

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE ECLIPSE OF THE CHURCH IN ESCHATOLOGY

As we approach our subject of the church's historical destiny, the dispensational theology of John Nelson Darby [1800-1882] will be discussed, providing an introduction and backdrop for the entire study. In his writings, and in the dark shadow he cast over huge segments of Christendom, we have a crystallised instance of ecclesio-eschatological pessimism. He is representative of the fusion of ecclesial and eschatological views that spawned a distinct theological system, commonly known as Dispensationalism. One of the primary axioms in his theology was his denigration of the historical identity and mission of the church – a tenet which has directly and indirectly affected the thinking of many Christians. This thesis can therefore be seen as a proposed answer to the ecclesial pessimism of Darby and Dispensationalism. It will be shown that the church's presence in the world (not its absence) and its successful accomplishment of the missionary mandate is the crucial factor in understanding the apocalyptic events of the terminal period.

Before we begin, it must be noted that this thesis is primarily a biblical-theological polemic for the final obedience of the church and the crucial function of this occurrence in relation to NT apocalyptic. It will seek to show that this ecclesial aspect is rooted in the Scriptures and that it has been articulated at various times throughout the history of the Christian church. For this reason, chapter three contains the heart of the thesis, focussing on the biblical grounds for such an ecclesial hope.

The focus of this work is thus on the more 'horizontal' and temporal aspects of eschatology, rather than on those 'vertical' eschatological dimensions in NT theology. We believe that a reemphasis of these aspects in NT eschatology will provide the church with a sense of historical destiny and world-wide mission.

Lastly, due to the scope of the topic and the diversity of opinion, footnotes have been used. These will hopefully provide the reader with important expatiation and help in further study.

1.1 Background to Darby

The eschatological views of John Nelson Darby were not wholly unique.¹ The matrix for his eschatology was the period of eschatological ferment that arose as a consequence of the volcanic French Revolution in the late 1700's and early 1800's (cf. Froom 1946:265-533). Prophetic conferences in England at the estates of the Anglican Henry Drummond (Albury) in 1827 and 1828 and the Irishwoman Lady Powerscourt from 1831-1833, crystallised and popularised, respectively, the prevailing historicist and futurist interpretations of Daniel and Revelation (Bass 1960:146; Murray 1991:185-206; Sandeen 1978:18-19, 34-39). 'The Albury conferences...gave structure to the British millenarian revival, consolidating both the theology and the group of men who were to defend it' (Sandeen:18-19). According to Sandeen (:38), at the Powerscourt session in 1833 'Darby introduced into discussion...the ideas of a secret rapture of the church and of a parenthesis in prophetic fulfillment'.²

It was a period in which futurism came to full bloom, with the tectonic affects of the French Revolution, industrialisation, religious romanticism, modernism and the like, portending the imminent fulfillment of prophetic expectations. The violent uprooting of both political and social institutions occasioned apocalyptic fervor. The Revolution was a 'cataclysm [that] undermined the progressive and rationalist cosmology of the eighteenth century' (Sandeen 1978:7) and provided the necessary fillip for an ardent millenarian movement.³ This era was the zenith of the historicist school of eschatological interpretation, and interestingly, according to Nelson

¹ Kromminga (1945:204-206) calls Cocceius [d. 1669] the father of dispensationalism. According to Williams, the genius of dispensationalism is that it 'understands the ways of God in our world in an historical framework' (1989:179).

² Sandeen (:64) believed that 'neither Irving nor any member of the Albury group advocated any doctrine resembling the secret rapture', whilst others (Rennie 1992:197) credit Edward Irving as being the generator of this novel doctrine. Rennie's views seem to have the majority of scholarly consensus. Either way, the resilience of this 'doctrine' is seen in the contemporary best-selling series *Left-Behind*, authored by La Haye and Jenkins (1995). Interestingly, La Haye and Ice (1999) formed the Pre-Trib Research Center in 1992 in order to 'communicate the rapture to the present generation' (Ice:12).

