

CHRISTADELPHIANS - WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

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This article originated with a study day organised by the New South Wales Christadelphian Committee at which the writer was asked to speak about “Christadelphians - Where are We Headed?” Some of the material used on that occasion subsequently appeared in *Christadelphian Forum* from October, 1992, to April, 1993, as a series of articles under the same title, which are reproduced here slightly modified.

LOOKING BACK

Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, described history as "little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind". Thomas Carlyle spoke of history as "a distillation of rumour". We have to be careful in making conclusions from history, yet, in looking at the Christadelphian community at the end of the twentieth century to see where we are headed we must, of necessity, see from whence we have come.

The Christadelphian community in the past has had mixed fortunes. We have experienced remarkable growth at times, as well as schism and a resultant decline in numbers, and the community still struggles under the legacy of a nineteenth century decision making process. A classic work in analysing the history of Christadelphianism is the thesis by Andrew Wilson (himself a Christadelphian) *The History of the Christadelphians, 1862-1885: The Emergence of a Denomination*.¹ He explained his objectives in his introduction, which I quote in part:

"Between 1864 and 1885, the development of the Christadelphian community was remarkable. Numerically, it increased from a few hundred² to over 5,000 brethren, with an eventual annual rate of about 400 adult baptisms; intellectually, it increased to the point where it had interested a number of notables and academics such as W.E. Gladstone, and had baptised others such as Professor David Evans; polemically, leaders of the movement had challenged or actually engaged in debate not only prominent figures in rival religious groups - ranging from Edward Hine of the British Israelites to the Archbishop of Canterbury - but also non-religious leaders of thought such as Charles Bradlaugh, and non-Christians like Louis Stern the Jew. After 1885, nothing like the same degree of interest or success, as measured in annual baptismal numbers, was registered by Christadelphians.

"The reasons why a small group should attract such interest and support within a twenty year period without one major denomination from which to draw its membership, and why its effervescence should evaporate so quickly after 1885, are the major puzzles which this study sets out to solve".³

Wilson concludes his chapter on "The History of Christadelphians: 1864-1884" with this paragraph:

"Thus, the period 1864-1884 witnessed a whole range of achievements in Christadelphia: numerical success in conversions; success in maturity in dealing with the churches and intellectuals around them, amounting to selective ecumenicism; success in the streamlining of organisation - Birmingham clearly becoming the epicentre of worldwide activity by Christadelphians. Only in Church government was Christadelphianism lacking in development. On the rock of failures in that area, the ship of success foundered in 1884-5, and much of the precious cargo was lost".⁴

To support his claim that in 1884-85 "much of the precious cargo was lost", Andrew Wilson includes extensive statistical information to demonstrate the sudden and dramatic departure of a large number of brethren from our community. In overall terms the loss was between 35.05% and 44.27% of the brethren in the U.K. compared to a national annual increase in population of about 10%.

EARLY SUCCESS

It is not possible in this article to deal more than superficially with the enormous volume of material in Wilson's work to explain both the reasons for the initial outstanding success and the causes for the dramatic change in fortunes around 1885. However, I shall summarise them briefly and commend his thesis to the reader for a full evaluation. Wilson himself summarises the reasons for the success of Christadelphianism to 1885 as:

1. The organising ability of Robert Roberts: he gave the movement its rules, institutions and much of its literature.

¹ Andrew R. Wilson B.A., M.A., A.R.Hist.S., Stoke-on-Trent, 1985.

² The figure of 264 members in 1864 was given by B.R. Wilson in *Sects and Society* (London 1961) although Andrew Wilson suggests a more likely figure of 400 based on additional material to which B.R. Wilson did not have access.

³ Ibid pp 1-2.

⁴ Ibid p 137

2. The original openness of the Christadelphian community and the accessibility of its creedal formulae to change based on empirical data from the Bible. This commended itself to men from a wide spectrum of orthodox persuasions whose Christianity was of an open-minded, individualist and fundamentalist-rationalist stamp.

3. The openness of Christadelphianism in its early days permitted brethren, once converted, to stay nominally within their churches of origin, causing a wider spread of the new views amongst those with some sympathy for them than would have occurred under tighter restrictions regulating communion.

4. A spiritual vacuum was created by those dismayed by the schisms within mainstream Protestantism, including the Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists and Wesleyans. This vacuum was, in part at least, filled by Christadelphianism which was seen to be on the offensive against the challenges of Darwinism and other attempts to destroy the authority of Scripture.⁵

Much of this openness within the brotherhood and "the accessibility of its creedal formulae to change" was due to the considerable influence of John Thomas whose own views on doctrinal matters changed with increasing maturity, and who steadfastly resisted all efforts to dogmatise the faith in a creed or Statement of Faith.⁶ The first Birmingham Statement of Faith was adopted in 1886, fifteen years after the death of John Thomas.⁷

Robert Roberts admitted outright "to the charge of holding 'that the knowledge of Scripture, in the writings of Dr Thomas, has reached a finality', we plead guilty." He made his view clear that "in the writings of Dr Thomas, the truth is developed as a finality, and that they are a depot of the Christian doctrine."⁸ This attitude is in stark contrast to that of John Thomas himself, who wrote:

"Search the scriptures with the teachableness of a little child, and thy labour will not be in vain. Cast away to the owls and to the bats the traditions of men, and the prejudices indoctrinated into thy mind by their means; make a whole burnt offering of their creeds, confessions, catechisms and articles of religion; and, after the example of the Ephesian disciples, hand over your books of curious theological arts, and burn them before all. These mountains of rubbish have served the purpose of a dark and barbarous age; the Word, the Word of the Living God alone, can meet the necessities of the times"⁹ (my emphasis).

