

WHO ARE THE CHRISTADELPHIANS?

There must be many people who feel that there is something outstandingly significant about the person and the teaching of Jesus Christ. Yet when they survey "Christianity", both in its history and its modern forms, they find a wide variety of churches and communities, all with their differing foundations, teachings and practices. Feeling bewildered by the existence of so many groups claiming the name "Christian", they may well give up the quest for "the truth" as hopeless.

This short article is written to draw the attention of the interested enquirer to the existence of a community of believers in Christ, calling themselves "Christadelphians", organized in groups found throughout the world. Wherever they exist they have a fellowship founded upon an agreed basis of beliefs. Fundamental to their faith is the principle that what Christ and his apostles taught in the first century was truth, and it is still the truth today. The Holy Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, are their sole authority.

An Apostolic Fellowship

The community has no paid ministry, no robes or elaborate ceremonies, nor has it any "head of the church" or legislative council. Their ecclesias (the New Testament word for 'church') organize their own affairs, though the pattern is similar everywhere. Like the "elders" of New Testament times, members are appointed to manage the affairs of the ecclesia and to preside at its meetings.

At the meeting for the "breaking of bread" on "the first day of the week" there are hymns, prayers, readings from the Scriptures and an exhortation. The bread and the wine circulate among all the "brothers and sisters" present. Voluntary collections are taken to meet all the expenses. If some of the early followers of the apostles in the first century could attend such meetings, it is believed that they would immediately recognise what was going on, for it is patterned on New Testament worship.

Like Jesus' early disciples, they also proclaim his message of life to all willing to hear; they instruct their children and young people in Sunday Schools and Youth Groups, and promote the life of faith and prayer, and obedience to Christ's commands, among their members.

The Name "Christadelphians"

In the early days, members found that to preserve their identity they had to give themselves a name. "Christadelphians" was chosen because it means "brothers (and of course sisters) in Christ". It has been used to distinguish the community for more than 120 years.

Since 1864 The Christadelphian Magazine has appeared monthly, issued from Birmingham, U.K. It provides informative articles and contains items of news from the ecclesias worldwide. Pamphlets and books are also produced for the use of members and their friends. Other organizations throughout the world promote the preaching of the Gospel in areas where the ecclesia is small or non-existent, and there are special committees responsible for preaching the Gospel in other countries. Still another organization circulates typed exhortations and Bible studies to those members who live some distance from an ecclesia.

The care of the infirm and the elderly has been seen as a pressing need: there are several Homes in various countries. Voluntary contributions are made to help individual members in need. But why should the Christadelphians deserve any more attention than other groups of "believers", many claiming to be based on the Bible?

The brief answer is this: their understanding of the teachings of the Bible is quite different from that of other denominations. The difference arose from the conviction of one, John Thomas, that the teachings he was encountering in "Christendom" 150 years ago did not truly represent the faith of Christ and his apostles. Persuaded that the truth must be sought only in the Bible, he embarked upon a conscientious study of the Scriptures. He made no claim to any vision or personal revelation.

He eventually came to an understanding of "the gospel of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12) which was different in a number of important points from that of the churches and other religious sects. His labours attracted the support of others who were convinced of the validity of his conclusions. This understanding of Bible truths has been rigorously tested by free enquiry for 150 years. The distinctive views of the Christadelphians today are the result of this process.

The Whole Bible

What is this message of the Bible, and why is it different from popular "Christian" ideas?

It arises from the important principle that the Bible must be understood as a whole. It is easy to uphold certain teachings by accepting some parts of the Scriptures and neglecting others. For instance, it is popular today to dismiss much of the Old Testament. Yet these documents - the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets - were accepted by Jesus and his apostles as "the word of the Lord". The Bible is a unity: the revelation of God for mankind begins in the pages of the Old Testament and is continued and expanded in the New. The "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) is to be derived from the whole book.

Christadelphians accept that all of the Bible is the wholly inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). They therefore read it carefully and regularly. A reading plan, called the Bible Companion, enables them to read the Old Testament once in a year, and the New Testament twice.

There is another point of great importance: 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. It is the most realistic book in the world, confronting the stark issues of life without wishful thinking. Human problems, both of the race and of individuals, are frankly assessed. The origin of the problems is explained and so is the solution to them. The Bible is the only source in the world to do this in harmony with the facts of history and of human life.