³ 'The modern revival of millenarianism originated in the era of the French Revolution...The French Revolution was directly responsible for the revival of prophetic concern' (Sandeen:xxii, 5; also Nelson 1981). Also, the American Millerite adventist movement can be seen as the volcanic release of much of this apocalyptic fervour [1843]. 'William Miller began to teach a similar kind of eschatology at nearly the same time as the British millenarians were creating excitement by their second advent proclamations' (Sandeen:42). Cf. Froom 1946:429-854 for an exhaustive narration of this Adventist movement.

(1981:205), 'no events of the decade of revolution were interpreted as more clearly confirmatory of the correctness of the historicist schema of prophecy with its preoccupation with the conclusion of 1260 prophetic years than those that transpired in Rome in 1789'. This (Eurocentric) historicist interpretation and its year-day key was the 'Rosetta stone' of prophetic interpretation that spawned this theological 'riot' in eschatology.¹ Coad (1968:108) paints the picture:

Many believed that the prophetic sections of the Bible were intended to provide a divine summary of future human history, from which it would be possible for the enlightened of later ages to draw firm information on the course of current historical events. Such studies reached a point of great excitement in the years following the French Revolution, largely because, about a century before, several expositors had made prophecies on the basis of biblical statements, which were taken to have foretold the French Revolution and its aftermath.

The end result of all of these factors was a return to the premillennial framework in place of the optimistic Whitbyian postmillennial world view that had dominated the eighteenth century eschatological outlook. Many now believed that 'society and the church were on the downgrade until the parousia, although this might be interrupted by a brief "latter rain" of the Spirit's power' (Rennie 1992:197). Sandeen (1978:13) has noted how converts to premillennialism in the 1800's brought with them a sense of ecclesial disillusionment, generated particularly from the social and religious upheaval of the French Revolution: 'Converts to premillennialism abandoned man's ability to bring about significant and lasting social progress and in the church's ability to stem the tide of evil, convert mankind to Christianity, or even prevent its own corruption'. The situation could only be rectified by the personal presence of Jesus Christ.²

Sandeen's book *Roots of Fundamentalism* (1978) effectively showed how this new eschatological emphasis was introduced by the theological creativity of the early 1800's. Many of these leaders 'reached their theological conclusions without the benefit of the influence of their most immediate millenarian predecessors' (Sandeen:xxii). Novel doctrines matched the unique times. Darby is the prime

¹ The Albury group (Drummond, Irving *et al*) stated that: 'The 1260 years of Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 ought to be measured from the reign of Justinian to the French Revolution' (Sandeen 1978:21-22).

² Froom (1946:263-282) traces the resurgence of the futurist interpretation back to the Catholic priest Lacunza [1731-1801], a man whose writings Irving translated into English. See Gundry (1977:53-54) on the historical *Zeitgeist* during the premillennial rise.

example of this truth. Although Darby was, like all of us, a child of his day, he however came into his own by taking those prevalent eschatological views and integrating them into his convictions as to the state of the church in the 1800's.¹ Therefore Bass (1960) understood the essential issue with Darby as not with him being the originator of a distinctive dispensational hermeneutic but his attempts to integrate key dispensational tenets into a basic pattern of interpretation, and to systematise it in a prophetic doctrine which he promulgated (:47). His Brethren affiliations and convictions generated his own distinct interpretation and application of the new prophetic viewpoint. His first piece of theological writing in 1828, *The Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ*, reveals him as firstly an ecclesiologist and then an eschatologist. Thus Neatby (1902:76) proffered that 'all his actions subserved ecclesiological ends'. Right from the beginning, his eschatology seems to have been fueled by a radical ecclesiology, and *visa versa*. 'His doctrine of the church seems to have acted as the catalytic agent for the rest of his beliefs' (Sandeem 1978:66-67). In order to cursorily view his ecclesiology and resultant eschatology, we must briefly note the salience of the 19th century Brethren Movement.