CALAMITY

The year 1885 was a turning point for the Christadelphian community. The catalyst was the so-called 'Inspiration controversy' which centred on Robert Ashcroft, one-time assistant editor of *The Christadelphian*.

Andrew Wilson describes Robert Ashcroft's rise to eminence as 'meteoric'. Within a short time he was recognised as a prolific writer and capable speaker. He founded a chain of Young Men's Mutual Bible Study Associations to train young men in the methods of Bible study and public speaking. One writer described Robert Ashcroft in 1885 as having 'more moral weight in the ecclesias than any living brother'.¹⁰ It would be difficult to say, over 100 years later, whether jealousy on Robert Roberts' part had anything to do with the controversy which followed the publication of articles by Ashcroft on inspiration; although even in 1884 Roberts found it necessary to answer questions as to whether he was jealous of Robert Ashcroft or not.¹¹

The controversy which followed Robert Roberts' withdrawal of fellowship from Robert Ashcroft divided the brotherhood for nearly 70 years. The question of Ashcroft's views on inspiration were secondary. The real issue was Roberts' dictatorial

⁵ Ibid, my summary from pp 292-3.

⁶ See Appendix 1 "John Thomas' Summaries of the One Faith" on page

⁷ A 'Statement of the One Faith' formed part of the 'Record of the Birmingham Christadelphian Ecclesia' as early as 1873, although it was not universally accepted.

⁸ *The Christadelphian*, September, 1874, pp. 408-9. Elsewhere, he wrote: "There is but one safe position, and in that we mean by the favour of God, to entrench ourselves 'for better or for worse' viz., THE WHOLE TRUTH AS BROUGHT TO LIFE BY DR. THOMAS...We yield not a slavish deference to the judgment of Dr. Thomas; but we rejoice to be able to see that by the grace of God, he exhumed for us the whole truth; and for this we shall stand till death or the Lord's coming end the fight" (his emphasis). *The Christadelphian* December, 1873, p. 564.

⁹ *Elpis Israel* 14th Edition, Birmingham, 1970, pp 5-6.

¹⁰ A.T. Jannaway, *The Inspiration Division* cited in A.R.Wilson, op cit, p 199.

¹¹ *The Christadelphian* 1884, p 528, cited in A.R.Wilson, op cit, p 202.

handling of the matter and whether any authority as spokesman for the whole brotherhood should rest on the office of Editor of *The Christadelphian*. Many brethren objected to Roberts' heavy handed approach and his attempts to enforce his own views on the whole brotherhood by having them enshrined in a rigid Statement of Faith which had to be accepted as a condition of fellowship. Robert Roberts sent 'tickets' to his supporters in the ecclesia, which they were to produce in order to gain admittance to the meetings of the ecclesia. Fellowship was therefore denied to anyone not holding a ticket, and a physically strong brother was put in charge of the door to bar their entry. A meeting of Roberts' supporters, possessing tickets, dissolved the ecclesia and reconstituted themselves with a new basis of fellowship including Roberts' definition of inspiration.¹²

In my view, this was the REAL reason for division in 1885, and the reason why the brotherhood lost much of its zeal and effervescence thereafter. Any assessment of the current state of our community must take into account these historical roots; it may be that we will need to correct some of the errors of the past before we can plan for a happier future.

Undoubtedly, the cataclysmic events of 1885 have had a profound effect on the Christadelphian community ever since. British sociologist Bryan Wilson has written about the development of Christadelphianism in several of his works. In his *Religion in Secular Society*¹³ he writes of sects which

"have changed ... in a way rather less influenced by the immediate environment, and rather more in accordance with **essentially internal pressures** (my emphasis). Thus some revolutionist sects have tended over time...to become more preoccupied with the means of their own insulation from the wider society. They have tended to become more concerned with the condition of their own society, with their own inner holiness. Sometimes ... they have developed the proclivity for schism within, often over matters which to the outsider seem trivial in the extreme...The Christadelphians have shown marked tendencies in this direction."

Writing elsewhere of the Christadelphian 'proclivity for schism', Bryan Wilson refers to a

"series of bitter schisms. Excommunication of members and of one ecclesia by another became a common pattern in the attempt to maintain purity of doctrine and association. Whilst undoubtedly some schisms were at least partly a consequence of struggles for informal influence between leading brethren, there was always a strong concern for obedience to the word of God which led to over-scrupulousness, to purging evil men who arose in the fellowship, and hence to divisiveness."¹⁴

In a chapter dealing with the patterns of sect development, Bryan Wilson writes this of Christadelphians:

"Yet, although they remain adventists, some of the intensity has also gone from Christadelphian advocacy. As they have come, in large part, to recruit internally, and to sustain their segregation from the wider society, so they have also come to adopt a more introversionist position. There has been some shift from preoccupation with the kingdom to more emphasis on the cross..."¹⁵

No doubt this shift in emphasis from the kingdom to the cross has been the reason for 'the atonement' being the basis of more divisions in our community than any other doctrine. Coupled with an increasingly introversionist position this development has meant that we are more likely to DIVIDE over differences of opinion or expression, to maintain 'doctrinal purity' than we are to PREACH Jesus Christ and Him crucified!

