

members leaflets about, special efforts or events at the ecclesia they feel it would be good for them to attend.

- 5 When seminars are running they should be part of the ecclesia's Sunday announcements, letting the ecclesia know who is on that week and what topics are being covered. The seminar is an ecclesial activity, a most important one, and there is a need to let all members know what is happening.

The Word of God

There is a need in this desperate world for the stability and peace of mind that the Scriptures can bring. It has been reported by Amazon that their Bible sales have increased by twenty-five per cent for the year ending February 2009. The credit crunch, coming on top of wars and terrorism, has made people feel vulnerable and

insecure. Bringing them into contact with the Scriptures is the greatest gift we can give them. As the Apostle Paul instructed Timothy, "the holy scriptures . . . are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15); this Word of God "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man [or woman] of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works" (vv. 16,17).

We may still find that the seminars only bring one here and one more there into the household of God, but it is His work, His Word. Putting a Bible into the hands of people who have never opened one before is to give them the key that opens the door to the Kingdom of God. We are preparing for that Kingdom age when all the world will be educated by His saints in the wonders of His Word and purpose.

Breaking new ground

The experiences of the nineteenth-century pioneers

Reg Carr

All the early Christadelphians were pioneers, but the term came to be applied specifically to Brother Thomas and Brother Roberts. Reluctant at first to preach, Brother Thomas became drawn into preaching and, once he had discovered the Truth, devoted his life to disseminating it, suffering great deprivations and dangers. Brother Roberts regarded preaching as a duty and carried on the work begun by Brother Thomas. The ultimate pioneer is the Lord Jesus Christ, and we should follow his example and be encouraged and thankful for the efforts of all our pioneering brethren.

THE ORIGINAL USE of the word 'pioneer' was as a term for "a member of an infantry group preparing roads or terrain for the main body of troops" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*). Not inappropriately, in view of this military overtone, the word has long been used in Christadelphian circles to refer to the nineteenth-century preachers of apostolic truth whose 'trail-blazing'

work was an integral part of their service as "good soldier[s] of Jesus Christ" (2 Tim. 2:3).

A trawl through *The Christadelphian* reveals some interesting facts about the uses of this time-honoured Christadelphian cliché. As early as 1847, Brother John Thomas was writing of Walter Scott and the Campbellites as "pioneers in the forest".¹ By 1870—even within his own lifetime—Brother Thomas himself was being described

1. "I think you and your co-labourers have been an agency in the hands of Providence. God has used you as pioneers in the forest; you have been the axe-men and grubbers in the clearing" (letter from Brother Thomas to Walter Scott, May 1847, quoted in *The Christadelphian*, 1869, p. 194). Walter Scott was the Campbellite who persuaded Brother Thomas to be immersed in Cincinnati in 1832.

as “the old pioneer”;² and by the late 1870s the term was being commonly used to speak of almost anyone, brother or sister, who had ‘broken new ground’ in spreading the gospel. As the nineteenth century waned, and as these active early members of the community died, their obituaries in *The Christadelphian* almost always referred to them as ‘pioneers’,³ so that by the end of the century this fairly wide use of the term was well established.⁴

By the 1950s, however, the situation had changed, and the term ‘pioneers’ was being used to refer almost exclusively to Brother Thomas and Brother Robert Roberts.⁵ This more restricted usage is employed in the present article.⁶ But this is only for reasons of space, and it should not be taken to detract from the massive input made into the early preaching of the gospel by many other faithful Christadelphians.

“We did not travel as an evangelist”

Brother Thomas’s first efforts at preaching the gospel happened almost in spite of himself, and he was not particularly pleased with the experience. In Bethany, Virginia, in the Spring of 1833, not many months after his immersion in Cincinnati, Brother Thomas was called on at short notice by Alexander Campbell to speak, two Sundays in succession, to a sizeable congregation. He could find no excuse for refusing, and managed to make do with a few last-minute remarks, the first time about Daniel’s four empires and on the second occasion about “the Apostasy”. But Brother Thomas felt so ill-suited for this public speaking that he resolved to leave Bethany and move on: “He felt that he was being entangled in a work for which he was utterly unqualified, and which was entirely opposed to his tastes”.⁷

