

**Luther Meets Darby: *Sola Scriptura* and its Legacy of Ecclesiastical Independence<sup>1</sup>**

by Cory M. Marsh<sup>2</sup>

*Presented at the Evangelical Theological Society  
Far-West Regional Conference, April 21, 2017 – Gateway Seminary, Ontario, California*

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper will be published as a chapter in a forthcoming book from SCS Press in El Cajon, CA, titled: *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*, Ed. Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio. Publish date: October 31, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Cory M. Marsh, ThM (cand.), MA, MDiv, is associate professor of Bible and Theology at Southern California Seminary, in El Cajon.

Presented at The Evangelical Theological Society  
Far-West Regional Conference, April 21, 2017, Gateway Seminary, Ontario, California

## ***Luther meets Darby: Sola Scriptura and its Legacy of Ecclesiastical Independence***

By  
Cory M. Marsh \*

### **1.1 Introduction**

While the battle cry of the Reformation concerned issues directly majoring on soteriology, ecclesiology was affected only incidentally.<sup>1</sup> Yet, issues raised during this period would quickly alter assumed ecclesiastical convictions resulting most notably in the individual church member's prerogative to interpret Scripture, and regard himself as a Spirit-led priest under the authority of Christ alone. As such, the Pope and his Roman Church were quickly found to be obstructing the New Testament's portrayal of local, self-governing assemblies. With this as a backdrop, the paper will examine the impact left on the clergy / laity divide resulting from the recovery of Scripture's ultimate authority and the Christian's right to interpret it. The argument advanced throughout is that with the recovery and development of *sola Scriptura* and the Priesthood of Believers, papal authority was transferred to Spirit-filled laity which would later result in the rebirthing of local, autonomous churches. A spotlight is thus shown on the furtherance of the Reformation's legacy concerning ecclesiastical independence and individual Bible interpretation, principles that would in turn influence American evangelicalism

### **1.2 Context and Method**

Of all the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers, it is Martin Luther who stands out as the premier fountainhead to challenge Rome's clerical abuses. Yet, his protest did not remain in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany. Luther's calling-to-task the Catholic Church's captivity of Western Christianity was picked up again three centuries later by another commanding reformer dealing with almost identical issues in the United Kingdom—an Anglican priest named, John Nelson Darby.

With a focused interaction of Luther's three most controversial treatises published against the Catholic Church in 1520, the methodology used here will be to analyze and compare his manifesto with Darby's three most controversial treatises against the Established Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It will be shown that identical notions of both Scripture and ordained clergy

---

\* Cory M. Marsh, Th.M. (cand.), M.Div., M.A. is associate professor of Bible and Theology at Southern California Seminary in El Cajon, CA.

<sup>1</sup> James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 43–64, Kindle, traces the historical progression of Christian theology and labels the Reformation era as “the soteriological period” and “the period of controversies on the application of redemption (justification).” It appears Orr assumed that ecclesiology was a doctrine still in progress as he never devotes a specific chapter to its development in contrast to other key doctrines.

held by Luther and Darby are what connect these two reforming giants separated by time and geography, and that Darby is who furthered the mantle of Luther's reforms to their ecclesiastical conclusions. Moreover, certain key NT texts will be interspersed throughout this paper giving Scripture its due authoritative honor—a technique exemplified by both men.

## 2.1 Background to Martin Luther's Rise

As the focus here is limited to specific beliefs held by Luther concerning Scripture and the clergy reflected in specific writings, a detailed personal biography lies outside the scope of this paper.<sup>2</sup> What can be said, however, is that Martin Luther (1483–1546) was much like the sons of Issachar who “had understanding of the times” (1 Chron 12:32). He was a man with the depth of conviction that could only be matched by his passion for all things Christ and Scripture. Luther's sensitivity to his own personal sin as a monk in the Augustinian cloister of Erfurt has been well documented, as well as his personal conversion regarding the doctrines of repentance, justification, and faith alone while lecturing through the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians (1513–17).<sup>3</sup> Luther lived during a time in Germany where the collective resentment toward Rome had been bubbling for centuries. Immorality, financial abuses and various wars traced directly to Catholic popes and clergy—a group Luther coined “Romanists”—had left a rotten stench of hypocrisy smelled across all of Europe. Rome's captivity over the laity, highlighted in the selling of indulgences and the profiteering of personal masses, made the Catholic Church a lucrative industry; yet, it also left the citizens of Germany primed and ready for someone to rise up and lead a complete overhaul of the blatant corruption caused by dishonest clergy supposedly working for God. “It was according to this projection,” Mullet observes, “the gross corruption, the spiritual and practical despotism of Rome, built up over centuries of accumulated enslavement, that gave Luther his epic historical importance as a herald of freedom.”<sup>4</sup> It is in this context that the German laity found a liberating hero in Martin Luther.

## 2.2 Luther's Distinct Contribution

Other would be reformers came before Luther, even in Germany.<sup>5</sup> Yet, while Martin Luther may have been one link in a chain of German protestors against Roman abuses, he did

---

<sup>2</sup> Three excellent biographies on Luther commended to the reader are: Rolland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1995); Michael A Mullet, *Martin Luther* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2004), accessed February 9, 2017, EBSCOhost eBook Collection; and Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015). The author acknowledges his dependence on these three works for major parts of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> See Bainton, 42–50, 67; Mullet, 52–55.

<sup>4</sup> Mullet, 5.

<sup>5</sup> This historical fact is often overshadowed by Luther's monumental involvement; yet, is important to note that many Germans before Luther had already publically decried the corruption of the Roman papacy and clergy. In this sense, Luther, especially in his “Open Letter,” was not much different than those before him and thus joined an existing national consensus for social, political, and ecclesial reform. Examples include: Ulrich Wiest's widely distributed and scathing poem, “The Insolence of Ecclesiastical Princes” (1450); Erasmus's “Praise of Folly,” (1509, 11); Sebastian Brant's “The Ship of Fools,” (1494) and “On the Inevitable Fall of the Holy Roman Empire”

distinguish himself above all others through his masterful use of Scripture to justify each of his major complaints. Rolland Bainton points out: “The Scriptures assumed for Luther an overwhelming importance, not primarily as a source book for antipapal polemic, but as the one ground of certainty.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, for Luther, *sola Scriptura* was more of a presupposition to carry into all arguments, rather than a doctrine to expound. His constant appeals to Scripture above all things Rome is how Luther fleshed out this principle. It was *Scripture’s* supreme authority to which Luther appealed while dismantling the clergy’s stronghold over the laity, as well as calling the pope to task for his claim of exclusive authority in interpretation of the Word of God.

### 3.1 Luther’s Three Treatises

Nestled between his 95 Theses, officially called the *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences* (October 1517) and his *Bondage of the Will* (December 1525), Martin Luther wrote three rapid fire tracts which confirmed a split with the Roman Catholic Church was all but inevitable. “These three works, taken together,” Carl Trueman notes, “perhaps represent Luther’s most sustained and positive vision of what reformation should be.”<sup>7</sup> It was in the ink spent on writing these three treatises in the fall of 1520—works that Luther produced in the wake of his Leipzig debates with his Catholic adversary, Johannes Maier von Eck, in 1519—that Martin Luther most fully developed his reformation doctrines concerning the Scriptures and the laity. It is also in these three treatises where Luther’s insistence on the ultimate and divine authority of the Bible and the non-ordained Christian’s right to interpret it, had dealt the most crushing blow to the Roman Catholic Church which had been monopolizing all things religious and secular. To this Mullet adds, “More and more Luther was being driven back on his central focus on a reliable arbiter to hear and adjudicate his cause, the word of God in Scripture.”<sup>8</sup>

---

(1504). Two solid works showcasing this pre-Reformation German attitude against Rome are Gerald Strauss, *Manifestations of Discontent in Germany on the Eve of the Reformation: A Collection of Documents Selected, Translated, and Introduced* (Indiana University, 1971), esp. 3–63; 223–227; and Thomas A. Brady, Jr., “The Holy Roman Empire’s Bishops on the Eve of the Reformation,” in *Continuity and Change: The Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History*, edited by Robert J. Bast and Andrew C. Gow (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2000), esp. 20–47.