SOME LESSONS

Some conclusions which I would draw from our history, as it relates to present attitudes and our future, are:

1. Christadelphians have lost much of John Thomas' spirit of discovery, his pioneering drive and ambition to find the truth for himself and in allowing the Bible to interpret itself.
2. This original zeal which characterised our community in its early days, and which was the reason for its initial success, was quenched by controversy over organisational issues and attempts by some brethren to impose their own views on the whole brotherhood, without consensus.

¹² A.R. Wilson, op cit, p 216.

¹³ C.A. Watts & Co, London, 1966, pp 211-212.

¹⁴ Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects a sociological study*, World University Library, London, 1970, p 109.

¹⁵ Ibid, p 239.

3. Ecclesial rules, constitutions, and statements of faith have done more to divide than unite brethren, and have therefore been more destructive than edifying.
4. Because we have failed to correct the 'sins of our fathers' we have inherited a legacy which has made us introverted and preoccupied with our own holiness and doctrinal purity rather than our responsibility to preach the Gospel.
5. If we hope to be successful in the future, as faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ, we must decide what to retain from our heritage, and what to discard as the 'traditions of men'.

EXCITING TIMES TO BE A CHRISTADELPHIAN

Earlier I looked at key events in the history of the Christadelphian community which have formed some of our attitudes and traditions. I made the suggestion that ecclesial rules, constitutions and statements of faith have been more destructive and divisive than edifying; that we have had an introverted preoccupation with our own holiness and doctrinal purity; and, that it is now time to decide which traditions truly form part of our heritage, and which need to be discarded.

The news, however, is not all bad; nor is the situation hopeless. Alan Eyre and Gerzel Gordon, in the *Caribbean Pioneer*, referred to "evidence that a spiritual revival is taking place in the Brotherhood".¹⁶ They supported this claim with some interesting statistics:

1. During 1990-91, 13 Christadelphian magazines reported baptisms from 47 different countries and 60 nationalities. More than 2,000 people of many ages, races, colours and tongues, obeyed the call of the Gospel.
2. One in 15 (7%) of all living Christadelphians have been baptised within the past two years.
3. At least 72, or 1 in 12, of all 864 Christadelphian ecclesias worldwide have been established in the last 2 years.
4. In the 20 years since 1971, Christadelphian ecclesias have been established in 32 new countries where there were none before.
5. At the end of 1991 indigenous Christadelphian ecclesias, or at least a permanent presence, existed in 66 countries worldwide.
6. The Brotherhood is growing numerically in 58 countries, including Australia, Canada and the USA, and declining in only 8, where there is a preponderance of aged members.
7. In Australia in 1990-91, baptisms exceeded deaths and departures by a ratio of 3 to 1.

The *Caribbean Pioneer* editors commented on these statistics with the words, "These are exciting times to be a Christadelphian". In fact, an annual baptismal rate of over 1,000 new members is very encouraging when compared to that earlier period of remarkable growth, 1864-1884, when about 400 baptisms per year were recorded.¹⁷

Without further information, any suggestions as to WHY we are currently experiencing renewed growth would be largely guesswork. With that reservation in mind, I will make some speculations. First, I shall continue a quotation made earlier from British sociologist Bryan Wilson:

"As they (Christadelphians) have come, in large part, to recruit internally, and to sustain their segregation from the wider society, so they have also come to adopt a more introversionist position. There has been some shift from preoccupation with the kingdom to more emphasis on the cross; the movement has become somewhat more devotional, and there has been a loss of the angular and contentious characters who, in the early days, were so joyously convinced of the early overturn of this dispensation. In recent years there has also been some indication that Christadelphianism might follow the path formerly taken by the Quakers, moving from introversionism to a more reformist position. Some Christadelphians have become increasingly concerned about social problems, refugees and famine relief".¹⁸

In describing 'reformist' sects, Bryan Wilson refers to their "very strong and perhaps partly collective conscience towards the wider world" and their feelings of "responsibility to do what they can for it". He gives a number of examples including "the revolutionist Christadelphians (who) strained their resources to aid Jews in nineteenth-century Palestine".¹⁹ More recently Christadelphians have become involved in other 'charitable' projects, either locally or abroad. Efforts to help children in India,

¹⁶ The *Caribbean Pioneer*, January, 1992, editorial, pp. 18-21.

¹⁷ Andrew R. Wilson B.A., M.A., A.R.Hist.S., *The History of the Christadelphians 1864-1885*, Stoke-on-Trent, 1985, pp 1 - 2.

¹⁸ Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects, A Sociological Study*, World University Library, London, 1970, p 239.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 177.

for example, either through the India Child Nutrition Scheme or the children's home and orphanages, have been supported enthusiastically.