Yet no sooner had Brother Thomas ‘escaped’ from Bethany than he found himself pressed into preaching by another group of Campbellites in Pennsylvania. “Nothing would satisfy the brethren but that we should speak on every occasion”, he wrote later.⁸ But again, he was not happy: “A disposition to oblige induced compliance, though sorely against our inclination; for *we did not travel as an evangelist*, but simply to find a place of settlement in our peculiar⁹ way of life; besides . . . the violence it did to our disposition, which is naturally reserved”.¹⁰

“Naturally reserved” or not, Brother Thomas seemed destined to be called on to preach wherever he went as he searched for a place to practise medicine. In Baltimore, in Philadelphia, and in Richmond, where he settled for a while, he was

constantly pressed into service as a preacher.¹¹ As Brother Roberts later put it, a “preaching career . . . *was being forced upon him*”.¹² Try as he may—and he certainly tried!¹³—Brother Thomas seemed unable to avoid becoming the ‘pioneer’ who,

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2. Letter to Robert Roberts from George Moyer, of Waterloo, Iowa (*The Christadelphian*, 1870, p. 224).
 3. For example: Brother John McDonald (1879, p. 142); Sister Marianna Kirby (1879, p. 432); and Brother W. T. P. Townshend (1884, p. 234).
 4. In 1897, for example, a Brother Parkes was described as “one of the early pioneers of the Truth in Nottingham, of which there are but few left now”.
 5. Robert Roberts (1839-98) was the first Editor of *The Christadelphian*, and was Brother Thomas’s ‘right-hand man’ in Britain.
 6. Brother John Carter used the term in this way in an editorial devoted exclusively to Brethren Thomas and Roberts (“Our Pioneers”, *The Christadelphian*, 1954, p. 181). Other examples from the pages of the magazine demonstrate this more restrictive usage of the term: 1961, p. 224 (used by Brother Doug Bedson); 1967, p. 541 (used by Brother L. G. Sargent); and 2000, p. 477 (used by Brother Michael Ashton).
 7. Robert Roberts, *Dr. Thomas: his life and work . . . Fourth edition* (Birmingham: The Christadelphian, 2000), p. 15.
 8. *The Apostolic Advocate*, Vol. 5 (1839), p. 88.
 9. ‘Peculiar’ here has the older sense of *distinctive or particular*. Brother Thomas was a qualified medical practitioner; having newly emigrated to America from England, he was seeking somewhere to practise medicine, rather than become an itinerant preacher.
 10. *The Apostolic Advocate*, *loc. cit.*
 11. In Richmond he was prevailed on to serve for a time as evangelist in the Sycamore (Campbellite) Church (Peter Hemingray, *John Thomas: his friends and his faith* [Canton, MI: The Christadelphian Tidings, 2003], pp. 61-3). But again, this was “a call from which there was no escape”, and Brother Thomas refused to accept a salary (*Dr. Thomas, op. cit.*, p. 25).
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
 13. Brother Thomas practised medicine in Richmond in 1834; but he had also begun writing and publishing his first Bible-based magazine (*The Apostolic Advocate*), and this, together with his forays into public preaching, led to his practice failing to make him an adequate living. To change this situation, he moved into rural Virginia in 1836 to become a farmer. When this proved unsuccessful, he migrated in 1839/40 to the fertile prairies of Illinois, working the land on a 288-acre farm in Longgrove, southwest of Chicago. But earning his living by hard labour left him little time for Bible study and writing, so in 1842 he moved to St. Charles and began to publish another magazine entitled *The Investigator*. All the time, however, he was being drawn into preaching and into controversies with his Campbellite contacts; and as he looked more deeply into the Word of God, he was unable to resist the need to speak out publicly about the truths he had discovered there.

under the hand of God, “uncovered the oracles of divine truth from the mass of ignorance and misinterpretation which for centuries overlaid and obscured them”.¹⁴

Towards the Kingdom of God and the Hope of Israel

Although Brother Thomas spent more than a decade associating with Campbellites, he gradually parted company with them as he deepened his own grasp of Bible teaching. Although he continued to think of the Campbellites as “pioneers” for the Truth,¹⁵ he came to see Campbellism itself as “a mere pioneer of truth, and not the truth itself”—a means of clearing the way for the fuller understanding of the doctrine of the apostles that he himself was rediscovering.¹⁶ It was these ‘discoveries’ that ultimately forced him to embrace a demanding life as a full-time editor and preacher as he freed himself from Campbellite error.

