

# **An Examination of “The Christadelphian Experience”**

## **The Testimony magazine of January 1984**

During the controversy between Christadelphians and the Nazarene Fellowship which has now gone on for over 100 years, one of the great obstacles to establishing the truth is the fact that the community is based upon a library of literature which dates back to about 1850. This literature is preserved with almost the same reverence as the Bible itself and although there have been quite a surprising number of corrections and revisions since the originals were written, we believe it has been conclusively proved to be defective in the one vital issue between us. Nevertheless, every new generation of Christadelphians is schooled in the expositions which Dr. Thomas elaborated in Elpis Israel and they sincerely believe that these are sound and scriptural when in fact they are fallacies.

We and others have many times explained the textual, grammatical and doctrinal mistakes which are involved in the view that sin became literally implanted in human flesh at the Fall and not only have quite a few people abandoned Christadelphianism entirely on this account but many more, while honestly admitting that they can see there are certain errors have felt that they have so much of truth as compared with most other sects that they have never felt the need or found the courage to come out. One recognizes the strength and attraction of a numerous and prosperous community which during its existence has evolved into an entity with a life of its own almost independent of its membership and this can be a peril even when it is founded upon sound doctrine - as can be seen in the warnings in the Epistles to the early churches. If, as we believe is the case here, the basis of doctrine is unsound in any particular, then the protection and inviolability afforded by a strong community makes the perpetuation of error inevitable.

Christadelphians understand very well - none better - how difficult it is to persuade a Catholic to contemplate the possibility that his worship of the Virgin Mary is wrong or a C. of E. member to accept that man is not an immortal soul, yet they are themselves quite as impervious to the possibility that Dr. Thomas was mistaken in his teaching that sin is literally in our flesh. The consequence is that as new younger writers and speakers come along they are directed by their leaders or go of their own choice back to Elpis Israel or Robert Roberts and, supposing them to have stood up to the test of time and largely unaware of the controversies there have been, happily reproduce them and do their best to justify their conviction, even if, as we sometimes suspect the brighter ones are conscious that something is not quite right. This is exactly what is happening again today. The Testimony has produced a special issue for January 1984 and a group of capable writers have produced a full study of The Atonement. Unfortunately it is not a study of the Bible doctrine of The Atonement but of the Christadelphian doctrine of The Atonement and these are by no means the same thing. Sadly, but unsurprisingly, it commences with the exposition given by Dr. Thomas where he wrote, “Sin could not have been condemned in the body of Jesus if it had not existed there.”

We believe that it has been demonstrated beyond a doubt and on many occasions, not only by ourselves but by independent Bible scholars of good repute that this is a very great error. Sin did not and could not exist in Jesus' body because that is an impossible thing, but that did not mean that sin was not condemned when He died. Sin was condemned but it was condemned in the same way as it was condemned under the Mosaic Law - when the Priest

made an offering of a legally clean and perfect lamb; sin was condemned by Jesus suffering in His body the punishment due to sinners. Reg Carr makes no attempt to reason the thing out from the

Scripture; he is content to quote what Dr. Thomas wrote and clearly this is what he believes but we suggest it is time they ceased merely quoting what others have written and applied their own reasoning to the facts.

It is a certain fact that what Dr. Thomas asserted in 1850 has since proved to be defective, but it may well be that in the state of knowledge at that time his understanding could have been sufficient to constitute him a saint in Christ - we may hope so. But for another, a century later with better education and the benefit of other peoples' work, to pin his faith to a fallible man and reject the scriptural reasoning of his own brethren which would teach him better is surely to qualify for condemnation. He has read our various works quite carefully as his quotations prove but he rejects our conclusions. This he has a perfect right to do but one wonders if he fully realizes that he is making a choice which bears on the future life and if he finds himself rejected by the Lord because he has been content to accept a totally wrong and dishonouring concept of the life and death of Jesus, he will have no one to blame but himself. He has written a reasonably fair account of Edward Turney's teaching and although he speaks of it as illogical he does not show how or where it lacks logic. We feel that even the tendentious treatment he gives will not prevent some of his readers recognizing that Turney explained The Atonement with an elegance which, in the event reduced his adversary to fury.

