

## *Émile Guers: An Early Darbyite Response to Irvingism and a Precursor to Charles Ryrie*

Modern dispensational theology has always been discussed in the light of historical controversy. To covenant theologians, dispensational theology is a rather recent theological phenomena dating from the early 1800s. Its founder, John Nelson Darby, is considered to be, at best, an aberration in Bible interpretation. In fact, some covenant theologians have referred to dispensationalism in the same way that they would refer to cults like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I would like to address, at least indirectly, two recent claims which attempt to cast doubt upon the validity of traditional dispensationalism by using historical arguments. The **first claim** is the continuing shrill rhetoric of Dave MacPherson who claims (once again) in his recent book, *The Rapture Plot*, that dispensationalists have been dishonest in representing their own historical development in order to avoid the embarrassment that the origin of the "secret rapture" (two-phase Second Coming) can be traced to the charismatic visions of a deluded teenage girl.<sup>2</sup> The **second claim** is the more serious use of dispensational history by progressive dispensationalists to demonstrate historical discontinuity. The discontinuity found in dispensational thought in the historical record of the last two centuries, in their minds, justifies the abandonment of any essentialist interpretation of dispensational history.<sup>3</sup>

For both cases above, the nineteenth-century Genevan pastor Émile Guers provides an interesting insight. In response to MacPherson's claim, Guers shows an early Darbyite understanding of Irvingism which is quite negative. In Guers' book *Irvingism and Mormonism* (1853), Pastor Guers responds to these two "cult-like" movements within the first twenty-five years of their existence. Of special note is his rejection of charismatic revelations found in both. In Guers' book *La Future D'Israël* (1856), Guers presents a *sine qua non* of Darbyite theology which foreshadows by over one hundred years the famous *sine qua non* of Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* (1965). This may point in the direction that dispensational history has a stronger core unity than progressive dispensationalism is willing to admit. Both cases above are introduced with the hope that further research will bring final clarification on these issues.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, 1991), 150-69.

<sup>2</sup> Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot*, (Simpsonville, South Carolina: Millennium III Publishers, 1995). A book review of this book is forthcoming from this writer.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Blaising, "The Search for Definition" in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992), 13-34.

<sup>4</sup> The present writer is working on a full-length article entitled "Continuity in the History of Dispensationalism" which attempts to develop more fully the second of the two points covered in this article.

## The Background of Émile Guers

Before the two areas of historical inquiry are pursued, one must understand something of the man under consideration. Émile Guers (1794 - 1882) was a product of the Genevan awakening<sup>5</sup> which took place in the early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> He was one of the pastors of the dissident Bourg-de-Four assembly in Geneva which had close ties with British evangelicals.<sup>7</sup> For example, in 1821 Guers, along with an associate named J. G. Gonthier, was consecrated or ordained by a congregation in London for the work in Geneva. Guers may have joined other Genevans in traveling on deputation in Britain to raise funds for his work. In a practical way the British evangelicals considered the Genevan pastors as national missionaries. It is also highly significant that there is

---

<sup>5</sup> The Genevan *réveil* or “awakening” was an expression used by Guers and his contemporaries to refer to a movement begun in the second decade of the nineteenth century in Geneva, Switzerland, composed of dissidents against existing ecclesiastical institutions. A pietistic approach to life, concern for biblical exposition, and, at times, separation from traditional ecclesiastical authorities were the main emphases. See Émile Guers, *Le Premier Réveil et la Première Église Indépendante à Genève* (Gèneve: Librairie Beroud & Kaufmann, 1871).

<sup>6</sup> Guers was a prolific writer and multitalented individual. In addition to his work as a pastor, he labored as a historian and, late in life, served as a military chaplain. There are at least twelve books by Guers known to this writer. Among his historical works are *Le Premier Réveil* mentioned in a previous note; *Historie Abrégée de l'Église de Jésus Christ, Principalement Pendant Les Siècles du Moyen Age, Rattachée Aux Grands Traits de la Prophétie*, (Gèneve: Madame Susan Guers, 1833); *Notice Historique sur l'Église Évangélique Libre de Genève*, (Gèneve: n.p., 1875); *Vie de Henri Pyt, Ministre de la Parole de Dieu*, (Toulouse: Delhorbe, 1850); *Les Droits de la Papauté et le Devoir Actuel de la France*, (Lyon: P.-N. Jossierand, 1871); *Les Prisonniers Français en Allemagne*, (Lyon: J. Roussier, 1871). The last work was probably included in a larger work entitled *How French Soldiers Fared in German Prisons: Being the Reminiscences of a French Army Chaplain During and After the Franco-German War*, ed. Henry Hayward, (London: Dean and Son, 1890). Guers dabbled in biblical exposition as well: *Le Camp et le Tabernacle du Désert, ou, Le Christ dans le Cuite Lévitique*, (Gèneve: Chez Mmes Beroud, et Susan Guers, 1849); *Jonas Fils d'Amittai, ou, Méditations, Sur la Mission de ce Prophète*, (Paris: Delay, 1846). The interesting work by Guers which is the matter of discussion of the first part of this article is *L'Irvingisme et le Mormonisme Jugés Par la Parole de Dieu*, (Gèneve: E. Beroud, 1853). This book was translated into English in 1854. It is this English edition which is used in this article. Guers' primary theological work is the book under consideration in the second part of this article. The full title is *Israël aux Derniers Jours De L'Économie Actuelle ou Essai Sur La Restauration Prochaine De Ce Peuple, Suivi D'Un Fragment Sur Le Millénarisme*, (Gèneve: Émile Beroud, 1856). The English edition is *Israel in the Last Days of the Present Economy; or, An Essay on the Coming Restoration of this People. Also, a Fragment on Millenarianism*, trans. With a preface by Aubrey C. Price, (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1862). The short title *La Future D'Israël* apparently comes from the the German edition *Israels Zukunft*, (Leipzig: E. Bredt, 1860).

