

Christadelphians

By Rebecca Zurbrick and Tim Martin

Founder: Dr. John Thomas (1805-1871)

Founding Date: 1864

Location of groups today: *major areas:* U.S., Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.
Minor areas: Central and South America, Africa, Pacific Rim, and Eastern Europe

Official Publications: “*The Herald of the Future Age*” was a periodical written by Thomas in 1848. He also wrote a book called “*Eipis Israel- An Exposition of the Kingdom of God.*” Today there are many publications produced by the Christadelphians. The periodicals include: *The Christadelphian, The Christadelphian Tidings of the Kingdom of God, The Bible Magazine, The Testimony Magazine, The Gospel News, Faith Alive!, Lookout, The Christadelphian Advocate.*

Organizational structures: There are no levels of organization, although thoroughly congregational. The highest level would be considered the *ecclesia* (the local church) which is normally led by the rotation of more mature members. They are called presiding brethren, managing brethren, secretary and treasurer, and superintendent of the Sunday school. Communication occurs through the sharing of periodicals, small groups, travel, mail, and other various forms.

Schools: Texas Christadelphian Camp and Conference Center, Terra Nova Bible School (Newfoundland, Canada), and the Russian Bible School.

Unique terms: They use “ecclesia” instead of “church,” “fraternal gatherings” which is a group that meets to spiritually up-build the members, further their enlightenment in the Scriptures, and for the instruction of the public.

Other names: The Berean Christadelphians, The Dawn Christadelphians, Brothers of Christ, Thomasites.

HISTORY

John Thomas was born in Hoxton Square, London, on April 12th, 1805 and studied medicine at an early age in Chorley and London.¹ During his migration to America in 1832, the ship he was on sprung a leak.

Several times the passengers were in a state of panic and fear of drowning. Dr. Thomas was much exercised by the experience; he realized that he had made no study of religion; and, faced with the possibility of death, his sense of uncertainty was so borne upon him that [he] resolved that if he reached land safely he would not rest until he had found out the truth about what lay beyond death.²

Soon after arriving in America, Thomas met Alexander Campbell of the Reformation Movement (sometimes called the ‘Campbellites’ now known as the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ). Thomas was baptized and immediately became involved in the preaching ministry. In 1834 he became editor of a new magazine, the *Apostolic Advocate*.³ Soon afterwards, disagreements with Campbell emerged.

Unlike Campbell, Thomas believed that a person must have knowledge of the scriptures before baptism and that a resurrection would take place when Jesus returned. “Because of these differences in belief Dr Thomas was ‘disfellowshipped’ in 1837. However some of the Campbellite congregations agreed with his views and departed with him.”⁴ These early followers of Thomas were commonly called Thomasites.⁵

In 1843,⁶ Thomas became interested in the Adventist (or Millerite) movement due to their intriguing teachings concerning the end times and their questioning of orthodox faith. Thomas “influenced the movement and was influenced by it.”⁷

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Thomas incorporated the doctrines of the Second Advent of Christ and its close arrival into his prominent teachings. In 1846, when Thomas traveled to New York City and began a series of lectures, he based his speeches on thirty doctrinal points which would later become part of his book *Elipis Israel (The Hope of Israel)*.⁸

As pacifists, the Thomasites were against military service. But, to opt out of service during the civil war, a person had to be identified with a recognized religious group that did not agree with war. Hence, in 1864 Thomas introduced the name “*Christadelphians*” (which is Greek for *Brethren in Christ*).⁹

When Thomas died in 1871, the movement continued. Although in the 1880’s some conflicts among his followers lead to a split. They were divided into the *Unamended* group and the *Amended* group. The *Unamended* group believes that “only the deceased who are ‘in Christ’ will be raised from the dead and have eternal life; the rest will simply remain dead, without conscious existence.”¹⁰ The *Amended* group believes that everyone who has been exposed to the Gospel’s message will be raised from the dead at the final judgment. If they are found to be wicked, they will be annihilated with those who did not hear.

Today most of the world follows the beliefs of the *Amended* group. In the 1970’s there was an attempt to merge the two groups in the U.S., but it was unsuccessful because of their inability to agree on the matter of the resurrection responsibility. Today there are currently “about 90 *unamended* and 80 *amended* congregations in the US. Worldwide, the two groups have some 850 congregations located in Africa, Australia, New Zealand, North America, South East Asia, and throughout Europe.”¹¹

Christadelphians do not vote, run for any office, or go to war. Members usually read the Bible daily, both Old and New Testament. They also discourage their members from having fellowship with Christians from other denominations.¹²

DOCTRINE

The Bible: The Christadelphian church believes that the scriptures must be studied in whole because the whole Bible is the inspired Word of God. Therefore the Old Testament as well as the New Testament should be read and studied together since they are unified. Another important point to notice is “if man is truly to understand the Bible, he must be prepared for the fact that it is absolutely frank about all issues, and primarily about ourselves.”¹³ They recognize that the Bible teaches doctrine clearly and with precision, it tells the truth. They also believe that no past or present Christadelphian has ever received any special revelation because it is only through prayerful reading of the Bible that we will be able to understand how to conduct ourselves as well as the purpose of God in our lives.¹⁴