God, Creator and Father

The Bible portrays God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth. He is "the King eternal, incorruptible, invisible.....to whom be honour and power everlasting" (1 Timothy 1:17). Yet by His Holy Spirit, the expression of His power, He controls the affairs of the world according to His ultimate purpose with mankind. Holiness and truth are His attributes; there can be no deceit or falsehood with Him, nor can He regard with indifference persistent human rebellion. Yet He describes Himself as a God "full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy....forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty" (Exodus 34:6,7, R.V.). This is the portrait of an Eternal Creator, a supremely moral Being, who is also the Father of those who seek Him according to His Word. And it is only in this Word - in the Bible - that man can learn of Him.

The Vital Earth

There is a common impression that the Bible is not really interested in the earth and what happens there. Its major concern is said to be "heaven", the abode of the righteous. This is a great mistake. The revelation of God's purpose shows Him to be positively concerned with the earth and the human race upon it. As He said himself: "Thus saith the Lord that created the heavens....that formed the earth and made it....he created it not in vain: he formed it to be inhabited" (Isaiah 45:18).

God is concerned with the earth as a whole, and the nations inhabiting it. The careers of great empires are under God's control and their fate is predicted. The severe troubles of the modern world are all foreseen, and so is their solution: the establishment by God of a new order in the earth as the only means by which the waywardness of mankind can be controlled.

The Bible, far from being "other-worldly", is realistic and practical in its concern for the fate of the whole human race. Its vision of the future is worldwide in its scope, for "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).

Though this prophecy was uttered 6000 years before Christ, it represents the world-view of the whole Bible. It is entirely relevant to our modern troubled condition and is unique in the history of our planet.

Israel in God's Purpose

The careful reader of the Bible will be in no doubt that the nation of Israel has occupied a special place in the purpose of God. But many people today find this difficult to reconcile with the nature of the modern State of Israel. How did the "special relationship" arise?

The Bible account shows us that the human race, in the early centuries of its existence, massively abandoned the true worship of God, so that "the earth was corrupt....and filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11), thus bringing the divine judgment of the Flood. It was not long, however, before mankind began to show again the same tendencies to evil. God therefore determined to build up a special community, by whom His Word would be preserved. So he chose Abraham, a man of faith, and made outstanding promises to him and his descendants, involving the future possession of the land of Canaan (later Palestine or Israel) and blessings for all the nations (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14,15).

Abraham's descendants were brought out of Egypt by God's power and were eventually settled in 12 tribes in the Promised Land, Israel. There they lived under the Law, a system of regulations given them by God through Moses, with the intention of training them to be a people devoted to His service. In the following centuries the Jews repeatedly neglected the worship of God and turned to worship the idols of their pagan neighbours, and as a result were driven out of their land by the invasion of foreign powers. They lived for centuries scattered and persecuted, as God has warned them would happen (read Deuteronomy 28). Nevertheless, despite their waywardness, the Jews preserved the Word of God both in the land of Israel and during their exile in other countries.

Promises to the Patriarchs

But the promises God made to Abraham did not only concern the nation of Israel. He was to be "a father of many nations" (Genesis 17:5), though significantly it would be one special Jewish descendant who was to ensure the fulfilment of the promise of blessing for all peoples. This descendant, spoken about so long before, was the Lord Jesus Christ. Later promises made to David, one of Israel's kings, filled out further details of what Jesus would accomplish, and of how "God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever" (Luke 1:32,33).

God's purpose with Israel, then, was to make them a training centre for the faithful in the pagan centuries before Christ. Of them Jesus was born, to proclaim the good news that his faithful servants become children of Abraham by faith and so inherit the promises. So the Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: "If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:27-29).

The Truth about Mankind

From the dawn of history men have sought consolation in pleasing views about themselves and their ultimate fate, because in this way their natural desires have been satisfied. The Bible, however, encourages no wishful thinking about human nature. It is utterly realistic about ourselves, our powers and our weaknesses. We were created, so it tells us, "in the image of God"; that is, we have been given wonderful powers of mind. We can reason; we have a power of conscience, warning us when wrong is being done; and we have a power of will, enabling us to make decisions affecting our conduct and so our lives.

Yet we have strong natural desires which demand satisfaction: the pressure to indulge ourselves in many ways, to acquire material possessions, and to defend our pride. Human history is a record of the way in which men and women have allowed their desires to dominate them. Strife and suffering have been the inevitable result.