As Brother Thomas’s Scriptural understanding grew, he saw that the Campbellites did not believe or preach the key apostolic teachings about the Second Coming of Christ, the Kingdom of God on earth, and the mortality of man. He felt obliged therefore to oppose the ‘received wisdom’ of the Campbellites by every means at his disposal: in his magazine articles, on his preaching tours (at first in West Virginia and then further afield), and in his set-piece debates on controversial topics (such debates being then the most popular means of addressing the issues that preoccupied the churches).¹⁷ Small wonder is it, then, that within four years of Alexander Campbell’s first meeting with Brother Thomas in 1833 he no longer regarded Brother Thomas as a follower.¹⁸

The breach with Campbellism continued to widen with each passing year and with every other important doctrinal truth that Brother Thomas encountered in his Bible study. Perhaps chief among these truths was the all-important ‘Hope of Israel’, which was unknown to the Campbellites, but which Brother Thomas came to recognise as absolutely central to the gospel, the ‘things concerning the Kingdom of God’ being identical to the fulfilment of God’s promises to Abraham and the fathers of the Jewish nation. Looking back later on the importance of this basic element of the gospel, Brother Thomas wrote that it “was evident (from the Scriptures) . . . that a Christian should know and believe the things that God had spoken to the Fathers of Israel by the Prophets”.¹⁹ By early 1847, so changed in substance was Brother Thomas’s faith from that

which he had professed at his first immersion fifteen years before, that he felt it necessary to be re-immersed on a very different basis from his early ‘Campbellism’. From that moment on he was ‘breaking new ground’ in a very different direction.

Explicitly separating himself from Campbell and his disciples, but followed by many of his former co-religionists into the Scriptural beliefs which he now embraced, Brother Thomas solemnly published a “Confession and Abjuration”, renouncing the errors he had formerly preached. He followed this up too with a “Declaration” of his mature faith, and a summary of the “Mystery of the Gospel of the Kingdom”.²⁰ ‘The Truth’, as he himself now called it,²¹ had been well and truly rediscovered, and he determined to spend the rest of his life disseminating it.

“By mouth and pen”

After a few months of dwindling audiences in Virginia, where most of the Campbellite churches were now closed to him, Brother Thomas turned to address the Millerite and Adventist congregations of Baltimore, Philadelphia, Newark and New

14. *Dr. Thomas, op. cit.*, p. 248.

15. See Footnote 1.

16. *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, Vol. I (1851), p. 140.

17. For example: articles such as “The Second Advent of Messiah” (*The Apostolic Advocate*, Vol. I [1834], pp. 145-52); a gruelling but successful 550-mile preaching tour of northern Virginia in the summer of 1834 (described in *John Thomas: his friends and his faith, op. cit.*, p. 64); and an important debate with the Rev. John Watt on the immortal soul, which took place in Lunenburg, Virginia, 1–5 August 1837 (an original transcript of which still exists in The Christadelphian Office in Birmingham). In all these ways Brother Thomas was already contradicting the incomplete (and in many respects quite false) teaching of Alexander Campbell from a fairly early date in his own spiritual journey towards the Truth.

18. This happened about “the middle of 1837” (*John Thomas, op. cit.*, p. 68).

19. *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, Vol. I (1851), p. 1.

20. *Herald of the Future Age*, Vol. III (1847), pp. 73-80. These documents (several of which are reproduced in *John Thomas, op. cit.*) are well worth reading. Most Christadelphians would recognise them as expressive of the faith we hold and preach today.

21. The article “Transition from Error to the Truth” (*Herald of the Future Age*, Vol. III (1847), pp. 122-8) is as close as Brother Thomas ever came to writing his ‘spiritual’ autobiography.

York. He was given a patient, but not especially enthusiastic, hearing. With “the long-lost faith of the Apostles” burning inside him, therefore, he resolved to undertake an extended speaking tour of ‘the old country’, acting on the invitation of his brother Henry, who still lived in London.²² The forty-three-year-old ‘pioneer’ now really was ‘travelling as an evangelist’, and he was taking the gospel of Christ much further afield than he had ever done before . . .

