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### A History of the Independent Bible Church

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# **SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL**

This Honors thesis entitled

## **A History of the Independent Bible Church**

written by

**Karen Lynn Dearing**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for completion of the  
Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

thesis director

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## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly more influential in America today is the Independent Bible Church. Bible churches, in general, are denominationally unrelated, believing that the local church can best function independent of a denominational hierarchy. The Independent Bible Church is one of many nondenominational or independent churches that are attended by 5% of the adult population in America. In order to understand this church, it is necessary to trace its roots back to the beginning of certain ideas that eventually led to the foundation and became the theology of the Independent Bible Church.

Revolutionary events have taken place over the last five centuries that have led to drastic changes in church structure and beliefs in Europe and North America. Change has often been characteristic of the church, but those which led directly to the emergence of the denominations as they are known today began at the time of the Reformation in Europe. Tracing theological and practical changes through the Reformation, the Anabaptist movement, the Pietist Movement, on into the Colonization of America and the First Great Awakening gives clarity in understanding church development in 20<sup>th</sup> century America and more particularly, the Independent Bible Church.

This paper will overview Christian history from the Reformation to the present and look at the religious liberalism and fundamentalism that arose during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and how these aided in the rise of denominations. During this time period non-denominational churches arose, including the Independent Bible Church. In addition, an examination of the key leader in the roots of non-denominationalism, John Nelson Darby, and his beliefs on dispensationalism, ecclesiology, and eschatology will prove helpful, as well as a brief history of education in America and the part it played in

the development of both Bible colleges and theological seminaries, particularly Dallas Theological Seminary. Finally, the beliefs and doctrines commonly affiliated with the Independent Bible Church today will be explored and contextualized using Fellowship Bible Church North in Plano as an example of a specific Bible church in action.

The church has been part of our American culture as well as the global culture for centuries. Understanding more about how churches, in particular the Independent Bible Church began gives perspective regarding why this church functions the way it does and gives insight into its possible place in the future. The purpose of this paper is to look at history to understand how the independent Bible church began, what it is and why it exists.

## HISTORICAL ROOTS: REFORMATION

The roots of the Bible Church movement can be traced as far back as the Reformation and the rise of Pietism. Before the Reformation began, Europe was dealing with great change and unrest. The troubled state of the Western Church was a major area of concern, contributing greatly to the turmoil of the whole continent. The Reformation began when Martin Luther challenged the Roman Catholic Church by posting his *Ninety-five Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. In the theses, Luther professed his conviction that justification comes by faith alone and stated boldly his position on the worthless character of the doctrine of indulgences and his doubts concerning papal authority. This eventually led to his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church on January 3, 1521 (Dowley, 367).

Luther published a multitude of books during his life, the majority of which were written in German so that ordinary Christians could read and understand them. He

translated the Bible, “which enabled people to see for themselves the truth of his arguments,” and “he published an account of each of his disputes with Rome, so that people could judge for themselves” the issues at hand (Dowley, 367). He gave ordinary Christians a chance to think for themselves and read the Scriptures for the first time on their own. This willingness to allow independence has carried on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the Independent Bible Church and others seek to do the same thing with congregates.

Some of Luther’s key doctrinal beliefs dealt with worship, the Lord’s Supper, baptism, and the Christian life. Luther conducted worship in the language of the people and the congregation was encouraged to participate in worship through liturgy and the singing of hymns. Both elements of the Lord’s Supper were given to all communicants, whereas Roman Catholics had only allowed the priests to partake of the wine. Finally, Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers “meant that there were no longer two levels of Christianity, spiritual and lay” (Dowley, 372). There had been no precedent in the early church for the priests to act as mediators. Every Christian, regardless of their occupation, could go directly to God in prayer. In addition, “believers have both the right and the duty to read the newly-translated Bible” (Dowley, 373). By the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Luther’s ideas and the Lutheran Church had become the dominant faith of much of Germany and most of Scandinavia, and impacted the religious life in the rest of Europe.

#### HISTORICAL ROOTS: ANABAPTISM

Contemporary with Luther was Ulrich Zwingli, who began the Reformation in Switzerland (Leaf, 2). Zwingli gathered a group of young scholars to help with his reformation. Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and Simon Stumpf were among that group.

Eventually these with others split from Zwingli in 1525 over the issue of infant baptism. Zwingli supported infant baptism, but Grebel and the other Anabaptists rejected it because of the lack of scriptural support. They opted for believer's baptism and established their church on that basis (Dowley, 401).

However, baptism was not the only issue for the Anabaptists. They clung to other beliefs as well. An important belief of the Anabaptist's was that of discipleship. They believed that Christianity "must go beyond inner experience and acceptance of doctrines. It must involve a daily walk with God, in which Christ's teaching and example shaped a transformed style of life" (Dowley, 402). A second Anabaptist belief was called the principle of love. In dealing with non-Anabaptists, they would not go to war, defend themselves, or be coerced by the state. A final prominent Anabaptist belief was the insistence on the separation of church and state. Many of these beliefs are still held by American groups today, including the Independent Bible Church (Dowley, 403). However, most Bible churches are not pacifists.

#### HISTORICAL ROOTS: PIETISM

Over time, the Lutheran Reformation became rather formal and less personal which resulted in a very dry, lifeless faith. Pietism arose as a reaction to this in the early seventeenth century, with an emphasis on "the importance of the new birth, personal faith and the warmth of Christian experience as a spur to effective mission" (Dowley, 444). Pietists did not separate from the church, but tried to change it from within. As a result of this movement, many people were inspired to write new hymns of praise and thanksgiving. These hymns became an obvious link between Pietism and Evangelicalism as many of them were translated and used in England. The greatest contribution of the

Pietist Movement came with its emphasis on holy living, biblical scholarship, and missions. This missionary concern eventually became an important feature in the revivals in both Britain and America (Dowley, 445). Many Pietistic practices play an important part in the lives of church members today, including members of the Independent Bible Church. These practices include the singing of hymns written during the time of the Pietist movement and an emphasis on similar things such as new birth and personal faith.