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Stunt, “Geneva and British Evangelicals in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 32 (January 1981): 36. Recent studies are now available with respect to Geneva and its relationship to developing evangelicalism in Europe. See, for example, Olivier Fatio, “Quelle Réformation? Les Commémorations Genevoises de la Réformation à Travers Les Siècles,” *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 118 (1986): 111-30; Olivier Fatio, ed., *Gèneve Protestante en 1831*, (Gèneve: Labor et Fides, 1983) and Olivier Fatio, “Commémoration: Gèneve et le Refuge,” *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 133 (January-March 1987): 115-19. Older works yielding information and analysis about this movement also exist: Francis Chaponniere, *Pasteurs et Laiques de L'Église de Genève au Dix-Neuvième Siècle*, (Gèneve: n.p., 1889); H. de Goltz, *Gèneve Religieuse au Dix-Neuvième Siècle*, (Gèneve: n.p., 1862) and Guers, *Le Premier Réveil*.

evidence that Guers' congregation was classified with the Brethren movement as early as 1824.<sup>8</sup>

In the preface to Guers' work *La Future D'Israël*, the French pastor comments:

The present Work ought to have appeared much earlier, its publication has been retarded by circumstances not under the Author's control. The subject he here opens up has been gradually developing in his thoughts since the year 1831. Six or seven years later the most striking features of the Essay now published, were completely fixed and framed in his mind.<sup>9</sup>

Two factors are especially important to the development of the essay and the views which it contains. The first one is *prophetic interpretation using literalism*. Guers noted that this approach was not new nor was it the "property of any one; a contemporary religious denomination has used it much, but it did not create it. Before the latter came into existence more than one Theologian had adopted it."<sup>10</sup> He gives some cautious credit, however, to Benjamin Newton for the advancement of this method of interpretation.

The second factor for the development of Guers' essay is *the direct influence of Darby*. It seems that both Darby and Guers underwent similar spiritual pilgrimages in eschatology and ecclesiology. Both clarified ecclesiastical notions that led to a separatist position with respect to the established church.<sup>11</sup> The significance of the 1831 date which Guers gave coupled with Darby's own development reminds one of the Powerscourt Conferences which began in October of that year.<sup>12</sup> There is no evidence that Guers ever attended the conferences. However, there can be no doubt that he was aware of the debates. The main topic of the restoration of Israel, the many detailed analyses concerning the personal Antichrist, interpretations of the book of Daniel, and the Second Coming of Christ, which fill the pages of *La Future D'Israël*, matched the topics discussed at the conferences during the 1830s. That Guers' assembly had contacts with that part of Ireland is proven by the fact that one of the pastors of the Bourg-de-Four assembly named Henri Pyt represented the work in Dublin and throughout northern Ireland a year before the conferences were first held.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Guers demonstrated Brethren associations with an acceptance of the Darbyite view of the coming of Christ in two stages.<sup>14</sup>

The final proof of Guers' Darbyite heritage is provided by a contemporary enemy of the Brethren movement. H. de Goltz, writing critically of the separatist movement (including Guers' church, Darbyism, Irvingism, and others), testified to the direct connection between Darby and Guers. The Bourg-de-Four assembly in Geneva was, according to H. de Goltz, closely aligned with the Plymouth Brethren by 1835. In fact,

---

<sup>8</sup> Stunt, "Geneva," 36-42. The 1824 date may be surprising in light of the fact that 1826 has been cited as the official year of the origin of the Plymouth Brethren. However, Brethren historians acknowledge that the roots of the Brethren go back to the second decade of the nineteenth century. See Napoleon Noel, *The History of the Brethren* ed. William F. Knapp (Denver, Colorado: W. F. Knapp, 1936), 1:19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Guers, *La Future D'Israël*, iii (English edition).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See Floyd S. Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby," (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990), 16-62.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>13</sup> Guers, *Le Premier Réveil*, 278.

<sup>14</sup> Guers, *La Future D'Israël*, 239.