Take his exposition of Romans 8:3. We read "God sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh." Edward Turney pointed out that the adjective "sinful" is a wrong translation - it is a possessive noun and should be rendered "sin's flesh." If you are seeking Green's hat you don't necessarily look for a Green hat. It may be a black one but it belongs to Green. Thus the translators allowed their biased belief to colour their translation and Dr. Thomas appears to have accepted it quite uncritically, probably no doubt influenced by the Christian tradition of his earlier associates that the Fall was supposed to have changed man's nature. In fact he rather worsened what was already bad enough by the gloss he put on in his assertion, "inasmuch as this evil principle pervades every part of the flesh, the animal nature is styled "sinful flesh," that is "flesh full of sin." "Why did he not ask himself the obvious question "Why does Paul say in the "likeness of sin's flesh"? If Jesus had to be flesh full of sin what is the significance of the word "likeness"? The answer is because Jesus, although identical in flesh and nature with all other humans, in fact Himself belonged to God, because God gave Him His life direct whereas we belong to sin because we descend from Adam who sold himself to sin. The word likeness therefore indicates that there is a distinction between men of the same nature but of different legal relationship. Is it not obvious that if the purpose of God to save mankind required that Jesus should belong to sin in the same sense as we do, that He should have been Joseph's son? Had He been so He would have been no different in nature because He was a man, but He would not then have been legally qualified to give His life in a sacrifice for us.

Here we come bang up against the other side of the Christadelphian dilemma. When such a writer has to face the question of why Jesus was the Son of God it explodes in his face and obliges him to contradict the very first basic truth that our Saviour was made and tempted in all points like as we are. Reg Carr quotes Robert Roberts amazing words:-

"Being then invested with human nature - being "made sin (nature) for us, who knew no sin" he was a fit representative sufferer. But it was also necessary that He should be holy. If Christ had been a son of Adam merely He could not have sustained this unblemished character."

This is a bottomless pit of contradiction and falsehood; it reveals a chasm which no honest exposition can conceal. What does it do to the reputation of Jesus who trod the winepress alone, who suffered being tempted? What does it do to our conception of the justice of God? It does two things, either one of which is fatal to true faith.

First it implies that there is a contradiction amounting to foolishness in the way the Creation is organized, for, having created man good and in the image of God which we take to indicate his

independence and free-will', to be fruitful and exercise dominion over the whole creation and clearly with no more than a limited span of natural life, He (God) then caused his nature to be changed to evil thus sentencing him to death. It does not improve things to believe as some do, that the evil was the work of the Devil or the effect of his disobedience, for whatever was the cause, ultimately God alone could have caused it to be. His purpose only makes sense on the hypothesis that in his original very good state man was corruptible and subject to temptation and that we are still in that state. We are certainly as God has made us and if it were true that we are sinful flesh then God has made us sinners and ought to take the blame. This is what we mean when we say that Christadelphianism charges God with foolishness. Nothing we do or can do can change our nature. If it was ever changed then God did it; common-sense and reason tell us He did not. The Testimony fudges the issue but it won't go away!

Secondly, if Jesus could not have sustained an unblemished character had He not been the Son of God as Robert Roberts affirms, then there could have been no genuine virtue in His perfection- He could be no example to us because it implies that it required some Divine element in His nature to enable Him to obey the commandments and any sinner could complain, "If I had been a son of God I could behave myself better." It is a view which robs Jesus of all the honour due to Him for His suffering and endurance makes Him little more than a puppet and reduces His life and probation to a pretence. It is a view which no sincere lover of Christ could entertain.

Worst of all perhaps is the way it makes a mockery of Divine justice, for it implies that Jesus, coming in the sinful nature that God created, being tried in all things and overcoming, is then required to suffer death, and a death in a more cruel and terrible form than even the very worst of (most) sinners, in order to be delivered from His sinful nature - when He had lived a perfect life! What kind of Justice is that? If it were true that God required Jesus to be put to death because He was sinful nature the Atonement would be the most terrible demonstration of sadistic cruelty it would be possible to invent. This is what these people attribute to our God. They may scorn us and disregard our contention that God did not work to bring about the crucifixion - it was the crime of evil men carried out of their own will and volition but which God foresaw, standing back and allowing it to happen for the sake of its effect on us and our salvation. But if they will take no notice of what we say, why do they not hear what the Apostle says? "Ye, by wicked hands have crucified and slain Him, a man approved of God."