## AMERICAN COLONIZATION

The colonization of America was in progress during the 1600s. This colonization of a free land brought opportunities for a fresh expression of Reformation theology. The first settlers came to America from England and Europe and transplanted the various English related Christian denominations. Congregationalists, Anglicans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholic churches arose, each focused in certain states or colonies.

By the early 1700s, the evangelical enthusiasm initially evident in these denominations was beginning to decline. This decline was partly due to increased materialism stemming from the development of commerce, which increased the wealth of the people. Materialism “blunted the keen edge of Protestant witness” (Dowley, 438). As a result, people were allowed to join churches without agreeing to any church covenant, which was the previous practice. The Half Way Covenant allowed children to be baptized regardless of the spiritual life of their parents. No longer did it take a saving experience of Christ for baptism to occur. All it took was moral respectability, or parents with moral respectability. This degeneration lasted until the 1720s and 30s, when a



revival began in the Colonies (Dowley, 439). This revival is referred to as the First Great Awakening. The awakening, which lasted well into the eighteenth century, led people to repent of their sins and renew their commitment to Christ and the Scriptures. Without this awakening the church would have taken a different course, possibly not leading to the establishment of further churches, including the Independent Bible Church.

## THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM

Between 1789 and 1865 religious liberalism was on the rise in Europe. This idea included the advocacy of a broad interpretation of the Bible as well as freedom from rigid doctrine and authoritarianism. This resulted in the reinterpretation of such doctrines as the deity of Christ and the authority of Scripture. This liberalism began to grow and spread, eventually finding its way to America around 1865. At this time most Americans thought of their country as a Christian nation and considered evangelical Protestantism the national religion. Though differences existed among various denominations and between the Northern and Southern areas, an overall unity of beliefs and values was still present. This unity dissolved when liberalism arose, attempting to “save Christianity from the assault of contemporary intellectual developments by accommodating the traditional faith to modern culture” (Longfield, 646).

This accommodation included various new beliefs or new interpretations of Christian thought. Liberals placed an emphasis on the immanence of God in nature and history. According to them, God did not work by miraculous intervention but through natural laws. They also argued that experience, rather than creeds or doctrine, provided the foundation of Christianity. A final important belief was a different view of sin. Seeing man as fundamentally good, sin did not cause a gulf between man and God that



needed to be bridged by Jesus. Sin was merely a matter of ignorance that could be corrected through Christian education (Longfield, 647).

These beliefs led to conflict between liberals and evangelical Protestants, who came to be known as fundamentalists in the controversy. Fundamentalists defended “orthodox Protestant Christianity against the challenges of theological liberalism, higher criticism of the Bible, evolution, and other modernisms judged to be harmful to traditional faith” (Weber, 461-2). Some of these fundamentalists took part in theological innovations, most importantly the development of dispensational premillennialism by John Nelson Darby. These innovations would influence the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s. Darby’s doctrine of dispensational premillennialism became the core of a key belief held by many churches in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the Independent Bible Church.

The beliefs of the fundamentalists, specifically John Nelson Darby, are the theological foundations that led to the formation of the Independent Bible Church. His doctrinal views focus on dispensationalism, eschatology, and ecclesiology, all of which directly relate to the beliefs of the modern day Independent Bible Church. Therefore, it is important to survey Darby’s beliefs in our effort to understand the background of this nondenominational church.

## JOHN NELSON DARBY

John Nelson Darby was an Anglican priest ordained in 1826, who, through the study of the Scripture, came to reject the idea of a state church. This rejection caused him to withdraw from the Anglican Church in 1827 and begin a search for another approach to church life. His search led him to establish fellowship groups with other

Christians who had also come out of the denominational structure of the church (Melton, 107). A concept that dominated Darby's thinking was that the true church is a temporary structure, composed of a number of individual believers, and set up by God for the time between the death of Jesus on the cross and the second coming of Christ (Wilt, 137).

Darby also developed a new belief system dealing with eschatology. Eschatology refers to the study of the end time and includes consideration of death, heaven and hell, judgment, the second coming of Christ, and the millennium or Christ's reign on earth for a thousand years. Darby's new system of thought is called dispensationalism.

## DISPENSATIONALISM

Before Darby, the church viewed history as divided into three or seven periods according to a theological or numerological basis. Darby, however, divided the history reflected in the biblical story based on God's method of dealing with his people. This dispensational approach divided the story of the Bible into seven dispensations (Marsden, 40). These dispensations are as follows:

1. (Paradisaical state) to the flood
2. Noah- government
3. Abraham- calling and election
4. Israel
  - a. Under the law- Moses
  - b. Under the priesthood
  - c. Under the kings- Saul
5. Gentiles (begins with Nebuchadnezzar)
6. The Spirit (the present?)

7. The fullness of time (Melton, 107).

Darby was fairly clear about the early dispensations, but his discussion of the present and future was vague and sometimes contradictory. Because of this confusion, C. I. Scofield and Harry A. Ironside, two of Darby's theological successors, refined his system into what became the basis for most modern discussions of dispensational schemes. Scofield's seven dispensations are:

1. Innocence- from creation to the fall of Adam
  2. Conscience- from the fall to the flood
  3. Government- from Noah to Abraham
  4. Promise- from Abraham to Moses
  5. Law- from Moses to Jesus
  6. Grace- from the cross to the second coming
  7. Personal reign of Christ- from the second coming to and including eternity
- (Melton, 107).