Darby made an extended visit to Geneva in the autumn of 1837 and was warmly received by the Bourg-de-Four brethren.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the process of thinking about millennial questions which Guers said began in 1831 and was finalized six or seven years later was apparently consummated at the time of Darby's visit to Geneva. In short, Guers was a direct disciple of Darby.

## *Émile Guers' Response to Irvingism*

The history of Irvingism, according to Émile Guers, begins with the doctrinal deviation of the Scottish divine and London preacher Edward Irving sometime in the decade of the 1820s.<sup>16</sup> Concerning Irving, Guers noted that

he conceived and forthwith set himself to propagate with characteristic ardour a most fatal doctrine. He taught that Jesus came in fallen and sinful flesh, with similar appetites and desires to our own; and that whereas the Holy Spirit had perfectly subdued in him every movement of the flesh, so his mission was to equally subdue it in us, thereby purifying us from all our sins, and rendering us as holy as he himself was holy.<sup>17</sup>

Guers lamented that this led to the rejection of the "doctrines of expiation by the death of the Saviour, and the substitution of the sacred victim for the guilty creature, as the Bible teaches, and the church has constantly received it."<sup>18</sup> Guers' historical overview then records that

To this heresy regarding the humanity of Christ and the sanctification of the believer, Irving, by a natural consequence, added soon after this other rash assertion, that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were at all times to remain in their full plenitude in the church, and that if we do not possess them, our want of faith is the single cause.<sup>19</sup>

In the mind of Guers, Irving used these miraculous gifts, especially revelatory utterances, to confirm the false doctrine he had been teaching.<sup>20</sup>

Guers' reaction to Irvingism was partly that of pastoral protector of his flock. Apparently, missionaries of the Irvingite faith had come to Geneva:

Meanwhile, Newman Street busily propagated everywhere its favourite and false doctrines. Its emissaries reached Geneva in 1835, and returned in 1837. But they were speedily discomfited

---

<sup>15</sup> H. de Goltz, *Gèneve Religieuse au Dix-Neuvième Siècle*, 452. H. de Goltz, as a contemporary critical historian of separatist movements in Geneva during the rise of Brethrenism and Irvingism, reports greater discontinuity between Irvingism and Darby's followers than does MacPherson's modern rewrite of history. This is especially seen as it relates to the issues of the nature of the Church and dependence upon utterances by the Holy Spirit. See 437-55. Apparently, de Goltz's animosity to both Irvingism and Darbyism did not prevent him from accurately describing each movement and its emphases.

<sup>16</sup> Guers, *Irvingism and Mormonism*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

there, one word shattering their whole scheme so far as the Saviour was concerned: "That holy thing, which shall be born of thee, shall be called the Son of God," (Luke i. 33) . . ."<sup>21</sup>

Guers added the succinct summary: "They had better success elsewhere."<sup>22</sup> The occasion for his work *Irvingism and Mormonism* (1854) can be found in his section entitled "Present State of Irvingism." Apparently the Genevan pastor was bothered by a resurgence of Irvingism two decades after the death of Irving in 1834.

After attaining some notoriety in England, Irvingism lost its ground considerably. Discouraged by the numerous and notorious failures of its prophecies, and weakened by the defection of one of its apostles and one of its prophets, as well as by other untoward things, it fell into a sort of decline. But rebuked rather than corrected, it is again raising its head, and is of new spreading in England as well as on the Continent. It boasts there, among its adepts, of Tiersch, a learned German professor, and throws envious looks on Switzerland by the way of Basle, where it possesses a church, under the charge of one who was a scholar in the Theological Seminary of Geneva.<sup>23</sup>

He goes on to note that other areas of Switzerland and France were under attack by the Irvingite heretics.<sup>24</sup>

## Guers' Theological Response to Irvingism

Some of Émile Guers' theological response came to light as his presentation was summarized concerning the history of Irvingism. However, in his book he showed some of his keenest theological assessments in the sections entitled "Doctrines of Irvingism" and "Miscellaneous Reflections."<sup>25</sup> Here he relied upon two writings of the Irvingites: (1) *The Church of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1836), and (2) a document he calls the *Irvingite Manifesto* for which he gives no date, calling it a later document.<sup>26</sup> In his analysis several differences between the teachings of Irvingism and his own view of Scripture (Darbyism) emerge.

### **First, Irvingism was largely historicist in its approach to prophecy.**

Concerning the all-important prophecies involving 1,260 days (Dan. 7:25, 12:7; Rev. 11:3, 12:6, 14), the followers of Irving felt they were living through the fulfillment of those three and a half years. While they had abandoned the one prophetic day equals one year common to most historicist interpretations, they did not rid themselves of the historicist approach in general. In fact, the terminal points for that time period were clearly known by means of Irvingite utterances. The beginning was January 14, 1832 while the ending (and the coming of Christ) was to be July 14, 1835. Fortunately for Irving himself, he passed away in December of 1834. That way he was not alive to witness the British parallel to the Great Disappointment in the American Millerite movement in the next decade (1844).<sup>27</sup> The response by Irvingites to the lack of any

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9. Newman Street refers to the later location of Edward Irving's London congregation.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 23-41, 41-51, respectively.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 23, 25.