In fact this growing sense of responsibility towards the wider world has possibly been fostered by the growth of the various Christadelphian Bible Missions. A pioneer of this work was our late brother Harry Whittaker who was one of the founders of the Campaigns movement in 1935, later spearheaded the drive to plant new ecclesias in Scotland and Ireland, and was then one of the five brethren who petitioned the A.L.S. in 1954-55 to found a missionary society. His personal campaign in Georgetown, Guyana, in 1955, at that time the only ecclesia in the Third World, was instrumental in silencing all opposition to the formation of the Christadelphian Bible Mission.²⁰

Perhaps it was this closer contact with Third World countries as a result of the new missionary activity that worked on the conscience of our community during the subsequent years, bringing about a realisation that our Christianity needed to be more practical. So, in the post-war period we have seen two possibly related developments: the formation of missionary societies for the purpose of preaching the Gospel abroad; and, an increasing number of charitable projects which are the expression of a collective social conscience.

It is possible that it is these developments which have been the causes of renewed vigour and consequent growth. I would, however, be a little more cautious than the editors of the *Caribbean Pioneer* in describing this as "a new revival" of Christadelphians worldwide. Reformation is sorely needed, and there may be hints that it is indeed on the way, yet there is a great deal of soul-searching to be done and changes to be made before we can be content that we have our much-needed 'revival'.

Following are some personal opinions about established Christadelphian traditions, with suggestions as to which are truly part of our rich spiritual heritage, and which could be safely abandoned as 'traditions of men'.

THE SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY

John Thomas has been described as "a pioneer, a discoverer ... What appealed to him was to wriggle free of what he considered the mental shackles imposed by orthodoxy, so he could soar high in the spiritual etherea and see vistas, within the Bible, of God's past, present and future plans".²¹

While writers such as Robert Roberts and many others have done a service to our community by simplifying some of the difficult writings of John Thomas, few have approached the Scriptures with the same spirit of discovery. A notable exception would be Harry Whittaker who was possibly the most prolific writer the Christadelphian community has seen. To have this spirit of discovery is to not be afraid of finding something in the Scriptures which may challenge our preconceived notions or traditionally held ideas.

We need to build on the work of the 'pioneers' like John Thomas and look closely at what the Scriptures say on matters which they did not write about in detail. The range of subjects here is vast, but some important work needs to be done on matters such as the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life; the role of women in the church; our relationships with the wider community; communicating the Gospel to the world; prayer; structuring our community for optimal spiritual growth; and many more. There are always risks associated with pioneering or discovering. We may have to make some changes which will be uncomfortable for some at first. We can be certain, however, that the benefits will far outweigh any imagined disadvantages.

DEFINING OUR FAITH

Christadelphians have always boasted that our understanding of the Scriptures is amazingly simple; that ours is a "religion that makes sense". Yet, the way we choose to define our faith, in documents such as the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith, or the Cooper-Carter Addendum in the Australian Unity Agreement, is far from simple. These documents have their roots in controversy and grew out of attempts to define one side of an argument. As a means of summarising our faith, as a positive explanation of what we believe for the benefit of the non-Christadelphian, they are hopelessly inadequate. In fact, history has shown that as a basis for inter-ecclesial fellowship they are equally as inadequate. The Australian situation, for example, where we have groups of ecclesias all claiming to accept the Unity Agreement as their basis of fellowship, yet not fully 'in fellowship'

²⁰ Alan Hayward, "Brother Harry Whittaker and the Birth of the Bible Mission", *The Bible Missionary*, No.125, July, 1992, pp 6 - 8.

²¹Andrew Wilson, op cit, p 82.

with each other, is evidence that, as an expression of that which we have in common, the 'BASf' and the Unity Agreement might create more problems than they solve.

Do we need a synopsis of our beliefs for fellowship to take place between ecclesias? The ecclesias managed for forty years without one, and have been divided into several schismatic groups ever since attempts were first made to impose one Statement of Faith on the whole brotherhood. The so-called 'reunion' of 1958 has never really worked; at least, not in Australia. Perhaps we need to put these man-made documents into perspective, and realise that they are inadequate because they are man-made, and that unity can be achieved only by the Spirit of God and not by human endeavours merely. Let's remove the unnecessary emphasis placed on these documents and start focusing on what we have IN COMMON, not on what divides.

SHARING OUR FAITH

It is when we are preaching the Gospel that we are most able to concentrate on the needs of others, rather than on our own holiness. This is especially true if we are endeavouring to understand and meet the REAL NEEDS of people in the wider community, rather than our traditional perceptions of their needs. A family in crisis, experiencing a breakdown in relationships, will need positive and practical guidance which will help them to turn their situation around more than they need to hear whether there is a trinity, a supernatural devil or an immortal soul. Young people facing the prospect of lifelong unemployment will need to learn how to COPE with the PRESENT SITUATION before they will be even remotely interested in a religion which only preaches a future 'kingdom of God on earth' as the solution for everything.

We need to discover the immediate needs of the world we live in, and to learn how God meets all these needs. We must then find the most effective ways of communicating that message. We will have to get away from the 'public lecture' mentality which can only ever communicate a message to those few willing to attend lectures.