According to dispensationalists, the schemes solve several basic biblical problems. First, they clear up some of the confusing biblical contradictions by placing contradictory passages in different dispensations. For instance, Bible readers are often confused as to what will happen in the end times and the events surrounding the second coming of Christ. Various passages in Matthew, Thessalonians, and Revelation all seem to offer contradictory images of the future. The complex outlines of future events developed by the dispensationalists help to reconcile these contradictions. Dispensational schemes also reconcile the difference between the small New Testament church and the large ecclesiastical organizations surrounding dispensationalists in the

1830s. “The true church (i.e., the church of the dispensationalists) was ever the small body of the faithful called out from Babylon (i.e., large religious organization)” (Melton, 107). Finally, the dispensational schemes offered a rationale for change. “Each dispensation was initiated by a renewed action of God toward his people, by which God tries to reach his chosen ones” (Melton, 108).

Two books were published that greatly increased the popularity of Darby’s ideas about dispensationalism. The first of these books was *Jesus Is Coming* by William E. Blackstone. The book appeared in 1878 and was an immediate success. Its topic was the second coming, but it was thoroughly dispensational. The second book was the *Scotfield Reference Bible*, put out by C. I. Scotfield championing the dispensational scheme discussed above. Scotfield was a St. Louis lawyer who was converted under Moody’s preaching. He began the work in 1902 and it appeared to the public in 1909. The *Scotfield Reference Bible* immediately became the cardinal work of the dispensational movement and for years was the standard by which to judge the movement (Melton, 109). “Scotfield defined a dispensation as a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God” (Whiteman, 1058). Seven dispensations were delineated in the biblical text following Scotfield’s seven dispensations listed above. They are:

1. The dispensation of innocence (Gen 1:28-3:13)
2. The dispensation of consequence (Gen 3:23-7:23)
3. The dispensation of human government (Gen 8:20-11:9)
4. The dispensation of promise (Gen 12:1-Ex 19:8)
5. The Law (Ex 19:8-Mt 27:53)

6. The dispensation of grace (Mt 27:35; John 1:17)
7. The present which will come to an end at the pretribulation rapture  
(Whiteman, 1058).

Scofield later became a Congregational minister in Dallas. The ideas in his reference Bible are still agreed upon by the majority of Independent Bible Churches. However, the *Scofield Reference Bible* is not necessarily the Bible owned by the majority of the members in these churches.

Darby's dispensationalism directly rejected the ideas of liberalism. While liberalism was optimistic about modern culture, dispensationalism was pessimistic. While liberals interpreted the Bible in regards to human history, dispensationals interpreted it in regards to Scripture. Where liberalism focused on social forces as being crucial to understanding religion, dispensationalism made divine intervention the solution to explaining historical change (Marsden, 41). These dispensational beliefs, teamed up with the rising number of fundamentalists, continued to lead to the break from denominationalism and into churches such as the Independent Bible Church.

## ECCLESIOLOGY

In addition to his beliefs on dispensationalism, "Darby accepted the orthodox Protestantism of the Reformation on the central issues of the belief in God, the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the Bible as the Word of God, and the necessity of man's repentance, forgiveness and salvation" (Melton, 108). Where he differed from the Protestants of the Reformation was in his beliefs on ecclesiology and eschatology. In his ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, Darby rejected denominational Christianity and dealt with the problem of the "Nature and Unity

of the Church of Christ” in his first pamphlet in 1828. He stated that anyone “who seeks the interests of any particular denomination” was an enemy of the work of the Holy Spirit. He believed that unity is to be found in the unity of the Spirit as discussed in Ephesians, chapter four. Churches influenced by this ecclesiology commonly have a statement of belief in the spiritual unity of believers in Jesus Christ. Darby established assemblies of people who had a simple faith in Christ and a consistent walk in Christian love (Bass, 70).

Darby’s assemblies were not set up with elders and deacons, but with groups of people apart from the world awaiting Christ’s return (Dowley, 526). They were local gatherings of like-minded Christians, where each person was both layman and minister. Each assembly was independent and tied to the other assemblies only by the bonds of doctrinal consensus and fellowship. No formal corporate name was accepted, although Brethren was the term most often used when referring to them. Because few groups of Brethren published their membership statistics, they were an invisible part of the religious life of the European communities in which they resided. Although they had no formal ministry, the Brethren did show an intense evangelical zeal and developed structures to be used without infringing on the autonomy of the assembly. Gifted teachers and evangelists arose in the assemblies and began to teach the Bible and preach the gospel. The responsibilities of reaching the lost with the gospel, however, fell on the majority of the assembly (Melton, 108).

The typical sermon in one of these assemblies traced a key word or idea through the Bible, often relating otherwise disconnected passages. The new form of preaching caused many Brethren to have an interest in personal Bible study. Students began to



gather in homes to search the Scripture together as a way of learning more during the week. Another positive development of this movement was a publishing ministry that printed pamphlets, tracts, books and periodicals containing the voluminous writings of Darby. A few wealthy Brethren families opened printing and publishing houses, servicing the brotherhood as well as the community. Later we will investigate how this influenced large numbers of Bible students who received Darby's writings (Melton, 108).

What distinguished these assemblies from other groups was that no church or denominational government existed beyond the local church (Dowley, 527). Financing missions, building a church, and conducting Bible studies all occurred as the result of various agencies set up by the members of the assembly. There was no hierarchy or centralized organization. "Local churches are free to apply the teaching of Scripture in the light of contemporary needs and the local situation, though in practice the inbuilt conservatism of any grouping results in widely-recognized common practice" (Dowley, 527). This church structure is shared today by the Independent Bible Church, which functions independently of any centralized organization but still shares common practices among various assemblies and agencies.

## ESCHATOLOGY

As stated earlier, Darby's main differences with the Protestants of the Reformation was in ecclesiology and eschatology. Having already looked at his ideas on ecclesiology, it is time to focus on his eschatological beliefs. Darby's view of eschatology is commonly termed premillennialism. According to Bass,

Darby's eschatology grows out of two basic principles: his doctrine of the church, which is itself rooted in his dispensational dichotomy between Israel and the



church; and a hermeneutical application of rigid literalism, particularly to prophetic Scripture (129).