Man is Mortal

Why does human nature behave like this? Because, says the Bible, the first human beings having been presented with a free choice, preferred to please themselves and to reject the clear command of God. It was an act of rebellion which the Bible calls sin. Its consequence was mortality, the condition in which all human life ends naturally in death. We die because we are mortal. If left to ourselves, we "perish" (to use the Bible phrase) - that is, we cease to exist. The dead lie unconscious in the grave; they suffer no pain, but "sleep in the dust of the earth" (Daniel 12:2). The widespread idea that man possesses an "immortal soul" and goes on living after death (usually "in heaven") is definitely not a Bible teaching. The Church of England Commission which produced in 1945 its report *Towards the Conversion of England*, stated clearly that the idea of the immortal soul "owes its origin to Greek, not the Bible, sources" (page 23). The theory was early absorbed into the teaching of the Church from paganism, and is an important example of a number of changes in original Christian beliefs made over the centuries.

But there is hope. The grave need not be the end for us, as we shall see.

The Nature of Jesus

There is one very important result of a right understanding of human nature: it enables us to make sense of the life and the death of Jesus Christ by making clear their significance in the purpose of God for us.

The Gospel of Luke describes how Jesus was born of the young Israelite woman, Mary of Nazareth, by the power of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus was born Son of man through his mother. Thus he inherited our physical nature in the fullest sense and as a result was "tempted in all points like as we are" (Hebrews 4:15). But he was also the Son of God, because God was literally his Father. Experiencing within himself the desire for self-satisfaction, he overcame every temptation. Thus he was able to submit to his Father at the crisis of Gethsemane, declaring "Not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

So Jesus was "without sin" and became in his death on the cross the ultimate sacrifice for sin, "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). His body was taken down from the cross and buried. But a just God could not leave a wholly righteous man for ever in the grave. Therefore He did not allow his body to "see corruption" (Acts 2:31) and raised him again the third day. Jesus, being granted immortal nature, "death hath no more dominion over him" (Romans 6:9). So he ascended to heaven to sit at his Father's right hand.

Son of God not God the Son

The very important point thus emerges that the death of Jesus was not just a sublime example of noble self-sacrifice (though it was all of that). It was the vital atonement for sin, which makes it possible for us sinners to have hope. It is a tragedy that in popular Christianity this understanding has been perverted by the doctrine of the Trinity, which arose 300 years after the ascension of Jesus as a result of disputes within the Church. The creeds expressing the Trinity were decisions of Catholic Church Councils in the 4th and 5th centuries. Their teaching is not found in the Bible. The idea of a pre-existent "God the Son" in heaven changes the vital experience of Jesus as the independent, responsible Son of man who was also Son of God, and so takes away the true significance of his life and his death as the atonement for sin, achieved once for all.

Similarly the Holy Spirit is not presented in the Bible as the third "Person" of a Trinity. It is the power by which God achieves His ends, both physical and spiritual. It is always under the control of the Father, and later of the Son, and is never represented as acting independently of them, or as an object of worship.

It can thus be seen that a right understanding of human nature, and so of the nature of Jesus, lies at the very centre of the purpose of God in him for the redemption of men and women from sin and death. It is the very core of the Gospel. Only in the Bible do we find these vital truths about Jesus Christ.

The Devil and Satan

Realising the truth about human nature is a great help towards understanding "the devil" and "satan" in the Bible. These terms have a long tradition in human superstitions about an Evil Spirit, active against God and tempting mankind to evil. The popular understanding of them did not originate in the Bible but in the pagan centuries long before the Christian era.

Where the Bible writers, under the inspiration of God, have occasionally used these terms -they are in fact comparatively rare in the Bible - they represent only the evil tendencies of human nature. It is significant that throughout the Bible sinners are never encouraged to blame something or someone else for their failings, but only themselves. The persistent enemy of God is the human mind and its demands for satisfaction.

The true Bible teaching about human nature delivers us from the fear of some supernatural devil and shows clearly where the real enemy of God is to be found.

The Good News

The Bible, as we have seen, exposes all the weaknesses of human nature and its perishing in the grave. But that need not be the end, for the Gospel is a message of hope. It is "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16), deliverance from sin and its consequence, death. That is why the Biblical Gospel is "good news".

Its message is an appeal to the individual man and woman for "repentance", and then a promise of life. God does not desire that any should perish, says the Apostle Peter, "but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). What is meant by repentance is partly explained by the Apostle Paul's statement: "that they should come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). Having realised "the truth" about himself, and God's redemption in Christ, the believer is called upon by God to "have another mind". Repentance is not a sudden emotional upsurge, which may pass as quickly as it has arisen, but a sober assessment by the believer of his true position, his acknowledgement of this in confession of sin to God, a prayer for forgiveness and a resolve to re-direct his life in harmony with the commandments of Christ.