<sup>27</sup> See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, chapters 18 and following.

return of Christ was similar to the early fledgling years of the Seventh-Day Adventists. According to Guers, the Irvingites abandoned the literal interpretation of their own historicist prophecies in order to accommodate the failure.<sup>28</sup> In contradistinction to this position is the Guers-Darby futurism which looked for the 1,260 days *within* a future tribulation period.<sup>29</sup>

**Second, Irvingism, while sending conflicting signals, seemed to posit a post-tribulational rapture.**<sup>30</sup> In Guers' understanding of the utterances of Irving's group, "the return of Jesus in glory at the end of three years and a half of testifying, dated from 14<sup>th</sup> January 1832, when the saints were to be caught up before the Lord, the earth judged, and the millennial kingdom of Christ established."<sup>31</sup> This appears at face value to be a post-tribulational rapture of the Church. Guers' view was clearly different.

But at what precise moment will the Church be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air? All that can be advanced for certain on this point is, that the Church will certainly be with the Lord before the great and terrible day of *wrath*, because not only is she to be preserved from that wrath, (Rom. ii.v.; 2 Thess. i.); but she will accompany the Sovereign Judge when He returns to execute judgment on His enemies, (Rev. xix. 14). The Apostle, it is true, says the Church will be with the Lord at His coming, (1 Thess. iv; 1 Cor. xv.23; 2 Thess. ii.1, etc.); but Jesus' coming is not one single act of His glory; it admits, on the contrary, of distinct and rapidly succeeding scenes, as we have just pointed out: first the Lord takes His Church to Himself, "that where He is there His well-beloved may be also," (John xiv.); then He returns with her to judge the imperial beast; and it is between these two phases of His coming that the Church celebrates her marriage with Him in the Father's house.<sup>32</sup>

Guers seems to mirror the undogmatic spirit of Darby during those early days of doctrinal development although evidently spelling out a two-phase Second Coming.<sup>33</sup>

**Third, the nature of the Church was different in Irvingism than it was in the Guers-Darby scheme.** Guers noted that the Irvingites, through their doctrine of baptismal regeneration and their anointed New Testament priesthood, confused the Old and New Testament economies. In a stinging rebuke of Irvingism, Guers thundered his complaint:

But not only does the Irvingite definition [of the Church] change and thus adulterate the Bible notion of the Church (Eph., Col., &c.): it in addition denies, by implication, the election of grace,

---

<sup>28</sup> Guers, *Irvingism and Mormonism*, 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> Guers, *La Future D'Israël*, 85-115 (English edition).

<sup>30</sup> Dave MacPherson points out the advocacy on the part of Margaret MacDonald of a partial rapture before development of a full-fledged two-phase Second Coming or pre-tribulational rapture, *The Rapture Plot*, 21-53. Guers acknowledged the prominent place given to the MacDonald family in the utterances of Irvingism, *Irvingism and Mormonism*, 3. Guers also cites several examples of conflicting utterances in other areas throughout his expose. The centrality of the fact that the Irving congregation was waiting for the end of the 1,260 days shows that any partial rapture view was not the majority view of the Irvingites. No doubt all of these ideas were being discussed on several different fronts. Those in the Irving camp would have been drawn to prophetic utterances to justify their peculiar approaches.

<sup>31</sup> Guers, *Irvingism and Mormonism*, 16-17.

<sup>32</sup> Guers, *La Future D'Israël*, 199-200 (English edition).

<sup>33</sup> See Floyd Elmore, "J. N. Darby's Early Years" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1995), 138.

and the doctrine of regeneration and adoption through faith; it confounds the world and the church, the children of God and the children of the devil, and overthrows the whole counsel of God.<sup>34</sup>

He further complained of them, “Always the Church in place of Christ!”<sup>35</sup> To Guers, the followers of Irving were viewing themselves as the visible Universal Church on earth through which God was uniquely working. Instead, the Bible taught that by simple faith believers were added to the Universal body of Christ. This led to his labeling of them as a new “Popery.”<sup>36</sup>

**Fourth, Guers also criticized Irvingism for its belief in the insufficiency of Scripture for faith and practice.** He noted that the extra-biblical utterances are the “idol of Irvingism” and complained that “nothing, not even the Word of God, is to be placed above utterances.”<sup>37</sup> Guers appeals to Deut. 13 & 18 to show that the existence of many false prophecies among them, even though some of the prophecies may match the truth, proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that Irvingism is not from God.<sup>38</sup> In a concise and telling summary, Guers laid bare the heart and soul of Irvingism:

Such then is Irvingism. It is a perversion of the true idea of the Church, and a denial of election by grace, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, adoption by faith, and the sufficiency and perfection of Scripture; a perpetual mingling of the church and the world, and of the first and second covenants; with its salvation by sacraments and ministries, clericalism in its lowest form, baptismal regeneration and the restoration of all things by its prophets and apostles.<sup>39</sup>

The strong distinction between Darbyism and Irvingism is bolstered by the testimony of an enemy of both. The aforementioned H. de Goltz was a contemporary adversary of separatistic religious movements such as Irvingism, Darbyism, and others. Well acquainted with Guers and the Bourg-de-Four assembly, de Goltz marked off distinctions which separated the Darbyites from the Irvingites. First, he noted that Darby (he also mentions Guers in these connections) opposed an enforced visible, external unity in the Church which seemed to be the aim of Irving (using, of course, his church). What is interesting in de Goltz’s presentation is that he gives this understanding on the basis of Darby’s dispensational scheme with its distinction between Israel and the Church. The Church was a spiritual body internally established by the Holy Spirit, not externally established by men. In short, he viewed Irving and his followers as inserting more Old Testament ideas into the Church than did Darby.<sup>40</sup> Second, de Goltz highlights in Irvingism the work of the Spirit through extraordinary visitations (a reference to the utterances?) to establish the external church. Constantly, however, in his discussion of Darby he notes the exposition of the Scriptures under the internal guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup> In the end, he appeared to be concerned that Darbyism had more influence in

---

<sup>34</sup> Guers, *Irvingism and Mormonism*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 37ff.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-51.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> H. de Goltz, *Gèneve Religieuse au Dix-Neuvieme Siecle*, (Gèneve: n.p., 1862), 447.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 448-49.

driving people from the established churches and that this impact was strong in French Switzerland by 1841 and 1842.<sup>42</sup>

## Comparison of Irvingism to Mormonism

Guers rehearses the history and doctrines of Mormonism in the same manner.<sup>43</sup> In doing so he shows great detailed awareness of a movement on a different continent which was still in its infancy. Much of his assessment foreshadows modern evangelical critiques of the Mormon cult. In a summary chapter, he compares the British Irvingism with the American Mormonism.<sup>44</sup> The following list covers the main points of his comparison:

- Both deny the sufficiency of Scripture using added revelations.
- Both deny the uniqueness of the Apostles and have their own modern day equivalents.
- Both show hostility to the spread of the Bible.
- Both practice materialism in worship.
- Both seek supernatural gifts and utterances.
- Both define the Church as a society of the Baptized.
- Both teach a salvation by the sacraments.
- Both amount to a new “Popery.”

The comparison to Mormonism shows the marked depth of animosity which Guers and his camp had for those who used extra-biblical prophecies to undermine the written Word of God.

## The Significance of Guers’ Response to Irvingism

The overall discussion of Guers’ reply to Edward Irving’s movement leads one to note some important themes. First, Darbyism possessed a general aversion to prophetic utterances, whether from Irving’s group or elsewhere. This dislike is lamented even today by charismatics who speak against the cessationism common to most traditional dispensationalists. Guers’ detailed analysis showed that while he viewed some alleged prophecies of the Irving group being correct (because they matched Scripture or simply “accidentally” came true), the overall direction of the prophecies was a confused mass of contradictory predictions pitting Irvingites against Irvingites. In their most important prophecy, the prediction of the coming of Christ on July 14, 1835, their grand failure showed that, in the eyes of Guers’ Darbyism, the prophetic utterances of the Irvingites were simply not to be trusted.

Second, Darbyism opted, on the other hand, to ground its systematic theology in literal Bible exposition. One may disagree with the conclusions drawn up by Guers and the Darbyites. However, one would be hard pressed to prove that Darbyite theology came

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 455.

<sup>43</sup> Guers, *Irvingism and Mormonism*, 52-84.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 85-90.

through any other source than discussions about the meaning of various passages. If one disagrees with them, he should simply show from Scripture how he does so rather than seeking another origin of the system. The instructive example of H. de Goltz shows that even contemporary enemies of Darbyism recognized this reliance upon the Bible to determine what was to be believed.

Third, the largest gulf between Darbyism and Irvingism is the debate between futurism and historicism, especially concerning the issue of the rapture of the Church. Guers demonstrated that the 1,260 days were future and that the rapture apparently occurred before them.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Irvingism practiced (at least until 1835) a historicism which believed that they were actually living through the time of the 1,260 days at the end of which Christ would return to rapture the Church. Even the aberration of Margaret MacDonald's partial rapture view does not match the later Darby developments concerning the timing of the rapture of the Church.