Darby believed that Scripture has been interpreted incorrectly in regards to the spiritual interpretation of the heavenly Jerusalem, the role of the Gentiles in the millennium, the restoration of Paradise during the millenium, and the distinction between the kingdom of God and Christ's earthly reign on the throne of David (Bass, 129). The common eschatological beliefs in the 1830s considered symbolism an inherent part of prophecy. Darby brought controversy to this by considering almost every reference to Israel in the Bible as a literal reference. This literal rendering of prophetic passages grew in popularity along with the idea of dispensationalism, and it set the issues of debate for other Bible students and conservative Christians. Darby's opponents attacked his beliefs, mainly on the rapture, because it included a special resurrection of the Church (Bass, 132).

As stated earlier, Darby's theology influenced a large number of Bible students. Darby made visits to Canada in 1859, 1864 and 1866, and then to most of the major cities in the United States in 1870, 1872-3, and 1874. In 1872, Dwight L. Moody discovered the Brethren and spent several days being introduced to dispensational thought. Darby's association with Moody along with the wide array of literature this movement produced led to an increased number of conservative Christians accepting these new ideas.

As popular as Darby's theology became many people who accepted his theology never accepted his ecclesiology nor became Brethren. Yet in the 1880s and 1890s, his theology became institutionalized in several Bible colleges, most importantly, Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Moody and the Bible Institute Movement played a key role as well in the establishment of the independent Bible church.

## EDUCATION IN AMERICA

The Bible Institute Movement arose out of the need for a different approach to educating students who desired to enter the ministry. The early history of education in America was closely related to the church. Early schools, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, were founded to train young men for the ministry. Harvard opened in 1639, Yale in 1702, and Princeton, as The College of New Jersey, in 1746, later renamed Princeton in 1896. These church-related schools held the primary responsibility for education during these years. But as the country grew and government expanded, the responsibility of education fell to the government. Since education was expensive, the government taxed the people in order to support colleges and universities. State schools became the primary source of higher education because they could afford better teachers and facilities than the church funded schools could. “Since the Constitution required separation of Church and State, religion was not included as the major part of the curriculum” (Magness, 5). Sensing the need to study the areas of science, medicine, sociology, and agriculture state schools placed emphasis here, not on theology. “No longer was it necessary to study Bible or religion in order to gain an education and a degree” (Magness, 5).

In addition, liberalism began to claim the theology departments of most church funded schools, causing liberalism to spread into many churches. Fundamentalists and supporters of dispensational premillennialism battled against this liberalism. These fundamentalists, including Dwight L. Moody, longed to give dispensationalism permanence and force out liberalism. As a result of this desire, Moody and others began Bible institutes such as the Moody Bible Institute, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, and

the Philadelphia College of the Bible (Marsden, 40). These institutes, formed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, encouraged students to reject liberal views and to support dispensationalism and fundamentalism. “The network of related institutes that soon sprang up became the nucleus for much of the important fundamentalist movement of the twentieth century” (Marsden, 41).

## THE BIBLE INSTITUTE MOVEMENT

Since the Independent Bible Church receives many of its ministers from Bible Institutes, the development of the movement plays a key role in understanding the Bible churches. Although the roots of this movement are found in Europe, the movement itself is almost entirely an American phenomenon. “The concept of Bible Schools was brought to America first by Dr. A. B. Simpson” (Magness, 10). While in England, Simpson was introduced to the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Missionaries. As a result, he began teaching twelve students in New York City in 1882. Like the majority of Bible institutes, this school began by meeting in a church and studying the Word of God. Simpson divided the school, later known as Nyack Missionary College, into three departments.

1. Literary- English, logic, philosophy, natural sciences, ancient and modern history, geography.
2. Theological- Christian evidences, Bible, New Testament Greek, Systematic Theology, Church History, pastoral theology.
3. Practical- homiletics, evangelism, Sunday School work, and vocal music (Magness, 10).

A second Bible Institute was founded in 1885 and a third by Dwight L. Moody in 1886. This third institute remains the most influential of all Bible Institutes. Its objective was to “educate, maintain, and send forth Christian workers, Bible teachers, gospel singers, teachers and evangelists, to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Witmer, 37). Founded as the Chicago Evangelization Society, it is now known as Moody Bible Institute.

“Beginning with the Moody Bible Institute and then the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Bible institutes spread throughout America so that there is one in every large city and several in the very large cities” (Ramm, 87). Some of these have become Bible colleges or even liberal arts colleges, but they all have formed the continuum of the institutionalizing of the fundamentalist movement. These are the schools that have produced many of the Christian workers in Bible churches over the past century (Magness, 13).

In the early years of the twentieth century, Bible institutes were increasingly affected by the great conflict that broke out in the denominations between modernists and fundamentalists. “The Bible Institute came to serve as a standard bearer for the conservative groups in American Protestantism” (Findlay, 400). Moody Bible Institute became one of the centers for the spread of fundamentalism and was a training ground for many of the professional revivalists in the twentieth century. It was a reaction to the new modernism. The essence of modernism was that “religion is primarily the religious experiences of man or the religious potential of man or the religious a priori of man” (Ramm, 14). Modernism, as a movement, rejected the authority of the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. Fundamentalism was the conservative reaction to this movement.

The Fundamentalists reemphasized “the miracles of Christ, the virgin birth of Christ, the satisfaction view of the atonement, verbal inspiration, and the bodily resurrection of Christ” (Wells, 30). This controversy continues in some form or another even today. New denominational groups have formed as a result and denominations have split. And important to our study, many churches decided to separate from denominationalism altogether as a result of this controversy. The Independent Bible Church is one example.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

As noted earlier, several new theological seminaries were established as a result of the changes in education throughout America. Some of these are central to the Bible Church movement, Dallas Theological Seminary is one of these. “Other schools have played an important part, too, but it is clear that Dallas Seminary has had the most prominent role” (Leafe, 9). Dallas Seminary was founded in 1926 by close colleagues of C. I. Scofield and became probably the most influential fundamentalist seminary (Carpenter, 20). Its core curriculum was designed to equip men to be expositors of the Word of God. “They are not involved in teaching men to function under a denominational job description. Consequently, most of the graduates of the Master of Theology program at Dallas Seminary either become teachers at Bible colleges or seminaries, missionaries, or pastors of Bible Churches” (Leafe, 10). As a direct result of this, Bible churches are very prominent in the Dallas metroplex and surrounding areas. The same is true for the areas surrounding other theological seminaries such as Denver Seminary, Fuller Seminary in Los Angeles, Western Seminary in Portland, and Wheaton near Chicago. These seminaries were all begun by supporters of fundamentalism and have trained their students to follow in evangelical beliefs.