There is no space here to catalogue all the deprivations and adventures ‘the Dr.’ experienced during the scores of preaching tours of America and Britain which he undertook in the twenty-three years that remained to him. Suffice it to say that, from May 1848, when he arrived in England for the first of three extended preaching visits, until his death in America in March 1871, he travelled tens of thousands of miles (by boat, by rail, and on horseback), he was heard and read by hundreds of thousands, and he wrote and published millions of words. He was vilified, threatened with shooting, and even (during the American Civil War) arrested as a spy; he went ‘missing, presumed dead’, and he wore himself out in pursuing his pioneering work for the Truth. It is in grateful recognition of all this that his tombstone epitaph accurately summarises his work:

“During a busy lifetime, by mouth and pen, he contended earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints, and at his death left behind him as the result of his labours, a body of people, in different parts of the world, known as THE CHRISTADELPHIANS, to continue the work begun”.

“The Duty of Brethren as Christ’s Bowmen”

Brother Thomas is credited with ‘rediscovering’ the apostolic gospel, while Brother Robert Roberts is generally considered as the ‘organiser’ of the early Christadelphian community. Brother Roberts was a skilled administrator, and it is to him that we largely owe the forms and procedures of ecclesial organisation that survive, more or less intact, to this day.²³ Yet this general view of Brother Roberts overlooks the fact that, as a prolific writer and editor and, especially, as a pioneering preacher, he had a very great deal in common with Brother Thomas. And, certainly, the last thirty-five years of Brother Roberts’s life were very deliberately spent in a conscious continuation of ‘the Dr.’s’ work.

The two men had very different personalities and temperaments; yet their attitudes to preaching

were identical. For them both, spreading the good news was not an optional extra. It was a sacred duty, to be carried out whatever the personal cost. Brother Roberts described himself as having ‘the resolution of Noah’ as far as preaching was concerned—by which he meant “the resolution to undertake the effort, as a matter of duty to God, without any reference to consequences at all”.²⁴ And when he wrote, at the age of nineteen, to ask for Brother Thomas’s view about “the duty of brethren in relation to the proclamation of the Truth”, he was delighted to read in reply that “a complacently quiescent Christian is one who will never inherit the kingdom, though his faith be ever so orthodox . . . Quietude and silence are not the prerogatives of the Saints in this present evil world”.²⁵

Portrait of a pioneer at work

Here, then, to illustrate the pioneering attitude of Brother Roberts towards the spreading of the gospel, are just a few representative snapshots from his preaching activities, as he sought to do his ‘duty towards God’ and ‘to continue the work begun’ by his older mentor:

- Having failed to turn any of the Campbellites in Huddersfield to the Truth, Brother Roberts “came to the conclusion if anything was to be done . . . it would have to be done on virgin ground”;²⁶
- In Halifax, in 1858, his first public efforts at preaching were lectures on “The Kingdom of God” and “The nature of man”;²⁷
- In 1860, having billed Huddersfield with his wife, he delivered the first of a planned series

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22. “3, Brudenell Place, New North Road, London”, which appears below the preface to the first edition of *Elpis Israel* (1850), was the home address of Henry Thomas, one of John’s younger brothers.
 23. From Brother Roberts came the ‘Bible Companion’ Reading Tables, *The Declaration* (based on the work of Brother R. C. Bingley), *The Ecclesial Guide*, and *The Constitution of the Birmingham Ecclesia* (including *The Commandments of Christ* and a Statement of Faith which, with one amendment, is still the doctrinal ‘yardstick’ of the Central Fellowship).
 24. *An Autobiography* (Birmingham: The Christadelphian, 1917), p. 79.
 25. “The Duty of Brethren as Christ’s Bowmen”, *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, Vol. VIII (1858), p. 270.
 26. *An Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 44. These topics were precisely those on which Brother Thomas concentrated in the 1830s as he moved away from Campbellism.

of eight weekly lectures to a disappointingly small audience while a snowstorm was going on outside;²⁸

- In Birmingham, in 1861, he lectured seven Sunday evenings in a row, “to a suffocatingly crowded audience in the barber’s bath-room [in Summer Lane] that would not comfortably seat perhaps over 16”. Of this early ‘ecclesia’, he wrote: “It was a small affair, to the verge of contemptibility, but it was a beginning, and long experience has taught the wisdom of not despising the day of small things”;²⁹
- In 1865, he had his first taste of ‘debating’ on behalf of the Truth, in the form of a written discussion with a Campbellite;³⁰
- As the direct outcome of an “open tea meeting” in Birmingham on 1 April 1866, at which Brother Roberts spoke on “The Spiritual Dangers of the Nineteenth Century”, twenty-three people were baptized, increasing the membership of the Birmingham ecclesia to 68;³¹
- In 1871 (April to July) he sailed to America to bury Brother Thomas, and to undertake a lecture tour of the northern US and Canada, giving more than fifty lectures in thirty towns and cities;³²
- Like Brother Thomas before him, he undertook regular, lengthy, preaching tours of Britain, which took him from home for weeks and months on end;³³
- His facility for preaching was such that he was described as “the only one in [Birmingham] . . . who had the capacity to speak without notes or preparation, to quote scriptures from memory and to handle the hecklers who were always to the front in open air meetings”.³⁴