Baptism

When this state of mind was reached, the believers in Christ in apostolic times were "baptized", by total immersion in water. So they were "buried with Christ in baptism" (Colossians 2:12); they died in symbol with him upon the cross, and as he rose from the dead to immortal life, so they rose from the waters of baptism to "newness of life". This remains the requirement for sincere believers today. No authority has arisen since the days of the apostles with power to alter it.

God, in His grace and mercy, is prepared to accept those who adopt this attitude and to forgive their sins, bringing them into fellowship with Himself. So, from being alienated from God by sin, sincere believers become sons and daughters of God by their obedience and faith. They are made heirs of eternal life according to God's promise. For even if death should overtake them, they die in certain hope of resurrection from the grave in the day when Christ comes again. The reward of the faithful is in the gift of an undying nature: as Jesus said, "like unto the angels, to die no more" (Luke 20:35-36). If they should be living in the day of the Lord's return, and of the resurrection of the dead, the faithful servants will be granted a change of nature, from mortality to immortality. So will be fulfilled the best-known verse in the New Testament: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

The Kingdom of God

Once the truth about human nature has been grasped, it will readily be understood why human governments throughout the centuries have failed to establish lasting peace on earth. The minds of men are powerless to cope with the severe problems which have arisen, but from the beginning the Bible has foreseen their solution. The intervention of God in human affairs at a critical moment in history is the firm prophecy of the Bible.

The return of Jesus Christ to the earth, just as literally as he left it, was the unanimous hope of the early believers. The Church abandoned it in the early centuries, because Christ did not come as soon as they had hoped, but even more because it did not square with the popular idea of the righteous enjoying their reward in heaven at death. The New Testament repeatedly asserts the Second Coming; the apostles take it for granted in their writings.

When Christ Comes

The purpose of the return of Christ will be to re-establish the authority of God in the earth. First, there will be the judgment, another clear Biblical teaching which is now widely rejected. Jesus, writes Paul to Timothy, "shall judge the living and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1). After the resurrection those individuals who have understood the Gospel of God's grace will "appear before the judgment seat of Christ" to receive the reward of their deeds, "whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Then will come the turn of the nations, who will be summoned to "fear God and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come" (Revelation 14:7). The Bible leaves us in no doubt that the governments of many nations will refuse the summons and will have to learn submission. Thus will begin the re-education of the peoples of the earth under the new kingdom of God with Christ as King. When God's will is understood and obeyed, then peace and justice among men will come to the earth at last.

The Life of Discipleship

Believing the Gospel as the Bible presents it, brings about a marked change in outlook. The true follower of Christ has a new dimension in his life: the will of God is sovereign and Christ is his King. The Kingdom which Christ will establish at his Second Coming is the one to which he belongs. Following the apostolic command: "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake" (1 Peter 2:13), he will obey all the commandments of authority, unless they conflict with the law of God. Then he follows the apostle Peter's saying: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). When his nation goes to war, the sincere believer who accepts New Testament teaching cannot fight for a human government, nor set out to destroy his fellow man. Christadelphians have a long record of refusing to join armed forces, and many governments have recognized the sincerity of their convictions.

Peace of Mind

But the greatest impact is in the believer's personal life. He has had his eyes opened to the self-indulgence, the greed and the pride which are so evident in human society. He has the example of Christ, who put away these natural desires in order to do the will of God. Recognising the great grace he has received in the forgiveness of sins and in reconciliation with God, the servant of Christ seeks to extend the same love, mercy and kindness to others, to speak the truth and to act honestly in all his dealings. Though the ideal is not always attained, owing to human weakness, its recognition produces a calm and peaceful attitude of great comfort in this turbulent age.

Christadelphians know from the Scriptures that the present age of man's dominion is coming to an end. While there is still time, they invite all to examine - or re-examine - the true teachings of the Bible. Once he has understood "the truth", the sincere enquirer will appreciate the new view he has gained, both of his own life and of the world in general. He will be better equipped to face that life as it is, with its mingled joy and sorrow, fortified by faith in the power of God and in the truth of His Word, sustained by the assurance that God is a merciful Father and that Jesus is his intercessor; in this life of service and faith, he will enjoy the encouraging fellowship of others who believe the same things.

God is still calling out a people for His Kingdom. Your future depends on your response!