<sup>6</sup> Bainton, 288.

<sup>7</sup> Trueman, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Mullet, 98. Mullet directed these words specifically toward Luther’s stance on Rome’s conciliar tradition, which often erred, but was still used to decide on various religious dogma as well as secular affairs. As a response to the Western Schism (1378–1417), ecumenical councils called by representatives of the Catholic Church militant were officially recognized as “supreme authority” at the Council of Constance 1414-18. They were later overturned by popes Julius II and Leo X at the Fifth Council of the Lateran (1512-17) thereby re-establishing the supreme authority of the papacy. This last decision took place a mere 7 months before Luther posted his 95 Theses which began his reformation career.

### 3.2.1 The Open Letter

The first of the three treatises Luther wrote was in his native tongue called, “An Open Letter [or Address] to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” published on August 18, 1520. Luther, a master of communication and its promotion through the still developing print media, chose not to write this tract in Latin unlike his 95 Theses. This was because Latin, a language in which Luther was fluent, was the written speech used by Catholic scholastics and professional theologians. However, by writing his *Open Letter* in the language of the German people, Luther fanned into flame the laity’s national conscience and seething resentment toward Rome—that old foe, now under the guise of the Holy See, which had re-birthed the Pharisaic image of exploitation and taxation from over 800 miles away.

Luther’s *Open Letter* consisted mainly of a three-point manifesto he built to destroy the corresponding Catholic hedges he termed, “Romanist Walls.” These three walls were religious dogmas the Catholic Church had erected to keep itself impenetrable from any non-ordained subservient who dared question its divine authority. Thus, being a patriotic German only helped serve Luther’s protest against Rome’s stronghold of the Western world as he appealed to his nation’s “Christian Estates.”<sup>9</sup> In the preface of his *Open Letter* addressed to his friend and fellow academic, Nicholas Von Amsdorf, Luther wastes no time appealing to Scripture as he sees himself as almost prophet-like: “The time to keep silence has passed,” Luther thundered, “and the time to speak is come, as Ecclesiastes says.”<sup>10</sup> He then goes on to make plain his intention of Reform in the Address, arguing from the clergy to the laity, “in the hope that God may deign to help His Church through the efforts of the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown indifferent.”<sup>11</sup> And, just in case his sentiments toward “the Romanists” were not fully known Luther added: “We must be sure that in this matter we are dealing not with men, but with princes of hell, who can fill the world with war and bloodshed, but whom war and bloodshed do not overcome.”<sup>12</sup> With such words directed toward the papacy at Rome, Luther now saw the Reformation akin to Esau and Jacob’s troubled relationship. If Esau was Rome, than Jacob was the divinely-called protests of Luther, for as the Scripture says: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Rom 9:13).

### 3.2.2 The Three Romanist Walls

While the latter half of his *Open Letter* lists 27 specific reform proposals Luther offered as the cure against Rome’s abuses, the core of his manifesto consists of a three-pronged attack destroying, what he termed, the “Romanist Walls”:

---

<sup>9</sup> The “Christian Estates” to which Luther wrote included Germany’s territorial and civic rulers of all classes—from Emperor Charles V to the lesser, yet vitally important, *Reichsritter* (Imperial Knights). Cf, Mullet, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, “An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning The Reform of the Christian Estate” in *Three Treatises*, trans. by Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1960), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12.

First, when pressed by the temporal power, they [the Romanists] have made decrees and said that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the other hand, that the spiritual is above the temporal power. Second, when the attempt is made to reprove them out of the Scriptures, they raise the objection that the interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to no one except the pope. Third, if threatened with a council, they answer with fable that no one can call a council but the pope.<sup>13</sup>

In Luther's mind, these three Roman barriers could never withstand the crushing blow of Scripture. Solomon wrote, "A wise man scales the city of the mighty and brings down the stronghold in which they trust" (Prov 21:22), and thus Luther set out to dismantle the pope's unbiblical fortifications with a relentless appeal to the biblical Text. The timing was just right as the Catholic tradition was emerging from medieval thought more familiar with Aristotelian scholastics than Scripture. Consequently, Luther's appeal to the Word of God—not the word of Aquinas—left the Romanists seeing stars.<sup>14</sup>

The first two walls of Rome protected the Catholic Church's supposed authority over any individual believer, and the pope's exclusive right to interpret the Scriptures.<sup>15</sup> Using key texts found in 1 Corinthians 12; 1 Peter 2; and Revelation 1, 5, and 20, among others, Luther proved that every believer is a priest under *Christ* (not the pope), and that he or she has every right to challenge the pope's interpretation. Appealing to John 6:45—"they will all be taught of God"—Luther presupposes Biblical authority over fallible popes and cardinals and makes a salient observation:

Thus it may well happen that the pope and his followers are wicked men, and no true Christians, not taught of God, not having true understanding. On the other hand, an ordinary man may have true understanding; why then should we not follow him? Has not the pope erred many times? Who would help Christendom when the pope errs, if we were not to believe another, who had the Scriptures on his side, more than the pope?<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, "Open Letter," 13.

<sup>14</sup> One month before nailing his 95 Theses, Luther caused a storm among the faculty University of Wittenberg with his *Disputation of Scholastic Theology* (Sep 1517). This tract essentially dethroned Aquinas who was the Catholic Church's bridge to Aristotle the previous 250 years. By doing this, Luther almost single-handedly reformed the university's curriculum by returning it to an emphasis of the biblical languages. Thus a case can be made that the Protestant Reformation really began with this reform inside academia. Cf. Trueman, 41; Bainton, 45.

<sup>15</sup> While papal infallibility was not decreed official by the Catholic Church until late 19<sup>th</sup> century First Vatican Council under Pius IX, it was nonetheless a widely held "unofficial" belief of Rome for centuries leading up to then.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, "Open Letter," 21.

Luther, in challenging the papacy's stronghold over the laity, was reminiscent of Paul's challenge to the Corinthian church that was showing signs of pride hindering orderly and encouraging worship: "Or was it from you that the word of God came?" Paul rhetorically inquired, "Or are you the only ones it has reached? (1 Cor 14:36). This passage had clear application concerning the papacy. While the apostle instructed the Corinthians to share in their teaching and understanding of God's revelation (vv.29-32), the priesthood of the individual Christian was something kept under lock and key by the Romanists.

However, even the powers of Rome with its control over Western Christianity could not shut the mouth of man who "was not concerned to philosophize about the structure of Church and state, [but rather] his insistence was simply that every man must answer for himself to God."<sup>17</sup> It was this deep-rooted faith fleshed out in works (cf. James 2:14–26) that placed Luther head and shoulders above his fellow German protestors—those who had only managed to bounce off the three walls of Romanism. In contrast, Luther penetrated these walls with a battering ram armed with details of 1 Peter 2: 5–9 which describe the Church in terms of "a spiritual house," and "a royal priesthood" and understanding that every believer had the Holy Spirit's anointing so that "[they] have no need that anyone should teach [them]" (1 John 2:27). "Therefore," Luther remarked concerning the pope's shackling of Scripture, "it is a wickedly invented fable, and they cannot produce a letter in defense of it, that the interpretation of Scripture or the confirmation of its interpretation belongs to the pope alone."<sup>18</sup> As the Christian laity had every right to read and interpret the Bible, and do so joyfully in faith with full accountability before his Lord, Luther added: "We should not allow the Spirit of liberty, as Paul calls Him, to be frightened off by the fabrications of the popes, but we ought to go boldly forward to test all that they do or leave undone, *according to our interpretation of the Scripture, which rests on faith*, and compel them to follow not their own interpretation, but the one that is better [emphasis added]."<sup>19</sup>