Fourth, Guers' example is instructive because it opens up a whole new world of research into Darbyism and its relationship to other movements. Most studies have concentrated on British and American developments of dispensationalism. However, it appears that a major stream of dispensational development took place on the Continent with Guers as a central figure and Geneva as a leading center. That Guers' influence transcended his local area can be seen in the fact that Arno C. Gaebelein, a leading American dispensational figure at the turn of the twentieth century, became a premillennialist partly by reading *La Future D'Israël*.<sup>46</sup>

This influence brings added pressure to MacPherson's thesis that there was and is a rapture plot or incredible cover up by dispensationalists to hide the origin of the two-phase Second Coming with Margaret MacDonald of the Irvingite group. To sustain his view he has to maintain that early on Darbyites outright lied about the origin and that later writers either lied or copied an existing lie. He has gone to great lengths in his books to demonstrate the details of this progression. However, now the Continental dispensationalists such as Guers must be considered in that formulation. As anyone knows, any "frame up" becomes less feasible when more people have to be added to the conspiracy. The task really becomes daunting in the case of Guers in light of his contemporary status to both Darby and Irving and his strong adversarial tone toward the so-called prophetic utterances coming out of the Irving crowd.

### ***Émile Guers: Precursor to Charles Ryrie***

One of Guers' contributions in *La Future D'Israël* was the detailed presentation of what he considered to be proper methodology when studying prophetic portions of the Bible. After an introductory chapter yielding motives for being interested in prophecy related to Israel (recall that Israel was not in the land at the time in any form), Guers cited three general principles which should guide prophetic study:

---

<sup>45</sup> Guers is not clear about whether or not all seven years of Daniel's Seventieth Week are included after the rapture. In fact, he seems to believe that the actual length of the interval between the two phases is indeterminate. See *La Future D'Israël*, 239-41.

<sup>46</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *Half a Century: The Autobiography of a Servant*, (New York: Publication Office "Our Hope," 1930), 5.

<b>1</b>	<b>Literalism</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The diversity of classes and privileges in the entire body of the redeemed</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The literal value of the word <i>day</i> in prophecy</b>

He also described the spirit and general plan of prophecy followed by five chapters discussing the major biblical prophecies about Israel's future restoration. He covered Daniel, Revelation, Joel, Obadiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Matthew 24, and 2 Thess. 2 while adding an overview of the nature of Israel's restoration.<sup>47</sup>

Guers also outlined a detailed chronology of the seven phases of Israel's restoration:

<b>1</b>	<b>The partial return of the Jewish state to Palestine</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Jerusalem becomes the residence of the Antichrist and the principal seat of apostasy on the Roman earth</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The judgment of Jerusalem</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The deliverance of Jerusalem from the Antichrist and the nations</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>The general conversion of Israel by the appearing of Christ</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>The general reestablishment of the nation of Israel</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>The establishment of the glory of the Holy City, and the Chosen Race in the age to come<sup>48</sup></b>

Guers concluded this particular discussion with a presentation of signs of the times including an interesting discussion about the possibility of the Sultan in Palestine letting Jews return to the land and how it would be possible for the reshaping of a political Israel in Palestine.<sup>49</sup>

A closing appendix to *La Future D'Israël* entitled "Fragment on Millenarianism" attempted to prove the premillennial coming of the Lord, the distinction between the resurrection of the righteous and the resurrection of the wicked, and finally, the personal reign of the Messiah on earth.<sup>50</sup>

## The Principle of Literalism

The three principles of prophetic study which Guers promoted begin with the already mentioned *literalism*. Prophecy was to be interpreted just like all other passages of scripture. By observation three forms or modes of language were seen:

<sup>47</sup> Guers, *La Future D'Israël*, 14-189.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 190-342.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 371-98.

<b>1</b>	<b>The <i>figurative or metaphorical</i> in which images are taken from the order of ordinary or natural things;</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The <i>symbolic</i> in which images are taken from the order of supernatural or superhuman things;</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>The <i>literal or historical form</i>.<sup>51</sup></b>

All of these were encompassed in Guers' overall understanding of literalism in interpretation. He showed a heightened awareness of the nuances and subtleties of the discussion which would be at home in modern discussions of these same issues.<sup>52</sup> Yet it is the third case that simple, natural language should be taken at face value which was emphasized while rules for governing the other two cases were worked out. As it applied to the restoration of Israel, Guers maintained that a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecies led automatically to an understanding that Israel would one day be restored to political viability as a nation in God's future economy.

### **The Principle of Diversity of Classes and Privileges in the Entire Body of the Redeemed**

The second principle of prophetic interpretation which Guers insisted on was one which he believed was simply an application of the principle of literalism. Within the realm of the redeemed there were different classes of people with differing privileges. Concerning the **differing classes** of redeemed peoples, Guers commented:

Diversity in unity is the general seal of the works of God. There are distinct classes in the body of the redeemed. Israel must not be confounded with the Church. This people must not be mixed up with the nations who will serve God during the millennium. Israel, as a people, retain their individuality in prophecy, as they do also in history. It is true that the first fruits of Israel, reunited to those of the nations who compose together the Church, have lost, and continue to lose their original and national character; it is true that as soon as he is converted the Jew ceases to be a Jew, for in the body of Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek;" and that once called and incorporated in the Church, the Jew disappears, and is wholly effaced (Rom. i.; Eph. ii.; Col. iii.); but this does not hinder the Jewish nation, as such, from remaining for ever distinct from the Church and the nations. In no part does Holy Scripture teach the absorption of Israel by the Church, in no part does it teach the absorption of the Church, or the nations by Israel. The opposite view may please our minds but it has no root in the Word of God.<sup>53</sup>

The Church, Guers goes on to say, is a "kind of parenthesis—a glorious parenthesis in the order of Divine dispensations!"<sup>54</sup> This distinction between Israel and the Church will exist "until the end come, when Christ shall deliver up the mediatorial kingdom to God

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 22-28.