Brethrenism was primarily an ecclesiastical reaction to the prevalent state of the Anglican church in early 1800's. It began as an attempt 'to secure a spiritual fellowship where all men might gather under the theme "The Blood of the Lamb and the Union of the Saints"' (Bass 1960:142). Small groups of Christians in many different parts of the British Isles were becoming disillusioned with the spiritual condition of the regular churches, and were breaking off to form independent congregations of their own. Many of the well educated National Church believers (United Church of England and Ireland) who were recently revived, were drawn to the class and educated high culture of early Brethrenism. These 'evangelical' Anglicans, known as Recordites, were characterised by their upper class Romanticism, ecclesial idealism and antipathy toward continental rationalism (Rennie 1992:191). Concerns of a rejuvenated Roman Catholic peasantry, aided and abetted by political liberation,

¹ Much to the credit of Darby, he broke somewhat free from the regnant historicist interpretation of Revelation and favoured a more futurist model. However, historicist tendencies still seem to have affected his 'eschatologising' of his contemporary generation. Thus Sandeen (1978:39): 'The divergence between the historicists and futurists remained the only serious source of dissent among the millenarians during the first generation of the movement'. Cf. Sandeen (:36-38) who mentions the attack on the 'year-day' principle at the first Powerscourt conference, so essential for the move from a historicist to a futurist interpretation of Daniel and Revelation (also Rennie 1992:199).

became a socio-religious threat to many Anglo-Irish land-owning aristocratic Anglicans – a fact fuelling the uncertainty of the times and resulting in disaffection over the response of the Anglican Church (Rennie:191).¹ Many defected to the Brethren sodalities. The Dublin, Plymouth and Bristol congregations became prototypical.

Being mainly of Anglican stock, the disaffected were suspicious of the non-conformist churches and many, including Darby, never considered joining them or any other institutionalised bodies. Joining these bodies would imply another separation from one party to join another. The non-conformists were seen as examples of 'Gentile apostasy', being fraught with the liberalism that follows from the defection from the Calvinistic heritage (Rennie 1992:197). Neatby (1902) posits the source of Darby's ecclesiology as that of a mixture of High Churchmanship, evangelicalism and Puseyite Romanticism. This idealism prejudiced him against many otherwise virulent forms of Christianity of his day:

He felt the outward failed to maintain a correspondence with the inward. But Dissent mended nothing. It was an attempt to repair the irreparable. They could not restore the glory of the Church, for they could not restore its unity, nor gather together the scattered children of God. The only thing to do was to own at once the ruin, and the impotence to remedy it; and in Darby's view, this was his great and distinctive witness (Neatby:90).

With the crisis of ecclesial identity, many met informally, without formally seceding from the Anglican Church. Yet later more and more people seceded and these informal 'nameless' groups developed distinct identities. Many overcame their initial disillusionment toward other church bodies and reached out the right hand of fellowship with other believers. Others smarted and never adopted a positive outlook toward any others. The latter became reactionary, pessimistic and libelous in their words and writings, holding on to ecclesiastical shibboleths and party interpretations. This tendency crystallised in the Exclusive Brethren, whilst the other current of Brethrenism joined the ranks of the conservative evangelicals, albeit with their own distinct flavour.²

¹ Preskett (1997:310) mentions the following factors that contributed to the rise of Brethrenism and the switch to futurism: the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 extended civil rights to non-conformists; George the 4th signed the Emancipation Act, emancipating Catholics in 1829; the Great Reform Bill of 1832 was followed by a cholera outbreak; and the education of Irish children on a non-Protestant basis.

