited Irving as the real source of dispensationalism and pretribulationism. "Clearly, then, it is incontrovertible that Irving held to a pretribulation doctrine in a form that is developed and remarkably similar to contemporary dispensational views," say Paterson and Walker.²⁸ Such remarks and conclusions make me wonder if these writers have read very deeply in either Edward Irving or the Irvingite view of eschatology.

A few years ago, an extensive critical analysis of Irvingite doctrine declared that they were still overwhelmingly historicist, while Darby and the Brethren had become futurist. Further, Columba G. Flegg notes that the Brethren teaching on the rapture and the present invisible and spiritual nature of the church,

The later Powerscourt Conferences were dominated by the new sect. The Brethren took a futurist view of the Apocalypse, attacking particularly the interpretation of prophetic 'days' as 'years', so important for all historicists, including the Catholic Apostolics. . . . Darby introduced the concept of a *secret* rapture to take place 'at any moment', a belief which subsequently became one of the chief hallmarks of Brethren eschatology. He also taught that the 'true' Church was invisible and spiritual. Both these ideas were in sharp contrast to Catholic Apostolic teaching, . . . There were thus very significant differences between the two eschatologies, and attempts to see any direct influence of one upon the other seem unlikely to succeed—they had a number of common *roots*, but are much more notable for their points of disagreement. Several writers [referring specifically to MacPherson] have attempted to trace Darby's secret rapture theory to a prophetic statement associated with Irving, but their arguments do not stand up to serious criticism.²⁹

When reading the full message of Irvingite eschatology it is clear that they were still very much locked into the historicist system which views the entire church age as the tribulation. After all, the major point in Irving's eschatology was that Babylon (false Christianity) was about to be destroyed and then the second coming would occur. Classic historicism! He also taught that the second coming was synonymous with the rapture.³⁰ Irving believed that raptured saints would stay in heaven until the earth was renovated by fire and then return to the earth. This is hardly pretrib since Irving

²⁶ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, p. 67.

²⁷ See Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1995).

²⁸ Mark Patterson & Andrew Walker, "'Our Unspeakable Comfort' Irving, Albury, and the Origins of the Pretribulation Rapture," *Fides et Historia*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 1999), p. 77.

²⁹ Columba Graham Flegg, *'Gathered Under Apostles' A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 436.

³⁰ Edward Irving, "Signs of the Times in the Church," *The Morning Watch*, Vol. 2 (1830), p. 156.

believed that the tribulation began at least 1,500 years earlier and he did not teach a separate rapture, followed by the tribulation, culminating in the second coming.

CONCLUSION

F. F. Bruce, who was part of the Brethren movement his entire life, but one who did not agree with pretribulationism, said the following when commenting on the validity of MacPherson's thesis:

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, . . . direct dependence by Darby on Margaret Macdonald is unlikely.³¹

John Walvoord's assessment is likely close to the truth:ⁱ

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.³²

I challenge opponents of the pre-trib rapture to stick to a discussion of this matter based upon the Scriptures. While some have done this, many have not been so honest. To call the pre-trib position Satanic, as Rosenthal has done, does not help anyone in this discussion. Such rhetoric will only serve to cause greater polarization of the two views. However, when pre-trib opponents make false charges about the history of the pre-trib view we must respond. And respond we will in our next issue where **we will present a clear pre-trib rapture statement from the fourth or fifth century.** This pre-trib rapture statement ante-dates 1830 by almost 1,500 years and will certainly lead to at least a revision of those propagating The Big Lie.

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³¹ F. F. Bruce, Review of *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, (Vol. XLVII, No. 1; Jan-Mar, 1975), p. 58.

³² Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, p. 47.