The most effective way of sharing our faith is through PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS with individual people, and through positive and practical meetings to which we can bring them. If Christadelphians don't enjoy 'public lectures' themselves (and attendance, or lack of it, indicates that generally we don't), then why would we ever invite other people to share our boredom? On the other hand, if we truly ENJOY our meetings because they are positive, practical, interesting, lively and meet OUR needs, then we will be so enthusiastic when we invite our friends to come with us that they will want to come to see why we enjoy them so much, and why they make such a profound and obvious difference to our lives.

The Word of God IS relevant to daily life. We should preach this relevance whenever we are confronted with human need. We should remind ourselves that our PRIMARY mission is to help people see their need for Christ, not to keep ourselves 'unspotted by the world'. A religion preoccupied by its own purity is essentially a selfish thing rather than a living witness to the power of God to change lives.

SOME TRADITIONS WE MAY NEED TO ABANDON:

- our unhealthy interest in controversy;
- our slavish adherence to nineteenth century explanations and definitions of our faith;
- 'public lectures' as the primary means of preaching;
- an over-emphasis on the 'doctrinal' rather than the 'practical' aspects of our religion;
- ecclesial structures and meetings which may have met the needs of our brethren last century, but are not necessarily the most effective ways of achieving our objectives at the end of the twentieth century;
- and others.

SOME TRADITIONS WE NEED TO ENCOURAGE:

- our emphasis on reading the Scriptures daily, and a personal familiarity with the Word of God;
- our insistence that the 'Commandments of Christ' are as much a part of our faith and our basis of fellowship as the doctrines we have in common;
- our commitment to individual and personal ministry, encouraging each member to discover their talent and make their contribution;
- our genuine sense of 'family' and community;
- and many more.

SOME TRADITIONS NEED TO BE REVIVED:

- a 'spirit of discovery' which energised 'pioneers' like John Thomas, and an eagerness to hear what God has to say, rather than following the interpretations of others;
- a flexibility and adaptability which allowed our early brethren to change when they saw a better way;
- strong support for new members to maintain their previous contacts with others, as a way of encouraging them to share their new faith with their friends;
- the appeal of our faith to 'ordinary people' from all classes;
- and possibly more.

POLES APART

Over the course of the last generation or two, Christadelphians in Australia (and apparently elsewhere) have tended to polarise into two distinct groups. These groups use different hymn books in their worship, have their own Sunday School organisations using different lesson notes, tend to read different Christadelphian magazines (and probably literature generally), conduct separate Bible schools and preaching campaigns and use different materials for preaching. Each has its own inter-ecclesial committees of various types, their own combined youth groups, and conduct 'combined' preaching efforts with their affiliated ecclesias only.

Yet the polarity is not one of organisation merely. The attitudes, methods and philosophies of the two groups are fundamentally at variance. This is reflected in differences as diverse as Bible study methods, styles of clothing, forms of worship, family relationships and attitudes to scores of everyday issues. The two groups have maintained almost separate existences for so long they have developed their own jargons, cliches and other forms of speech that makes communication between the two groups difficult due to the frequency of misunderstandings or need for clarification.

Inter-ecclesial fellowship between the two groups is made difficult by the use of a different basis of fellowship in each group. (While both claim to accept the Australian Unity Agreement as their basis, one group accepts it "without addition or further explanation", while some ecclesias in the other group have added qualifying or explanatory clauses which are required to be accepted in addition to the Agreement).

One group tends to elevate 'the pioneers' while the other group feels they have built on the foundation of the pioneers. Both groups have an appalling ignorance of the early writings of our community. Even those who claim to 'uphold the pioneers' are often selective as to which of the early writings they will uphold and of which they will remain blissfully ignorant.

So, any discussion of the future of the Christadelphian community has to take into account, frankly and honestly, the existence of these two groups with almost irreconcilable differences. There is no value in pretending the differences don't exist and somehow hoping that, if we don't admit to them, they will quietly disappear. It is the opinion of this writer, however, that the differences cannot be resolved merely by trying to tidy up the Unity Agreement or by accepting yet another set of words which will remove, harmonise or accommodate alleged doctrinal differences. The polarisation has occurred on a more fundamental level and has to be dealt with on that level.

How do we achieve 'unity'? Obviously not by agreement merely. (History attests to the failure of the 'Unity Agreement', except superficially perhaps, and only for a short time.)

What SHOULD we mean by 'unity'? Unity is the result of minds in harmony with God, and lives lived in obedience to His commandments.

UNITY IS NOT UNIFORMITY

We cannot achieve unity by dressing the same, talking the same way (using the same jargon and cliches) or having the same interpretation of every passage of Scripture (especially if that interpretation is imposed on us by the dogmatic assertions of prominent brethren, committees or magazine editors).

We have yet to discover the God-given value of diversity. Nature in its wonderful complexity is testimony to the pleasure God takes in variety, diversity and contrasts. The Creator did not create a world of monotony or 'same-ness'. In His new creation - the body of Christ - He draws together men and women from different backgrounds and cultures, not to make them identical, but to weave a rich tapestry of diversity. Unity, but not uniformity.

This is the emphasis of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12 about one body with many parts. After writing about the diversity within the human body he says, "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be" (v. 18) and goes on to argue that God has created an inter-dependence between the parts "so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other" (v. 25). The unity here is not in uniformity, but in a recognition that the diversity creates an awareness of their mutual need for each other, and a healthy respect for the differences.