² 'The epoch of Excelsivism really derives its whole character, and its therefore sovereign explanation, from the personality of Darby' (Neatby 1902:192). Bass (1960:143) considered Darby vital to the organic growth and intellectual articulation of Brethrenism: 'Darby was also undoubtedly the maker

Early Brethrenism championed Scriptural sincerity and liberty in worship. Their Romanticism accounted for their penchants of philosophical history, literal Scriptural interpretations and the confession of the verbal inspiration of Scripture (Rennie 1992:195-197). Yet they were first and foremost an ecclesiastical renewal, and many who looked for a more simple and 'apostolic' church practice swelled their ranks. Their genius was their emphasis on the *oneness of the church* as the body of Christ, and they welcomed all true believers, in contrast to 'sectarian' Protestantism and Anglicanism's 'special membership' for the Lord's table. Breaking of bread was a weekly occurrence for *all* sincere believers. The Table, not the Pulpit, was central to their meetings. This fraternal focus accounted for their antipathy toward the clerical caste and the unscriptural nature of 'man-ordained ministry'. Yet the roots of many were still in Anglican soil. Regarding this residue of Anglicanism in Brethrenism, Neatby (1902:194) provides further elaboration on the nature of Darby's ecclesial practice and of early Brethrenism: 'Fundamentally, the conception to which Darby devoted his enormous energies for more than fifty years was a High Churchism that should disdain the common accompaniment of Ritualism, and borrow from Protestantism an intensely Biblical element'. The movement could not fully extricate itself from the heritage of the Anglican communion.

In sum, McDowell (1983:211) characterised the Brethren as 'fundamentalistic, evangelical, Calvinistic, baptist, objectivist, congregational, non-clerical, futurist and separatist'. Yet while their association with certain prophetic views was a later outgrowth, their remnant mentality provided the fertile ground for the then contemporary eschatological views to take firm root. Their reactionary nature set many on a path that became narrower and narrower, eventually resulting in a perverted form of Christianity (the 'Exclusive Brethren'). Others fortunately joined with other movements on the evangelical highway, although they retained their Brethren distinctives (the 'Open Brethren').

of Brethrenism as a theological system, and he gave it the impetus it needed for expansion. He systematized its doctrine, and through his own dynamic personality, intellectual capabilities, and social position, popularized the movement.

1.2 Darby's views of the church

Darby was a 'mystic', a linguist (he translated the Bible or portions thereof into French, German, Dutch, and Italian), an indefatigable traveler, an impassioned preacher and a prolific writer (40 volumes remain of his collected writings, which Sandeen (1978:23) considers as 'almost uniformly unintelligible').¹ He was deeply dismayed over the present state of the church - a fact which dominated his thinking and ecclesiastical labours. He had a 'pervasiveness of dissatisfaction with the church, [an] interest in prophecy and the second advent, and [a] desire to break through apathy and tradition to the heart of the apostolic faith' (Sandeen:32). To his credit, he sought to turn into reality the principles which others merely confessed with their lips. His pain over the state of the church was eased with his separation of the 'church' into two distinct groups, reflecting a *dual character of the church*: the visible Christendom and the invisible Bride of Christ, the human institution and the true people of God. This resulted in a defamatory stance toward the visible and empirical church, and alienated him from the mainstream of Christianity. The *ruin of the church* became axiomatic for him and coloured much of his eschatology (Neatby 1902:87-95). Startlingly, 'it was of the ruin of the Church as the company of the elect that Darby predicated the ruin' (Neatby:88).

Darby and many others were disenchanted with the church and 'man-ordained-ministry', opting rather to meet together with others of like mind. Together with this ecclesial disappointment and his dichotomy between the professing church and the authentic church, he was entrenched further into a disaffected separatist mentality. McLaren (1995), surveying the origins of the Open Brethren, characterises Darby as a religious purist who called for a positive separation from all established and dissenting churches. The root of such a reaction to both the established church and the nonconformist bodies is found in Neatby's statement that 'he [Darby] made all the characteristic testimony of the Church...to depend on the preservation of external unity' (1902:89). Darby was disgusted at the evasive justification of the distinction between the visible Church and the invisible Church - the church was not to be an

¹ Cf. Sandeen pp 30-41, 59-80 for further information on Darby and the millenarian movement in Britain in 1800's. For a letter crystallising Darby's personal experience in seceding from the Anglicans, see pp 32-34 in Sandeen. See also Neatby 1902:192-198, who wrote of Darby's monumental enthusiasm as a gigantic failure.

invisible light of the world. He thus traced a dim and perilous way, between the Scylla of acquiescing with the 'mixed multitude' established church and the Charybdis of the 're-building' spirit of the dissenters. He eventually settled for a modified form of congregationalism that avoided 'independency' by having a federation of new meetings (Neatby:91). Yet he was certainly 'rebuilding what he had once destroyed', and 'in condemning every existing conception, he had in fact excluded all possible alternatives' (Neatby:91).