While the third wall dealing with the pope's exclusive right to call a council was certainly important, it is the first two that warranted the most attention here. This is because, quite simply in Luther's words, "The third wall falls of itself when the first two are down."<sup>20</sup> Appealing to the Scripture's divine authority, Luther summed up his assault on the third wall with: "They have no basis in Scripture for their contention that it belongs to the pope alone to call a council or confirm its actions"<sup>21</sup> Moreover, remaining consistent with his focus on the believer's own priestly authority, Luther ended this third Romanist Wall with: "Therefore, when necessity demands, and the pope is an offense to Christendom, the first man who is able should, as a faithful member of the whole body, do what he can to bring about a truly free council"<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Bainton, 109.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, "Open Letter," 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

### 3.2.3 The Babylonian Captivity

Following his *Open Letter to the German Nobility* by two months, Luther published *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* on October 6, 1520. If the first treatise came across as cordial (that is, cordial for Luther!), this second treatise made his intention against the Roman Catholic Church perfectly clear: Rome had forfeited any spiritual virtue that may still be hanging on and had become the pagan whore of old, Babylon. The translator to the work, A. T. W. Steinhausser, explains, “The reference is clear from the contents of the document: just as the Jews were carried away from Jerusalem into captivity under the tyranny of the Babylonian Empire, so in Europe the Christians have been carried away from the Scriptures and made subject to the tyranny of the papacy.”<sup>23</sup> In this work, Luther’s polemical tone turned even more aggressive as he left little doubt that a reform from within the Catholic Church was impossible, and that separation was the only solution (cf. 2 Cor 6:17). An introductory remark in his preface made plain where his thoughts on the papacy now were: “I know for certainty,” remarked Luther, “that the papacy is the kingdom of Babylon and the power of Nimrod, the mighty hunter [Gen 10:8-9].”<sup>24</sup>

Unlike his other two treatises, *Babylon Captivity of the Church* was written solely in the theological language of the Church (Latin) so as not to confuse who Luther intended as the target audience. Mullet asserts, “It was a Latin work by a Churchman, addressed in the first instance to other Churchmen throughout Christendom and signaling the author’s utter rejection of the Roman Church as Babylon—and Antichrist.”<sup>25</sup> Throughout this second treatise, Luther continued his notion of the legitimacy of *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of believers with a special focus on Rome’s seven sacramental pillars.<sup>26</sup> With his hand guided by an acute understanding of Scripture, Luther reduced the seven so-called sacraments to two or three: the Eucharist; baptism; and penance, as these were the only three with biblical support.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, “Open Letter,” 24. Luther not only had a command of Scripture to prove his points, but also of Church history. Here he added: “Even the Council of Nicea—the most famous of all—was neither called nor confirmed by the Bishop of Rome, but by Emperor Constantine, and many other emperors after him did the like.”

<sup>23</sup> A. T. W. Steinhausser in Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” in *Three Treatises*, trans. by A. T. W. Steinhausser, rev. by Fredrick C. Ahrens and Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1960), 116.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity,” 124.

<sup>25</sup> Mullet, 110.

<sup>26</sup> Later codified at the Council of Trent (1545–63), the seven being: Baptism; Eucharist; Confirmation; Marriage; Ordination [holy orders]; Penance; and Extreme Unction [anointing of the sick].

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Mullet, 113; Bainton, 67. It is fascinating to read Luther’s thinking as it develops in the *Babylonian Captivity*. One notable reason is his thoughts on “penance” turns into what evangelicals understand as “repentance.” Luther’s doctrine of repentance came earlier from his “glowing discovery” through Erasmus’s Greek New Testament that the Latin of Matthew 4:17, *penitentiam agite* (do penance) was a mistranslation of the Greek μετανοεῖτε (repent or be penitent), lit: “change your mind.” Because repentance is found so prominently in



Yet, it is also here where Luther delivers the death knell to the clergy / laity divide prized by the pope and his cardinals. It was specifically the supposed “ordained clergy” of Rome that Luther found the most troubling. Their moral scandals, profiteering of the masses, and withholding the Eucharist cup from the laity turned Luther into a Protestant son of thunder. In Luther’s developmental thinking, the “sacraments” of Rome were nothing more than man’s attempt of power and control under the (always-successful) guise of religion and guilt.<sup>28</sup> Railing against ordained clergy, Luther thundered: “They have sought by this means [sacrament of ordination] to set up a seed bed of implacable discord, by which clergy and laymen should be separated from each other farther than heaven from earth to the incredible injury of the grace of baptism and to the confusion of our fellowship in the gospel.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, Luther found utter disdain for a corrupt clergy that held captive non-ordained Christians creating an impassable us / them chasm. “Of this sacrament,” Luther boldly stated, “the church knows nothing; it is an invention of the church and of the pope.”<sup>30</sup>

By Luther’s time, the Roman Church had long practiced something they invented called *character indelebili* or indelible [sacramental] character in which a priest who was ordained, was ordained with the rights of that office for life. He could never be displaced of his office and could only move up through the hierarchy to the rank of bishop.<sup>31</sup> An ordained priest, therefore, whose character could never be accused of malicious behavior, even when deserving of the accusation, had free reign as to how he conducted his affairs—whether on official business for the Church or personal. To this monopolizing of “holy priests,” Luther pointed out that the only difference between an ordained priest and the average Spirit-filled believer was that of office, not character: “According to what the Scriptures teach us, what we call the priesthood is a ministry. So I cannot understand at all why one who has once been made a priest cannot again become a layman; for the sole difference between him and the layman is his ministry.”<sup>32</sup>

It is in the “sacrament of ordination,” that Luther exposed Rome’s destructive impact on the true priesthood of all believers (cf. 1 Peter 2:5; Rev 1:6). “Let everyone,” railed Luther,

---

Scripture, Luther considered it a legitimate “sacrament” unlike the other four. Yet, he seems to refine his thinking as he moves on questioning if it is indeed a sacrament or not—finally deciding on the latter (cf. Luther, “Babylon Captivity,” 258).

<sup>28</sup> The sacramental system seems to have originated in Dionysius’s *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (Syria, c., A.D. 500) who mentions six sacraments and became an authority to which clergy appealed. These six developed into seven by Peter Lombard (12<sup>th</sup> century) and was made official Catholic dogma at Council of Florence in 1439. It is worth noting that it was the Council of Constance (1414-18) that sanctioned withholding the cup from laity—a practice the Bohemian reformer, John Huss, hated and was ultimately burned at the stake for disputing a hundred years before Luther’s time in 1415.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity,” 244.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>31</sup> While the doctrine of *character indelebili* was practiced for at least a thousand years before Luther, it was dogmatically defined and officially recognized at the Council of Trent (1545–63).

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” 249.

“who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests . . . . And therefore this ‘sacrament’ of ordination, if it be anything at all, is nothing else but a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church.”<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that Luther’s protests birthed in germinal form a plea for what would later become, local autonomous churches that chose their own pastors. On this, Bainton observes, “The repudiation of ordination as a sacrament demolished the caste system of clericalism and provided a sound basis for the priesthood of all believers. . . . At this point, what the priest does any Christian may do, *if commissioned by the congregation*, because all Christians are priests [emphasis added].”<sup>34</sup>

### **3.2.4 The Christian’s Freedom**

Luther rounded out his insistence on Scripture’s supreme authority and the priesthood of all believers in his final work of the *Three Treatise* called *The Freedom of a Christian*. Published in November 1520, this tract was not only the shortest of the Three, but it was also published in both Latin and German since it was meant for a wider dissemination.<sup>35</sup> This fact alone demonstrates Luther’s disdain for the clergy / laity divide as he wanted all Christians to enjoy their definitive position in Christ. It also showcases Luther’s remarkable grasp of the burgeoning print media production in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In Luther’s mind, since *all* Christians are justified by faith alone in Christ alone—a truth extrapolated from Scripture alone—then all Christians deserve to know how to live their lives to the glory of *God* alone (not the pope). Hence, his much more congenial treatise on the Christian’s freedom in Christ.