God: The Christadelphians believe that only the Father is God. The Bible clearly teaches that God is one, and is not part of a trinity: “We likewise reject the idea of a God with multiple independent personalities as not being in harmony with the teachings of scripture.”¹⁵ The Holy Spirit is not a person, but the power emanating from God that He uses to do His will. “...by [the Father’s] Holy Spirit, the expression of His power, He controls the affairs of the world according to His ultimate purpose with mankind.”¹⁶

Jesus: Jesus is the Son of God, but not God the Son. Instead, he is merely a man. There are several reasons why this is so:

1. God is one. It cannot be denied that Jesus referred to himself as separate from God because there can only be one true God.
2. Mortality and immortality are equally elite characteristics. Since God is immortal he cannot die, but Jesus did die.
3. In Jesus’ power, teaching, and life he consistently points out and demonstrates his servant-like attitude towards God. There is no equality between God and Jesus.¹⁷

They believe that Jesus did not exist prior to his birth on earth. He was subjected to the same trials and weaknesses that we face in the flesh but yet he did not give into sin. Jesus did die on the cross for the atonement of all people’s sin. He will one day come back to raise up the dead and judge them so that he can establish his Kingdom of God in Palestine in place of human governments and it will become the “City of the Great King” where the throne of the Lord over Israel will be reestablished.¹⁸ Jesus will then reign for a thousand years and the saints will live on earth forever.

Satan/Devil: Christadelphians do not believe in the existence of a fallen angel named Satan or the devil. When the term “Satan” is found in the Bible, they may take it to mean a human adversary (as in Num. 22:22 or Job) or illustrative of the “allurements of the world” (as in 1 John 2:15-16).¹⁹

The term “devil” is synonymous with “human nature” or “sin.” Christadelphians come to this conclusion by linking several verses together.²⁰

	Sin	Devil
Jesus came to destroy it:	He was manifested to take away our sins” 1 John 3:5. “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3). See also Heb. 1:26, 1 Pet. 2:25.	“For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).
It causes death:	Jesus became flesh “that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14).	“The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6 23). “The sting of death is sin” (1 Cor. 15:56).

Salvation: “Belief, baptism and obedience (in that order) are the essential steps to salvation.”²¹ Though the Christadelphians say belief is required, they do not mean faith, or trusting in the merits of Christ. Instead, it is reframed as “acquiring accurate knowledge.” “A knowledge of God’s revelation to man is absolutely essential to salvation.”²² This is gained through the study and understanding of the teachings of the Gospel.

Secondly, baptism is required. It is an expression of obedience. Just as Jesus died a sacrificial death, we too must die a sacrificial death. This is done through “baptism which is when a person figuratively dies, is buried, and is raised again to newness of life, thus he figuratively dies to live!”²³ Baptism accomplishes three things:

1. It provides a cover which blots out past sins by forgiveness;
2. It inducts one into Christ Jesus providing a basis of fellowship with God;
3. It provides a means of access to the divine throne of mercy ensuring the continued forgiveness of sins after baptism, when such are confessed and forsaken.²⁴

Hence, baptism opens the door for the third and final step of salvation. Baptism is the initial point of obedience which allows continued forgiveness based on obedience to God. Those who are saved will not look forward to an eternity in heaven. Instead, “they believe that the Kingdom of God will be located on Earth, with Jerusalem as its capital.”²⁵

Humanity: Humans do not have a soul or spirit that survives death. Instead, we are only a physical animal (called soul) that becomes non-existent at death:

We believe that man is created out of the dust of the earth. By the dust of the earth, we understand the elements and compounds that make up all things. This body is given life, or breath, by God. Upon death, our breath leaves our body, our bodies return to the soil. Our only hope lies in the resurrection from the dead when Christ returns to this earth. In the meantime, the dead lie in the earth in the sleep of death, alive only in the memory of God, until Jesus comes.²⁶

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Many of their doctrinal issues disagree with what the Bible teaches. Many of the Christadelphian teachings are referenced with Scripture, but the verses and their explanations are taken out of context.

God: Christadelphians are correct to observe that there is only one God in the Bible. This does not however, negate the tri-unity within the nature of God. This tri-unity can be seen through the Bible’s representing three distinct persons as being God: the Father (Phil. 2:11; 2 Pet. 1:17), Son (John 1:1; 10:32-38; Rev. 1:8), and the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4; 13:2). Though the Bible does not use the term “trinity,” it clearly teaches the doctrine of the trinity.

Jesus: Jesus existed before he was born of the virgin Mary (John 1:1, 8:58, Colossians 1:15, 17-18). Also, He is fully God and fully man. In Philippians 2:6-7, Paul describes Jesus as being in the form of God, and that he took on the form of a servant by being made in the likeness of men. Hence, if being in the form of a servant means that Jesus is human, then being in the form of God would likewise mean that he is God.

Satan/Devil: The words “Devil” and “Satan” refer to the same person (Rev. 12:9, 20:2). The Devil is portrayed in the scriptures as a sentient being. When Jesus was tempted, the Devil quoted scripture to him, thus demonstrating a mind. John did not say that the devil was a sin nature, but that the “devil sinneth from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). Hence, the Devil must be able to make moral decisions if his is capable of sin.