<sup>52</sup> For example, see Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), 82-86.

<sup>53</sup> Guers, *La Future D'Israël*, 21 (English edition).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 24 (English edition).

the Father, when a new heavens and a new earth shall be created, and God shall be all in all.<sup>55</sup>

In summary, Guers has stated a belief in two peoples of God. In prophetic interpretation these two were not to be confounded. Sound familiar?

Concerning the **differing privileges** of the two peoples, Guers taught that Israel inherits eternal salvation and national restoration as provided in the Abrahamic Covenant. In particular, Israel inherits the temporal and national promises such as the return to Judea, fertility of the soil, longevity of the inhabitants, and political supremacy.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, the Church inherits the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant through Christ. That is, it shares in the glory of Christ, a kind of heavenly or spiritual inheritance which is not as concretely described, but which involves eternal salvation, a deeper bond with Christ, and a locus in heaven.<sup>57</sup> As stated above, the differing privileges as well as the differing classes will be eliminated at the end of the millennium in Guers' scheme.

## The Literal Value of the Word *Day* in Prophecy

The third principle which Guers enunciated is that the word *day* in prophecy should be taken naturally as a twenty-four hour period.<sup>58</sup> Guers here combated the view that one day in prophecy is to be taken symbolically as one year. This issue was one of the first prophetic issues taken up at the Powerscourt Conferences in 1831 and was one of major debate throughout the culture of the times.<sup>59</sup> After discussing various passages in Daniel and Revelation for which it would be absurd to take one day to mean one year, Guers opted for the notion that one day should be taken as one twenty-four hour period.<sup>60</sup> This conclusion he believed to be of great consequence.

The view we have just explained is of great importance; it is at the foundation of futurism, or the system which maintains that the prophecies respecting the fourth empire (Rev., from chap. iv. to xix.) have not yet obtained their accomplishment. It is the system we incline to; but as will shortly be shewn, we nevertheless do not admit it in all its rigour.<sup>61</sup>

Guers admitted to possible exceptions, but saw that as a general rule, a single prophetic day means exactly twenty-four hours. The result was a futuristic approach to passages, especially in Daniel and Revelation. Hence, the final and third principle of Guers' *sine qua non* for interpretation boils down to **futurism** as opposed to **historicism** or **preterism**.

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 25 (English edition).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 25-27 (English edition).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 37-39 (English edition).

<sup>59</sup> See Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1939*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 35 and Elmore, "A Critical Examination," 38.

<sup>60</sup> Guers usually viewed days in the context of the Jewish use of the lunar calendar. See *La Future D'Israël*, 38 (English edition).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

## Summary

Émile Guers noted that the three principles were all related and that the last two were built upon the first one of literalism. In an eloquent summary, he writes

Thus, then – literalism – diversity of classes and privileges in the body of the Redeemed, the continuance of Israel as a distinct people on the present earth so long as it shall last, and consequently, the permanence of the special blessings promised to them, -- lastly, the value of the literal word *day* in prophecy; such are the three great principles it is necessary to establish; these are the staffs we must carry to support our steps in the course we are entering on. In fact, these staffs, these principles, as we have already said, are summed up in one – literalism. This was the principle to which the early Christians conformed in the interpretation of prophecy. But since the reign of Constantine the temporal prosperity of the Church rapidly changed her primitive belief on this point. Passing suddenly from a state of oppression to the highest favour, the Church then believed she had come to the times of blessing foretold by the Scriptures. The better to persuade herself of this, it was necessary to enfeeble their natural meaning, and to see in them only poetical and figurative expressions. But all the prophecies agree in making the day of vengeance and the coming of the Lord precede that happy period. A fresh effort of imagination dispersed this obstacle. They persuaded themselves that the day of vengeance was passed. Such was the origin, little praiseworthy certainly, of that system of interpretation which tends to allegorize the most exact prophetic proofs of our holy books. Let us return to the pure principle, that of the Scriptures, and the early Christians.<sup>62</sup>

## Comparison to Charles Ryrie

Charles Ryrie posited in 1965 that there were three essential principles that distinguished dispensationalists from nondispensationalists. His *sine qua non* highlighted what has come to be called an essentialist view of dispensational history and interpretation. Notice the similarities to Émile Guers' principles:

	<b>Émile Guers (1856)</b> <i>La Future D'Israël</i>	<b>Charles Ryrie (1965)</b> <i>Dispensationalism Today</i>
<b>1</b>	<b>Literalism in prophecy</b>	<b>Consistent literal interpretation</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Principle of Diversity of Classes and Privileges in the Entire Body of the Redeemed</b>	<b>Distinction between Israel and the Church</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Futurism</b>	<b>Doxological purpose to biblical history (as opposed to a soteriological purpose as in Covenant theology)</b>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 38-39 (English edition).