A factor which helped to strengthen the tie between Dallas Theological Seminary and the Bible churches was separatism. "Separatism has been a dominant theme of American fundamentalists in the twentieth century" (Whiteman, 1074). Separatism came about when fundamentalists claimed passages of Scripture that required them to separate from theological liberals and ungodly living. These passages include 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, Romans 16:17-18, and 1 Timothy 6:3-5. In the 1940s, many separatist groups began to grow, including the Independent Fundamentalist Churches of America; a loosely affiliated fellowship of pastors serving independent Bible churches. By 1948, a membership of 1,129 clergy existed, which included some of the leaders of Dallas Theological Seminary and the Moody Bible Institute (Carpenter, 205). While Dallas Theological Seminary, Wheaton, and Moody did not choose sides in the separatist debate, many of the men affiliated with them did. Many independent fundamentalist schools in the South, including Dallas Theological Seminary "had networks of local alumni who were steeped in fundamentalism beliefs and outlook. They were starting up independent but Baptist-like congregations, often called 'Bible churches'" (Carpenter, 206). These churches, as a direct result of their founders, were fundamentalist in doctrine and separatist in outlook (Carpenter, 206).

#### THE BREAK FROM DENOMINATIONALISM

Why did these churches break away from denominationalism? Louis Gasper gives us two basic reasons.

First, the Conservatives (Fundamentalists) wanted to maintain the autonomy of their local congregations, which they feared would disappear as soon as the denominations tightened their control over each church. Second, those whose churches (including their property) were controlled by a centralized body had to choose between secession from their denomination which had gone over to modernism and thereby risking the loss of their church properties, or to remain as

they were – unwilling, but contaminated members of apostate denominations. For those who chose the former, they lost the right to any use of the property which had been supported by their contributions” (Leafe, 8).

Another reason was the umbrella voice of the denomination. A church will often speak for all of its members in regards to their beliefs on the social, economic and political issues of the day. “Many conservatives did not (and still do not) wish to be identified with a denomination or group that expressed beliefs or positions that were contrary to what they believed the Scriptures taught” (Leafe, 8). A fourth reason was the issue of separation. Church members argued that if religious liberalism is a sin, Christians should keep themselves from communing with those who embrace this sin. Finally, as religious liberalism spread through the denominations, it was adopted by the colleges and seminaries supported by these denominations. Because of this, nondenominational groups began to form their own schools to train ministers in the conservative tradition.

In summary, then, we can say that those who broke with the denominations did so basically over theology and autonomy. The Bible Church movement as we have been able to trace it thus far is really not a movement as much as it is a mindset or a philosophy of ministry that characterizes those churches who call themselves Bible Churches. There are certain distinctives by which they are generally characterized, but there are also areas in which they differ (Leafe, 9).

## DISTINCTIVES OF THE INDEPENDENT BIBLE CHURCH

Bible Churches, generally speaking, cling to the fundamentals, which are the inspiration (including inerrancy) of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection and second coming, and salvation by grace through faith in Christ apart from any human merit. Bible Churches are dispensational in their interpretation and understanding of the Word of God. Another very prominent distinction of most Bible Churches is their emphasis on the practical teaching of the Scriptures.



Bible churches emphasize biblical preaching. This often means expository preaching. The attempt is to compare Scripture with Scripture in an effort to determine all that the Bible has to say about a particular subject or theme. (Wilt, 137).

In addition, Bible Churches have other unique characteristics, which often differ from church to church. Baptism in various Bible Churches may be performed in different ways. While baptism is always done by the immersion of new believers, the believer may choose who baptizes them in one Bible church but not have a choice in another. Some churches may be governed by elders, while others are governed by the congregation. Worship may be traditional or contemporary or anything in between. The strict adherence to the ideas of Darby on eschatology, ecclesiology, and dispensationalism will vary from church to church as will pulpit evangelism. Bible churches, for the most part, stress evangelism. “They are typically apolitical, emphasize individual conversion, interpret the Scriptures in a literal manner and advocate a strict separation from the world in personal conduct” (Wilt, 138). Most of them receive their support entirely from the freewill offerings of their communicants. Tithing is emphasized, but the method in which it is done varies from church to church. Some refuse to pass an offering plate while others do so every week (Wilt, 138).

#### FELLOWSHIP BIBLE CHURCH NORTH

As stated, Bible Churches are without denomination, thus making it difficult to trace the movement corporately. But perhaps a brief look at a key and influential Bible church will help clarify the movement. A good example of the movement in general might be the work of Dr. Gene Getz and his church, Fellowship Bible Church North in Plano, Texas. The history of his church and its influence in the Dallas metroplex serves as an excellent example of a typical Bible church. Dr. Gene Getz was a professor at

Dallas Theological Seminary during the cultural revolution of the 1960s. During this time, many students on college campuses began to question the relevance and integrity of American institutions. Several students left state institutions and journeyed into Christian higher education. These students challenged Dr. Getz to examine how God intended the church to function. “They surfaced biblical principles to measure the effectiveness of the church regardless of time or cultural context. Through this process, traditions were able to be differentiated from biblical principles” (Fellowship). Getz’s book, *Sharpening The Focus of the Church* was written as a result of his challenge from his students. Then, a group of families challenged Getz and his wife to launch a church based on his research and study.