With a splattering of other texts from Scripture proving the individual Christian’s liberty, Luther most prominently based his argument using two from the apostle Paul: Romans 13:8 and 1 Corinthians 9:19. In the first, Paul writes, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8); in the second, the apostle penned, “For although I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them” (1 Cor 9:19). With these two verses as the backdrop, Luther blankets his tract in wonderful paradox: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”<sup>36</sup> Mullet expresses Luther’s words this way: “A royal priesthood, true Christians have the dignity and perfect freedom of the sons of God and, having freedom, voluntarily exchange it for willing service of their neighbours [*sic*].”<sup>37</sup> That the pope and clergy have no inherent authority over the individual Christian is

---

<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” 248.

<sup>34</sup> Bainton, 107.

<sup>35</sup> *The Freedom of a Christian* first appeared in Latin as Luther had sent it along with a personal attachment to Pope Leo X (who was probably incensed to be instructed by a lowly German monk!). After he had produced the Latin version, Luther re-wrote and published it in German which is the more widely read version.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian” in *Three Treatises*, transl. by W. A. Lambert, rev. by Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1960), 277.

<sup>37</sup> Mullet, 115.

obvious in this work. The believer is free to enjoy his life under the authority of Jesus Christ alone, and is to use that freedom joyfully in the service of others (cf. Gal 5:13).

The more harsh words from Luther had already been spent. His dismantling of the papacy's incarceration of the laity was relentlessly proven in the *Open Letter to the German Nobility*, and *the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Now, Luther fleshed out the implications from both works in the *Freedom of a Christian* as ethical living under Christ to the glory of God took center stage. No longer was the pope to monopolize all Bible interpretation. No longer was ordained clergy to be glorified to a holy status above the laity. Each believer had the same Spirit for interpretation of Scripture (1 Cor 6:19; 1 John 2:27), and each believer was accountable to no one but the Lord Himself (Rom 14:7–8). Joyful freedom in the edification of one another was to be the Christian's premier duty (1 Cor 12; Eph 4). As Luther himself made clear ending his three treatises: "Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligations."<sup>38</sup>

### **3.2.5 The Result of the Three Treatises**

With the completion of his three treatises of 1520, Martin Luther had become Germany's premier heavy weight. To the corrupt, unbiblical papal system in Rome, he had delivered a collective knockout punch with these three works. The Roman Catholic Church would survive of course, but it would never be the same. Luther had exposed too much. He had proven too aptly from the Scriptures. The tables were now turned and the Catholic Church was on the defense against this former monk who was proven scriptural, but ironically considered heretical. Now that these treatises were making their way through Europe, Rome forged their own view of this German reformer rocking the boat of medieval Catholicism. According to Mullet, "Martin Luther was being identified primarily as the author of published printed literary works, the first leader of the heresy of the new age of print, and capable of infinite harm against the peace of the Church and the primacy of the Holy See."<sup>39</sup> Yet, the vast gulf fixed between the priesthood of the papacy, and the priesthood of believers was now bridged by Luther's manifesto—the former unable to withstand the scrutiny of God's Word.

Western Christianity was now freed from its Roman captor. Principles associated with *sola Scriptura* had exposed the pope as an unnecessary appendage to the Spirit-filled believer's interpreting the Bible for himself. Christians were to submit to Jesus Christ alone—the Chief Shepherd of the Church (1 Peter 5:4)—as Scripture made clear. The papacy was obstructing this truth for too long, and the time to rise up had come (cf. Eccl 3:7). This would have far reaching implications affecting ecclesiology, as the Reformation would continue furthering the cause of a Church broken off from the establishment while centered on the Scriptures; a Church, of course, unhindered by professionally corrupt clergy who boasted in their life-long "holy

---

<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," 304.

<sup>39</sup> Mullet, 115.

orders.” In an incredible act of Providence, these vey issues would resurface in Europe three centuries later as one man picked up Martin Luther’s fight against a new, yet similar opponent on an island nation across the Atlantic. Enter John Nelson Darby.

#### **4.1 Background to John Nelson Darby’s Rise**

Because this next reformer is both “unknown and well known,” perhaps a little more space is warranted for his background.<sup>40</sup> When addressing the Greeks at Mars Hill, Paul the Apostle declared that “God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:26). That God is sovereign over every person’s place and every event in history is not only dramatic throughout Scripture’s metanarrative, but can also be traced to those living in modern times. And, nowhere does this ring truer than in the lives of Martin Luther and John Darby.

Much like Luther’s appointed place in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, God likewise had His hand on the island nations forming the United Kingdom at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “An act for the Union of Great Britain and Ireland” was passed resulting in a new Western power called, “the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.” This global power move fueled by both political and religious motives occurred in the year 1800—the very year of John Nelson Darby’s birth. With this act the Church of England, which in Ireland was called the Church of Ireland, became known simply as the Established Church. As God would have it, almost the identical issues Martin Luther protested against the Catholic “Romanists,” Darby would pick up again and call to task the kingly church of England—and carry them even further. This time ecclesiology was directly on the table of reforms, and John Nelson Darby would be the new champion to carry on Reformation principles in Europe. And, as God would have it, it was this latter reformer who would deliver a distinct impact on American evangelical ecclesiology.

#### **4.2 A Brief Biography of J. N. Darby**

John Nelson Darby, whose family legacy was thoroughly Irish, was born in Westminster, London on November 18, 1800. The eighth child to John and Anne Darby, John Nelson was baptized as an infant 15 weeks later at the towering St. Margaret’s Church in London.<sup>41</sup> As a

---

<sup>40</sup> The phrase “As unknown and well known” is carved into J. N. Darby’s gravestone at Bournemouth, England. The number of biographies written on Darby are far less than Luther. And, as is the case with many biographies of influential (or controversial) people, many things written on Darby are questionable. That said, three notable works used for this particular section and commended to the reader are: Max S. Weremchuck, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1992); W. G. Turner, *Unknown and Well Known: A Biography of John Nelson Darby*, ed. by E. N. Cross (London, UK: Chapter Two, 2006); and Marian Field, *John Nelson Darby: Prophetic Pioneer* (Godalming, UK: Highland, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> It is interesting that throughout his life, Darby supported pedo-baptism which put him at odds with most of his own Plymouth Brethren and the countless people his theology influenced. It seems to be the one lingering Anglican / Catholic ritual he could never shake. However, Darby thought more highly of peace and gospel unity among Christians than he did on baptizing children. Writing to a fellow Christian in 1852, Darby, as quoted in Weremchuck, 203, stated: “What I think on the baptism of infants...I care much more for the peace of the church

young teenager, Darby enrolled at Trinity College in Dublin at 14 years old. Trinity was *the* reputable Anglican school in Ireland known for its rigor in mathematics and classical languages and literature. Graduating in 1819 with a BA with the highest honors in classics at age 18, Darby would also win the school's prestigious classical gold medal.<sup>42</sup> His gifting in languages would later prominently play out in his ministry, as he would become fluent in Latin, Hebrew, Greek, French, German, Italian, and, for the most part, Dutch. How many other dialects Darby would pick up is known only to Darby. Case in point, "While visiting New Zealand," reports Weremchuck, "[Darby] learned the native language, Maori, and was able to preach in it."<sup>43</sup> Besides the many hymns and commentaries on Scripture he would write, perhaps Darby's remarkable gift of languages would bear the most fruit with his literal translation of the Bible's Hebrew and Greek into English, French, and German.<sup>44</sup> His motivation for languages was always centered on reaching people with the gospel and instructing them in the Scriptures—something he was adamant they can do on their own without being reliant on man-appointed clergy.

