

# The People Behind the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine



I believe this picture may depict an accurate description of 1 Thessalonians 4. But when?

This is part of an article entitled, “The Origin of the Pretribulation Rapture” by Tim Warner of [www.4windsfellowships.net](http://www.4windsfellowships.net)

The story of the development of pretribulationism is a tangled one. From its inception in the early 1800s, there has been a deliberate attempt to cover up its origins. And the cover up continues to this day. This has been perpetrated along two lines of revisionism. One was to hide the real origin of pretribulationism in 19th century Scotland, and attribute it to John Nelson Darby and the Plymouth Brethren. The other has been a recent attempt to selectively quote and misrepresent ancient Christian documents to make it appear early Christian writers were pretribulationists. The purpose of this article is to document a timeline of the major events in the development of this relatively new prophetic viewpoint.

## **THE REFORMATION CHURCH**

During and after the Protestant Reformation (16th century), Protestant Christians held to what is called “historicism,” a view of prophecy that considers the events of Revelation as occurring all throughout the Church’s history. This was supported by employing the “year-day theory” – that the 1260, 1290, & 1335 days mentioned in Daniel and Revelation should be interpreted as years. It was common for Protestants to identify the Roman Catholic Church with Mystery Babylon, and the papacy with the Antichrist. Since historicists considered the tribulation as encompassing most of the Church age, and viewed themselves as being in the tribulation, they were necessarily posttribulationists. This view lent itself to a flurry of date-setting in the first half of the 19th century, where the 1260, 1290, & 1335 days (years) were calculated from the Roman Church’s rise to supreme power under the Roman Emperors, until the second coming.

## **THE RETURN TO PREMILLENNIALISM**

## **Morgan Edwards**

Morgan Edwards was a Baptist minister in Pennsylvania in the mid-late 1700s. As a teenager and seminary student, Morgan wrote a hypothetical essay as part of his seminary training. Morgan was assigned the task, by his tutor, to write an essay on the Millennium using literal interpretation. In Morgan's hypothetical scenario, he separated the rapture from the second coming by at least 3.5 years. His work seems to be a mixture of futurism and historicism. And, Morgan contradicted himself and made many obvious errors. Yet, his work appears to be the very first time the rapture was separated from the second coming of Christ. Many years later (1788), Morgan published his essay in a book. While Morgan Edwards is sometimes cited as a pretribulationist, his work indicates that he did not wish to be seen as a literalist, and was content with the typical historicist view of the times. He insisted that his work was purely hypothetical. Furthermore, there is no apparent connection between Morgan Edwards' essay and modern pretribulationism. Morgan's later works do not display pretribulationist thinking. We must look elsewhere for the origins of modern pretribulationism.

## **Father Manuel de Lacunza**



Fr. Manuel de Lacunza was a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest, born in Chili in 1731, and sent to Spain at the young age of 15 to become a Jesuit priest. When the Jesuits were expelled from Spain in 1767, Fr. Lacunza moved to Italy. In 1790, he wrote a book on prophecy, called *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, which was published in Spain in 1812. Fr. Lacunza wrote under the pen name, Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra (a converted Jew), allegedly to avoid detection since his book ended up on Rome's banned books list.

Fr. Lacunza's book promoted a return to the literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy, and the primitive futurist view of Revelation. He rejected the "year-day theory" of the historicists. Consequently, he saw a personal Antichrist and future tribulation of 1260 days, followed by the second coming of the Lord. He did not espouse a pretribulation rapture.

## **Edward Irving**



Edward Irving was the pastor of a Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) congregation in London in the 1820s. Irving became aware of Fr. Lacunza's book, and was so impressed with it, he took it upon himself to translate it into English, adding a lengthy Preliminary Discourse of his own. Irving's English translation was published in 1827. Irving's developing prophetic views can be clearly discerned from his Preliminary Discourse, including, surprisingly, all the key elements of dispensationalism that later showed up in Darby's writings. Irving indicated that he had been teaching these things to his congregation beginning in Christmas 1825, several years before Darby embraced dispensational ideas.

Irving strongly denounced the apostasy of the Christian denominations in his preaching. He proclaimed that God was about to restore Apostles and prophets to the Church in the last days, and that a great Pentecostal outpouring would come just before the soon return of Jesus Christ. Right on schedule, rumors of healings, tongues, visions, and other manifestations began circulating in Port Glasgow, Scotland, from the home of James and George MacDonald and their sister Margaret. People came from England, Ireland, and Scotland to observe the strange manifestations in the prayer meetings held by the MacDonalds.

The "revival" quickly spread to Irving's church, with tongues, prophecy, and other manifestations breaking out. Margaret MacDonald's Visions – March, 1830. Irving was eventually defrocked by the Church of Scotland because of the strange goings on, and his heretical views of the person of Christ, (he taught that Jesus had a fallen human nature). So, Irving moved his congregation to a rented hall, forming the Catholic Apostolic Church. Not only were tongues, prophetic revelations, and other alleged miracles occurring in Irving's congregation, but these ecstatic utterances focused on end-time prophecy concerning the coming of the Lord.