Their desire was to begin with biblical principles, allowing forms and methods to emerge that would best fulfill the Great Commission in the Dallas culture. By differentiating what was tradition and what was biblical principle, it gave them a basis and freedom to develop programs and methods that were culturally relevant. Traditions did not have to be maintained if other methods were more effective for the people being reached (Fellowship).

Fellowship began in 1972, and many other Fellowship-style churches followed. In the Dallas metroplex Garland Bible Fellowship was founded in 1974, Bethany Bible Fellowship in 1976, Bent Tree Bible Fellowship in 1978, Richland Bible Fellowship in 1979, and Oakcliff Bible Fellowship in 1977. The church in Oakcliff was begun by Tony Evans, a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, who was challenged by Dr. Getz to consider praying about a church plant in his black culture using the principles of church renewal there. The church has made a significant impact in the Oakcliff area of Dallas.

In 1982, Dr. Getz and several of his staff members left Fellowship Bible Church in Richardson, Texas to begin a church plant a few miles away in Plano, Texas. The original Fellowship Bible Church is still active today, functioning under the leadership of

many of the original congregates. In just two years, the new church, Fellowship Bible Church North, was holding three weekend services, two on Sunday morning and one on Friday night (Chalemin). All this growth occurred before the church ever built its own building; it was still meeting in a warehouse converted to a meeting facility. The church quickly raised 2 million dollars for a building and the church facility was completed in 1986. Since these beginnings, over 250 Bible churches have been planted in the United States and around the world. Through Dr. Gene Getz's books, several churches overseas have been planted using the principles of renewal found in the original publication, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church (Fellowship)*.

#### MINISTRY OF FELLOWSHIP BIBLE CHURCH NORTH

Because of FBCN's location in the Dallas metroplex and its size, it is able to provide unique ministry opportunities for church members. One popular ministry at Fellowship Bible Church North, as well as many other independent Bible Churches, is the mini-church ministry. This ministry was formed following Acts chapter 4, to provide three vital experiences for any church member who wanted to take part. These experiences are fellowship, Bible teaching, and outreach. Members and attendees who wanted to take part in the mini-church ministry were divided into small groups of 6 to 8 families who would meet in homes twice a month for fellowship, Bible teaching, and outreach. Each mini-church has a lay-leader approved by the church staff (Chalemin).

Another ministry of Fellowship Bible Church North is the Renewal Radio ministry. In 1994 this 15-minute daily radio program had its start. The vision of Renewal Radio is to spread the message of the gospel "to people all over the world through quality programming in order to significantly impact the lives of individuals,

families and churches” (Renewal). Dr. Gene Getz is the host teacher and executive producer of Renewal Radio. “The Moody Broadcasting network began to host it on many of its affiliate radio stations. From this point, the radio program has expanded to independent Christian radio stations in the USA and in 124 other countries. It currently is aired in 44 states in the US” (Fellowship). The program is a listener-supported ministry, which allows many of the members of FBCN to play a part in supporting a ministry outside their church body. The program has also increased attendance at FBCN since it began in 1994.

A third ministry is an opportunity provided at the church for an internship designed to provide on the job training for the many Dallas Theological Seminary students who have become involved in FBCN. The program is organized to assign these men and women to mentoring relationships with a pastor in charge of the ministry in which they desire training. “Such a relationship provides a context of learning by experience as well as a means to refine and formulate the biblical character that is needed in leading” (Fellowship). The program was shaped by using 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy chapter four and Titus chapter two as guides. The internship program has trained over 120 men and women who have gone into full-time ministry or lay leadership in a variety of contexts.

A final unique ministry to consider is the Center for Church-Based Training, or CCBT. This training arose out of the need to develop effectively trained leadership. A group of the pastoral staff at FBCN developed this program and curriculum to train leadership for all levels and avenues of ministry. CCBT “exists to contribute to Christ’s mission of discipling the nations through healthy churches. It’s mission is to effect spiritual growth in local churches as it assists in bringing all believers to maturity and

many to leadership” (Center). The curriculum exists in two parts; one designed for adults, believers, pre-believers, and the general congregation, and the other for pastors, elders, emerging leaders, and lay leaders. They both consist of four books with twelve lessons each. The discovery series teaches the general congregation about the Christian life, intimacy with God, their role in God’s family, and how to share their faith. The goal of these books is to achieve a biblical life-view and the ability to think through life’s issues from God’s perspective. The leadership series for pastors and leaders includes books on church leadership, church missions, church dynamics, and theology. Its goal is to achieve a solid foundation for leadership based on theology, character development, and ministry skills (Center).

## DOCTRINAL BELIEFS

In the doctrinal statement found on the web, Fellowship Bible Church North gives a systematized theology of the church’s beliefs. These beliefs are evangelical and non-denominational. They reflect the ecclesiology and eschatology of Scofield. It is important in the study of the independent Bible Church movement to realize that every church is independent of the others and therefore no two churches are exactly the same in their beliefs or worship styles. There are, however, many common threads between these churches that were mentioned earlier.

These common threads can be seen through a comparison of the doctrinal statements of Frisco Bible Church, Bent Tree Bible Fellowship, Richland Bible Fellowship, McKinney Bible Church, and Fellowship Bible Church North. While these churches agree with the doctrine of FBCN in its entirety, they go on to include some beliefs that FBCN does not. The doctrine of McKinney Bible Church includes a belief in



“the Spirit baptism of all believers in our Lord Jesus Christ” (McKinney). The doctrine of Frisco Bible Church includes beliefs on angels as spiritual beings who were created as sinless personalities, presently existing in both fallen and unfallen states, the former including Satan and his angels (Frisco). Richland Bible Fellowship and Bent Tree Bible Fellowship include a statement on the security of believers, meaning that “all true believers are kept eternally secure by the power of God through the new birth, the indwelling and sealing of the Holy Spirit, and intercession of Christ” (Richland). Richland and Bent Tree also include their a that every believer has at least one spiritual gift and that the sign gifts no longer accomplish the same need and function in our culture that they did in the first century (Richland). They go on to include the belief that God heals, with or without means in answer to prayer offered in faith and in accord with His sovereign will (Bent Tree). These beliefs represent some unique doctrines held by some Bible churches, but are exceptions. .