Subsequent to the third Powerscourt conference in September 1833, 'Darby attacked openly what he considered the apostate institutional church and stressed the need for all believers to be gathered only unto the name of Jesus' (Neatby 1902:78). This divisive tendency ripened in 1848, in the vitriolic debates over the autonomy of the local assembly. The protagonist calling for division was Darby, 'the man who had led in the division between the two main groups of Brethren' (McLaren 1995:175). The Darbyite group came to be known as the Exclusive Brethren, seeing themselves as representing the classical affirmation of the *one church* of Jesus Christ. They 'stressed that there is only one body and all assemblies were members of it, so that to act in independence was to deny the truth of that one body' (McLaren:192).

Darby's separation of the church into the 'professing and possessing' groups, fueled his pessimism and eschatological hopes. His writings are racked with this theme. We notice how this controlling idea steers his interpretation of Revelation 2-3. He interprets this section as a message to the *professing* church, to Christendom. Here the church is looked upon in its earthly condition, not its heavenly one. He sees Christ's relationship with this body as different to that of the true church:

Mark again, here, the character that Christ takes in connection with the seven churches, as well as with the world. It is not as Head of the body, as the source of grace to His members, but as one working in the midst of something outside Himself, and pronouncing His judgment on their external state...*None of the seven churches consequently is viewed as the work of God in itself* [italics mine]. What takes place is a judicial investigation, and God is not judging His own work, but man, on the ground of responsibility, according to which he has received through that work (Darby 1962, 2:266-269 *passim*).

This pessimistic view of the 'earthly responsible church' was buttressed by his interpretation of the seven churches. In typical (to be anachronistic) dispensational form, he reads these chapters as a 'successional picture of the condition of the church upon the earth, as responsible to God from the beginning to the end of this

dispensation, in a prophetic way' (Darby 1962, 2:278). Revelation 2-3 is therefore programmatic for church history - the classical dispensational approach. Thus the final church, Laodicea, is portrayed as lukewarm, a condition precipitating its separation from Christ. The possibility of God divesting himself of the established church is foreseen in the history of Israel. Darby writes: 'Yet we all know as a plain fact that God has cast off Israel as a visible witness to bear His name to the world. And He will, in the same way, cast off the church, if it fails in its responsibility on the earth' (2:279). Thus *the Laodicean church becomes a prophetic prediction of the apostasy of the visible church of Christ*, for, 'though the professing church still subsists in form, yet it is utterly rejected, and Christ declares unconditionally that he will spew it out of his mouth. The judgment is not accomplished, but it is certain and assumed as much' (2:365). This interpretation of the Laodicean church is the watershed in Darby's interpretation of the book of Revelation:

In its general character, notwithstanding the special working of grace in detail, the professing church gets worse and worse, till it comes to that condition that it has to be spewed out of Christ's mouth; and then 'a door is opened in heaven' and John is caught up there; Revelation 4. Then the judgment of the world comes, and the introduction of the Only Begotten to His earthly inheritance....God has done with the church as a testimony....*The church has failed to put its Amen to the promises of God* [italics mine] (2:368).

Darby's dismay over the empirical church of his day, affirmed his suspicion. He saw the professing pseudo 'church' fraught with *the leaven of heresy*, a cancer in the body he fought continually. Coad's comments (1968:111) are consistent with the tenor of Darby's writings: 'Darby early developed a theory of the workings of heresy which coloured his actions for the whole of his life. Heresy was to him a real and evil thing, working secretly and deviously beneath the surface, until it broke out in its full development, to the ruin of churches'. The leaven in Matthew 13:33 was seen as the sin of heresy; the patent heresy of the professing churches driving his interpretive wedge home. The result was a sectarian separatism that created a culture of suspicion amongst its followers.