#### **4.2.1 Darby the Lawyer**

Like Calvin and Luther before him, Darby originally trained for a career in law but surpassed them both in actually securing a short legal vocation after being admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1819/20. Lincoln's Inn was the most prestigious of London's schools for those called to the Bar. Because J. N. Darby was virtually born in the Anglican Communion, he had an awareness of Christ, but one that was dry of any true flavor throughout his teenage years (contra. Psalm 34:8). This began to haunt him. Devoid of any intimate relation with the true Vine (John 15:1, 5), Darby was a branch desperately seeking purpose for his life, and rest for his soul. He even toyed with the idea of becoming a Roman Catholic, a taboo that would put him in the minority of a nation who's practically every citizen at the time held life-long associations with the Established Church. Yet, while at Lincoln's Inn, he began reading his dusty New Testament and finally got to chapters nine and ten of Hebrews which convinced him that the Catholic Mass, with its suggestion of the perpetual sacrifice of Christ, was indeed heretical.<sup>45</sup>

---

than any opinion on that. I have never tried to persuade anybody. I believe that everyone must act according to his own conscience."

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Weremchuck, 30–31. The parallels are interesting in Luther's and Darby's young academic lives. Both entered college as young teenagers (Luther at 15, Darby at 14), and both had aspirations to be lawyers. However, one notable difference can be seen in how they each performed academically. Darby graduated head of his class *summa cum laude* winning the coveted "gold medal" in classics, while Luther graduated in the less-than-half bottom tier of his class with no awards earned.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>44</sup> W. G. Turner, 143–44, adds, "Darby did not feel such a need for a new translation in English, because he considered the King James Version to be adequate for most purposes, and he encouraged his followers to continue to use it. But, he decided to produce a highly literal English version for study purposes."

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Marion Field, 26.

This discovery was the first for Darby who would live a life consistently rejecting Catholic dogma, and promoting Reformation principles. Christ would soon grab hold of Darby at 21 when he worked as a “barrister” (a British court room lawyer) and was converted through simply through reading the Scriptures on his own. Hence, the private interpretation of Scripture, of which Luther so ably defended, Darby would always hold dear. For him, it was personal.

Likewise in the same vein as Luther, Darby would hold the Bible as the ultimate authority under heaven, and would have occasional “glowing discoveries” and “great recoveries.” And, resembling Martin Luther’s sensitive conscious, the more Darby read the Bible, the more he became convicted of his unworthiness of salvation—and it weighed heavy on his soul. “He felt that Christ was the only Savior,” relates Wermehuck, “but was not able to say that he possessed Him, or that he was saved by Him. He looked for proofs of regeneration in himself, something that can never give peace.”<sup>46</sup> Darby continued on as an aspiring lawyer, but with a view toward delving back into his childhood faith wrought in the Established Church; an institution which held sway over England and Northern Ireland. Much like pre-reformation Europe that hardly kept a distinction between church and state, England was dominated by its own state church since King Henry VIII founded Anglicanism—and it did all it could to stamp out any Catholic influence. This even included a sworn commitment from England and Ireland’s brightest lawyers. In fact, as Wermehuck points out, “Part of the oath [Darby] had to take when called to the Irish Chancery Bar contained the vow to prevent the further growth of popery.”<sup>47</sup>

#### **4.2.2 Darby the Clergyman**

After Darby came to Christ through reading His Word, he desperately craved relief for a soul that wanted nothing but Jesus. Wrestling with this in prayer, and through the advice of others, John Darby decided to leave his law career for ministry and was later ordained a deacon in the Established Church in 1825. In the following year, Darby was ordained an Anglican priest in the famed Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin. Like Martin Luther’s father whose chief desire was for his son to practice law, Darby’s father was not pleased with his son’s decision either. He even disinherited him over it.<sup>48</sup> And, just like Luther who did the monkish rituals in constant desperation to ease his conscience, so did Darby who was known, for example, to fast for weeks at a time, even to the point of severally jeopardizing his health. And also like Luther, he would tremble at taking the elements of the Lord’ Supper, always being sure he was approved to do so by a more senior clergy member. In 1826, Darby would take up a pastoral position in the country village of Calary, Ireland being the only clergy of the town. It was during this time of concentrated ministry, that he fell in love with pastoring Christ’s sheep.<sup>49</sup> And, it was also

---

<sup>46</sup> Wermehuck, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, Darby has too often been mischaracterized as an esoteric, divisive figure devoid of any love or humility. This is radically untrue. While it is wise (and realistic) not to portray any man as consistently

during this time, that Darby saw the inconsistencies of Established institutionalized version of the Church. “His soul was still not eased while a priest,” observes Wermehchuck, “because he was beginning to feel that the style of work was not in agreement with what he read concerning the church and Christianity.”<sup>50</sup>

Ironically, the Protestant Anglican clergy of Darby’s day held too many similarities with the Roman Catholic clergy of Luther’s day. It seems the squid of Romanism had far reaching tentacles with its habit of turning the Church into a lucrative industry. The ordained clergy, as Darby began to notice, seemed to hold no true convictions for the people God put under their care. And, like the clergy that surrounded Luther, they had no true knowledge *of* or *from* the Scriptures. Everything they appealed to was ritualistic as passed down to them from the Anglican hierarchy. According to Wermehchuck:

The clergy were, as a whole, careless in giving out the bread of life to the flocks who had been committed to their care and keeping. At best they preached a carnal and soul-benumbing morality, and trafficked with souls of men by receiving money for discharging the pastoral office in parishes where they did not so much as look on the faces of the people more than once a year.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, Darby began to hold the ordained clergy of the Established Church in contempt. Once again, Christ and His Word were not the authority; bishops were. Once again, an impassable gulf was fixed between the Christian laity and the ordained priesthood. This period in Darby’s life was much like Luther’s in that it took serving as an ordained member of the establishment to see how far it had fallen from the Scriptures.<sup>52</sup> And, if Scripture really did come with God’s ultimate authority, then it is only toward God through Christ alone that man must give an account. No bishop, priest, pope, or king can act as a substitute.

It was the Book of Acts with its portrayal of the early Church that had a particular affect on Darby’s ecclesiastical beliefs, as Acts ran contrary to what he was used to seeing around him. As such, it would be Darby’s conviction of *sola Scriptura* that would lead directly to his beliefs concerning ecclesiology. The Christian was not accountable to any “ordained” man, but to Christ. The Christian as a member of Jesus’ body really did have a freedom to it—one that highlighted serving each other in God’s love. The Church of God was not a business set up like a corporation, or one that lorded different stages of ordained holiness over the Lord’s sheep (cf. Matt 20:26–28). It was here, while serving as the “curate of Calary,” that Darby “saw that membership in Scripture was not membership of an association organized and formed by

---

Christ-like in all of his endeavors, a case must be made for Darby’s tender pastoral heart. In fact, the village people of Calary got together and wrote a beautiful letter of commendation for their beloved pastor dated March 28, 1829 expressing their sincere gratitude and affections for “Dr. and Rev’d. Mr. Darby” for his unceasing love and care toward them (cf. Field, 45; Wermehchuck, 217–18.).

<sup>50</sup> Wermehchuck, 44.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Wermehchuck, 61; Turner, 26

man...but membership of Christ—a hand, foot etc. (1 Cor 12:18, 20.)”<sup>53</sup> Darby would eventually leave the Church of England and Ireland, being unable to find a justification for any national church structure in Scripture.<sup>54</sup> What he did find in the New Testament, however, were local autonomous fellowships making up the whole Body of Christ.

### 5.1 Darby’s Three Treatises

Darby was not an innovator. He was a studious and brilliant disciplinarian who consistently carried forth Luther’s exposures of the establishment in papal Rome to the religious-kingly establishment in England and Ireland. And like Luther before him, Darby wrote voluminously.<sup>55</sup> In what follows, three of John Nelson Darby’s influential tracts dealing directly with notions of Scripture and clergy will be analyzed in light of Luther’s three above. This comparison will show the furthering of Luther’s legacy by Darby into what would become a movement of ecclesiastical independence led by Spirit-filled laity, which would later directly influence American evangelicalism.