FBCN includes in its doctrinal statement its beliefs on God, the Bible, Christ, man’s sin, salvation, and the church. Their beliefs in regards to these six areas are in agreement with most of the doctrines of the other Bible churches listed above. Because of this, the doctrine of FBCN can be considered a good representation of the general Bible church beliefs.

## GOD THE FATHER

Fellowship holds that God is One, eternally and fully existing in three persons. God the Father has eternally existed as an all knowing all powerful Spirit. He is characterized as just, kind, loving, compassionate, merciful, firm, righteous, truthful, and corrective. The characteristics are demonstrated in Deuteronomy 10:14-22, Psalm 28,

and Isaiah 30:18-21. God became flesh in Jesus Christ and walked on earth as both God and man, as shown in John 1:1, John 14, Galatians 4:4, and Hebrews 4:15. “God as a Spirit was sent to guide the believer toward righteous living and to convict the world of their need for a relationship with Him” (Fellowship). This is shown in Matthew 28:18-20, John 14:26, John 16:7-15, and Galatians 5:16-26 (Fellowship).

## MAN’S SIN

God made both man and woman in His image, and provided everything necessary for them to live in total harmony with Him. Yet, Adam and Eve chose to sin, to act independent from God and His Word. Because of this act, every human has received from them an inborn sinful nature that influences each person to commit specific acts of sin. Since God is just, the sins of His people brought about the need for him to deal with their sin. The Bible states in Romans chapter five that the consequence of sin is death, physical death as well as spiritual separation from God. God in mercy and grace provided a pardon through His Son, Jesus Christ. Through Christ’s death, God graciously gives each person a choice to accept this sacrifice by faith as shown in Romans 5:6-11. All men will be bodily resurrected to give an account before God. For those who choose to trust in and follow Christ, they will spend an eternity with God and for those who do not, there will be suffering apart from God (Fellowship).

## DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

Fellowship Bible Church North believes that the Bible is God’s Word, given to us by the Holy Spirit through human writers. This truth is proclaimed in II Timothy 3:16, and II Peter 1:20,21. The Bible is trustworthy, meaning that it is thoroughly accurate, reliable and authoritative beyond all human statements in all theology, doctrine, and faith



as well as science and history. The Bible is to be followed by believers. God gave us His Word to be a source of truth to convict us and protect us from the destructiveness of sin. God's Word has also been given to us for a roadmap to train us in righteous living (Fellowship).

#### GOD: THE SON

“Christ is God eternally existing as a person of the Godhead” (Fellowship). He existed as a person of the Godhead prior to His coming to earth as a human according to John 1:1, 14; John 8:58, and Colossians 1:16. Jesus Christ is God in the human form, who walked on earth as both God and man at the same time. Jesus Christ died for all mankind as our substitute and all who believe in Him are declared righteous as a result of His life and death. Christ rose bodily from the dead and now serves as our representative before God the Father. Christ will physically return again to earth to reign in His kingdom for 1,000 years as stated in Revelation 20:1-6 (Fellowship).

#### SALVATION

Romans 3:23 confirms that all of us are separated from God. We stand condemned before Him by our sin. According to God's law, sin will bring forth death in our lives. It will produce mental, emotional and physical destruction in our lives and relationships. It will ultimately produce spiritual death by spending eternity separated from God. Restoring our relationship with God begins by confessing that we have sinned. Salvation is not the result of any human effort but comes by faith alone, agreeing with Martin Luther and his previously mentioned ideas. This sole act of faith results in a person becoming a child of God.

The intercession of Christ and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit keep a child of God secure. This does not mean that sin is forever away from us. I John 1:8,9 says that all believers still sin in this life, but we are able to overcome sin by God's provision through the Word, Christ and the Spirit. Obedience to His word produces desired spiritual growth and maturity in the believer. Believers are to build up other believers and introduce Christ to those who do not know Him. One way to build up others is through the use of gifts and abilities spoken of in Ephesians 4:12 (Fellowship).

#### THE FUNCTIONS OF THE CHURCH

According to the Bible in I Corinthians 13:13, a church should continue to grow corporately, reflecting more and more faith, hope, and love. I Corinthians 12:25 also says that believers should be devoted to one another in brotherly love, honoring one another, accepting one another, teaching and admonishing one another, showing hospitality to one another, encouraging one another, serving one another, and much more (Fellowship). These doctrinal beliefs shape the growth and worship styles at Fellowship Bible Church North (Chalemin).

#### FELLOWSHIP BIBLE CHURCH NORTH IN ACTION

How do Bible churches do "church"? A brief look at how Fellowship Bible Church North functions on a day to day basis will help us understand. Bible churches vary in their size just as any group of churches would. Some are considered small, while others, like FBCN are megachurches. The size of a church affects the number of ministries it can have as well as the effect of these ministries. Because of FBCN's size, it is able to offer a variety of ministries to people of all ages and to congregates as well as non-congregates. Among the five churches whose doctrines were compared earlier,

FBCN is the only one that has developed a leadership program such as CCBT or an internship program. However, all five churches have a mini-church ministry, and McKinney Bible Church plays a role in the Renewal Radio ministry of FBCN.

Membership in these five churches varies from hundreds to thousands. They all hold elections for elders; some in a similar way to FBCN while others do it in a less structured manner. They all conduct believer's baptism and partake of communion on a schedule, some partaking every month, others more often, and still others less often. They all offer a worship service for adults while the children are in Sunday school. While this comparison only looks at five churches, it is clear that among these FBCN is representative of the normal functioning of Bible churches.