By way of conclusion: the spirit of the pioneers

These snippets of information about the preaching experiences of two of our nineteenth-century pioneers could be multiplied almost *ad infinitum*. But what of ourselves in relation to all of this? What conclusions can we draw for ourselves from these historical anecdotes? How do *we* fare in ‘continuing the work begun’?

We live in different times, of course: the Sunday evening lecture has many competing attractions today; the response to the distribution of handbills is now generally modest, to say the least; the crowds no longer flock in their hundreds to multi-night public debates; instant communications have replaced the effectiveness of personal tours; and the background level of Scripture

knowledge in the general public is far lower than it once was. *Yet the obligation upon us to share the Truth with others is no less clear and pressing than it has always been.*³⁵

A scholarly observer of the Brotherhood in the mid-twentieth century wrote that “the local ecclesia tends . . . to be less active than once it was in spreading its gospel in its own and in neighbouring districts”, and that “local evangelism . . . lost its momentum” in the inter-war years, with Christadelphian preaching efforts containing “less emphasis on the expectation of an early advent”.³⁶ The same commentator astutely observed also that in more affluent times, “the social order provokes relatively little profound dissatisfaction”, and that the ‘Christ is coming soon’ message is “less attractive” in “an age in which there is relatively little economic impoverishment and oppression”.³⁷

If these observations are accurate, and if they still ring true today, there is only one certain

28. Of this effort Brother Roberts wrote that he was “leaving results with God, but scarcely daring to think it possible that His purpose admitted of any”. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

30. *The Ambassador*, Vol. II (1865), pp. 163-7, 182-7, 201-5. For a time, Brother Roberts used public debates as a means of promulgating the Truth, perhaps the most celebrated occasion being a six-night debate in June 1876 with Charles Bradlaugh, the leading humanist of Victorian England. See: “The Great Debater”, *Testimony*, 1988, pp. 66-9; also Andrew R. Wilson, *The History of the Christadelphians, 1864-1885* (Glenhaven, NSW: Shalom Publications, 1997), p. 151.

31. *An Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

32. “Across the Atlantic, through America and back”, *The Christadelphian*, 1871, June-December.

33. *The History of the Christadelphians* (*op. cit.*) mentions nine such preaching tours during the period 1866-73 alone, two of which (in 1870) took up four months.

34. *The Life of Robert Roberts* (Torrensville, South Australia: Stallard & Potter, 1983), p. 29. Brother Roberts’s facility as a speaker can be illustrated by the following anecdote. Some time during the 1890s, Brother Roberts agreed to speak at a special lecture in Huddersfield Town Hall, where an audience of 1,000 was expected. Met at the railway station by Brother J. W. Smith just a few hours before the lecture, Brother Roberts turned to his host and asked, “Tell me, Brother Smith, what is my subject tonight?”. (Related to the author by the late Brother Harold Gee during the early 1970s.)

35. See: Reg Carr, “Do we have a preaching commission today?”, *Testimony*, 1994, pp. 264-7.

36. Bryan R. Wilson, *Sects and Society* (London: Heinemann, 1961), pp. 307, 262.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 306.

antidote to such a condition: it is the lesson which rings out loud and clear from this survey of the preaching of two of our Christadelphian pioneers. We must, somehow, revive that same spirit of individual responsibility for passing the Truth on to others; we need a sense of urgency and of 'sacred duty' about our preaching; and we should allow ourselves to be motivated by the example of flint-faced self-sacrifice which those who have gone before us have left. They may have been our 'pioneers', but there is still always 'new ground' for us to break . . .

In the final analysis, of course, we have only one real 'Pioneer': the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the great "forerunner" who has prepared the way for us to enter into the holiest place of all (Heb. 6:19-20). Yet it is no less important that we should take our example also from those who followed their Lord by preaching the Word selflessly in their own day. And it is precisely because their experiences still speak powerfully to us, even though they themselves are now dead, that we should "esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thess. 5:13).