### [Margaret MacDonald's Visions – March, 1830](#)

In March or April of 1830, after being ill and bed-ridden for about 18 months, Margaret MacDonald claimed to have seen a series of visions. She wrote down these visions in a series of letters, and sent copies to Edward Irving. A month later (June), Irving claimed in a private letter, that Margaret's visions had a huge impact on him: "the substance of Mary

Campbell's and Margaret MacDonald's visions or revelations, given in their papers, carry to me a spiritual conviction and a spiritual reproof which I cannot express."

The outstanding feature of Margaret's visions was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on an elite group within Christianity, just prior to the coming of Antichrist. She saw only "Spirit filled" Christians being caught up to meet Jesus in the air, which she identified as the five "wise virgins" of Jesus' parable in Matthew 25. The rest of Christianity, the "foolish virgins," would be left to be purged and purified by suffering at the hands of the Antichrist, until they were fit to be with the Lord.

### **The Morning Watch – September 1830**

The official quarterly publication of the Irvingite charismatics was called, **"The Morning Watch."** It had exclusively promoted a posttribulation second coming through mid- 1830. But, the September 1830 issue featured part two of an article by someone named, "Fidus," promoting the theory that the seven letters in Revelation describe seven consecutive "Church Ages." In this article, Fidus articulated the new idea of a partial pretribulation rapture. He saw the Philedelphian (Spirit filled) church being raptured prior to the tribulation, and the Laodicean church representing the rest of Christianity. **The Morning Watch** was quickly becoming the vehicle for providing a biblical basis for Margaret MacDonald's pretribulation rapture of "Spirit filled" Christians.

### **The Morning Watch – June, 1831**

In the June 1831 issue of The Morning Watch, Edward Irving made his pretribulationism crystal clear. His biblical support for the elite "Spirit-filled" believers being raptured before the tribulation was the catching up of the "man-child" in Revelation 12. Irving argued that the body of Christ has been "united to Him by regeneration of the Holy Ghost, 'born of God, sons of God,' (Rev. ii. 27; xii. 5). And therefore we with him are called Christ (1 Cor. xii. 12)." Irving went on to say that, "with this key [that Spirit filled Christians are also "Christ," and that the catching up of the "man child" refers to the rapture of Spirit-filled believers] the Old Testament prophecies which speak of Christ must be interpreted, ... and especially those prophecies which speak of the pregnant woman: to all which an explicit key is given to us in the xiith chapter of Revelation; where, though the child is spoken of as one (ver. 5), it is also described as many (ver. 11), who overcame the acuser; and when that number is accomplished, there are still a remnant of her seed, whom the dragon doth persecute and seek to destroy (ver. 17). This two-fold company – the one gathered before, and the other after the travailing woman is cast out into the wilderness, ... – do together constitute the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, which cometh down from heaven." (pp. 301-302).

### **The Morning Watch – December, 1832**

An anonymous writer in the December 1832 (p. 249) issue of The Morning Watch likely referred to Margaret MacDonald's letters (and probably her friend Mary

Campbell & Emily Cardale of London) with the following words; "The Spirit of God has caused several young women, in different parts of Great Britain, to condense into a few broken sentences more and deeper theology than ever Vaughan, Chalmers, or Irving uttered in their longest sermons; and therefore more than all the rest of the Evangelical pulpits ever put forth in the whole course of their existence."

### **Robert Baxter (1833)**

British Lawyer, Robert Baxter, was an early member of the Irvingite charismatics. Baxter had previously been a posttribulationist, but eventually adopted the pretribulation rapture views of Irving. He, along with several other "prophets" of the Catholic Apostolic Church, gave many prophecies, all of which failed. He later became disillusioned with the whole movement, and abandoned Irvingism (and pretribulationism). Upon his departure, he wrote an expose of Irvingism, called Narrative of Facts, Characterizing the Supernatural Manifestations in Members of Mr. Irving's Congregation (1833), including Irving's early pretribulation teachings. "An opinion had been advanced in some of Mr. Irving's writings, that before the second coming of Christ, and before the setting in upon the world of the day of vengeance, emphatically so called in the Scriptures, the saints would be caught up to heaven like Enoch and Elijah; and would be thus saved from the destruction of this world, as Noah was saved in the ark, and Lot was saved from Sodom." Baxter wrote that the coming of the Lord was the main topic of the prophetic utterances in Irving's congregation. Looking back, he thought they had all been deceived by lying spirits pretending to be the Holy Spirit.