Isn't it time we learned, not only to live with the differences within the brotherhood, but to value them? Each ecclesia SHOULD have its own personality, reflected in its forms of worship, methods of study and organisation. We can believe the same "first principles of the one faith" while expressing them differently.

If an ecclesia wants to use hymns or songs other than those in our hymn book (which ever edition), or to conduct their meetings following a non-traditional format, or to explore new methods of study or preaching or reaching out to others or developing inter-personal relationships, why should we not let them? It is none of these things which makes Christadelphians distinctive, but rather our dedication to the truth of the Word of God.

BACK TO THE BIBLE

And yet it seems that it is this dedication to the Word of God which has suffered most in the last generation or so. This is true of both 'groups' in the Australian brotherhood, although for different reasons. Some brethren may have over-reacted against the so-called Bible study methods of those who slavishly copied someone else's commentary into the margins of their own Bibles, by not studying at all! They made their objections to the practice of those who blindly accepted the views of 'the pioneers', by refusing to read anything which wasn't contemporary. Both attitudes are wrong. John Thomas, in particular, deserves to be read, not only for his remarkable insight into the Word of God, but also in the hope that the reader might pick up something of his determination, his spirit of discovery and his enthusiasm for the truth of God. Our motive in reading his works should be to stand on his shoulders so that we can see further than he could. On the other hand, I well remember my feeling of horror when I first attended an 'Elpis Israel class' many years ago and the introductory reading was from Elpis Israel rather than from the Scriptures. Sadly, because of this unhealthy attitude to the early brethren, I doubt that the members of that class were able to see as far into the Word as John Thomas could, let alone stand on his shoulders to see further.

Harry Whittaker wrote, "It has come to something when Christadelphians have to be urged to pull their socks up and do more Bible reading. But this is the situation, and it may as well be faced frankly and honestly. Time was when 'the daily readings' were done as a matter of course - by all. Those days are passed. It is now needful to reinstate the wholesome habits of earlier days".²²

I know of some ecclesias which have, very successfully, operated small Bible reading groups in homes. These groups, made up of families living in close proximity, meet once a week simply to do the daily Bible readings together. This not only encourages the practice of reading on the other days when they do not meet, it also promotes fellowship and a sense of unity within the ecclesia as a whole. These groups are also ideal opportunities to invite friends and neighbours to join in the reading of the Scriptures.

PRAY, BRETHREN, PRAY

A number of brethren over the years have made the comment that we are not, generally speaking, a praying community. The reason for this is puzzling. It is certainly not because of a lack of intention, or a shortage of exhortation to be more prayerful. Nor is it only a recent problem. In an article in *The Christadelphian* in 1940, Islip Collyer remarked, "Surely there is an urgent need for reformation and for prayer".²³ Would we need to change anything about that plea over 60 years later, other than to say it is now even more urgent?

History again may provide the clue as to why our community should have to wrestle with the problem of a lack of prayerfulness. In some ways early Christadelphianism was quite eclectic, borrowing 'traditions' from various sources. For example, the practice of standing, rather than kneeling, for prayer was adopted from the Church of Scotland. (Biblically there is no reason why standing should be preferred over kneeling). Most of the Psalms used in the Christadelphian Hymn Book came from the Scottish Psalter rather than the English Psalter. These choices were probably influenced by Robert Roberts' Scottish background.²⁴ Our customs of ecclesial management are a blend of Scottish Presbyterianism (from Roberts?) and Congregationalism (John Thomas' father was a Congregational minister. He also openly admitted to being influenced from an early age by the Church of Scotland. In an article in 1847 he wrote, "our moral training at the hands of a kind and pious mother

²² Harry Whittaker, *Reformation: A Book for Christadelphians*, Biblia, UK, 1985, p.20.

²³ *The Christadelphian*, May 1940, p. 225.

²⁴ John Thomas also preferred the Scottish version of the Psalms. One of his reasons for preferring it was that it was unpopular with the Methodist and Evangelical movements. He wrote: "Of all the metrical versions at present extant, the Scotch is the most literal, and one great point in its favor is, that it hath called forth more of the ridicule of the small wits of the day than any other". (*Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, May, 1859, p 119.)

was the best her education in the Calvinism of the Scottish Kirk could enable her to give. She instilled into us a profound veneration for the Holy Scriptures, which we retain to this day"²⁵).

At the same time many of these choices were a reaction against the traditions of the established churches. Impromptu prayer was preferred to the formalism of the Prayer Book which was thought to lack sincerity, however beautifully worded. Perhaps, too, it was thought that the established churches paid too much attention to 'devotions' (such as prayer) at the expense of good Bible reading and Bible study. In correcting an imbalance the pendulum may have swung too far the other way. So while mid-week Bible classes, Mutual Improvement Classes and public lectures became standard features of any ecclesia the Prayer Meeting was seen as an unnecessary activity.