Salvation: The three steps for salvation (knowledge, baptism and obedience) are not grounded in scripture. The Christadelphian re-defining of “belief” as “acquire accurate knowledge” is invalid. True, an adequate amount of valid information must be available to obtain the “belief” required for true salvation. But, true biblical belief is trusting in the merits of Christ for salvation.

Consider Jesus’ words, “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (John 5:24). Grammatically, in the original Greek, the phrase “hath everlasting life” would not be something obtained in the future. Instead, Jesus is promising something that can be possessed now, and it would never end (“hath” is present tense).²⁷ The only condition that Jesus gives for obtaining everlasting life is hearing his word and believing in God. Obviously, “believing” is not merely an acknowledgment that God exists. The demons know that He exists, and they shudder (Jas. 2:19). Instead, belief in this context means trust, or faith that God will grant the believer everlasting life based on belief, and belief alone. If a person insists that Baptism or continued obedience is mandatory, then they either did not hear Jesus’ words, or they did not believe on Him who sent Him.

Humanity: True, there are verses that seem to equate physical life with the soul or spirit (Ps. 33:18-19, 146:3-4). Hence, in their context, when the physical life dies then the soul or spirit dies. But, the subject is more complex. There are also other verses in the Bible that use “soul” or “spirit” in a different way. For example, Jesus said, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). If the soul and physical life are always synonymous, then this verse would not make sense. Anybody who killed the body would be killing the soul. But, Jesus warns that humans can only kill the body, whereas we should be weary of God who can kill both.

Also, there is eternal punishment in hell for those who have not been saved. Revelation 14:9-11 says that the one who worships the beast and his image will be tormented. “Tormented” indicates a conscious existence. The “smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night” (Rev. 14:11).

Notes

- 1 “Biographical Notes,” Christadelphia World Wide, www.christadelphia.org/books/elpisbionotes.htm (accessed May 2006).
- 2 John Carter, “The Faith in the Last Days,” Antipas, www.west.net/~antipas/books/faith_in_last_days/flid_014.html (accessed May 2006).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 “John Thomas (Christadelphian),” Wikipedia, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Thomas_%28Christadelphian%29#Association_with_Alexander_Campbell (accessed May 2006).
- 5 B.A. Robinson, “About The Christadelphians,” Religious Tolerance.org, www.religioustolerance.org/chr_delp.htm (accessed May 2006).
- 6 Charles H. Lippy, *The Christadelphians*, p. 49. as quoted in Jen Parsons “Christadelphians,” The Religious Movements Homepage Project @The University of Virginia, http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/crst.html (accessed May 2006).
- 7 “Our History,” The Christadelphians, www.widomaker.com/~cpatax/xadelfia/who01.htm (accessed May 2006).
- 8 Charles H. Lippy, *The Christadelphians*, p. 49. as quoted in Jen Parsons “Christadelphians,” The Religious Movements Homepage Project @The University of Virginia, www.religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/crst.html (accessed May 2006).
- 9 “Our History,” www.widomaker.com/~cpatax/xadelfia/who01.htm.
- 9 “The Christadelphians,” www.religioustolerance.org/chr_delp.htm.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 “Who are the Christadelphians?” Christadelphia World Wide, www.christadelphia.org/pamphlet/whoare.htm#2 (accessed May 2006).
- 14 “The Christadelphian Faith,” Christadelphia World Wide, www.christadelphia.org/belief.htm#2 (accessed May 2006).
- 15 “The Christadelphian Faith,” www.christadelphia.org/belief.htm#2.
- 16 “Who are the Christadelphians?” www.christadelphia.org/pamphlet/whoare.htm#2, see also www.dawnchristadelphians.org/whochr1.htm.
- 17 “The Christadelphian Faith,” www.christadelphia.org/belief.htm#2.
- 18 *Religious Bodies*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), 304–307 as cited in “G. F. Ane Christadelphians 1929,” www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/gane/RB26-CA.HTM (accessed May 2006).
- 19 “Key To The Understanding of the Scripture—Lesson 17: The Devil and Satan,” Christadelphia World Wide, www.christadelphia.org/books/keystudy17.htm (accessed May 2006).
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 “Baptism—Essential to Salvation,” Christadelphia World Wide, www.christadelphia.org/archive/baptism.htm (accessed May 2006).
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 “The Christadelphians,” www.religioustolerance.org/chr_delp.htm.
- 26 “Response to Mainstream Christianity,” Christadelphia World Wide, http://www.christadelphia.org/man.htm (accessed May 2006).
- 27 There are approximately ten uses of the present tense. Of the ten, this one would be “static.” Static represents an action or state that not only occurs at the time of speaking, but exists forever. There are other uses of the present tense that the Christadelphians would prefer, such as iterative (stresses repeated intervals). However, the verb “has” has the direct object “life” which is modified by “everlasting.” The adjective “everlasting” demonstrates an on-going unending life. Hence, the present tense “hath” demonstrates that “eternal life” is an actual reality in the person who believes.



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