### **Robert Norton (1861)**

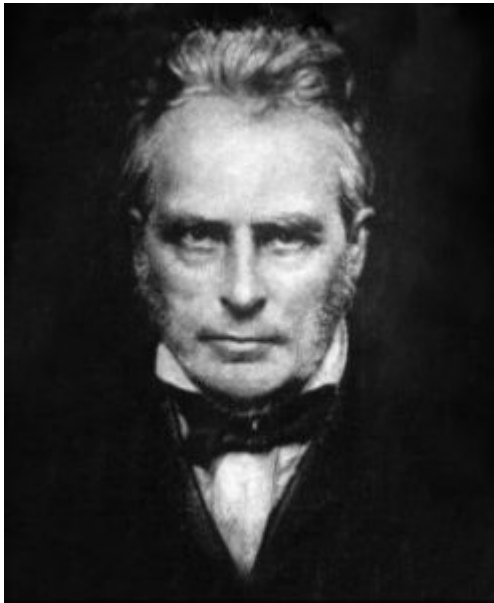
Robert Norton was the author of "The Restoration of Apostles and Prophets in the Catholic Apostolic Church" (1861). Norton took a favorable view of the Irvingite movement, writing in the preface that his book was offered "as proofs or illustrations of its heavenly origin and character." Norton named Margaret MacDonald as the first to proclaim the "new doctrine" of a pretribulation rapture, which was picked up by Edward Irving.

### **Samuel P. Tregelles (1855/1864)**

Samuel P. Tregelles was the most eminent Plymouth Brethren scholar of the 19th century, with first hand knowledge of the Irvingites. In an 1855 article in The Christian Annotator, Tregelles wrote that the true Christian hope is the final "advent" and "not some secret advent, or secret rapture to the Lord, as Judaizers supposed might be the case...". (A later Plymouth Brethren writer, William Kelly, also identified the Irvingites as the "Judaizers"). Nine years later, Tregelles published "The Hope of Christ's Second Coming," in which he wrote: "But when the theory of a secret coming of Christ was first brought forward (about the year 1832), it was adopted with eagerness: ... I am not aware that there was any definite teaching that there would be a secret rapture of the Church at a secret coming, until this was given forth as an "utterance" in Mr. Irving's Church, from what was there received as being the voice of the Spirit. But whether any one ever asserted such a thing or not, it was from that supposed revelation that the modern doctrine and the

modern phraseology respecting it arose. It came not from Holy Scripture, but from that which falsely pretended to be the Spirit of God, while not owning the true doctrine of our Lord's incarnation in the same flesh and blood as His brethren, but without taint of sin." The last statement, "not owning the true doctrine of our Lord's incarnation ... without taint of sin," referred to the Irvingite cult's heretical view of the person of Christ, and to the Apostle John's test that any spirit not acknowledging the true doctrine of the incarnation was of "the spirit of antichrist," (1 John 4:1-3).

### **John Nelson Darby**



The Irish lawyer, John Nelson Darby, one of the founders of the Plymouth Brethren, is typically credited by pretribulationists as the man who "revived" dispensational pretribulationism. Yet it is clear that Darby was a latecomer to pretribulationism, which originated among the Irvingites. Darby wrote his first prophecy paper in 1829. In this paper, he clearly did not have dispensationalist or pretribulationist views. Darby argued that unfulfilled Old Testament prophecy concerning the restoration of Israel should be applied to the Church, the typical historicist – amillennial point of view. He also placed the Church on earth until Armageddon, showing he was still a posttribulationist. By this time, dispensationalist ideas were already well developed in Irving's 1826 Preliminary Discourse. Darby was familiar with Irving and his ideas. On pages 6-10 & 19-21, Darby referred to Irving, de Lacunza, The Morning Watch, and even quoted some of Irving's works, including his Preliminary Discourse! So, while dispensational concepts may have eventually taken root in Darby's mind, they were not developed by him! He borrowed them from Irving.

In 1830, Darby was still defending historicism against futurism three months after the pretribulational "Fidus" article appeared in The Morning Watch. In the December 1830 issue of The Christian Herald, Darby published an article entitled, "On 'Days' Signifying 'Years' in Prophetic Language." Darby defended the standard historicist view, that the 1260 day tribulation meant 1260 years. Consequently, he saw the tribulation as largely past, and could not possibly have been expecting a pretribulation rapture, which requires a "futurist" viewpoint.

In 1830, J. N. Darby also visited the MacDonald's in Port Glasgow, and observed the strange manifestations in their prayer meetings, as Darby later recalled. Darby described the sequence of events – who prayed, who spoke in tongues, etc. But, while he noted Margaret's speaking, he failed to mention the subject of her prophesying. However, John Cardale, who was also present, wrote that Margaret "commenced also speaking ... gave testimony to the judgments coming on the earth; but also directed the church to the coming of the Lord as her hope of deliverance," and was heard speaking in a loud voice "denouncing the coming judgments." Therefore, we can conclude that Darby was fully aware that the pretribulation rapture was a subject of the prophecies among the MacDonalds and the Irvingite charismatics. It was nine more years before Darby clearly espoused a pretribulation rapture in his published works.