The first two points for both Guers and Ryrie are essentially the same. Literal interpretation applied to prophecy is the primary principle which leads to the other major distinctive features. Although the details of point number two might be worked out differently by each author, the basic idea is the same – Israel and the Church can not be confounded in Bible interpretation. Each has its sphere which must be recognized in order to make sense of the biblical text.

The third principles are not the same. However, both of them arose out of contemporary doctrinal debates. Guers responded to the nineteenth century debate over prophetic “days” as actual years or literal days. He opted for the latter which led to futurism. Ryrie responded to the heated criticisms of a popular dispensationalism which mostly came from the Reformed camp in the middle years of the twentieth century. Reformed theology focused on individual redemption via election which led it to undermine the national and community promises to Israel in the Old Testament. Dispensationalism, according to Ryrie, had a true “unity through diversity” and was able to see the bigger picture, both national and individual redemption schemes which were part of God’s dealings with men throughout the dispensational ages. Guers would probably have agreed with Ryrie on the third point and it is clear that Ryrie is a futurist.

The most recent debate, however, has focused on the first two points of the *sine qua non*. Here Guers remarkably anticipates Ryrie by over a century. Nonetheless, Ryrie’s view has come under fire recently from progressive dispensationalists at precisely the point under question. Especially intriguing is the claim by progressives that the essentialist view of dispensationalism lacks any historical perspective. Craig Blaising, referring to Ryrie’s approach, notes that

the essentialist view of dispensationalism sought for continuity in certain elements (expressed as the *sine qua non*) that remained unchanged through the history of the tradition. However, as already noted, while there is no question that the elements of the proposed *sine qua non* are related to traditional views and practice, nevertheless one must regard them as modifications and reformulations, whether small or great, that were part of the changes then taking place. They were in fact the central tenets of a new dispensationalism. But when that which is in fact new is presented and accepted as if it had always been the case, the result is not only historical confusion but a conceptual naïveté that resists both the idea and the fact of further development in the tradition.<sup>63</sup>

While Blaising admits that there is some connection between the dispensationalism of Ryrie and prior generations of dispensationalists, he laments the lack of historical perspective which has distanced essentialist dispensationalists from some of the views of past dispensationalists. For example, he intimates that, while essentialist dispensationalism progressed beyond Scofieldism, it also left behind some of the good features of the kind of dispensationalism one might find in the Niagara Bible Conference movement of the late nineteenth century.<sup>64</sup> In short, there was a failure to recognize historical perspective and progression in the formulation.

---

<sup>63</sup> Craig Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” 29.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

However, this is precisely where Émile Guers provides food for thought. The similarity of his essential principles to those of Ryrie shows that Ryrie's *sine qua non* pushes back past both the Scofield era and the Niagara Conference era to a direct disciple of John Nelson Darby, a period of over 100 years. This deliberately voiced continuity in essential principles forces one to the conclusion that progressive dispensationalists may have "rushed to judgment" in the matter. In other words, how can Ryrie's tenets be a "new dispensationalism" when there is so much similarity with Guers? While there is much discontinuity in the dispensational tradition which must be catalogued and analyzed, it is this writer's conviction that progressive dispensationalism has shortchanged the elements of continuity found in the history of modern dispensationalism.

### ***Conclusion: A Plea For Caution***

The motivation for this paper is a growing uneasiness with the way that the history of dispensationalism is being handled by contemporary scholars. Dave MacPherson's revisionism on the rapture origin is an attempt to justify his dogmatic theology. The progressive dispensationalists should be seen in a different light. They are sincerely attempting to examine the historical data to analyze the doctrinal development. However, their interest in development tends to focus on discontinuity in the historical tradition. Guers and other dispensational writers must be examined with reference to continuity. An essentialist approach to dispensationalism cannot be abandoned simply on the basis that there are elements of discontinuity within the tradition. Guers especially shows that Ryrie's later formulation is not simply a reaction to his own contemporary circumstances.

Two recommendations emerge from this study. First, dispensationalists and others interested in dispensational history should involve themselves with the emerging studies of Continental dispensationalism. We should not limit ourselves to British and American varieties. Second, we have had only ten years of development known as progressive dispensationalism. That is not enough time to make sweeping conclusions about a historical tradition that has been little studied. May the Lord raise up dispensational historians who will provide the analysis which in the end will result in an accurate synthesis that includes both continuity and discontinuity in the tradition. This writer's suspicion is that when that day comes, Charles Ryrie's instincts may be shown to have been right all along.