Thus the church is in ruins and without remedy. It is no longer capable of being a testimony on earth, for it is dominated by men and manipulated for earthly purposes. Bass (1960:102) penetrates further into the nature of this 'perversion': 'This ruin in which the church finds itself is not merely one of denominational division; *it is*

one in which the entire nature and purpose of the church has become so perverted that it is diametrically opposed to the fundamental reason for which it was instituted'. Theologically, the later NT epistles were referred to as bearing evidence of an incipient ecclesial apostasy, a downward church spiral, seen particularly in 1 Timothy and Jude. This culminated in the deduction, noted by McLaren (1995:182), that as Malachi testified to the ruin of Judaism, so Jude was supposedly testimony to the ruin of Christendom. There is thus no hope of restoration, for the true church is a Christian remnant in the midst of Christendom's ruins.¹ The church dispensation, like all others, ends in judgment and ruin.

Contiguous to the ruin of the church was Darby's distinct beliefs *vis-à-vis* the nature of the church. To him the true church belonged to a heavenly, transcendent sphere.² It was the antithesis of earthly Israel and the nations of the world. He had an extreme idealism of the Christian church, and, speaking of the relation between the true church and Israel, wrote: 'The heavenly and the earthly people...the habitation and scene of glory of the one being the heavens, of the other, the earth. Christ shall display His glory in the one according to that which is celestial; in the other, according to that which is terrestrial' (1962, 1:123). Due to her nature, the true church thus has no part in this historical age; that is reserved for the OT people of God, the Israelites. This thinking flowers in Darby's affirmation that once a Jewish remnant accept the Messiah after the rapture (Christ coming *for* his saints), they (the 144000 of Revelation 7) will fulfill the great commission.³ The true church has no future in this present world. Her home and identity are found in heaven and her ardent longing is to

¹ Sandeen (1978:21) delineates six conclusions that Drummond published on behalf of those attending the Albury conferences (1827-1828). The third states: 'The judgment to come [which cataclysmically ends this dispensation] will fall *principally* upon Christendom' [italics mine]. This axiom is understandable if we also remember that 'millenarians without exception were staunchly anti-Catholic' (Sandeen:17).

² 'In opposition to the worldliness of the church, Darby advocated a church so spiritual that it existed outside of history' (Sandeen 1978:67). See particularly Williams 1989:170-171.

³ Travis (1997:154-155) notes the absurdity of this theological statement: 'It thus expects the Lord to achieve after his coming the work which he has in fact committed to the church now, and for which he has promised the Holy Spirit's power'. Thus the church has, *effectively*, no part in salvation-history in Darby's system (!). According to Bock & Blaising (1993:23-24), classical dispensationalism's central dualism was the line between the heavenly humanity (church) and the earthly humanity (Israel). The church was considered as ahistorical and Christendom a human attempt to 'terrestrialise' an exclusively heavenly phenomenon. For this reason, 'the distinction between God's program for Israel and His program for the church' is the key variable in dispensationalism (Lighter 1986:34. Also Lewis & Demarest 1996: 312-326).

be caught up to be with her Groom.¹ Initially, this heavenly emphasis was the rationale for Darby's earlier emphasis on remaining in the established churches, for the ideal of unity was primarily a *spiritual* one. Any formal union of professing bodies was seen as a Romanish illusion. Mutual co-operation was insufficient. This spiritual identity became a key tenet of Brethrenism as a whole. For them, this truth of the church's unity meant that any meeting which was not framed to embrace all the children of God in the full basis of the kingdom of the Son can find no blessing. Later however, this tenet came to be interpreted in narrowly exclusivistic terms, as Coad (1968:120) pertinently observes: 'Darby's teaching left a vacuum which could only be filled, at a later date, by his own bodies arrogating to themselves the position, if not title, of the only valid churches'. This denunciation of the institutional church created a profound psychological climate for Darby to present his views, and 'by the suppression of every form of organisation, his system gave all the more play to the ascendancy of his powerful individuality' (Neatby 1902:83). Bass (1960:145) clarifies this point further: 'By maintaining staunchly that the existing church organizations were forsaken by God in favor of "heavenly assemblies", which in turn included only those who receive the truth as he conceived it, Darby put himself in a position to advance his own program'. Neatby (:59), who wrote a putatively equable history of early Brethrenism, writes of the sad outcome of Darby's noble ideals:

In his evolutions, Darby ended at a point exactly opposite to that from which he started. He began...with universal communion, and ended with universal excommunication. He began with the declaration that it would be presumption and impiety to attempt to build up the 'ruined Church', or to restore 'the administration of the Body'; and he ended by doing both things strenuously, if there is meaning in words.

This spiritual nature of the church had a dark gloomy backdrop - the present and eventual demise of the world. In reading Darby's works, one notices how his pessimism is all pervasive and consistently developed. To him, the present dispensation is under man's control and is inexorably destined for destruction. There is no glory for the church in this world:

Instead of permitting ourselves to hope for a continued progress of good, we must expect a progress of evil; and that the hope of the earth being filled with the knowledge

¹ Williams (1989) chastises dispensationalism for propagating a 'fully spiritualised notion of the church as the body of Christ', whereas in the NT it is 'the one great, tangible, observable truth of the Christian religion' (:170-171). For a notable study on how Darby depreciated the expected latter-day-glory of the church, see Murray 1991:185-206.

of the Lord before the exercise of His judgment, and the consummation of this judgment on earth, is delusive. We are to expect evil, until it becomes so flagrant that it will be necessary for the Lord to judge it (Darby 1962, 1:311).

One cannot be more far removed from postmillennialism. He even went so far as to aver: 'We have no reason to expect, in the ordinary given meaning to it, the progress of the gospel; there may be and will be, as much as is necessary for the gathering together of the children of God (1962, 1:312). Surrounded by such regnant evil and darkness, any effort to reform the 'church' was pointless and presumptuous. Such aspirations were not congruent with the present dispensation, which was fallen, and any who tried to remedy this state had failed to grasp the Divine will (thus his antipathy for dissenters). For this reason, Darby viewed with suspicion any tendency to set up elders or organisations within the church. The only governing principle was to be the Spirit of God. Also, advances in technology and worldwide efficiency were viewed with suspicion, being seen as a human glory that would only further serve the purposes of Satan.

Adventism was another tenet of Brethrenism. The return of Christ, whether secret or visible, was in the offing. Neatby (1902:339) accents this eschatological aspect and its effect:

Brethrenism is the child of unfulfilled prophecy, and of the expectation of the immediate return of the Saviour....Brethrenism took shape in part under the influence of a delusion, and that delusion left its traces, more or less deeply, on most of the distinctive features of the system.

Yet this ingredient fitted in with the salient features of Darby's system, being axiomatic within it. Given Darby's pessimism, both terrestrially and ecclesiastically, is it little wonder that the doctrine of the *secret rapture* fitted so comfortably into the following pessimistic outlook?: 'Truly Christendom has become completely corrupted; the dispensation of the Gentiles has been found unfaithful; can it be restored? no; impossible. As the Jewish dispensation was cut off, the Christian will be also' (Darby 1962, 1:320-321). Darby thus posited two comings: Christ would come secretly *for* his saints, and he would come (seven years later) manifestly *with* his saints. Bass (1960:39) rightly links his emphasis on evil and heresy with this secret rapture and concludes: 'The idea of the rapture does not arise from exegesis, even for dispensationalism, but from its concept of the church'. For Darby, 'the character of the

church required that the coming be secret and mystical' (Sandeen 1978:63).¹ To excise this rapture theory would be like pulling at a loose thread of a garment. It would deny the whole system of interpretation and undermine the movement that Darby came to be associated with.