## MEMBERSHIP

While Darby's Brethren did not publish membership statistics, the majority of Independent Bible Churches do, including Fellowship Bible Church North. Approximately 4500 adults and children attend services at FBCN. There are 60 full time staff members who minister to various groups within the church. FBCN is considered a megachurch and is bigger than most churches in the Dallas metroplex. Membership at the church can be attained in a variety of ways. A person is considered a member if they attend a mini-church, tithe regularly to the church, or are involved in a ministry group within the church. These are all informal ways to obtain membership, which are more specific to FBCN than they are to the majority of Bible churches. A more formal way is to go through the orientation class offered by the church once a month. This orientation class is the most common way for obtaining membership in a Bible church. The class takes place one Saturday a month and lasts for most of the day. At Fellowship, about 60

people attend each orientation class and after attending they are considered members of the church if they wish to be. It is important to note that a gospel presentation is done during the orientation class, but salvation is not necessary for church membership (Chalemin).

#### ELDER ELECTION PROCESS

Similar to the Brethren, there is no denominational hierarchy or centralized organization governing the Independent Bible Churches. However, unlike the Brethren, Bible churches are set up with elders or deacons. Decisions in the church are made not by a member vote, but by the elders who govern the church. Currently FBCN has eight elders, selected through a process that looks intently at the man's character. When a man is being considered for elder, the first step in the process is to speak with others in their mini-church about him and his wife. Then an informal "get to know" meeting takes place between the couple and members of the church staff on the elder selection committee. In this meeting, the couple is informed that they are being considered. If they are interested, the man must read *The Measure of a Man* by Dr. Gene Getz. After a careful look at character, the candidate is brought before the church to inform the body that he is being considered as an elder. If someone in the body has a problem with the couple, they are given an opportunity to talk to a specific staff member about the problem. If no problems are found, the candidate is made part of the elder board. The elders meet once a month except for the month of December. Emergency meetings can be called if needed (Chalemin).

## CHURCH ORDINANCES

Baptisms in the church are done once a month during the church service. In order to be baptized, you must talk to the evangelism pastor about your reason for wanting to be baptized, which includes sharing your personal testimony. Dr. Getz baptizes the majority of church attendees, but others are allowed to baptize if the baptismal candidate desires it. Since the church is so large, often a person would rather be baptized by a spiritual leader in their life instead of by the pastor. Baptisms are done by immersion after personal salvation. This is contrary to Luther's beliefs during the Reformation, but similar to the Anabaptists beliefs. Communion is taken once a month in the church body and the method varies. Sometimes the bread and cup are passed and other times attendees come forward to receive it. The church encourages communion to be taken in mini-churches or among families also. Every attendee decides whether or not he or she personally should partake (Chalemin).

## SUNDAY SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN/ WORSHIP SERVICE FOR ADULTS

Worship services consist mostly of adults. Children, from birth through high school have Sunday School classes to attend while parents worship. Obviously, older kids would attend both Sunday School and the service, and even some younger children could attend if parents desired it. Membership in the church is not required to work in a Sunday School classroom, but a criminal background check is done on all workers for safety reasons. Most Sunday School classes, depending upon the age of the children involved, consist of a Bible story, a craft related to the story, singing, and play time.

There really is no typical worship service. Each weekend the format of the services is different depending upon the topic being discussed. Dramas and worship

songs try to fit in with the theme of each particular service. A creativity team works with the format deciding when drama should be used in a service as well as what songs should be sung at what time and various other details. Both traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs are sung in the service and all are projected onto a screen at the front of the church. A paid worship leader leads with lay worship leaders on stage during each service (Chalemin).

Similar to Darby's Brethren, a typical sermon at FBCN will often trace a key word or idea through the Bible in an effort to relate disconnected passages. This is done to encourage congregates to be more interested in personal Bible study, as Brethren assemblies hoped. The day to day functions of a Bible church may be similar to a church of a particular denomination. These similarities include a church staff with a goal of ministering to their congregates by using the Bible to meet their needs. Bible churches are run by elders, who are members of the church. Also, church ordinances are carried out in a variety of ways at various times, depending upon the church or the denomination.

## CONCLUSION

Did Martin Luther, John Nelson Darby, Dwight L. Moody and the other reformers have any idea how much their efforts would influence the Christian world? Did they know that their time, commitment and faith would affect the lives of church-goers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Surely they had no clue of the extent they would impact those to follow. And yet, churches over the United States owe a debt concerning theology and practices to these reformers. The Bible Church movement is one of these.

The Reformation, Anabaptist, and Pietist Movement leaders impacted the form and function of the church. Eventually other forms like the rationalism of the



Enlightenment altered these new groups. Religious liberalism grew out of this rationalist approach and spread to the United States. This led to the rise of new denominations and in time non-denominational groups. These non-denominational and independent churches grasped many of the beliefs of John Nelson Darby as well as the beliefs of the Bible colleges and theological seminaries that grew up in this time. In other words, from the Reformation to the present social, religious and theological changes eventually caused the evolution of a non-denominational church called the Bible church.

With all the various denominations it is impossible to claim that one is functioning in the correct way while the others are not. It would be arrogant to claim that the founders of the Independent Bible Church finally found the one correct way to serve God as a body of believers. However, the Independent Bible Church is providing spiritual growth for many believers in America and other countries. Fellowship Bible Church North in Plano, Texas is just one of the many congregations claiming a Bible church name. Some Bible churches are very similar to FBCN, while others are quite different. But they all have in common a heritage and history. They all were formed as a result of men allowing their hearts to be open to God. Their founding resulted from a variety of belief systems coming together in one body of believers.

Currently, there are hundreds of churches operating under the Bible church name both in the United States and overseas. They function to meet the spiritual needs of the people in the area in which they minister. Over the past thirty years since Dr. Gene Getz began his first Fellowship Bible church in Texas, the Fellowship Bible Church name has spread and created sister churches in large areas like Little Rock and even small areas like Arkadelphia. The impact of these churches is extended when members of one



church break away in order to minister to another geographical area by helping form a new church. If Bible churches continue to grow and plant new churches as they have over the last few decades, their future looks promising.

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