#### 5.1.2 *The Nature and Unity of the Church*

John Nelson Darby published his first major work in Dublin in 1828 called *Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ*. This tract of less than 20 pages had a massive impact on those trying to understand what the Church was before Catholicism and Anglicanism had corrupted its organic form. Darby’s main contention in this work was that Christ always has His true Church in the world—even when it seems she has all but apostatized. Neither pope, king, nor demon can ever thwart Jesus’ promise in Matthew 16:18, that He *will* build His Church. Like the 7000 Israelites whom the Lord kept from bowing the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18), Jesus still has and is building His faithful remnant. This even includes Christians in the Established Church or in the various dissenting groups that had protested since the Reformation. As Darby saw it, the Church in its pure form is united in faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whether the Christian be an Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, or Independent—the nature and unity of the Church is forged together by faith in the gospel. This was so obvious to Darby

---

<sup>53</sup> Wermechuck, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Turner, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Due to space limitations, much more can be said concerning this period in Darby’s life. Perhaps the most important would be Darby’s “great recovery” after a serious horse riding accident occurred one evening on his way to a parishioner’s home. It was during his recovery from it in Dublin that gave him the concentrated time in the Scriptures which then led to him leaving (yet never “officially”) the Established Church in 1828, and later founding the Plymouth Brethren in 1831.

<sup>55</sup> Darby’s literary achievements are truly remarkable. In addition to his literal translations of the Bible into English, German, and French (and possibly Dutch, yet the extent of his involvement is unknown), as well as his five volume biblical commentary, *The Synopsis of the Bible*, Darby wrote 34 volumes of doctrine and theology later collected and edited by William Kelley (1821–1906). Moreover, he wrote the seven volume *Notes and Comments on Scripture*, the two volume *Notes and Jottings*, three volumes of letters, and 27 different hymns (at least ones that were published) called *Spiritual Songs* (cf. Turner, 77–91; Wermechuck 164 – 70; Field, 168–85).



from the Scriptures, he thought of it as a presupposition to Protestantism: “I am supposing here, of course,” wrote Darby, “that the great truths of the gospel are the professed faith of the churches, as they are in all the genuine Protestant churches.”<sup>56</sup>

Darby certainly recognized God’s hand upon the Reformation sparked by Luther, but also made it clear that the Reformation did not root out the lingering problems of holy hierarchy still obstructing the laity from enjoying the true Church. “Such indeed,” remarked Darby, “however blessed as we are all bound most thankfully, to acknowledge the Reformation to have been, was not the case: it was much and manifestly mixed with human agency...there was much of the old system which remained in the constitution of the churches, and which was in no way the development of the mind of Christ, by setting up the light and authority in the word.”<sup>57</sup> Commenting on Darby’s sentiments, Turner states:

The Reformation was seen as a great light in this growing darkness, and most certainly a work of God in which the truth of justification by faith alone shone brightly. Yet Darby thought the movement overlooked much Scriptural teaching regarding the church and substituted the opinions and the preferences of the leaders of the time. These leaders sought the favor and protection of the world, while Roman Catholicism had always sought to control the world.<sup>58</sup>

While the Reformation’s *sola Scriptura* cry may have, for the most part, overlooked ecclesiology, Darby was sure to apply it directly to the doctrine of the Church. Drawing on language he no doubt borrowed from Luther, Darby asserted: “These observations are in some measure applicable to all the great national Protestant bodies since the outward form and constitution became so prominent a matter, which was not the case originally while deliverance from Babylon was in question.”<sup>59</sup> If the pope and clergy of Catholicism were obstructing the New Testament’s vision for the Church, so were the bishops and priests of Anglicanism. It was each believer’s repentant-faith in Jesus Christ that gave the true Church its hope and unity.

Darby recognized that a true unity in anything worthy of the gospel, the Church being the premier example, was not bound together by uniform ritual prescribed by an ordained overlord. Rather, it was by their true profession in Christ and unity in the Spirit. This truth transcends all denominational lines and state-controlled religion. Darby contended: “The bond of communion is not the *unity* of the people of God, but really (in point of fact), their *differences*.”<sup>60</sup> It was the manifest *differences* among Christians that shows the real beauty of the Church’s unity—something difficult to see when kept under the bondage of the Established

---

<sup>56</sup> John Nelson Darby, “Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ” in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. by William Kelley (Winschoten, Netherlands: Heijkoop, 1971), 1:20.

<sup>57</sup> John Nelson Darby, “Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ,” 1:21.

<sup>58</sup> Turner, 78.

<sup>59</sup> John Nelson Darby, “Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ,” 1:22.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

Church, whatever its form.<sup>61</sup> At certain points in history, a separation from the established form of Christianity is necessary. Even New Testament history has shown that believers are prone to remain in one place if not given an obvious reason to scatter with the gospel message (cf. Acts 11:19). Too often, Christians are more ready to give an answer for the hope of their denominational tie than for their hope in Christ. To them, Darby would rebuke: “So far as men pride themselves on being Established, Presbyterian, Baptist, Independent, or anything else, they are antichristian.”<sup>62</sup> Believers owe their loyalties to the Christ of Scripture, not an institution. Thus, Darby saw the true Church as full of independent fellowships that moved freely about the world in obedience to the Great Commission. For Darby, it is only when believers take the Word of God outside of their comfort zone are they truly fulfilling their duty of witnessing. And sometimes, that means having to shake a complacent state church that has monopolized the Faith. “Our duty as believers,” according to Darby—who understood the Bible as the Christian’s supreme authority—“is to be witnesses of what we believe.”<sup>63</sup> On this, Martin Luther and John Darby could not be more united.

### **5.1.3 Notion of a Clergyman**

If Martin Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was his most aggressive polemic against the Catholic Church, than John Nelson Darby’s *Notion of a Clergyman* was certainly his against the Established Church. Darby’s sentiments are quickly picked up in the tract’s unsubtle subtitle: *Dispensationally the Sin Against the Holy Ghost*.<sup>64</sup> However, rather than this treatise being about *an individual* committing the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 12:31–32), a misunderstanding the Anglican clergy would take it for, Darby’s issue was with the Established Church substituting a man-made *system* for the actual gifting and leading of the Holy Spirit. Hence, it was the *notion* of a clergyman Darby found to be in error. For Darby, the ordained clerical scheme in his day was as corrupt a system as the Romanists made centuries earlier which called for Luther’s reforms. And like Luther, Darby called to task a clerical system that lorded their position over the laity. Wermechuck explains, “Christendom now appeared to be a set of human ecclesiastical systems, all of which had no right claim to be *the* church of God,

---

<sup>61</sup> This is one reason why Darby’s own Plymouth Brethren movement was genuinely in line with Darby’s ecclesiastical convictions and thoroughly biblical. Ecclesiastical separation, when deemed necessary, is something the apostle Paul taught (cf. Rom 16:17; 2 Thess 3:14-15; Titus 3:10-11).

<sup>62</sup> John Nelson Darby, “Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ,” 1:31.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:28.