It simply is not true to say - as Carr does - that from the earliest days of the brotherhood there has been no lack of clarity or certainty about the community's understanding of the nature of Christ. On the contrary, it has been a subject of controversy almost from the beginning, just as in the wider world of Christendom it goes back to 400 AD and Pelagius.

There were in fact barely 25 years between when Dr. Thomas published *Elpis Israel* and the controversy of 1873 and no one knows how much discussion there may have been in this period before David Handley brought it into the open. It reveals a very mistaken impression of the time scale to say there was no lack of clarity or certainty, for it could only have been for a comparatively short period that the view that Jesus was sinful flesh prevailed unchallenged, whereas it has been an issue in debate and division for 4 or 5 times as long. His account would give Testimony readers the impression that we are questioning interpretations accepted during all the history of the Truth, whereas what Dr. Thomas says on the subject appears to us to have been written rather "off the cuff" than researched and carefully thought out as many of his expositions clearly were.

Reg Carr has clearly studied the literature carefully, both Christadelphian and ours but he has either overlooked or chosen to ignore some of the important admissions of his own brethren. For example, John Carter wrote (quoting from memory) that it was wrong to use the phrase sin-in-the-flesh as if it were a compound noun describing a quality of human flesh. This it is not. He was honest enough to recognize that in its context it does NOT mean that flesh contains sin but that Jesus condemned sin while He was in the flesh, that is, while He was a man of our nature. Yet here is Reg

still using it in exactly the same way as Dr. Thomas when he wrote, “Sin in the flesh is hereditary” - just what John Carter said we ought not to do. Admissions of this kind do not in themselves prove anything, because even the best expositors can be mistaken, but they do serve to shew that quite eminent and recent writers have recognized that there are faults even in Dr. Thomas. It would have reflected more credit on The Testimony if facts like this had at least been mentioned, even if it is impossible to explain them away.

The assertion that in his reasoning that as descendants of Adam men are under the dominion of Sin Paul was saying that our flesh is full of sin is really complete nonsense. When Adam was created very good his flesh was not full of sin, but he could be tempted and could commit sin, because that is what he did. He thus became a sinner, or in the scriptural usage, sold himself to or under Sin as a master who henceforth held him and all his children under bondage. That left us all, legally sinners and alienated from our Creator, but it did not fill our flesh with an evil principle, and given that we know that Jesus was the same flesh as we are, yet without sin, it cannot possibly be right to say that He or any other man is physically full of sin. When the annunciation was made to Mary, the Angel said, “That HOLY thing that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.” Reading these words, how does any responsible expositor dare to write “The law required the death of the transgressing nature, viz. human nature;” or, “It was necessary that the sinning nature should suffer in Him;” or “There was no injustice in His death; it was not wrong for Him to die”?

Reg Carr writes that many of the fallacies in Turney’s arguments were high-lighted by Robert Roberts. As we see it the facts are the other way round; the fallacies are those stemming from the Christadelphian view that because Jesus came in the likeness of flesh of sin, therefore He was of sinful nature and needed to die for His own redemption, and while it makes good propaganda to say that Turney reverted to some of the main elements of orthodox Church teaching on The Atonement, it has to be said that some of the elements of Church teaching are infinitely to be preferred to some of the errors of Christadelphianism. If one had to make the choice, I feel that it would be less reprehensible to worship in Church than with my former brethren. I am not likely to be found doing either, but with all their egregious Trinitarian-follies at least they honour Jesus as the Prince of Life and Saviour of

the World in a way which no Christadelphian, who sees Him as our brother representative suffering Justly because of His defiled nature, can possibly understand.

We would invite The Testimony writers to re-consider a bit; to ask themselves a few simple questions instead of being content to re-affirm these horrible errors of the past. One assumes that they have minds open to reason and that if someone said to them “Ye do greatly err, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God” and offered them some sound proof, that they could accept it; but they would need to think for themselves without fear of the consequences.

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