

## Was Isaac Watts a Proto-Dispensationalist?

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Both dispensationalists and their critics debate the exact origins of the system, the latter claiming that the system has no historical roots, and the former citing examples of dispensational schemes as far back as the church fathers.<sup>2</sup> As proof of its relative historical/theological novelty, critics usually argue that John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) first systematized dispensationalism. For example, Clarence Bass claims that “no dispensational writer has ever been able to offer...a single point of continuity between what is today known as dispensationalism and the historic premillennial view,”<sup>3</sup> and Millard J. Erickson likewise asserts that “no trace of this theology can be found in the early history of the church.”<sup>4</sup> Dispensationalists, on the other hand, argue that while Darby may have been the first to order dispensational distinctives into a lucid system, other theologians held certain dispensational-like presuppositions far before Darby. These dispensationalists include British hymn-writer Isaac Watts (1674-1748) among such theologians.<sup>5</sup> This essay will compare the writings of Isaac Watts to essential distinctives of dispensationalism in order to determine to what extent, if any, he exhibits early dispensational-like characteristics.

### Origins of Dispensational Distinctives

#### John Nelson Darby

Dispensationalists today usually admit that dispensationalism as a system first appeared in Darby’s writings. For example, Charles Ryrie states that “there is no question that the Plymouth Brethren, of which John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) was a leader, had much to do with

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the systematizing and promoting of dispensationalism.”<sup>6</sup> However, they are, nevertheless, often quick to distance themselves from him, as Ryrie does in the very next breath: “But neither Darby nor the Brethren originated the concepts involved in the system, and even if they had that would not make them wrong if they can be shown to be biblical.”<sup>7</sup> He repeats this in another place: “Darby’s teaching...was obviously not the pattern which Scofield followed.... The glib statement that dispensationalism originated with Darby, whose system was taken over and popularized by Scofield, is not historically accurate.”<sup>8</sup> Others are e...

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