<sup>64</sup> The actual publication date of Darby’s *Notion of a Clergyman* is little hazy as he pulled it from publication after he sent it to the printer. Yet, it had to follow his *Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ*, per his own remarks calling attention to it in the preface. In the preface to the only available version (as collected by W. Kelley), Darby explains that the tract was originally leaked to influential clergy members in the Established Church before publication, and he was persuaded not to publish it at the time. Darby, who always remained warm toward his former church, never wanting to unnecessarily offend any of his Anglican clergy friends, conceded to hold off on publication until it can be read for its doctrine sake and not for shock value.

because there were true Christians in all of them.”<sup>65</sup>

But, Darby took it a step further than Luther in that he did not merely see corruption *within* the clergy as being problematic; he saw the entire concept of the clergy as problematic. Darby did not hold back in calling it a sin because he saw the concept of an ordained clergy as an invented system devoid of any biblical warrant; one that substituted man for God:

The statement which I make is this, that I believe the notion of a Clergyman to be the sin against the Holy Ghost in this dispensation. I am not talking of individuals willfully committing it but that the thing itself is such as regards this dispensation, and must result in its destruction: the substitution of something for the power and presence of that holy, blessed, and blessing Spirit, by which this dispensation is charcaterised [*sic*], and by which the unrenewedness [*sic*] of man, and the authority of man holds the place which alone that blessed Spirit has power and title to fill, as that other Comforter which should abide forever.<sup>66</sup>

Because the Established Church vehemently opposed any Spirit-led movement that may expose their cracks, similar to the Romanists during Luther’s time, J. N. Darby saw his state church as another resurrected form of the Pharisaical system—a system that Stephen the martyr rebuked as “stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, always resisting the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). With this Scripture and others on his mind, Darby contended:

The sin against the Holy Ghost was the ascribing to the power of evil that which came from the Holy Ghost: and such is the direct operation of the idea of a Clergyman. It charges the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ, which the Spirit gives by the mouth of those whom He chooses, whom they are pleased to call laymen, and the righteousness of conduct which flows from the reception of that testimony, with disorder and schism.<sup>67</sup>

Like Luther before him, Darby sought to destroy the wall dividing the clergy and laity. Yet, Darby took Luther’s attacks further in condemning the entire concept of the clerical system. If the authority of the clergy is derived from man and not God, Darby argued, it follows that any form of Church that is not of the Holy Spirit must be shelved as evil.

In this tract, Darby leans on 1 Corinthians 14:33 which teaches that God is not the author of confusion, but of peace and order. Thus, if the Church truly exists in Spirit-indwelt fellowships, and in forms other than just the Establishment, these fellowships are the work of the Spirit and are not to be charged with divisiveness, confusions, or schisms. This must have carried added weight coming from a man who was technically still an ordained Anglican

---

<sup>65</sup> Wemerchck, 82. Emphasis in original.

<sup>66</sup> John Nelson Darby, “The Notion of a Clergyman: Dispensationally the Sin Against the Holy Ghost” in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. by William Kelley (Winschoten, Netherlands: Heijkoop, 1971), 1:38.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:39.

clergyman. Yet, Darby could not overlook the clergy's insistence that a man must be approved and ordained by senior clergy in order to administer or receive Communion, or even to preach the Word of God to common folk. As to the latter, Darby came to the same conclusion from the Scriptures as John Wesley did a century earlier, that it was not necessary to be ordained in order to preach and serve God in ministry.<sup>68</sup> With this, Darby realized that the notion of ordained clergy bars even preachers of the New Testament as "St. Paul, perhaps the greatest preacher of all time, would not have been allowed to preach from the pulpit of the Established Church because he had not been ordained!"<sup>69</sup>

For Darby, then, this notion of ordained clergy is the sin against the Holy Spirit in the present dispensation—whether in Protestant or Catholic circles: "If a Protestant clergyman has title to this, or whatever title to respect he has," asserted Darby, "the Roman Catholic priest has the same."<sup>70</sup> Either way, for Darby the use of the term "clergy" as it was used in the Catholic and Established Church "is precisely the sign of *the substitution of ministers in the place of the Church of God.*"<sup>71</sup>

#### **5.1.4 Formation of Churches**

Originally written in French and published in Switzerland around 1840, Darby produced a tract called *On the Formation of Churches* addressing the problem of presumption among well intended church planters. It is here in this essay where Darby's undergirding dispensationalism takes center stage helping shape his ecclesiology. It also here that Darby picked up the ecclesiastical ball where Martin Luther and other reformers had left it, since it was the building of *national churches* that were the monuments left in their wake. Commenting on this, Darby wrote:

Nationalism—in other words, the dividing of the church into bodies—consisting of such and such a nation, is a novelty, not above three centuries old, although many dear children of God are found dwelling in it. The Reformation did not directly touch the question of the true character of God's church....It did not re-establish the church in its primitive powers. On the contrary, it placed it in general under subjection to the state in order to free it from subjection to the Pope; because it regarded the papal authority as dangerous, and looked upon all the subjects of a country as Christians.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Field, 43.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 42. It is interesting to note that Darby had originally defended the idea of "apostolic succession." However, he changed this view to the more inclusive "divinely appointed ministry" while diligently studying the New Testament during his convalescence in Dublin. Ironically, this time of recovery was due to the horse riding accident Darby incurred while ministering as a *clergyman* in Calary.

<sup>70</sup> John Nelson Darby, "The Notion of a Clergyman: Dispensationally the Sin Against the Holy Ghost," 1:42.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 1:46. Emphasis in original.

<sup>72</sup> John Nelson Darby, "On the Formation of Churches" in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. by William Kelley (Winschoten, Netherlands: Heijkoop, 1971), 1:140.

Darby's main thesis in *Formation of Churches* was that the Church in this dispensation, that is, from Pentecost (Acts 2) to Rapture (1 Thess 4:17), is "ruined." As both Jesus and Paul promised that the latter times will go from bad to worse, it is in vain that Christians should ever attempt to reconstruct the Church in its purest form, whether by vote or by a single charismatic leader.

For Darby, both the Roman Catholic and Established Church have proven that the Church of God on earth has failed in this dispensation to keep the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). He also recognized those who dissented from their national church to form their own churches have done so, even if well intended, in the mere power man: "Those who have been endeavouring [*sic*] to form churches seem, though meaning well," relates Darby, "to have entirely forgotten our need of *power* as well as *direction*."<sup>73</sup> The power and direction of which Darby spoke is found only in the God of Scripture. For a man to try and form a church alone, armed with only *his* discernment while isolated from other churches, in Darby's estimation, was an evil as gross as the notion of ordained clergy.

Darby was trying his best to get across to fellow ministers that they should at least consider the possibility of presumption when they judge in full confidence that *they* are to restore the primitive church due to other churches failings at the same attempt. Darby realized the years since the Church's birth have proven how much ruin man can bring upon Christ's church, as can already be seen in the seven letters addressed to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3. "I have written from a desire," states Darby, "that there should be less presumption and more diffidence in what we undertake to do: and that we should feel more deeply the ruined condition to which we have reduced the Church."<sup>74</sup>

Lest anyone think that Darby was against independent and local Spirit-led fellowships, on the contrary, it was that very thing he saw as Scriptural: "This truth of the gathering together of God's children is in Scripture seen realised [*sic*] in various localities, and in each central locality the Christians resident therein composed but one body: Scripture is perfectly clear on that head."<sup>75</sup> The Scriptures were plain that the true Church of God already exists in fellowships all over the world, and are united by their faith in Christ and obedience to His Word. Darby understood this from Jesus' promise that He is in the midst of any gathering of at least two or three believers meeting in His name (cf. Matt 18:20). "The thought," Wermechuck clarifies, "was not to seek to be a church alongside many other churches, nor assume to be *the* church, but the thought was to give expression to an already existing unity, the only one God recognizes, the unity of the body of Christ, the one true church."<sup>76</sup> And, rather than relying on man-appointed clergyman to lead these expressions of the Church, Darby fully recognized that God gives them pastors and teachers, wherever a Spirit-filled gathering may be found. Understating this from Ephesians 4, Darby exhorts: "It is plainly our duty to desire pastors and teachers to take the care of such congregations, and that God did raise up such a church as we

---

<sup>73</sup> John Nelson Darby, "On the Formation of Churches," 1:148.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:149.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:141.