The poet William Cowper was well known for his involvement in prayer meetings, together with John Newton. These meetings were so successful and grew in numbers at such a rate that at one stage, in 1789, they had to find much larger premises. Cowper wrote a hymn for the occasion to re-assure those members who must have been apprehensive of the change: "Wherever, Lord, thy people meet" (hymn 185 in the Christadelphian Hymn Book – 1964 ed.). The hymn reflects the confidence the writer had in "the power of prayer" and his conviction that they would see further growth (they did), "thy former mercies here renew ... come thou, and fill this wider space,/ and bless us with a large increase" (these last 2 lines from a stanza not in our hymn book). Yet the same could not be said of Christadelphian meetings called for the purpose of praying together, so the compilers of our Hymn Book, in borrowing Cowper's hymn, altered its purpose by adding a stanza to make the hymn suitable for the Breaking of Bread instead, "And now around thy table, Lord,/ we keep the memory adored ...".

In many ways it's a terrible pity we didn't adopt Prayer Meetings too as our universal custom. The quality of our personal and congregational prayers would have been better for it if we had.

Is it too late to do anything to correct that which is lacking? Are we so intransigent that we will not change even for our own survival? We will acknowledge, from our study of the Word, that prayer is a vital part of the believer's life, yet in practice we are reluctant to make the necessary changes to improve this part of our spirituality. A well respected senior brother wrote to me: "The Brotherhood has reached a crisis point and its future is very much under a cloud. I made a remark a few days ago that I believed we were sowing the seeds of extinction and if not awakened to this prospect we may verily become a very little known quantity in a very short time from hence ... Change is certainly a necessity for ... the revival of the Spirit of Adventure, to be up and doing the will of God in calling others to the hope of salvation".

It is urgent! We cannot allow our Body to stagnate because of some misguided notion that our early brethren got it ALL right and we ought not to change a thing.

- Prayer has to become a more important feature of our meetings;
- our Arranging Brethren need to devote more time to praying together in all their meetings;
- individually and collectively we need to pray for each other, by name;
- our mid-week meetings should be for prayer and Bible study.

The standard of our congregational prayers will then be raised to a level more suiting a body of people truly in fellowship with the Father and the Son.

And then, when we are more in tune with the Father by prayer and through more regular reading of His Word, when we are more fully "in fellowship" with God, we will realise that it is because of our fellowship with God and because we are "walking in the light" that we are "in fellowship" with each other (1 John 1:7). Not because we have agreed on it, but because the Spirit of God has caused it to happen.

²⁵*Herald of the Future Age*, March, 1847, p73.

WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

The title of this article was taken from the subject of a study day organised by the NSW Christadelphian Committee. The fact that the question needed to be asked, and the amount of interest shown in it by those attending, indicates that many brethren see our community as standing at a cross-roads. We have a number of choices to make, but they will lead us in one of only two directions. As one brother, quoted earlier, put it frankly: "The Brotherhood has reached a crisis point..."

Here are our two choices:

- On the one hand we can cling tenaciously to our past with all its traditions, good and bad; we can maintain a rigid dogmatism which asserts that "if it was good enough for our earlier brethren, then it's good enough for us"; and we can continue down the path of introversion, preoccupation with our own purity, and consequent and inevitable division and fragmentation until we eventually self-destruct.
- On the other hand, we can be encouraged by the signs of growth in some areas of the brotherhood, and the hints of revival. We can fan into flame the spirit of adventure which is still there in the brotherhood, although almost quenched in some parts.

There is evidence that the brotherhood is currently travelling along both paths: in some places experiencing fragmentation and running the risk of extinction, while in others enjoying steady or even dramatic growth.

Earlier we quoted from an editorial in the *Caribbean Pioneer* entitled "Christadelphians Worldwide: A New Revival". Here are a few more statistics from that editorial:

- In 1990-91 baptisms exceeded deaths and departures, in Nigeria by a ratio of 7 to 1, in the Caribbean and Central America by 6 to 1, in the U.S.A. by nearly 4 to 1, and in Australia and New Zealand by 3 to 1.
- The fastest growing region in the brotherhood is East Asia, which in 1990-91 had 21 baptisms per hundred members, followed by West Africa with 19, South Asia by 17 and the Caribbean by 12.
- One third of all Christadelphians baptised in recent years speak a language other than English as their native tongue. Last year 300 new brothers and sisters could speak ONLY an indigenous language.

So, in some parts of the world the Christadelphian community is flourishing, and in others (such as eastern Europe) there are some early signs of growth as true Christianity extends into new territory.

There is an important characteristic of the brotherhood in these areas of growth which is essential to their vigour: missionary fervour. The enthusiasm of new converts and the thrill of discovery upon finding the light after being in darkness creates an atmosphere of excitement. But if we were to analyse the predominant characteristics of such areas I am sure we would find that there is also an overriding sense of urgency, and an awareness of the world's desperate need of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps, in the west, we have lost some of our missionary fervour. Because we are continually busying ourselves with so many personal and ecclesial matters we have lost the sense of urgency. We are so much in control of our lives and ecclesial environment, and so self-sufficient, that our dependance on Jesus may seem neither desperate nor urgent.