In conclusion, we can sum up certain of Bass' (1960) and McLaren's (1995) distinctive features of Darby's position which will be pertinent to this thesis:

- A dichotomy between Israel and the church.
- The church exists in parenthesis. She is not a continuation of salvation-history.
- Each dispensation, existing as a test for man, ends with apostasy.
- In all dispensations, a remnant is preserved.
- God never restores a fallen situation but makes a new dispensation.
- The pre-tribulation rapture is the next great ecclesial expectation.
- The purpose of the great tribulation has only to do with the Jewish kingdom.
- The apostate nature of Christendom is axiomatic for an assessment of the church.

1.3 Darby and the maturity of the church

The reason for choosing to begin the thesis with this analysis of Darby is that he consistently crystallised and publicised the pessimistic trend in eschatology and ecclesiology that saw *the future of this age as a church-less future*. He is the arch representative of that eccentric thinking that sees the evacuation of the church as the precipitating factor in initiating the final events of God's eschatological program. This thesis is diametrically opposed to that theological trend and will argue for *the presence of a mature church as the precipitating factor* in the said program. We will show that the '*ruin of the church*' is an oxymoron.

Darby fed the self-consciousness of the church with a sense of its spiritual and heavenly nature and destination, something rightly needed in a period which tended to simplistically associate the church with an empirical denomination. Yet instead of augmenting that truth with a healthy historical sense of destiny, he truncated the church's future, looking *only* upwards and not forwards. His 'church' had no self-

¹ Sandeen (:63) quotes Darby's 'stunning' words: 'The Christian's hope is not a prophetic subject at all'. Darby attempted a resolution of his exegetical dilemma [on the rapture] by distinguishing between Scriptures intended for the church and Scriptures intended for Israel (Sandeen:66). 'Darby's distinctive beliefs were...the doctrine of the secret rapture and the subsequent necessity to divide the NT into Jewish and churchly texts' (:69-70).

conscious historical mission or destiny - it had a glorious verticality but a withered horizontality. To him, the road of church history had a precipitous terminal point, and *the rapture* - where the believers would be scooped out from the final calamitous days of history - *became the blessed hope of the church*. The church needed to escape to better things. For many, this 'evacuation theory' has blighted the salvation-historical perspective of the church and eclipsed the days of her greatest glory and triumph. For this reason, we can heartily affirm with Bass (1960:148) that 'belief in a pre-tribulation rapture tends to alter one's concept of the *purpose* of the church in the world'.¹

More than a church-less future, Darby saw the plenary apostasy of the church as a requisite precursor to the coming of Christ. An apostate church was to precipitate the return of Christ. Classical Dispensationalism has its matrix during this period, and is a theological system that has had far reaching effect, effectively eclipsing the church's future glory.² The key aspects of Darby's theology, namely, ecclesiastical dualism, heresy and apostasy, the nature and identity of the church and an imminent global demise, have been requisite ingredients in spawning the dispensationalist doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture.³ Darby was consistent with his systematising of ecclesiology and eschatology, and showed that what one believes about the church is determinative for any forecasts as to her future glory in this world. In contradistinction to Darby, it is particularly *through* the contemporary reality of the church that this thesis will view the events that precipitate the second coming of Christ into this world. The plenary renewal of the church rather than a pessimistic ruin, will forecast the glorious return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ Williams' pertinent monograph *Where is the Church? The Church as the unfinished business of Dispensational Theology* (1989) accused dispensationalism's view on the visible church as at best 'a mere convenience for the individual believer during his earthly sojourn, and at worst...a theologically impotent human construction' (:167). Though extreme, the statement nuances the deficiencies. For the most comprehensive refutation of the entire Darbyite pretribulation theory, see Reese [s a].

² Progressive dispensationalism, though a modified and corrected version of its mother, still identifies with a pre-tribulation rapture (see Bock & Blaising 1993 and Saucy 1993). If this tenet was dropped, it would probably have to drop the 'dispensational' epithet.

³ Cf. Ryrie 1973 and Sandeen 1978:59-80 for a concise study of Dispensationalism.