<sup>76</sup> Wermechuck, 82. Emphasis in original.

see it in the world.”<sup>77</sup> What Darby held in contempt was any notion of “independence” that was more akin to cultish-esoteric-isolation. That a man, totally independent of other fellowships, could ever form a church in order to restore it to perfection was ludicrous in Darby’s estimation.<sup>78</sup> And finally, much like Luther who had closed his *Open Letter* with a point-by-point proposal of reform, Darby closes his *On the Formation of Churches* with a point-by-point manifesto of his vision of the Church as he understood it from the New Testament. Most germane to the purposes here are points four, five, and six:

(4) The necessity of ordination in order to administer the Lord’s Supper nowhere appears in the New Testament; and it is clear that it was to break bread Christians came together on the Lord’s day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor.11:20-23); (5) A commission from man to preach the gospel is unknown to the New Testament; (6) The choosing of presidents and pastors by the assembly is all together unwarranted by the New Testament.<sup>79</sup>

### **5.1.5 The Result of the Three Treatises**

Darby’s writing and teaching ministry had an impact all over the world. Unlike Martin Luther who remained within the confines of Germany, even dying in the same town that he was born, Darby ministered all over the Western hemisphere. While he would later be remembered more for his teachings on eschatology harmonious to his dispensationalism, it was his beliefs regarding ecclesiology that really drove him. As his three treatises have shown, Darby was churchman at heart *first*, rather than a prophecy expert.<sup>80</sup> “With Darby,” observed Sweetnam and Gribben, “eschatology followed on from church doctrine. It was ecclesiological concern that led to Darby’s rethinking of prophecy.”<sup>81</sup>

John Darby’s disdain for a professionalized, corrupt clergy that kept the laity under bondage from the beauties of Scripture was matched only by Martin Luther three hundred years prior. And it was Darby’s relentless traveling, preaching, and writing ministry concerning the church that would bear a subtle, yet, enduring impact on American evangelicalism. Indeed, his treatises and preaching concerning ecclesiastical independency had a peculiar impact on the

---

<sup>77</sup> John Nelson Darby, “On the Formation of Churches,” 1:141.

<sup>78</sup> It is worth pondering how much of Joseph Smith’s Mormonism was on Darby’s mind when writing of independent, isolated church formation done in order to singlehandedly “restore the pure church.” Joseph Smith (1805–44) was a contemporary of Darby, and Darby makes mention of Mormons in some of his letters and essays when ministering in America. Interestingly enough, Smith had appointed “Independence” Missouri as the new Zion for Mormonism.

<sup>79</sup> John Nelson Darby, “On the Formation of Churches,” 1:152.

<sup>80</sup> Indeed, Darby wrote four separate volumes on Ecclesiology, each volume ranging from 10–30 separate essays, which were later collected and edited by his friend, William Kelley. These are in addition to the hundreds of other writings, including hymns, from Darby that most often touched on ecclesiastical matters.

<sup>81</sup> Mark Sweetnam and Crawford Gribben, “J. N. Darby And The Irish Origins Of Dispensationalism,” *Journal of The Evangelical Theology Society* 52, no. 3 (September 2009):573.

United States, where he had visited at least a half dozen times. Sweetnam and Gribben acknowledge, “Though his name is not widely known, and the details of his life are unfamiliar to many, even to many of those whom he influenced the most, he has been one of the most important shapers of evangelical thought throughout the last two hundred years.”<sup>82</sup>

### **5.1.6 The Unique Legacy of Darby**

What is perhaps the most unique contribution of Darby’s legacy in America, besides his eschatology which became overly sensationalized by those who came after him, was his influence concerning local, independent assemblies of believers. Rejecting any form of state church or denominational loyalties, Darby emphasized Spirit-filled gatherings that were led by pastors and teachers gifted from God. However, he was not looking for fame or notoriety as a pioneer, he was merely acting consistent with what he thought the Bible taught: “Darby wasn’t seeking to be the progenitor of a new movement,” reports Sutherland, “That came about as a result of his uncompromising positions on the doctrines of scripture.”<sup>83</sup> And as Darby held tightly to *sola Scriptura*, there was absolutely no room in his ecclesiology for a professional clergy that was nowhere to be found in the New Testament.

Darby saw the Church of God as existing in the world through its countless autonomous, Christian gatherings based on Jesus’ promise in Matthew 18:20. And, in so doing, he was more consistent with New Testament ecclesiology, and reached further than even Luther was willing to go. The great reformers who heroically freed the Church from its bondage to the Pope and the Roman Catholic clergy got no further than fastening a State or National Church as a result: “This was true of Luther, who fastened a State Church upon Germany. Zwingli, who fastened a State Church upon Switzerland. John Knox, who fastened a State Church upon Scotland. Henry VIII, who fastened a State Church upon England.”<sup>84</sup> By further carrying the Reformation recovery of *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers, John Nelson Darby left an un-repairable crack in the Established Church’s wall of clericalism. A state church was no church.

In America, he had a distinctly unique impact. By emphasizing separation from corrupt ecclesiastical institutions, Darby almost single-handedly influenced what would become the Bible School movement resulting in thousands of local churches. Several times Darby was invited by D. L. Moody to participate in evangelistic and teaching campaigns. While they eventually had a falling out over predestination vs. free-will, Darby being labeled an “extreme Calvinist” by Moody,<sup>85</sup> Moody nonetheless highly revered Darby’s dispensationalism, and especially, his literal hermeneutics and separatist ecclesiology free of denominations. Moody Bible Institute was later founded in 1886 as a non-denominational ministry training school that

---

<sup>82</sup> Mark Sweetnam and Crawford Gribben, “J. N. Darby And The Irish Origins Of Dispensationalism,” 569.

<sup>83</sup> Winston Terrance Sutherland, “John Nelson Darby: Scholarship that Influenced the Bible College Movement,” in *Christian Higher Education* 9:271–85 (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), 9:276.

<sup>84</sup> Anonymous, “Foreword,” *Central Bible Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1961): 2.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Turner, 34–35; Weremchuck, 143–44.

graduated gospel workers who went on to pastor independent, autonomous churches. Many other Bible schools, colleges and seminaries then followed. “Darby’s ‘stepchildren’,” as Marion Field calls them, “are supported by certain Non-Denominational Bible Schools; Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible College [sic] are examples.”<sup>86</sup> To these could be added Grace College and Theological Seminary, Northwestern College, Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, Western Seminary, Denver Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Biola University and Talbot School of Theology, Southern California Seminary, The Master’s Seminary, Philadelphia College of the Bible (now Cairn University), Multnomah Bible College/Biblical Seminary, and William Tyndale College, and still others.<sup>87</sup> Hence, there is little doubt that Darby’s teaching influenced American evangelicalism through the Bible College and Bible conference movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These schools trained men to fill independent churches that needed qualified, Spirit-filled leadership. “Darby and the Bible college Movement,” states Sutherland “paved the way to fill that need. As a natural consequence, their brand of theology proved part and parcel of the germinating movement.”<sup>88</sup>

## 6.1 Conclusion

So, this paper comes full circle—from the thunders of Martin Luther against Scripture being kept the exclusive property of the pope along with his protests against an artificial clergy / laity divide in Rome, to John Nelson Darby’s picking back up the same arguments against the Established Church in England and Ireland. Yet, it was the later reformer who most consistently carried out the Reformation legacy of *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers as it relates to ecclesiology. If Lutheranism is the legacy of Luther; local autonomous, self-governed assemblies are the legacy of Darby. Both were born out of each man’s haunting conviction that Scripture is the supreme authority under heaven—and every Christian is free to read it for himself and obey it.

Therefore, this paper has demonstrated that the Protestant Reformation’s insistence of *sola Scriptura*, and its proper interpretation by the individual believer, led to its unforeseen development of modern-day ecclesiology. By way of analysis tracing a literary connection between two reforming fountainheads—Martin Luther and John Nelson Darby—a justification has been provided for the modern day, local independent church as a mode of governance faithful to principles initiated by the Reformation; and as such, was shown to be an accurate reflection of New Testament ecclesiology as well. In so doing, it has been demonstrated that without the Reformation’s recovery of *sola Scriptura* spearheaded by Martin Luther, Rome would still retain its unlawful captivity of the Western Church by holding the laity under lock and key—an identical battle later fought by John Nelson Darby in England. While Luther and Darby may have been separated by time and nation, their place in history as instruments in God’s sovereign hand is indeed remarkable, and worthy of reflection and thanksgiving.

---

<sup>86</sup> Field, 210.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Sutherland, 9:272.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 9:281.