Yet, as Jane Roberts (wife of Robert Roberts) is quoted as having said often: "EVERY Christadelphian is a missionary". Here is a reminder that, in those places where reformation is needed, it is the individual who must first be reformed. Alan Eyre, in the final paragraph of *The Protesters*²⁶, writes of generations of believers who "wrote, not with the cool pen of the academic theologian, but with the passionate intensity of tested conviction and a love that overflowed from a source which they felt was infinitely more precious than anything that this world affords. There is much we can learn from them". Perhaps books like *The Protesters* ought to be made compulsory reading for all Christadelphians, to "fan into flame the gift of God ... a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" so that we will not be timid or ashamed to testify about our faith (2 Tim 1:6-8).

²⁶ Alan Eyre, *The Protesters*, The Christadelphian, Birmingham, 1975, p193.

Too often we place the emphasis of preaching on communal endeavours such as Town Hall lectures, Show stands, and radio and newspaper advertising. The individual can too easily forget his or her personal responsibility to be a missionary. It is easy to criticise the corporate efforts. It is even easier to hide behind them and invent all sorts of reasons for our lack of individual effort.

What can we do to help each other to be more active missionaries?

- Some ecclesias include a "bring a friend night" on their Sunday evening programmes. These evenings are on a theme such as "Meet the Christadelphians." There may be one or two speakers who will speak about the things which are important to Christadelphians, our various activities, our way of life, our 'traditions' such as the way we worship and so on. The purpose of the evening is to provide an overall picture and to whet the appetite for more. The evening may include some community singing, musical or drama items performed by the young people, the Sunday School scholars or individuals or groups. Supper provides an excellent opportunity to mingle in a relaxed atmosphere and introduce our friends to others in the ecclesia in a friendly and non-threatening way.
- For such evenings to be successful, of course, we all have to make a determined effort to bring friends, family or neighbours. The ecclesial preaching committee should start well in advance to explain the objectives of the evening to the ecclesia and to encourage everyone to invite friends. Everyone on the ecclesia's 'contact list' should be invited personally as well (a phone call or short visit is preferable to an impersonal letter, perhaps with a personalised, hand-written note to follow-up). The whole ecclesia needs to know what to expect on the evening so that everyone will feel comfortable about the programme and know exactly to what they are inviting their friends. Ideally, such nights should be regular, rather than as a 'one-off', and can be planned with special groups in mind. For example, the young people could plan a night especially for their friends, but with the whole ecclesia attending and supporting. Families with young children could be invited to an evening with a Sunday School emphasis, and so on.
- The ecclesial literature stand should always be well stocked and with relevant titles. Brothers and sisters should be encouraged to make use of the literature by regularly taking it home to pass on to friends. We should not think of the literature stand as being only for visitors, but as a source of material for our own personal preaching.
- Do you usually invite your Christadelphian friends around for dinner on a different occasion to when you invite your 'outside' friends? (We usually do!) Have you thought about inviting both on the same occasion? It could be an excellent opportunity for your friends to meet a wider group of Christadelphians.
- If our Bible classes were conducted in homes, with small groups, we might also be more inclined to invite our friends to these smaller meetings rather than the more threatening atmosphere of the ecclesial hall and the formal service. Or we could have a separate Bible class, dealing with simpler, more fundamental subjects on a permanent basis. This class would be ideal for teaching our young people the 'first principles' before baptism, for teaching our friends and contacts the fundamental truths of the Bible, and would be suitable for the newly converted and recently baptised members of the ecclesia as well, before 'progressing' to the more difficult subjects discussed at regular Bible classes.
- Perhaps, too, the planners of the speaking list could include more practical subjects dealing with real-life matters such as improving marriages, family life, coping with various difficulties (such as stress, depression, unemployment, etc), and discovering meaning and satisfaction in life. We might be more able to convince our friends to come to a meeting, seminar or workshop on a subject that we know would interest them than it would be to persuade them of the importance of a more doctrinal subject. Once we can show them the relevance of the Bible to daily living there will be plenty of other opportunities to talk about the important doctrinal issues later. These meetings, by the way, don't have to be on Sunday evening. The television networks know very well that most people don't like to go out on a Sunday evening, after a tiring weekend and before another week of work or school. Some discussions on the Bible and family life, for example, might best be held during a week-day while the children are at school and the mothers have a little time to think! Ideally, our sisters would be the best ones to conduct these meetings.

So, just where are Christadelphians headed? The answer to the question will depend largely on which part of the world you are talking about. History has demonstrated that God is never without His witnesses, and if the Christadelphian community fails to measure up to God's requirements we can have no doubts that God will raise up others to do the job we failed to do. In some places our brethren are witnessing very effectively and the truth is spreading. But if the Father has no further use for us

because we have failed to do what was expected, then, at best, we will probably follow some sort of evolutionary path predicted by the sociologists and become a curiosity or irrelevancy. At worst, we will suffer at the hands of the Judge for burying our 'talent'.

The question then is a very personal one. Where are you heading in your spiritual development and what influence are you having on your fellow-brethren and on the world around you? In the final analysis we will be unable to blame anyone, past or present, for our own lack of commitment. We will be unable to point the finger anywhere, except at ourselves.

Our community stands at the cross-roads, but we all stand there together. Undoubtedly some brethren are facing in the right direction and will not be moved from their course. Sadly, a few will head down the wrong track despite every effort to persuade them otherwise. But how many will hang around at the cross-roads, and for how long, wondering which way they should go?

"We know the end, we know the way,
... we make the answer now."